Integration of Digital Communication in B2B Companies

- *A qualitative case study of Company X*

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Abstract

In communication and marketing there have been a shift from a transaction focus with emphasis on persuasion to a relationship focus referred to as a two-way communication with increased interactivity. Traditional companies are challenged to understand how their business can take advantage and adapt to the digital changes and opportunities when it comes to communication and building relationships and gain the ability to anticipate and deliver what customers expect them to.

B2B companies have a slower adaptation to digital media and digital changes compared to B2C companies and when it comes to digital channels there is many opportunities to discover. B2B companies still feel dependent on traditional communication when it comes to building relationships but the digital trend pressure companies to get involved and keep up digitally. The constantly expanding digital landscape force B2B companies to find a way to utilize digital platforms and channels in order to create strong digital relationships with retailer and audience

The purpose of this study is to investigate and gain an understanding how B2B wholesalers communicate and build digital relationships with retailers.

A qualitative method is used featuring a single-case study with Company X a B2B firm operating in the wholesale trade business as a producer and a wholesaler. Data used in the study is collected from semi-structured interviews with employees from the sales and marketing department.

Digital marketing is one of the most emerging tools within communication, that B2B businesses not yet use to its full potential but are eager to discover the opportunities and advantages B2C companies adapted for a long time. B2B businesses use digital tools to support and strengthen the communication and relationship with retailers however findings reveal traditional tools is still the preferred communication method in B2B.

Our findings suggest how there are still qualities lacking in digital communication that can only be achieved through traditional communication with psychical meetings. Empirical suggestion on how a B2B company can adopt techniques from B2C and apply it in a B2B context.
Keywords

Communication, two-way communication, integrated marketing communication, IMC, digital marketing, digital platforms, B2B.

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Table of Content

1 INTRODUCTION ........................................................................................................... 1
  1.1 BACKGROUND ........................................................................................................ 1
  1.2 PROBLEM DISCUSSION ......................................................................................... 2
  1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS ......................................................................................... 4
  1.4 PURPOSE ................................................................................................................ 4

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK ...................................................................................... 5
  2.1 COMMUNICATION ................................................................................................. 5
      2.1.1 Integrated marketing communication .......................................................... 5
          2.1.1.1 Communication channels ...................................................................... 8
      2.1.2 Communication-based marketing model for managing relationships .......... 10
          2.1.2.1 Communication based model ................................................................. 10
          2.1.2.2 Integration perspective ............................................................................. 10
      2.1.3 Effective Communication .............................................................................. 13
  2.2 DIGITAL MARKETING ............................................................................................ 13
      2.2.1 Digital marketing definition .......................................................................... 13
      2.2.2 Digital business strategy .............................................................................. 14
  2.3 RELATIONSHIPS .................................................................................................. 15
  2.4 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK ............................................................................... 17

3 METHODOLOGY ............................................................................................................ 18
  3.1 RESEARCH APPROACH ....................................................................................... 18
      3.1.1 Qualitative Approach .................................................................................... 19
      3.1.2 Abductive, Deductive and Inductive Approach ............................................. 20
  3.2 CASE STUDY ......................................................................................................... 20
  3.3 DATA COLLECTION ............................................................................................... 21
      3.3.1 Semi-structured interviews ......................................................................... 22
      3.3.2 Interview Guide ............................................................................................ 22
      3.3.3 Selection of respondents ............................................................................. 23
      3.3.4 Respondent overview .................................................................................. 23
  3.4 ANALYSIS METHOD ............................................................................................. 24
  3.5 EMPIRICAL FINDINGS OVERVIEW ...................................................................... 25
3.6 Quality Criteria .................................................................................................................. 26
  3.6.1 Validity .......................................................................................................................... 26
  3.6.2 Reliability ...................................................................................................................... 26
  3.6.3 Credibility ..................................................................................................................... 27
  3.6.4 Conformability .............................................................................................................. 27
3.7 Ethical Considerations ......................................................................................................... 27

4 Empirical Findings .................................................................................................................... 29
  4.1 Digital Platforms ................................................................................................................ 29
  4.2 Strategy ............................................................................................................................. 30
  4.3 Relationships ..................................................................................................................... 32
  4.4 Communication .................................................................................................................. 33

5 Analysis .................................................................................................................................. 35
  5.1 Digital Platforms ................................................................................................................ 35
  5.2 Strategy ............................................................................................................................. 38
  5.3 Relationships ..................................................................................................................... 39
  5.4 Communication .................................................................................................................. 40

6 Conclusion .............................................................................................................................. 42
  6.1 Practical and Managerial Implications .............................................................................. 43

References

Appendices 1
1 Introduction

The following chapter will provide an insight and background of the topic of the research. The papers contributions will be explained and motivated followed by a problem discussion for further explanation regarding the purpose of the study and research questions will be presented.

