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How do SMEs in Sweden use
digitalization to strengthen their
relationship with customers?

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ABSTRACT

Purpose

This paper aims to explore how digitalization affects Swedish SMEs' relationship with the customers to increase satisfaction, trust, and loyalty of the customers.

Literature review

The literature review gives a thorough account of the theoretical concepts and contributes to the analysis. This chapter thoroughly reviews digitalization, such as digital transformation strategies, digital business model, and customer relationship management. It also examines the relationship qualities: trust, satisfaction, and loyalty and explores if there is any correlation between these and how these relationship qualities can be affected by digitalization.

Methodology

The research approach in this study is a deductive approach. We use case studies in this qualitative experimental study. The sample for this study selected is standardized by following the non-probability procedure, and therefore, three companies were selected for the interviews. After collecting data from the interview and comparing the result with the existing theory stated in the frame of reference, it is a change in the type of research from exploratory to the one that descriptive research. The questionnaire for the interviews consists of two parts. The first part aims to explore the expected customer relationship of the company which the second part is designed to investigate the digitalization process.

Findings

The empirical findings of this study indicate that investigated companies pay much attention to the customer relationship. Digitalization has a positive effect on trust and satisfaction. However, digitalization has a minimal impact on customer loyalty compared to many other factors. The study indicates that digitalization can strengthen the customer relationship.

Keywords: Digitalization, Customer Relationship Management, Trust, Satisfaction, Loyalty

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1. Introduction

1.1 Digitalization

The digitalization of the environment is not a new phenomenon in such a way that the world has faced several waves of digitalization that have impacted both the business and broader society, including the creation of computers and the emergence of the internet (Mertens & Weiner, 2018). According to Elg et al., (2020), digitalization is changing culture and bringing many new opportunities and challenges as well for companies operating in this dynamic environment. It is not a surprise that digitalization has become a strategic predominant for companies, especially since moving ahead in this new field is seldom a linear process. The authors continue to state that digitalization affects businesses, processes, humans, organizations, the economy, and society. Also, actors in the system nurture digitalization and are shaped by digitalization. In the literature by Benfell and Hoy (2018), digitalization, the digital transformation of business, requires businesses to be more agile, people-orientated, pioneering, and customer-centric. Some articles point to digital technologies and their transforming properties. According to Gartner, digitalization uses digital technologies to change a business model and provide new revenue and value-producing opportunities; it is moving to a digital business. Digitalization offers many benefits in various ways, one of which is better knowledge (Parida et al., 2015), ultimately bringing about increased productivity and efficiency (Porter and Heppelmann, 2014). It is important to note that digitalization needs to be embedded in the whole business system; it is therefore not an 'add-on' element to a business area or function (Mäkiö et al., 2018). To successfully adopt digital technologies, underlying digitalization/technological capabilities are required. Digitalization goes beyond products; it affects the business model, organization, management systems, and entire value chain processes (Bleicher -Stanley, 2018). Scholars Bharadwaj et al. (2013) argue that digitalization refers to digital technologies such as information, computing, communication, and connection technologies to promote organizational changes. The digitalization of the business environment and the growing use of digital technologies facilitate the standardization of business processes (Ardolino et al., 2018; Green et al., 2018; Kokina and Blanchette, 2019, Troshani et al., 2019) and the uptake of competitive advantages for organizations (McKinsey, 2016).

1.2 Digitalization and customer relationship management

To achieve such a level of understanding, companies are deploying Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems for storing customer data, managing customer interactions, and building customer intelligence (Batista, Smart & Maull, 2008). According to Antikainen et al., (2018), some researchers have targeted certain businesses or economic processes to reflect the influences of digitalization, for instance as an enabler of a circular economy, as an enabler of risk control analytics within the supply chain, as a road map of business management strategy and as the framework to enable better customer relationship management. To secure long-term outcomes of digitalization the top management commitment, customer orientation, and technology focus on satisfying customers, and business needs are imperative (Elg et al., 2020). Along with the relationship revolution and one-to-one marketing,

a personalized approach would better manage individual relationships with individual customers (Rich, 2000; Lackner,1998). Alternatively, a digitalized process embracing the Internet as the source of information, feedback, and data gathering would build strong relationships (Hanson, 2000; Stermer, 1999)

With digitalization stakeholder interaction often increases as well and organizations can spend more time on customers, clients and other stakeholders when certain processes are digitalized. This was also affirmed in the study by Berman (2012), which showed that companies wishing to gain opportunities from digitalization should focus on reshaping customer value propositions and transforming their operations to offer more customer interaction and collaboration. Furthermore, the research indicated that engaging with customers at every value creation point in the relationship, companies can differentiate themselves from competitors. Digitalization enables SMEs to promptly identify changing customer needs and act accordingly (Stoldt et al, 2018). Besides opening up innovative activities to external actors (customers), digital tools also offer a great opportunity for process and management innovations.

Organizations must develop unique capabilities for customer engagement and value co-creation in order to improve their competitiveness. Lenka et al., (2017) mentioned three digitalization capabilities – intelligence capability, connect capability and analytic capability that enable value co-creation in business-to-business relationships. Placing customer needs at the heart of the digitalization strategy is one way to make digitalization feel more attainable for all businesses, echoing Randall and Berlina (2019) finding that digitalization is more about people than technology. Such transformation encompasses a wide variety of digital technologies that facilitate more efficient running of the business, better identification of market opportunities, improved relationships with customers and may other activities (Fitzgerald et al, 2014; Hess et al, 2016). A firm's level of digitalization or digital transformation is testimony to its success in incorporating digital practices into its business model.

Orrensalo, Zolbin, & Nikou (2022) has reported that digitalization efficiently assists entrepreneurs in acquiring different knowledge and information to progress the sustainability of their venture and the growth of the business, such as customer information or market asymmetries, and in mobilizing resources.

1.3 Relationship quality

Using digitalization and doing CRM aims to create and strengthen the relationship with customers; a good relationship consists of many qualities: trust, satisfaction, and loyalty. As stated by Smith (1998), relationship quality refers to a variety of relationship outcomes that reflect the overall strength. Moreso, researchers have also proposed relationship quality is composed of many different combinations of relationship outcomes. Crosby et al. (1990) found that trust and satisfaction are important aspects of relationship quality and that high relationship quality leads to future purchase intentions. Relationship quality is also understood as the suitability of a relationship to fulfill related customer needs (Hennig-Thurau and Klee, 1997).

Johnson (1999) suggested that relationship quality represents the overall depth and climate of a relationship, while De Wulf et al. (2001) defined relationship quality as a comprehensive evaluation of the quality of a relationship. Iriqat and Abu Daqar (2017) found a positive and robust relationship between CRM and long-term customer loyalty, whereby CRM system integration positively impacts long-term customer loyalty. Greenberg (2010) states that all definitions of social CRM highlight the need to consider the customer as a collaborator and actively engage them in relationship building and value co-creation. For example, social CRM is conceptualized as the business strategy of engaging customers through social media to build trust and brand loyalty. CRM is a strategical approach that helps firms develop strong relationships with potential consumers (Osarenkhoe and Bennani 2007). Firms are advised to keep solid relational bonds with their consumers to maintain satisfaction and loyalty (Mithas et al., 2005). The successful implementation of CRM programs targets achieving goals of consumer satisfaction and loyalty (Ness et al., 2002).

1.3.1 Customer Trust

Moorman et al. (1992) defined customer trust as the degree of customer confidence in a business's reliability. Customer trust is a central variable in most relationship models (Wilson,1995). Based on various contributions to the definition of trust (Doney and Cannon, 1997; Geyskens et al., 1996; Moorman et al., 1992), we define customer trust as the extent to which a customer believes that the supplier is honest, benevolent, and competent. Customer trust arises when they finally feel satisfied and trust the product or service they receive (Azmi and Genoveva 2020).

1.3.2 Customer Satisfaction

Oliver (1997) defines customer satisfaction as the customer's reaction to the state of satisfaction and the customer's judgment of satisfaction level. The most widely held definition is based on fulfilling customers' expectations; customer satisfaction refers to how a standard of the product/service offered fulfills customer expectations (Oliver et al., 1997). Customer satisfaction is generally defined as customer reaction to the state of fulfillment and customer judgment of the fulfilled state (Oliver et al., 1997). Johnson et al., (1995) argue that customer satisfaction is a cumulative construct simulated by market expectations as well as performance perceptions in any given period and is also influenced by past satisfaction from period to period.

1.3.3 Customer Loyalty.

The definition of customer loyalty implies a deep commitment to the service provider (Yoo, Lee, Hoffmann, 2008). Huma, Ahmed, Ikram, et al. (2019), state that Customer loyalty is considered a fundamental construct related to the relationship between customers and their suppliers in service and marketing-related research (Jang et al., 2013). The definition of customer loyalty is summarized in terms of aiming to continue the relationship, likelihood of not switching, expressing a positive word of mouth, a positive attitude, repeat purchasing, long-term commitment, or any contribution of

these (Davis-Sramek et al., 2008). Customer loyalty is defined by Oliver (1997) as a deeply held commitment to rebuy or patronize a favored product or service all the time in the future. The authors add that this definition focuses on customer loyalty's behavioral and attitudinal components.

In the study by Royo-vela and Casamassima (2011), the linkages between customer perception regarding the brand association, trust, commitment, and satisfaction are arguably the most widely studied relationships in the business literature. Research results from Deng et al. (2010) stated that trust influences loyalty through customer satisfaction. Therefore, if the company can pay attention to the customer's trust, the customer will be satisfied, leading to customer loyalty to the brand. According to Ha Janda and Muthaly (2010), satisfaction also indirectly affects loyalty through trust, suggesting that trust can mediate satisfaction in improving loyalty. Feliks and Panjaitan (2012) also indicated that organizations that properly implement CRM would benefit from increased customer satisfaction. Additionally, customer satisfaction, loyalty, and trust are also considered the resultant effect of involving the customer in CRM implementation (Wetsch, 2006).

1.4 Problem discussion

Digitalization is the best solution for firms facing challenges due to increased flow of goods and lack of information flow for timely decision (Huddinia and ER 2019). A firm's level of digitalization or digital transformation is testimony to its success in incorporating digital practices into its business model (Rubino, Vitolla Raimo et al. 2020). No business industry or organization is resistant to the effects of digitalization (Brunetti et al., 2020)

According to Mäkiö et al. (2018) It is important to note that digitalization requires to be put to the whole business system; it is not an 'add-on' element to a business area, or function. Therefore, the authors add that to adopt digital technologies successfully, underlying digitalization/technological capabilities are required. According to Richter and Hanf (2021) digitalization is changing society in various ways and brings with it many new opportunities and challenges alike for companies operating in this dynamic environment. The author goes on to suggest that it is not a surprise that digitalization has become a strategic priority for companies, since moving forward in this new field is seldom a linear process. Digitalization influence businesses, processes, humans, organizations, the economy and society, and, also, actors in the system build digitalization and are shaped by digitalization (Richter and Hanf 2021). The digitalization of the environment is not a new phenomenon (Mertens and Wiener, 2018). The world has faced several waves of digitalization that have impacted both the business and wider society, including the creation of computers and the emergence of the internet (Betti and Sarens 2020). Contrary to popular belief, the digitalisation of the business

environment is not a new phenomenon. Society has already faced several waves of digitalisation (Legner et al., 2017). According to the current important role play of customer-based knowledge management system in the business environment; there is a lack of a simple and general framework to integrate the functions of traditional customer relationship management, customer management and use of knowledge (Mendoza, 2006). They claimed that one of the reasons for failure to implement customer relationship management is the lack of tools and criteria for measuring and assessing customer relationships. (Hassanpour and Rostamian, 2019). Although CRM initiatives help establish and maintain valuable long-term relationships with customers, they lack visibility into the majority of existing operational processes and cannot manage interactions between customer and operational processes (Davis, 2002). Evidence suggests that digitalization is among the most critical factors that an organization in any setting should embrace. In their literature, Stoldt et al., (2018) state that digitalization enables SMEs to identify changing customer needs and act accordingly and promptly.

Small companies need to catch up with digitalization despite their tendency to be cautious of new technologies (Stoldt et al, 2018). To achieve this, owners and employees must be trained to increase digitalization in their SMEs (Zimmermann, 2016). It is important to note that meeting customers where they are by digitalizing distribution channels also brings about opportunities to obtain additional data from customers and better understand customer needs (Kaiser, 2002. According to Son, Kim, Hur, and Subramanian, 2021), SME suppliers cannot be free from the digitalization shift and therefore need to consider that supply chain digital technology could provide them with real-time visibility and traceability, increasing buyers' dependence on them, reducing the dependence gap. It is relevant to note that digitalization has become a strategic priority for companies, especially since moving forward in this new area is seldom a linear process (Elg, Birch-Jensen, Gremyr, Martin, and Melin, 2021). As SMEs are the spine of most Western industries, their escalating digitalization is relevant Lindner and Lehy (2019); Taiminen and Karjaluoto (2015) pointed out that a lack of human resources, time and expertise, and lack of financial resources and capital are two main barriers to digital channel adoption. Nevertheless, some areas can be further analyzed to highlight the link between digitalization and SME performance, especially productivity and external competitiveness (Trașcă, Ștefan, Sahlian, Hoinaru, and Șerban-Oprescu, 2019). Even though various studies have been made on the impact of digitalization, not much has been done on how SMEs in Sweden use digitalization to strengthen their relationship with customers.

1.4.1 Problem formulation

As discussed previously, a theoretical gap is identified within how SMEs in Sweden use digital communication strategy: digitalization help them stabilize and strengthen the relationship with their customers. Also, SMEs highly rely on the relationship with the customers and base on the relations that contribute to further development, which gives the paper theoretical relevance. These results can offer thoughtful guidelines to the SMEs when they change or start a new marketing communication strategy.

1.5 Purpose and research questions

This paper aims to explore how digitalization affects Swedish SMEs' relationship with the customers to gain their satisfaction, trust, and loyalty.

1.5.1 Research questions

1. How does digitalization affects customer relationships within Swedish SMEs?
2. How does digitalization affect customer's trust?
3. How does digitalization affect customer's satisfaction?
4. How does digitalization affect customer's loyalty?

1.6 Research boundaries

The study is delimited to one of the marketing communication strategies: digitalization. The research is delimited to the sample selected within the targeted country and the population meaning that the result is based on the delimited data. Due to the limited time and ability, the SMEs that we can reach are primarily located in the Southwest of Sweden, specifically in Halland province. The geographical factors could also influence the result

1.7 Research structures

In the following parts, the paper will firstly present a literature review, based on the theories stated, the hypotheses and model will be then formed and in the method part, the empirical study combined with the conceptual theories will be discussed based on the selected factor: digitalization, trust, satisfaction, loyalty. The empirical study will then show the sample and variables, and thus through analysis, the findings and results will be presented. We therefore conclude the study with theoretical and practical implications, state limitations, and suggest further study.

2. Literature review, and research model

The literature review provides a detailed account of the theoretical concepts and contributes to the data collection and analysis. This chapter gives a meticulous review of digitalization such as digital transformation strategies, digital business model and current digital approach. It also reviews the relationship qualities: trust, satisfaction and loyalty and explore if there is any correlation between these and how these relationship qualities can be affected by digitalization.

2.1 SMEs in Sweden

For a setting, we chose Sweden, a country that is considered a forerunner in adopting digital technologies (Gürdür et al., 2019; OECD, 2018), and one with a very high rate of digitalization. Østfold and Västra Götaland confirm the general trend of digitalization approaches in the Nordic region Randall and Berlina, 2019. In accordance with Randall and Berlina, (2019), digitalization is addressed concerning areas such as skills development, security and public services, and in this case, most prominently in business development and growth. In 2018, the Swedish government introduced a two-year initiative to support digitalization on the regional level (Government Offices of Sweden, 2018). At the same time as the government of Sweden aims to be a world leader in using the potential of digitalization, a large group of residents, mainly in the 65–85 age group, are nonusers of digital technology (Olsson et al., 2017)

According to Davidsson et al. (1996); NUTEK (2004), small-and-medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Sweden constitute a significant portion of the economy. Also, over 99% of all enterprises in Sweden are classified as SMEs, and altogether, the SME sector accounts for 60% of total private employment (Beheshti Hultman, Jung et al. 2007). It is also noted that from the 1980s and onwards, there has been a change in the size distribution of companies in Sweden, and the number of SMEs has increased dramatically (Statistics Sweden, 2008). According to the EU definition, SMEs are based on the number of employees, turnover or total balance, and company shares (Spickett-Jones and Eng, 2006) indicators such as turnover are constantly changing, but comparative independence should not be greater than 25%. Yazdanfar and Öhman (2015) state that the significance of SMEs has increased substantially in Sweden in recent decades whereby per now, around 99 percent of all Swedish firms are SMEs, and the SME sector generates jobs for almost 70 percent of the Swedish labor force (Yazdanfar and Öhman, 2015). It is important to note that, today, 94.5% of SMEs in Sweden are micro-firms (Achtenhagen, Ekberg, Melander 2017). Naldi (2008) in her study about Sweden portrayed that SME managers' and owners' accumulation of experiential knowledge regarding international markets partook a

significant role in SMEs' global growth and export performance. According to NUTEK (2004), SMEs contribute almost one-third of the Swedish GNP.

SMEs actually play a crucial role in the economic development of most countries such as New Zealand and Sweden. In a way that, SMEs represent the majority of firms regarded as essential players in the economic growth (Agndal, Chetty 2007). European Commission (2014) has established that policy makers have recognized internationalization as one of the critical indicators of SME development.

However, SMEs' constraint resources and limited marketing make it more challenging to manage and compete with other larger firms (Geroski et al., 2009; Mayr et al., 2016; Thornhill and Amit, 2003). There still exist significant challenges in which SMEs are faced, for instance: human resources management (15.3%), production management 8.6%, sales and marketing(40.2%), and general (Gimadeeva, 2016; Huang et al., 1999). Also, marketers in today's SMEs have noticed a big change in marketing communications to digital (Gimadeeva, 2016). Andersson et al. (2006) point out the fact that this is of particular interest for SMEs' home countries with a relatively limited domestic markets, for example, Sweden and New Zealand.

2.2 The effectiveness of Digitalization

According to the study by Lekhanya (2018), digitalization is a highly effective strategic growth strategy for businesses in emerging markets of the world. There is much confirmation that, in many countries, the advance of entrepreneurial activities is concerned as a strategy to elevate national productivity and job creation, improving their economic independence.

It is well established from specific studies that no business industry or organization is immune to the effects of Digitalization (Brunetti et al., 2020). Sony et al., (2020) adds that the Quality Management field is also significantly affected by ongoing digitalization.

Studies have demonstrated that digitalization significantly improves market transparency and traceability (Tsolakis et al., 2018). Wang et al., (2020) expound on this aspect by stating that digitalization provides entrepreneurs with sufficient tools to efficiently manage their online relationships and reinforce their offline relationships beyond geographical proximity at efficient cost-effectiveness. The same is exemplified in work undertaken by Ritter et al. (2020), who writes that digitalization leads to an increase in digital information and the ability to access information, which structures, shapes, and influences our modern market. Moreso, the authors write that Digitalization benefits businesses by offering a new, efficient way of communicating and networking.

The literature by Kaiser (2002) mentions a vital aspect that states that meeting customers where they are by digitalizing distribution channels also offers opportunities to obtain additional data from customers and understand customer needs better. In their study, Criscuolo, Gal, Leidecker, and Nicoletti (2021) highlight that other investments have boosted digitalization during the pandemic, creating particular challenges for market dynamism to the extent that extensive platform-based digital services benefit from strong network effects and make entry more difficult.

Beltrami et al., (2021) observed that digitalization could positively or negatively impact working conditions and, therefore, relate to social sustainability performance. Tajudeen et al. (2019) have further shown that digitalization vision positively correlated with innovation performance. In contrast, Niemand et al. (2017) consider that digitalization vision had a non-significant association with firm performance. Nonetheless, Marcon et al. (2019) highlighted that digital technologies can improve performance through process innovation capability.

However, it is paramount to note that digitalization is not necessarily a driver for sustainability without proper design (Gensch, Prakash, and Hilbert, (2017). Jiang, Klemeš, Fan, Fu, and Bee (2021) suggest that even though the comprehensive assessment of the rebound effects of digitalization and ICT is challenging, the energy cost, the environmental impact, and the climate footprint of digitalization and ICT should not be neglected. The authors add that digitalization and ICT, with proper support from design, production, and manufacturing is when it comes to coping with the pandemics, sustainable environmental management, and energy efficiency improvement.

2.3 Digital transformation strategies

The term digital transformation is used by Matt et al., (2015) to refer to the penetration of digital technology in the organization and the operation of a systematic organization. The author adds that to achieve a breakthrough in digital transformation strategy, one of the critical issues is to earn a high degree of matching and adaptability between the digital transformation strategy and other aspects of the organization and the functional strategy. Digital transformation, as defined by Demirkan (2016), is the profound and accelerating transformation of business activities, processes, competencies, and models to fully support the changes and opportunities presented by digital technologies and their influence across society in a strategic and prioritized way. Matt, Hess, and Benlian (2015) mention that digital transformation strategies also need to be consistent with other functional and operational strategies as management must monitor the digital transformation in harmony with the company's business. A further definition of Digital transformation is given by Fadhilah (2021), who writes that it is an extraordinary process that

involves the available resources, including utilizing digital technology that existed at that time to produce organizational outputs to provide new experiences. It is important to note that a company's ability to participate in a digital transformation often depends on several prerequisites for business digitalization. A significant aspect of Digital transformation strategies is that they are classified under four elements. Matt, Hess, and Benlian (2015) have provided a detailed description of these elements and can be attributed to four essential dimensions: use of technologies, value creation, structural changes, and financial aspects.

Matt et al. (2015) state that technologies address a company's attitude towards new technologies and its ability to make the most of them. The authors add that it contains the strategic role of IT for a company and the future technological ambition. A firm needs to determine whether it wants to become a market leader in terms of technology employment with the ability to develop its technological standards or whether it prefers to center on the already established standards and sees technologies as a means to fulfill business operation (Matt et al., 2015).

With value creation, the concern is the impact of digital transformation strategies on firms' value chains, that's to say, how far the new digital activities deviate from the classical – often still analog – core business (Matt et al., 2015). More to that structural changes are often needed to allow for an adequate basis for the new operations. Structural changes refer to contrasts in a firm's organizational setup, especially concerning the placement of the new digital activities in the corporate structures. This assessment is vital, whether it is mainly products, processes, or skills that are affected most by these changes (Matt et al., 2015).

The three mentioned dimensions can only be transformed after considering financial aspects. These include a firm's urgency to act due to diminishing core business and its ability to finance a digital transformation attempt; financial aspects are both a driving force in the transformation (Matt et al., 2015). While lower financial pressure on the major industry may lessen the perceived urgency to act, companies already under financial pressure might need external ways to finance a transformation (Matt et al., 2015). More literature is written on the components of digital transformation, which consist of six elements, namely Strategy, Process, Product/Service, People, Data, and Technology Strategy. Mahmood et al., (2019) write that digital transformation is not based on a single strategy. It includes IT, IS, change management, and business strategies. For a successful transition, the alignment of such strategies is critical.

Process. Ebert et al, (2018) state that In the procedure dimension, steps are made, both new and IT operability, utilizing new capabilities for more systematic processes and more efficient integration of traditional techniques.

Product/Service. Elwa, (2003) writes that improvement on e-learning flexibility and personalized learning is a trait always portrayed and, digital technologies often provide learning products and services that are universal and accessible but are relevant and appropriate.

People. The digital transformation points that organizations with such digital potential should change their organizational structure and identity, which affects all departments in the organization, roles, responsibilities, and design (Mahmood et al., 2019)

Data. One of the challenges organizations counters in digital transformation, is the storage of the organization's data. Understanding the data collected, and that which is available for analysis, indexing data resources, and evaluating data quality while searching for opportunities to integrate data resources creates even more challenges.

Technology. Morakanyane et al., (2017) write that the foundation of digital transformation efforts in digital technology enables technology to transform organizations. Digital technologies create opportunities that organizations can take advantage of. These opportunities can potentially change certain aspects of the organization, especially the business models, operational processes, and customer experiences. For that reason, the organization profits from the impacts of this transformation.

2.4 Digital Business Model.

Perelygina et al., (2022) state that a digital business model generates value based on creating user advantages through digital technology. In addition, Bärenfänger et al. (2015) write that the digital business model is a business model whose underlying business logic deliberately acknowledges the characteristics of digitalization and use to good advantage of them; both in interaction with customers and business partners and in its internal operations. The business model is digital if it is introduced by this model's digital technologies, which start fundamental changes in the way business is executed and revenues are generated (Roblek, Thorpe, Bach, Jerman, and Meško, 2020). Moreso, a business model is digital if changes in digital technologies trigger fundamental changes in how business is implemented and generate revenues. Under the Scientific research of business, Jabłoński, (2018) states that digitization refers to many areas such as value migration via the sustainable business models of digital economy companies on the capital market.

According to Heikkilä-Tammi et al., (2018), Technological aspects, business-model choices, and the view of strategic capabilities are prevalent in extant research dealing with digital business transformation, but few studies have examined organizational factors and leadership in digital business transformation. For example, extant literature includes analysis on the importance of leading digital transformation strategically and/or the content of a digital business strategy the new leading positions and roles related to digital change in organizations, such as the emergence of the status of chief digital officer (CDO) and the need for new business models in the digital economy

2.5 The current trend of digitalization in the business environment

Based on the previous studies and research, it is suggested that digitalization adopted within the business environment has its own efficacy (Melović et al., 2020). Shpak et al., (2020) share the same idea that digitalization has its own dominance when companies process large data sets, automate business activities and build communication externally. Moreover, according to Joensuu-Salo et al., (2018), digital tools benefit from enriching, extending, and enhancing boundary-spanning interactions, especially for small and medium-sized enterprises.

Due to the sensitivity of the customers and competitive business environment which requires high responsiveness of companies (Yasmin et al., 2015), agility and ambidexterity of digitalization help firms adapt to the changes in the uncertain context rapidly (Günther et al., 2017; Josnson, 2011; Huang et al, 2017; Fitzgzaeld,2016). Unlike traditional marketing channels: TV, radio, newspaper, the adoption of digital tools allows companies to communicate with targeted groups directly, continuously and timely (Lee and Cho, 2019). Thanks to the attributes of digitalization that eliminate the limitations of place and time when customers access information (Akter and Sultana, 2020). Therefore digital marketing communication offers companies more opportunities to enhance and cultivate customer relationships, which contributes to increased customer loyalty and growing market share (Marko Merisavo and Helsingin Kauppakorkeakoulu, 2008).

2.6 Digitalization: a customer-oriented approach

According to Narver et al., (1990), customer orientation is a domain of marketing orientation meaning that the core of the information is generated by monitoring customers' needs and desires. Customer orientation can be related to business performance either indirectly or directly. According to Peter Drucker (2009), the customer's point of view shapes the whole business including the final result. "customer is the king" is widely adopted in the literatures (Kotler, 2006; McCathy, 2002; Slater, 2011; Wilkinson, 2010;

Fiala, 2012), which reflects the significance of the power from the customers. Currently, the focus of many companies has been shifted from merely providing products to offering customer-related services. Companies pay attention to the customers' experience and they are willing to get the information so that they create channels by embedding technology systems, social media, and apps, in other words, digitalization (Birch-Jensen, 2020).

Neha (2014) found that digitalization in the marketing settings expands and changes marketing functions by utilizing the Internet and Information Technology. The main concept of digitalization within the business area is to attract customers and allow them to interact with the brand through the digital form (Yasmin et al., 2015). It is to access the information about products through a digital platform and the possibility that customers contribute to the development of business by leaving their feedback (Lucas, Jr. et al., 2013). According to Rahman Khan, (2017), the changing role of customers regarding co-producers is the consequence of digitalization since digitalization concentrates on empowering interactive affiliation with the customers.

According to Shpak et al., (2020), customers value the time, which means both the time of gaining information and leaving feedback is essential, Thus, it is necessary to build a well-designed digital platform, an online chat to reach an interactively and individually goal. It is suggested that the digitalization in the marketing context ought to be created in accordance to the requirements of customers and community, in this way the customer-orientation is in focus (Rakic, 2014).

2.7 Customers Relationship Management (CRM)

One of customer relationship management objectives is to improve and maintain the relationships with customers (Winer, 2001. As stated by Ngai et al, 2009), Customer Relationship Management is a set of processes and system enablers supporting business strategies to develop profitable long-term relations with special customers. In addition Customer Relationship Management is a philosophy for attracting and retaining customers, increasing customer value, sustainability, and implementing customer-oriented strategies. Valmohammadi, (2017) in his study conducted a classification of customer relationship management from three sides, namely the process of developing, content, and implementing customer relationship management. The authors goes ahead to state that the customer relationship management development process relates to the initiation, maintenance, and termination of customer relationship management. Mendoza, (2006) adds to this by stating that customer relationship management is definitely related to the knowledge management discipline and therefore, adequate and continuous updating of customer knowledge for effective customer relationship management system is very important (Swift, 2001).

According to the current important role play of customer-based knowledge management system in the business environment, there is a lack of a simple and general framework to integrate the functions of traditional customer relationship management, customer management and use of knowledge (Mendoza, 2006). In actual fact, customer relationship management aims to attain and maintain effective and efficient customers and create harmonious relations with them. Since there are different approaches in terms of customer relationship management, several definitions have been presented for the CRM (Payne and Frow, 2006). Another definition by Seeman and Hara (2006) refers to customer relationship management as a technology that is aimed to create and maintain individual relationships with profitable customers through the relevant adaption of the information and, communication technologies.

To the contrary, customer relationship management, is a standardized managerial process for creating, maintaining, and developing relationships with customers in all positions in order to maximize relationship value (Richard and Jones, 2008). Furthermore, the author adds that customer relationship management refers to the participative and interactive relationship between business and its customers to acquire a comprehensive view about customers and predict and satisfy their needs and wants through efficient and effective efforts that are tangible for every customer. Following Bermejo et al., (2010), for one to concentrate on the concept of customer value, it is advisable to begin with the simplification of the relationships amidst the concepts of customer relationship management, customer equity together with, customer value.

Customer relationship management is known as CRM and may can be defined as the management of mutually beneficial relationship(s) from the seller's perspective (Richards, 2008). CRM definitions are usually classified in two categories: strategic and operational. Customer relationship management, which aims to maintain long and lasting relationship with customers, has contributed significantly to customer-based brand equity building in different settings (Shriedeh and Ghani, 2017). CRM is also described as the strategic use of information, processes, technology and individuals to manage customer relationships. According to these definitions, it can be seen that the experts classify customer relationship management in four general categories with the titles of strategy, technology, process, system or project (Banar, Baygi, Golnezhad et al. 2020). For Borg and Blidner-Knittel (2009), Customer Relationship Management is elucidated as a process in which a company finds ways to know its customers by connecting with those who bring an income and should not just be a way to make a lot of money. From this definition, it is clear that Customer Relationship Management implies several parameters (Reinrtz et al, 2004).

One definition of CRM is a firm's skills and accumulated knowledge to identify attractive customers and prospects, initiate and sustain relationships with attractive customers and leverage these relationships into customer level profits. Thus, CRM capability requires the capacity to utilize management resources to achieve a competitive advantage. In the same way, Kassan (2000) has explained customer relationship management brings customer loyalty and profitability, such as repeat purchases and longevity. That means customers understand that they are benefiting because of time saving and money and receiving better information and special treatment. In fact, CRM has developed as an approach to maintain positive relationships with customers, increase customer loyalty, and expand customer lifetime value (Blattberg and Deighton, 1996). Moreover, Niemann and Pisla (2021) in their literature state that digitalisation as a megatrend brings about structural changes of markets, customers and also companies. Firms believe that increasing services will deliver a possibility to react to changing market conditions, higher level of differentiation and increasing customer relationship. Technology plays an important role in enabling servitization, the adoption of them allow the development of new, integrated product-service offers in manufacturing.

In the past few years, customer relationships have increasingly gained attention from both academics and marketers (Sheth, 1995; Berry, 1995; Morgan, 1994). According to Kotler and Keller (2006), the relationship with the customer is one of four components of holistic marketing and the core is to manage the customer relationship. CRM is defined as the outcome of natural evolution and integration of marketing ideas with the latest available data, technologies, and organizational approaches (Boulding et al., 2005).

According to Nikki, (2018), customer relationship management can be adopted and added to the marketing strategies to overcome the increased competition in the online selling environment for the small and medium-sized enterprises. In the previous research, Ayanso (2015) found that online retail managers pay more attention to establishing long-term relationships with customers rather than satisfying the needs of bargain shoppers. Harrigan (2014) suggests the significance of CRM in increasing competitive advantage for SMEs. Further, CRM activities are found to foster long-term consumer relationships (Nikki, 2018). Verhoef, (2003) conducted research on the effect of customer relationship management and he found it is helpful in developing customer retention and customer share. The findings are also in line with Adrian (2006), That CRM effectively and efficiently increases the retention of profitable customers.

Despite the majority of literature discussing the effectiveness of Customer relationship management, there still needs more effort to explore the practical

measures performed by the companies (Mithas et al., 2005). According to Nikki (2018), CRM can be conducted in various ways. For example, the adoption of CRM applications and software track customers' behavior so that companies can learn customers' tastes and evolving needs (Mithas et al., 2005). Information collected from the digital platform can be translated and understood by the companies so that they can improve both products and services (Davenport, 2001; Nambisan, 2002).

As discussed above, customer knowledge, which is customer feedback and information, is developed by CRM applications. According to Adrian (2006), companies have the disposal of a wide range of information through database, data marts, and data warehouses. CRM technologies make it easier and more visible to analyze, interpret and utilize it constructively.

According to Mithas et al., (2005), there are two mechanisms to gather and use customer knowledge. First, CRM applications promote the contact between customers and companies, thus, they can record the relevant information based on a single customer transaction. Then, the information can be converted into customer knowledge, which helps companies respond to the customer's needs contextually. Second, when companies share customer knowledge with their customers, it makes it easier for the customer to define their needs in the process of customer self-selection of service features (Pralhad, 2000). At the same time, the customer's self-selection process creates additional opportunities for the firm to learn about the evolving needs and to gain deeper customer knowledge (Mithas et al., 2005).

2.8 Definitions of a good relationship

As discussed above, companies make an effort for customer relationship management, and it is evident that good relationships with customers are highly essential. Now the focus is moved to what can be regarded as a good relationship, are there any features and characters that can reflect a good relationship.

Naudé et al. (2000) discussed the characteristic attributes of a good relationship and how they play various roles in the business environments. After observing changes in customer behaviors, for example, the repeat purchase indicates a closer relationship, the purchase behavior, and intention to communicate with the brands. Naudé et al., (2000) state, that trust, satisfaction, and commitment are the keys.

Wray et.al., (1994) and Storbacka et al., (1994) suggested there are at least two dimensions consisting of relationship quality: trust and satisfaction. Liu et al., (2011) share the same view that trust and satisfaction are the cores of a good relationship.

Liu et al. (2011) suggest that it is crucial to keep customers trusting the company, continuously feeling satisfied, and convert them to loyal customers. Rauyruen and Miller (2007) discover how relationship quality: trust, and satisfaction influence customer loyalty. He suggests relationship quality has a positive effect on loyalty. Moreover, Leninkumar (2017) states that there exists a positive correlation between trust, satisfaction, and loyalty. Thus customer loyalty has its own significance in reflecting a prosperous, powerful relationship.

2.8.1 Trust

As one common concept to the body of research on relationship quality, trust has been widely discussed by academics (Cosby et al., 1990; Mohr et al., 1994; Wilson et al., 1996; Naude et al., 2000). According to Morgan (1994), trust is the cornerstone of relationship commitment. Without trust, all social relationships would fail or become irregular (Patrick, 2002).

Trust is essential in the relationship. Trust strengthens the feeling of security, reduces uncertainty, as well as creating a supportive business environment (Geyskens et al., 1995). According to Morgan et al. (1994), trust is defined as a confidence from one group, which they show to another group with honesty and reliability. Patrick (2002), states that trust can be seen through customers' thoughts, feelings, emotions or behaviors when the customers feel that the provider can be relied upon.

There are several approaches to building great trust. According to (Siau et al., 2003), Enhancing customer familiarity and building a great reputation contribute to the customer's trust. He suggests, that frequent exposure and frequent advertisement enable customers to familiarize themselves with the brand thus they tend to trust it. Besides, Base on the company's past behavior and history, present image of the company, customers will choose whether they will put trust to the company (Dehghan et al., 2015).

Previous studies also suggest that the quality of the product or service also highly influences the customer's trust (Eisingerich et al., 2008; Siau et al., 2003). For instance, the high responsiveness of the company will inspire confidence in customers. Thus, due to this phenomenon, companies should improve their services, enrich their capability, to reach a high quality of their service and products and attract more customers to trust them.

Moreover, customer education or customer knowledge is also vital to trust. According to Eisingerich et al., (2008), The more knowledge customers have, the more interaction with the company will happen, and easier it will become for the customers to see the value of the company, which can be costly and time-consuming to gain (Dawar et al., 2004). In this case, companies are

suggested to offer critical information to the customers and develop customers' knowledge in great advance so that it will be easier to reach the customers when promoting the new products and win great trust.

In conclusion, trust is one of the most essential factors within a relationship with a customer and can reflect relationship quality. Simultaneously, Trust as one of the determinants of brand loyalty because of its significance in bonding between the brands and customers (Morgan et al., 1994). It has a significant impact on establishing a long-term relationship with customers for the companies.

2.8.2 Satisfaction

Satisfaction is another widely accepted construct of relationship quality (Cosby et al., 1990; Storbacka et al., 1994; Naude et al., 2000). Satisfaction is the customer's overall evaluation of the whole buying experience of the service or products (Fornell, 1992). Ningsih et al. (2014) defined satisfaction as an emotional response, an attitude, and an assessment after the purchase. Satisfaction means that customers feel pleased with the service or products

According to Wong et al. (2003), satisfying customers' needs and expectations during the service process can generate a higher repurchase possibility for the company. Previous researchers proved that contented customers have more probability of communicating positively with the company (Naude et al., 2000; Fornell, 1992).

There are multiple methods to measure customer satisfaction. According to Fornell (1992), Sweden was the earliest country who establish a national economic indicator reflecting customer satisfaction (NCSI) and brought up the idea to many other countries. The customer satisfaction index (CSI) represents customer evaluation and includes antecedents and the consequences of overall customer satisfaction.

Important-Performance Analysis (IPA) measures how well the selected attributes of one product or service meet customer's expectations (Matzler et al., 2003) as well as guides company the future resource allocation decisions (Liu et al., 2009).

Topalović (2015) and Gee (2008) stress that service quality is increasingly popular in the literature that studies the factors connected to the customers. Total-quality management (TQM), the one used to integrate business operations to maximize service and product quality, directly affects customer satisfaction. Mehra (2002) defines TQM as a consumer-oriented concept; companies adopting TQM are to create customer value. To satisfy customers, much focus needs to be put on customers; for example, companies need to

trace customers' needs, open to their feedback continuously and understand their requirements and expectations (Topalović, 2015).

Another technique that helps to satisfy customers has been discussed previously, which is customer relationship management (CRM). Long et al. (2013) explained the function of CRM that is based on digital technology to organize, automate and synchronize business processes. Long (2003) identified four critical elements: behavior of the employees, quality of the service, relationship development, and interaction management that link closely to the customer satisfaction, that can be recorded, processed in CRM, and implemented in the next step.

Thus, to meet the customers' expectations and establish a long-term relationship, customer satisfaction management is necessary for all companies to consider. Moreover, many academics clearly state a positive relationship between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty (Fornell, 1992; Rust et al., 1993; Taylor et al., 1994).

2.8.3 Customer loyalty

The concept of loyalty has been used for centuries and is widely adopted in different contexts. From a civilized marketer's perspective, customer loyalty pushes the process of capturing and defending market share (Kimmar, 2004). It is therefore termed as, one of the most valuable assets in the competitive business markets (Srivastava et al., 1998). According to Duffy (1998), companies in various industries study, implement and evaluate their loyalty strategies and campaign to cultivate strong relationships with their best customer.

As is an essential business resource, loyal customers create very stable, long-term, and active relationships between companies and customers. The efforts to reach that are various, and it is obvious that from the early 20th, companies started to conduct this kind of loyalty program (Duffy, 1998). For instance, consider airline frequent flyer programs: frequent flyers board the airline first; special access to the first-class or check-in desk (Gao, 1996).

Nowadays, combining the power of E-commerce and digitalization, loyalty programs are brought online (Tahal, 2014). Using an online loyalty program is that companies can track preferred customers' preferences and build up a database for communication and increase efficiency (Suh et al., 2012; Kooser, 2009).

Despite the wide range of knowledge of loyalty, there is still a thoughtful and feasible approach to measuring customer loyalty. Most previous academics state two distinctive methods to measuring loyalty: behavioral and attitudinal

measurements (Kahn et al., 1986; Morrison, 1986; Warrington, 2000; Leverin et al., 2006). Behavioral measurement refers to a customer's repetitious purchase behavior, and attitude measurement is the one explores a customer's psychological engagement.

Traditionally, behavioral measurement is the most visible one that is widely practiced by marketers (Kahn et al., 1986). For example, the share of purchase (SOP); share of visits (SOV); are the most common measures that calculate the number of relative customer activities: such as purchases, and visits, compared to the total amount of this activity created by the whole customer group (Magi, 2003; Ehrenberg, 1988; Du, 1990; Morrison, 1986). RFM refers to the Recency, Frequency, and Monetary value, which measures how much a customer spends and how frequently and how recently it happens (Hughes, 1996). PCV refers to Past Customer Value meaning the customer's contribution to the profit in the past. Based on these processed data, useful information is formed for marketers to evaluate behavioral loyalty (Kahn et al., 1986).

However, loyalty is a mental feeling showing the attitude toward the brand. According to Warrington (2000), attitudinal loyalty is defined in the context of the brand since it captures both affective and cognitive aspects of brand loyalty (Shankar et al., 2003). Commitment and preference are regarded as one of the aspects (Deepa and Chitramani, 2014). The most significant difference between attitudinal and behavioral loyalty is that attitudinal loyalty cannot be inferred by observation, it represents customers' likelihood in the long term. It is described by (Duffy, 1998) that when the customers feel that their needs will be satisfied by the company and believe in it, then it comes loyalty. Even if the purchase does not happen, the desire and trust in the business stand for loyalty, which is an attitudinal measurement (Leverin et al., 2006).

Based on both measurements, the composite one increases the predictive power of loyalty (Pritchard, 1997; Bowen and Chen, 2001). In reality, customers show loyalty not only by repeated purchase behavior but also the mental engagement, trust, and belief (Kahn et al., 1986).

2.9 Research model

Combining reviewed literature above, the authors suggest the research model shown in Figure 1 below. Based on previous research indicating the positive aspects of digitalization in establishing, maintaining and strengthening the relationship with customers (Wang et al., 2020; Kaiser, 2020; Tajudeen et al., 2019; Bärenfänger et al., 2015; Joensuu-Salo et al., 2018; Yasmin et al., 2015). The authors suggest three research questions, which will be answered further in this study. Since digitalization minimizes cost, time and space, it increases

efficiency (Lekhanya, 2018) and pays more attention to customer's needs and desires (Naver et al., 1990; Kotler, 2006; Birch-Jensen, 2020) to meet the expectation of customers, which is in line with the theory of customer's satisfaction (Fornell, 1992; Matzler et al., 2003; Gee, 2008). Besides, digitalization creates more channels to communicate and interact with customers (Birch-Jenson, 2020), and companies can improve their services or products through digital media (Lucas, Jr. et al., 2013). As discussed, customer trust consists of both the product and service quality and the customer's familiarity with the company (Siau et al., 2003; Eisingerich et al., 2008). Thus based on this, the authors propose that digitalization positively affects customer trust. Since trust and satisfaction are highly correlated to loyalty, loyalty is another key to relationship quality. Companies widely adopt online digital loyalty programs (Suh et al., 2012; Kooser, 2009), making the author propose that digitalization positively affects loyalty.

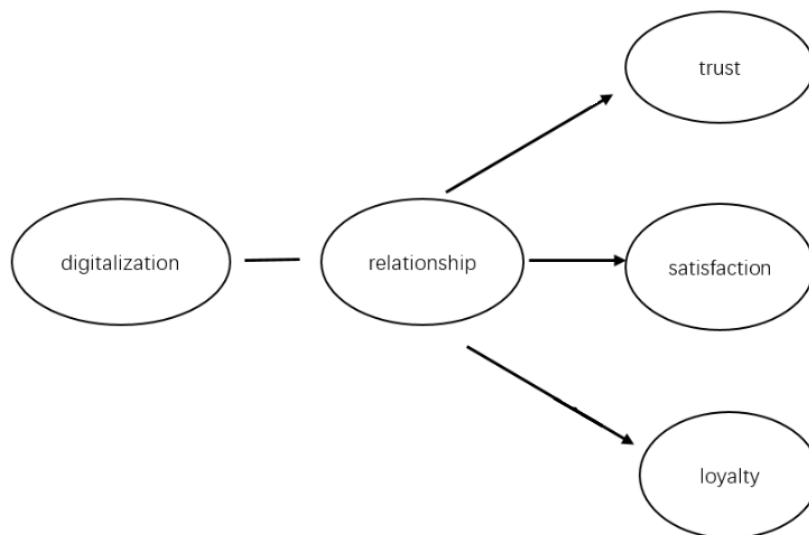


figure 1

3. Methodology

3.1 Approach

The research approach in this study is deductive. A deductive research approach begins with the theory and the concept of the designed research topic as the focal point of the study (L and Brewer, 2003). Data collection is another key part to the deductive study, and the core of the study is based on the data, which answers what, how and why (Reyes, 2004).

The deductive approach in this study consists of two aspects. First, an extensive review of literature will form basic concepts and identify a gap in the theories. And based on the theories reviewed, specific criteria will be

developed to enable the authors to select the samples. The result of investigated samples gives data and information necessary to this study.

3.2 method qualitative

Qualitative research methods are usually used for interviews, observation, and documentation. Qualitative research uses a scientific background, meaning that it interprets a phenomenon that occurs and is carried out by implementing existing methods. Qualitative research refers to understanding a social phenomenon from the participants' viewpoint (Nabila et al., 2017). According to Aspers et al. (2019), Qualitative research is a method to obtain research results based on analyzing and explaining data. Qualitative is concerned explanation with the description of the development of theory and not a number. Pasande et al., (2019) and Kuswandi et al., (2019) defines qualitative research as a form of systematic empirical inquiry into meaning. In addition, describe qualitative research method as involving an interpretive naturalistic approach to the world. The qualitative research method was used to gain a better understanding of the experiences of participants with a particular life context. In addition, the qualitative research method emphasizes the exploration of individual experiences, describes phenomena and builds theories (Noviaristanti, 2022). Qualitative research allows the researcher to explore, identify, and interpret the recurring patterns found in the collection of data. Hence, the qualitative method is suitable for the research that concentrates on the patterns of culture-specific items translation in the research's objects...."(Fitriyantisya et al., 2021). Shadish (2010) likewise stated that qualitative research methods are useful for attaining an in-depth understanding of the research problem. The qualitative research method is used to obtain in-depth information about a topic (Denzin, 1993). Qualitative research is considered only useful and appropriate for generating questionnaire items for subsequent quantitative analysis (Wiggins, 2011).

Consequently, the qualitative research method is designated for this study. The qualitative research method will allow authors to investigate and explore the research purpose, which is how digitalization can affect customer relationships.

3.3 Type of research

The type of research used is both exploratory and descriptive. According to Elman et al., (2020) exploratory study basically has two forms (1) a topic that has never been studied before. (2) from an existing topic to develop it into new ideas. After reviewing some scientific articles and books in this study, we find a gap existed in the theoretical framework. Based on the theory of digitalization, CRM and relationship qualities, we want to develop a

theoretical framework in this study and, explore how digitalization affects customer relationship in terms of trust, satisfaction and loyalty. This exploratory research type is necessary due to the lack of existing research on digitalization and customer relationships. According to Willian (2007), an experimental research requires a qualitative approach to the phenomenon. We will use case study in this qualitative exploratory study.

After collecting data from the interview and comparing the result with the existing theory stated in the frame of reference, it is a change in the type of research from exploratory to the one that descriptive research. According to Tracy, (2010), descriptive analysis seeks to address existing problem solutions based on data. Descriptive study also means providing a more detailed description of a symptom or phenomenon. The result of descriptive research is usually typology or patterns regarding the phenomenon being discussed

The study by Sun et al., (2011) states that the descriptive approach to scientific research is concerned with understanding naturally occurring phenomena by accurately describing what they are and how they work. The approach to answering the purpose was descriptive since a descriptive approach is often used in a research area that has been studied (Williams, 2007; Patel et al, 2011). It is also of great use to note that the research design employed both descriptive and qualitative approaches. This type of research aims to provide answers to the why's and how's (Braun et al.,2006).

Qualitative descriptive approach was considered appropriate to address the research question. Sandelowski (2010) acknowledges that whilst all research is interpretative, descriptive qualitative findings are reported as near to the original data as possible compared to other forms of research. Qualitative descriptive approaches are particularly useful where detailed descriptions are required (Sandelowski, 2000) or where there is a lack of research on the topic area. Descriptive qualitative research emphasizes the provision of wide-ranging, descriptive summaries that remain close to the data (Sandelowski, 2000). In addition, a qualitative descriptive approach is appropriate when a straight description of the phenomenon is desired because the researcher stays close to the data as reported (Sandelowski, 2010, p. 78), with minimal interpretation and low-influence descriptions (Sandelowski, 2000). Moreso, Qualitative research aims to delve into the research environment to gain insight into the nature of things, why they are so, and how the participants in the context perceive them (Hill, 2015).

3.4 Population and sample

The sample for this study selected is standardized by following the non-probability approach. The selection of the sample is not at random, instead,

there are some companies are more expected to participate in the interview. The SMEs selected are based on some requirements. First of all, the location and the size need to be in line with the definition, which is located in Sweden and has employee numbers under 50. Then, the SMEs in Sweden need to work with customer relationship management and pay attention to their customer relationship. Third, they have to adopt digitalization in their business activities. We have contacted one company that major in painting service with more than 5 employees located in Halmstad through the author's personal network. However, the company owner follows the traditional way of marketing by business network, radio, business cards. As a result, we have to abandon the interview with the owner.

In this study, selecting companies is convenient, which means chosen companies are based on the author's network, companies' availability and whether they can be reached online. To reach SMEs, many channels are used. Firstly, we searched companies on LinkedIn, which enabled us to set employees' numbers below 50. Then we got the email or telephone number to send them messages inviting them for the interview. At the same time, we use other social media, such as Facebook and Instagram pages, where we left messages about our research and invitation; since they will not reply instantly, we will keep reviewing the companies and contacts. We also conducted a walk-and-talk. We went to the city and found companies and asked about the company size first. After it is clear whether they use digitalization and their effort in customer relationship management, if they are fit for the interview, we will introduce the study and book a time with them. Besides, personal networks are also used since it consumes minimal time and effort.

In the end, three companies are selected for the interviews. As promised in advance, we followed the principle of informed consent, we do not publish the name. We will use Company A, B, and C instead of their names. Company A is a Swedish SME. As a food producer, their major in making bubble tea. The company is located in Gothenburg. The company pays so much attention to digitalization and customer relationships; they use digital social media, an accounting system, and a developing ordering system. Company B is a SME in Gothenburg as well. They are one of the Asian food retailer in the Nordic country with over 30 employees. Nowadays, they have started to adopt digitalization such as Power BI, and social media to accomplish customer relationship management. Company C is a small-sized company in Halmstad, with 6 employees. They are a traffic school but is registered as a company, and the students are their customers. Except for the leading service: teaching, they now put almost all business activities on digital tools. They use digital social media to communicate with the customer, "Elevecentralen" digital platform to plan the learning process for the customers.

3.5 Instrument to collect the data

Case studies may offer insights that might not be achieved with other strategies (Rowley, 2002) and thus case studies have been selected as the most suitable strategy for this study. Eisenhardt (1989) defines case study as "a research strategy, which focuses on understanding the dynamics present within single settings". Case studies are a relevant and effective research strategy (Remenyi et al, 2002) when a complex management or research situation is being investigated. A case study research strategy is one that uses a systemised way of observing (Serrano et al., 2005). A case study is a research strategy which focuses on understanding the dynamics present within single case settings (Eisenhardt, 1989). According to Godfray et al.,(2010), a case study also explores properties, attitudes, effects, and actions of individual or group characteristics with the aid of a questionnaire, observation, interviews, and document analysis.

The adopted research strategy consists of a multiple-case study based on the "process of building theory from case study research" proposed by Eisenhardt (1989). Qualitative research strategies like case studies are particularly suited for "how" or "why" questions, when the researcher has little control over actual behaviors, and when the study deals with contemporaneous events (Yin, 2003). According to Willis (2007), a case study research strategy can enable researchers to gather rich, detailed data in authentic settings.

According to Katuna, (2019) Interviewing is the process of obtaining information for research purposes in a way that answers face-to-face between the interviewer and the informant or the person being interviewed, with or without using an interview guide, where the interviewer and the informant are involved in a relatively long social life. Interviewing is one of the most highly used methods of collecting data in qualitative social research methods as suggested by Toubes et al., (2021). Interviews can be a useful tool in exploratory research. Interviews are a flexible research method, as improvements to the interview guide and the execution can be made between sessions. This study relies on the data that are collected by interviews. Interviewing is a typical research method in qualitative research (Massaro, 2019). Interviews are the most frequent form of data collection methods in social movement research and case study research. Interviews focus specifically on the case study topic and provide causal inferences (Schmidt et al.,2020). According to a review of interviewing methods in organizational research, the interview remains the most common data gathering method in qualitative research. Any qualitative research interview aims to view the research topic from the interviewee's standpoint (Mathison et al., 2010). The interview questions raised by the researcher are based on the literature (Nguyen, 2019) and research questions. The interview method, according to

research, builds an ethical connection between the interview recipient and the interviewer (Ikiseh, 2020). Interviews provide researchers with rich, detailed, qualitative data for understanding the experiences of participants and the meaning they make from their experiences. This type of research interview commonly involves the administration of an interview by an interviewer. The goal is to ensure respondents are interviewed in a standardized way in efforts to reduce variation and promote standardization in the method questions are asked and recorded (Bryman et al., 2008).

The interviews last 15 to 20 minutes based on the company's experience in using digitalization when making customer relationship management. Basically, 15 minute-interview can offer useful information for this study, and a certain amount of data can be collected. When conducting interviews, we use ZOOM to easily record interviews to communicate with Swedish SMEs in different cities. When we interviewed local company located in Halmstad, we made physical meeting with them and recorded the interview by telephone. To form useful information for the study, the data collection instruments are adopted variously in conducting empirical study (Wiley,2016).

During the interview, we followed the principle of informed consent. According to Flick et al., (2004), the investigation during the interview is based on the fullest possible information from the research purpose, to even the particular piece of research. To do that, we will contact the person of the SMEs in Sweden in advance, explain this study in detail, and inform their right to privacy. And we are open to them when they need to communicate or ask questions regard to the interview. The more the respondents understand, the more comfortable they feel when they answering the questions during the interview (Buck, 2009).

The language used in the interview is both English and Chinese. To the Company A and Company B, they are both owned by Chinese person, to minimize the misunderstanding about the interview questions, we will use Chinese to explain the main concept of the study, and if they feel comfortable with Chinese, they will answer the questions in Chinese. For Company C, the owner of the company is Swedish, because of the limited ability to speak Swedish, the interviewer will conduct interview by asking questions in English.

The questionnaire for the interviews consists of two parts. The first section of the questionnaire aims to explore the expected customer relationship of the company. And how they describe the relationship qualities in terms of trust, satisfaction and loyalty. And how these relationship qualities get affected by digitalization, which means respondents need to answer what are the specific digital strategy, and digital tools first and describe its influence in relationship

qualities. The second part of the questionnaire designed is to investigate the digitalization process, the digitalization outcomes, and the future development of the digital tools that can improve the customer relationship.

3.6 Research validity and reliability.

Dangal et al, (2020). states that validity and reliability are two essential factors to be considered by a qualitative researcher in order to maintain the quality of qualitative research. Reliability and validity are commonly used for testing or evaluating in quantitative research. To reveal the congruence between reliability and validity in qualitative research, Creswell et al., (2000) argued that there is no validity without reliability. Validity and reliability are conceptualized as trustworthiness, rigor and quality in qualitative research Ensuring research validity is strength of the qualitative research methodology (Berg, 2014). Researchers in a qualitative study assesses the findings' reliability and validity using appropriate designs and methods. Reliability and validity are related to the accuracy and precision of research and intended to make qualitative research rigorous (Jackson, 2021). Similarly, Kirk et al., (1986) suggest that validity in qualitative research entails the quality of collected data while reliability is concerned with the degree of consistency of collected data.

3.6.1 Reliability

In order to make this study more reliable, suitable respondents for the interview are being selected. Since the author wants to look deeply inside their business and gain useful information for the study, the respondents who will take the interview are also considered well. In this case we have the direct contact with the owner or manager of the company, who understand the goals and values of the business and have thoughtful insights in customer relationship as well. The table below showing the basic information of the respondents.

Name	The position of the respondent in the company
Company A	Owner/director
Company B	Manager

Company C	Owner/director
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Table the list of respondents.

With a focus to collect objective answers from the respondent, the interview questionnaire is well-designed. Respondents are expected to answer the questions from their own perspectives and the reality of their business rather than answer the questions by the meaning of the questions or the way they are asked (Bryman et al., 2019). Interviewer will ask respondents' opinion about digitalization, relationship with customers separately. And the effect of digitalization on customer relationship qualities will be asked, and any answers regarding positive effects, negative effects or none effects are expected. Thus, based on these two method, the reliability of this study is thus improved.

3.6.2 Validity

External validity indicates how the results can be applied for one entire population (Bryman et al., 2019). External validity of this study implies whether the findings can reach generalizability and that can be matched with the most of the SMEs in Sweden. Since a qualitative research involves a small number of cases and samples, the ability to be generalized in one population represent the degree of external validity.

Internal validity can be defined as the study's ability to measure a theoretical concept related to the foundation of this study: the research questions. In other words, whether the theoretical concepts can come to identical culmination with the findings (Bryman et al.,2019; Berg, 2014). In order to makes the empirical evidence more accurate, we take several measures. First, the information recorded during the interview will be saved during the whole research period. Second, to minimize the misunderstanding when authors make interpretations to each company, the audio will be carefully listened to several times. Third, when we finish the case study, the work will send back to the respondent, so they can add or change anything if is needed. So the validity and quality of the empirical evidence can be promised.

4. Empirical Study Results of the Qualitative Study—Case Study

4.1 Company A

Company A is a small-sized seller focusing on delivery and making fresh milk tea to the customers. The company is located in central of Gothenberg with only few competitors in this market. Currently, the company is still in the born stage of the life cycle and only two employees are working in the shop.

Except for the common role in a milk tea shop, the employer is also responsible for the administration and marketing jobs. In his opinion, the company's core value is not only making drinks but also arousing some memories for the Chinese in Sweden that there is still a place like home. He wishes that the milk tea culture expands worldwide, and in Sweden, especially in Gothenberg, the milk tea culture is growing and earning its own population.

Nowadays, the company adopts digital transformation strategies in several ways. In order to gather direct feedback from customers, the company uses several social media: Instagram, Facebook and Little Red Book(小红书, which is a Chinese app, users are mainly Chinese in other nations), where customers can share their experiences and comment with each other. One example is that in Little Red Book, there was a person who had never come to the shop yet, she asked if there would be a vegetarian milk option because she suffers from lactose intolerance. The manager instantly changed the menu and reply to the customer. The least time-consuming and active communication brings high interaction and company performance and because people learn their company and products and many positive feedback from other customers, many people from outside of Sweden come to shop the bubble tea products, he mentioned they have customers from Finland, America, Danmark and many other Chinese tourists.

Besides, the company also monitors the data such as sales amount on each product and inventory of raw materials through an online accounting system developed by the outsourcing company who sells cashier. The cashier has the function of calculating the sales amount of each product and creating a line chart so that they can test the popularity and decide whether or not to keep the products. As a small-sized company, the internal accounting software they adopt is only Excel, through some simple calculation, they can monitor the inventory so that the manager can be sure whether the material needs to be readded.

The company adjusts the digital transformation strategies in terms of the online ordering system embedded with social media Wechat (A Chinese social media like Facebook) and develops their own app other nations. This digital approach aims to shorten the customers' waiting time and make it more accessible. The products and ingredients can be shown and let the customer choose, in this way, satisfaction increases because it allows personalized and avoids the allergen. The ordering system is essential and helpful to the company as well. It shares a similar role with the cashier in collecting sales amount data

As the result of digital transformation strategies and digital tools adopted, there are some changes in their relationship with customers. As is described

by the manager, because it is free to share the shopping experience and products online, the company gets closer to the customers, unlike traditional marketing tools, it is two-way communication, the messages created by the customers are more helpful when attracting new customers and forming loyal customers. Moreover, customers are satisfied with the company's performance regarding high responsiveness, and customization. Due to the multiple factors, the company wins the trust of the customers.

4.2 Company B

Company B is an Asian food and accessories reseller, and it has customers from both individuals and companies. As a leading company within the food industry, the company supplies products to many other Asian markets in Nordic countries, and they also have a long-term cooperation with many Asian restaurants monthly even weekly. The company have a well-assorted range with over 6000 authentic items and have goods from all corners of the world with good variety, they promise they provide high quality Asian goods with both fresh and frozen goods.

The company also has, over thirty years of experience in the food industry, and has more than 30 workers. They believe a good relationship with customers is always at first-place, and they are willing to make everyone feel welcome.

With the great development of technology, the company is also experiencing a great change in the digitalization. They are one of the oldest Asian food company in Nordic countries, while they believe that they adopt most advanced technology and they appreciate the technology that brings a lot of convenience in doing business.

Like many other shops, the account system is embedded in the cashier, so that the sales amount, inventory, revenue can be traced. the raw data are record and processed. Unlike many other SMEs in Sweden, the company does not have the limitation in resource in terms of finance, time, labor, thus they create their own data mart instead of a data warehouse. The most significant difference is that data mart do some processing and concolidation to meet granularity. For example, each customer's record of purchase will be conformed in different hierachies and dimensions to ensure consistency between different data marts. Currently the company has 3 different data marts from B2B department, retail store, and warehouse.

According to the latest data, managers can predict future repurchase on each customer, so that they can conduct promotion and campaign individually. The individual marketing approach is very useful and efficient to the both company and customers. For instance, the system will predict whether the

customers will repurchase and when the purchase will happen, so that the company can purchase the products in a low price for selling in the future at a higher price. Manager mentioned that they always purchase Ice-cream in the winter season, for a low purchase and transport price.

Moreover, the data-based customer relationship management optimize the business and increase customer satisfaction by improving cost effectiveness and simplifying the process. The weekly updated data is very detailed and carefully monitoring customers' needs, and thus a large group of loyal customers follow the company for many years, and the company is always on their first option. Due to the good service and the quality of food, freshness of the fruits, vegetables and frozen food, many individual customers are also satisfied with the company.

Nowadays, the company also open an account in the social media, such as facebook and instagram, where they will update the new arrivals in the store. In the Chinese social media, Wechat, they post pictures and campaigns to keep close with the customers. Nonetheless, in order to learn what is fashion in China and many other countries, they collect messages from customers through Wechat, and they are open to these requirements, when they learnt one product from their customers, they tried to use their own network to contact with the producer or distributor, so that they can bring the product to Nordic.

In the end, they said, the digital technologies bring more chance and possibilities in making business, and also break the limitation of time and space to reach their customers any place at any time, the satisfaction, trust from the customers means a lot to the company.

4.3 Company C

Company C is a small-sized company located in the center of Halmstad. It is a traffic school that teaches students to drive both automatic and manual cars and deliver theory lessons and supervisor courses. The company is also qualified to teach risk 1 and risk 2 class, which are two of total 4 steps in obtaining a Swedish driver license. They also help students book exams through a system, which is offered by Swedish traffic agency. The owner of the company pays a lot of attention to how to gain competitive advantages when competing with other 8 traffic schools in Halmstad since each traffic school has almost identical roles and values, it is really hard to make the company outstanding.

During the interview, the company owner stated that they spend more time and effort into building a good relationship with the customers. He said most customers will never come back to school again. But they have to appreciate

their existing customers because the growing network will continuously expand. Customers probably will recommend the traffic school to their friends and relatives to be the potential customers even if the service ends. Their customer is the biggest resource; keeping a good relationship with them is always put first place.

In order to do this, the company has adopted digitalization strategies. They are very proactive on digital social media, both Facebook and Instagram. They try to keep uploading something almost every day. For instance, whenever students pass final driving test, they will upload the pictures; they also share the information about latest supervisor course available; posting theory questions and answers etc so that both potential and real customers will read and share it by using their private account, and the information will be seen by the follower's network.

The advantages of using digital social media are about expanding networks and having good communication and interaction channels regardless of time and space and costs. Since it is a small-sized company, the owner works as a teacher, during business hours, he is always on the road with other students. No matter when customers has questions or feedback, he can always answer it without picking up telephone or email it in the office. The high efficiency in processing customer's requirements increases the chance of establishing new relationships with potential customers. This happens especially when potential customer decide to start learning driving and have to choose only one traffic school. Customers will communicate with several traffic schools at one time, and based on their responsiveness, the communication channels to make a choice. Currently, customers prefer digital communication channels: Facebook and Instagram since they can gain useful information without a physical visit.

The digital transformation strategy also changes the way when they serve their customers. "Elevcentralen" is one digital platform designed for both traffic schools and students to book course, learn theory, and share experience. Traffic schools can learn their customer's ability in doing theory and driving through the record. The timely feedback from teachers to students is very useful, so students understand the learning process and the future plan. Moreover, traffic schools can book exams through the digital platform. Because the place of exam is always so limited and many people will compete for this in a very short period.

In conclusion, the digitalization in communication brings high efficiency and increases responsiveness, and the digital platform makes customer's expectations and ability traceable. Due to the several digital approaches, the company increases the service quality and creates more relationships with customers.

5. Analysis

5.1 Digitalization and CRM

Digitalization has been gaining more attention by both practitioners and academics. With the great development of information, technology and the internet, digitalization creates more channels for the companies to deliver messages to their customers (Ardolino et al, 2018; Green et al. 2018; Kokina and Blanchette, 2019, Troshani et al, 2019). Many researchers have proved that companies benefit from digitalization, such as new revenue and value-producing opportunities (Porter and Heppelmann, 2014). The advantage of using digitalization is not only creating communication channels, but also keeping updating data from customers thus , the performance of the company can be improved accordingly (Marcon et al., 2019). CRM as one of the purpose of digitalization can be conducted in various ways, such as applications, software, where companies can learn customer's desires and evolving need (Mithas et al., 2005). CRM also help companies collect, process data of the customers to be useful information to conduct future plans better and meet customer expectations (Davenport, 2001; Nambisan, 2002).

Combine the theory of Swedish SMEs, that most of them suffer from the limited time and resource, the traditional ways of marketing communication such as TV, radio, and newspaper are beyond their capability. Thus, as is discussed above, SMEs in Sweden take more advantages of using digitalization tools, take digital transformation strategies and digital business model (Perelygina et al., 2022; Heikkilä-Tammi et al., 2018; Ebert et al, 2018)

The respondent from company A is using digital social media from Facebook, Instagram to even Chinese Little Red Book, where they can communicate with customers gaining timely feedback. They are working on developing an online ordering application right now, so people can gain knowledge about the product information. Moreover, they use an intelligent system which is embedded in cashier, where they can monitor the sales and revenues to study customer's preference, thus they can make improvement in their products.

The respondent from Company B stated that the digital approach they use is data mart and Power BI, so they can transfer raw data such as sales amount to be useful information, offer customers promotion and make prediction of customers' repurchases on different products or learning their important customer's preference on different products. Besides, the company also using digital social media: Facebook, Instagram, and Wechat, where they show recommendations to the customers and collect the information from customers regarding customer's expected products, and their expectations.

The respondent from Company C confirms that they highly relied on the digital social media, Instagram and Facebook, in the opinion of the owner,

digital social media highly shorten the time of communication with customers, the direct communication also wins an opportunity for the company to attract new customer. At the same time, in order to expand the network, they make themselves active on the social media by organizing an activity, showing information about class, students who pass driver test. Moreover, to make it clear and accurate, they use Elevcentral to book class and exams for the students, where students can have a clear idea about the plan, learning process, and feedback from the teacher.

According to the empirical findings, companies are adopting many digital tools for different purposes simultaneously. For having direct communication with customers, digital social media such as Facebook, Instagram, Wechat, Little Red Book are adopted. Companies not only access to the message from the customers, but also deliver companies' image, culture, and successful experience in their great service or products. Moreover, in order to conduct customer relationship management, the certain amount of data is needed for learning their customers. In this case, accounting system, Power BI or even social media are good digital channels to gain and process all the information. With the great help of digitalization, the work of learning customers' needs and expectations become more efficient in the time, and better in the quality.

5.2 The effect of digitalization in customer's trust

As one relationship quality, trust brings customers a feeling of security, decreases uncertainty, and creates a supportive business environment (Geyskens et al., 1995). Trust consists of many elements, such as: customer's confidence on service or product; honesty, reliability, customer familiarity, quality of product or service (Morgan et al., 1994; Patrick, 2002; Dehghan et al., 2015; Eisingerich et al., 2008; Siau et al., 2003). In order to develop trust on customers, companies are creating more interaction with customers, enrich the customer's knowledge on their products or service, and improve the quality of the products or service (Morgan et al., 1994; Eisingerich et al., 2008; Siau et al., 2003).

The respondent from company A commented on their digital social media approach. They describe it as a teaching and learning process, for those who has no background of Bubble Tea or Asian culture, they try to show what actually it is so that even European people can understand it. At the same time, they learn what customers is looking for by customers, for example, the special requirements on material and customers like to keep improving their products and meet customer's requirements. They keep replying to customers' messages on social media and be more interactive with customers through the digital platform; the owner of the company stated that their customers highly trust them on both excellent quality of products and service.

The respondent from Company B discussed their digital approach in using Power BI and social media. Power BI helps them learning the information, especially the information of the key customers such as B2B business partner, local restaurant, other Asian stores in Nordic region, based on the history, they can always prepare the products in advance and at suitable time, so the frozen food and fresh fruits can be always delivered at the highest quality. The respondent comments that due to the highest quality of the products, they create many long-term cooperation with both B2B companies and individuals. Customers always have great confidence in the products. She believes that it is the real customer's trust.

The respondent from Company C stress the importance of trust, especially when attracting new customers. As a driving school, getting a driver's license is highly paid attention to. Digital social media offer a place where they keep uploading pictures when students pass driving test. It is the most powerful evidence of their excellent teaching outcome and is the most persuasive. When potential customers see these photos, they will be confident about their service, choose them to start a business relationship, and trust them. Moreover, they keep high pace of showing up on Facebook and Instagram and showing information and knowledge about driver license as a way to enrich customer's knowledge so they understand what is the standard of the service and be ready for the future, at the same time, customers become more familiar with the company. Based on the several efforts by the company and great communication and interaction with the company, they gain much trust from their both potential and existing customers.

The empirical findings indicate that the investigated companies improve their both service and products by using digital social media to communicate with customers directly. Many of them using digital social media to keep high interaction with customers in order to increase the familiarity since customers trust companies with whom they are familiar with. In order to deliver customer's expected quality of the service, companies using digital software such as PowerBI, and accounting system to monitor data and gather information for the future business.

5.3 The effect of digitalization in customer's satisfaction

Satisfaction is one important constructs of a good relationship (Cosby et al, 1990; Storbacka et al., 1994; Naude et al, 2000). Satisfaction comes from customer's attitude, assessment toward the products or service they purchased, in other word, customer's overall evaluation toward whole buying experience (Fornell, 1992; Ningsih et al., 2014). Satisfaction shares similarities with trust, for example, they both based on the quality of the service and products (Naude et al,2000; Fornell, 1992). They are still different, since satisfaction emphasizes the customer's expectations while trust focuses mainly on quality.

Satisfaction can be measured through Customer satisfaction index, Important –performance analysis, the advantage of adopting these methods is to help companies make decisions to the future resource allocation and better meet the customers' expectations (Topalović, 2015; Gee 2008). Using digital approach to make customer relationship management so that companies can learn the customer's expected service or product and continuously conduct high business performance (Mehra, 2002).

The respondent from Company A stated by communication through digital social media, they learn the customer's expectations and which is discussed above: the customer's requirements on material. They also collect customer's feedbacks from each digital social media so they will improve the products and service in a good way. They also conduct quality management both physical and digital, they promise good quality and high standard of making each product, at the same time, based on the sales amount, the ordered number of each products, they will make improvement based on these data and information, so that their future performance in terms of both service and products can satisfy more customers.

The respondent from Company B stated their efforts to satisfy customers. Through one digital social media, Wechat, a Chinese social media mainly of Chinese users, customers can share information about popular products in China or in other Asian countries and wish to shop it in Sweden. They can ask for it through Wechat. The manager said it is a very good approach in updating their product category and learning customer's expectations. The customer will get very good satisfied by this digital communication and interaction with the company.

The respondent of Company C did not work so much on customer's satisfaction. The majority of focus is on winning more customers and making customers trust the company. Satisfaction normally happens after experiencing the whole purchasing process from buying to enjoy the service. The satisfaction of the customers did not strengthen the relationship with the company since customers will never come back again. However, the company try to deliver the satisfaction from one customer to more potential customers to create more relations, which is discussed above showing students' pictures on Facebook or Instagram. Besides, customers' expectations of the service from the traffic school are more physical and face-to-face communication and experience, which digital tools cannot replace. While, there is one exception when customers expect a high responsiveness, and timely communication. Digital tools, Facebook, Instagram will be the most efficient way in communication. And the convenience of reading feedback and booking course or exams on Elevcentralen satisfies the customers.

The study's empirical findings indicate that investigated companies have greatly benefited from the adoption of digital social media. The convenience to communicate and gain useful information about their customers. The digital channels such as Facebook, Instagram, Wechat and Little Red book create new channels for the companies and break the limitation of time and space, so they can meet the expectations of customers in a very short period. Using digital tools such as accounting system to analyze and predict the customer's needs in the future also contributes to the customer's satisfaction.

5.4 The effects of digitalization in customer's loyalty

Customer's loyalty as a core resource of companies are gaining more emphasis. It is defined as both behavioral and attitudinal engagement (Fornell, 1992; Morrison, 1986; Warrington, 2000; Leverin et al., 2006). Behavior measure is based on the customer's repurchase, frequency of purchase and their contribution to the profit in the past (Hughes, 1996; Morrison, 1986; Kahn et al., 1986). Attitudinal engagement differs from the behavioral one, which cannot be traced or observed. It is described as a customer's feelings of trust in it or satisfied when the company meet customer's needs (Duffy, 1998). And unlike behavioral measurement, attitudinal measurement is not based on the purchase activities, it happens when there is trust or satisfaction in customers (Leverin et al., 2006)

The respondent of Company A stated that their customers always kept in good touch with the company; customers who live in Gothenburg and many nearby cities buy their products almost one time in a week. For those who cannot come to Gothenburg so often, over 50 percent will buy their products instead of other competitors when they arrive in Gothenburg. They believe those customers with frequent purchase behaviors are loyal to the company. And those who do not purchase frequently instead are active in social media, interact and communicate with the company, and trust in their quality and recommend to more people are also very loyal customers. They believe loyalty of the customers push the company to grow and continuously create new values.

The respondent of Company B shares the same opinion with Company A. They are very confident in their customers. They commented company has established many long-term cooperation with business customers, they always put the company in a very first place when they order some products. The purchase happens monthly even weekly by that restaurant and other Asian market in Nordic region. The frequent purchase behavior indicate loyalty among customers. Moreover, both individual and business customers trust the good quality of products and their expectations on the new products are satisfied, the mental feelings also mean a loyalty in the customers.

The respondent of Company C discussed the significance of loyal customers. He mentioned that many of their customers are loyal to the customers in terms of the psychological aspect. They trust the high teaching quality and are satisfied with the efficiency in communication through digital social media. Even if they do not purchase other service, they still recommend the traffic school to others, share their learning experience and leave feedback. The owner of the company comment, these customers are very loyal to the company.

The empirical findings of this study indicate that investigated companies pay much attention to customer loyalty. They usually have a very clear understanding of what their loyal customers are in adapting to their specific business. However, there are poor link between digitalization with customer loyalty, some customers are loyal to the company because of physical products or service they purchase. Digitalization does have an indirect role in improving service through digital technology, social media, application, and software. Companies learn customers' expectations and desires to improve the quality of products or service. while digitalization has a very limited impact on customer loyalty compared to many other factors that contribute to the customer's loyalty jointly.

6. Limitation and further implementation, conclusion

6.1 Limitation and further implementation

One of the challenges that slowed down the research process and collection of data was time constraints. In as much as we had sent out requests to companies earlier on, expressing my interest in interviewing them to find out more about how they operate, scheduling the interviews took a while and the managers who we were supposed to get answers from, to aid in data collection were busy most of the times. Considering that these are SMES, that are always running, it was hard to schedule enough time to collect the data we required, and when there was a bit of time, Managers had their busy roles to get back to. At the (beginning) of the research, we intended to present 4 case studies, however we ended up having only 3. Besides the aspect of time, these 3 perfectly fit the purpose of the study. The challenge with adopting 3 case studies as opposed to 4, was that it limited the scope of study, also narrowing down how much information we would be able to get, at the time of compiling the thesis. The other challenge with using only 3 case studies in the research was that it limited comparative advantage. Where we'd have had 4 companies to make comparisons from, we only had 3 to work with. The case studies we used and all the people that we had the opportunity to interact with represent Small and Medium Scale Enterprises within Sweden.

Thereby representing just a fraction of views into the study at hand.

Using one method for data collection allowed us to get information, limited to that method. If two or more methods had been used to collect data in this research project, it would greatly enrich the research project as a whole. The key form of data collection in the preparation of this research project was the use of online interviews. The major challenge that presented was it took away the ability of the researcher to obtain data that they would have obtained in a face-to-face interview for example. In as much as online interviews serve in being convenient, follow up questions on certain pieces of information may not be possible. It is also important to highlight that heavy reliance is placed on the accuracy of the respondent in collecting data, which accuracy may not be achieved in an online interview. The possibility of a respondent giving you what they want you to hear and not facts is also highly possible.

6.2 Conclusion

In this chapter, the authors make conclusions for this study and answer the research questions that were stated at the beginning and also explain how digitalization affects customer relationship and relationship qualities.

The main objective of this study is to explore how digitalization affects customer relationship. Three elements of relationship quality are selected and developed in the analysis. The primary data, which comes from the interviews, is all knowledge and experience from owners and managers of the companies. The authors also combine the analysis of empirical study to the references.

Answering the research question “How does digitalization affects customer relationships within Swedish SMEs?” during the interview, the authors find that companies improve the customer relationship by adoption of digitalization. For example, in order to improve the efficiency of communication with customers, companies use digital social media such as Facebook, Instagram, Wechat, and Little Red Book, where they can gain feedback, learn customer’s expectations on the products and services. The digital softwares such as accounting system and Power BI are used for collecting raw data of customers when they make purchase. Digital software translate data to useful information and helps companies to conduct customer relationship management. Moreso, different companies develop their own digital applications and platforms to increase efficiency in doing business, increase interaction and get closer with customers. Based on these factors, it is proved that digitalization can strengthen the customer relationship for the companies.

“How does digitalization affect customer’s trust?” It has been proved by most companies that using digital tools, digital social media and software to communicate and interact with customers can lead customers to trust in the company. Digitalization in business also increases the quality of the products

and services. Frequently interacting with customers improves customer's familiarity to the company, which also contributes to the customer trust.

“How does digitalization affect customer's satisfaction?” Satisfaction of customers is improved when their expectations are met. Digitalization contributes to the customer relationship management, in a way, that companies easily obtain knowledge of customer's expectation, and because of the high efficiency in using digital tools, companies can process the new requirements from the customers timely and perfectly, thus customers are satisfied.

“How does digitalization affect customer's loyalty?” From the empirical evidence, a weak link between customer loyalty and digitalization is portrayed. It indicates an indirect impact from digitalization to customer loyalty. However, customer's loyalty can be improved by increasing satisfaction and trust, and it has been proved that digitalization can have a positive effect on both satisfaction and trust.

The results imply that digitalization will have a positive effect on customer relationship as well as satisfaction, trust. A weak connection between digitalization and loyalty is also indicated, which means, digitalization indirectly influences customer's loyalty.

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Appendices

Interview questions

What is the name of your company?

How do you describe your business and core value?

How do you describe your role in the company?

Relationship

1. How do you describe the importance of the customer relationship within your business?

2. What are your expectations of a good customer relationship?
(please describe in detail what digital tools are used and what digital approaches are made when answering questions from No.3-No.14)
3. How does digitalization affect your customer relations?
4. How does digitalization affect your interaction and communication with your customer?
5. How would you describe digitalization affecting the customer's familiarity with the company?
6. How does digitalization affect the trust of customers based on interaction, and familiarity?
7. How would you describe the role of digitalization in influencing products or service quality?
8. What is your opinion on customers' expectations?
9. What have you done to try to improve the customer's expectations?
10. How would you describe the role of digitalization in influencing customers' expectations?
11. How does digitalization affect customer satisfaction based on the quality of products and service; customers' expectations?
12. How does digitalization affect customers' purchase and repurchase frequency?
13. How do you describe customers' mental feelings or attitudes toward the company?
14. How does digitalization affect the customer's loyalty in terms of both purchase behavior and attitudes.?

Digitalization

- 1 How often are you refining your digital transformation goals
2. What are the biggest challenges that your organization has faced in trying to undertake a successful digital transformation

3. Is your organization currently on schedule to become more digital.
(Describe your level of digitalization)

4. What specific outcomes do your organization expect to achieve as a result of its digital transformation

5. What are the results of the digitalization of your company?

6. What future development of digital tools can benefit the customer relationship?