1.1 Background

The relationship with external stakeholders and customers is seen as one of the most valuable assets and it is less beneficial for a company to acquire new customers compared with creating long-lasting customer relationships (Duncan & Moriarty, 1998). Porcu et al (2017) discuss the importance of interactivity and creating a two-way communication between parties as a necessity for creating a dialogue between organizations. The advancement in communication and information technology plays an important part as technology help to improve the interaction (Porcu et al. 2017). Transformations in consumer behaviour forces firms to reconsider their marketing strategies in the digital area (Tiago & Veríssimo, 2014.) The authors suggest a lot of research today focus on the customers and not the firm and to create an understanding of digital marketing usage as well as its advantages and hindrances focus must be on emphasize interactions and customer relationships (Tiago & Veríssimo, 2014). Such as Mallick (2016) suggest businesses are challenged to understand how their business can benefit and work with digital technologies when it comes to communication and building relationships (Mallick, 2016).

Today new businesses are driven by digital technology, companies such as Uber, Amazon and Airbnb are examples of companies that sparked a digital revolution where other businesses want to reinvent themselves to keep up (Telegraph, 2016; Goldenberg, B, 2016). Companies that did not consider themselves technology companies left the online market open for actors such as Amazon and eBay to take over large market shares (Libert et al, 2014). Pemberton Levy (2015) claim B2B industries can learn from B2C when it comes to the digital area and quote Newbold-Knipp (2015) “By adopting techniques from B2C, B2B marketers can drive revenue and capture untapped opportunities”
Another example of the digitalization is the CEO of HobSpot, Hallingan (2016) stating, “If you’re not marketing on social media, you might as well be marketing inside a trash can.” Also suggesting marketing today is not just about marketing business to business, it is about marketing businesses to humans since people are constantly on Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Messenger and WhatsApp (Del Rowe, 2017). Other perceived benefits with social media is efficient interactions, create customer engagement, educate customers, deliver information in an effective way and receive valuable feedback (Alalwan et al. 2017). Companies looking at the advantage of the use of social media in their business to reach new customers and what it can do to improve their marketing position. Digital marketing is a less expensive way of communication than using traditional marketing tools such as radio, TV and newspaper (Alalwan et al. 2017; Leeflang et al. 2014).

B2B organizations have had a slower adoption of new media than B2C organization and there are many opportunities to discover when it comes to using different digital channels in B2B marketing (Miller, 2012). Communication changes as a result of technology and having an online strategy has become a must to survive. Business communication has to incorporate a variety of online communication tools to reach the target segment. Digital marketing such as social media, social networking, webinars, email etc. are a part of the new world for business communication thus the success of a business relies on how well the company succeed to gain competitive advantage out of digitization (Patrutiu-Baltes, 2016).

1.2 Problem discussion

The advancement in technology have provided new channels of digital communication that plays an important part in improving integration, it has extended communication and increased expectations from customers. Technology has affected the accessibility of information and increased commitment from the audience (Goldhaber, 1993; Jones, 2005; Kliatchko, 2005; Luck & Moffatt, 2009; Porcu et al, 2017). Integration of digital marketing tools and social media are widely used within B2C while B2B companies are unwilling to fully adapt. Many B2B companies are lacking knowledge, practical experience and motivation when it comes to integrating digital means in the marketing strategy (Siamagka et al. 2015)
B2B companies are facing challenges when it comes to taking advantage of the benefits of online communities such as digital media platforms and channels, benefits the B2C community is already taking advantage of (Valos et al, 2015). Järvinen et al (2012) argue that B2B companies do not see how the potential of digital channels can be applied on their marketing activities. Karjaluoto et al (2015) argue how digital communication channels is not considered effective communication without the support of individual and personal communication and Hanninen & Karjaluoto (2017) argue that the most used marketing communication tool is still personal selling for B2B companies. According to Chikweche & Fletcher (2013) the digitalization has disrupted the traditional way of managing customer information and the digital platforms have caused a shift in relationship management, where many industries now are struggling with the pressure to revise strategies for communication channels within marketing and engaging in relationships. For B2B companies it is necessary to motivate the audience to a discussion where the company and customers can communicate with one another and where the company can engage and invest in mutually beneficial relationships rather than just a one-way communication, digitalisation has created new avenues of sharing information, communicate and managing information in an online setting (Chikweche & Fletcher, 2013; Opreana & Vinerean, 2015).

In a call for paper (Elsevier, 2016) it is argued how additional research is needed within digitalization and research regarding its effects on marketing. How it has changed considerably with deeper emphasis on online marketing and less on traditional marketing. Further research is needed in how businesses can get competitive advantage in the rising competitive digital world and what digital strategies that is effective when building and creating competitive advantage. Study how businesses adjust their traditional business models to take advantage from the digital revolution (Elsevier, 2016). As Karjaluoto et al (2015) highlights, their is a need for additional research of the use of new digital communication whether the aim is to generate leads, brand building or to improve communication with present customers regarding the use and adoption of new digital communication methods. Furthermore to investigate whether the objectives and main use of digital tools in the sales process is to improve communication with existing customers and brand building (Karjaluoto et al. 2015). Due to the changing way of interactions with companies and brands the old way when
companies use to pushing a message out is not as effective anymore. Focus is on interaction and engage the customer (Opreana & Vinerean, 2015).

The aim with this study is to investigate how B2B companies communicate and build digital relationships with retailers through integrated two-way communication activities on digital platforms and channels. Conducting a case-study we aim to receive a holistic view of all the digital communication channels and platforms used in B2B. Limit our study the focus is on B2B wholesalers and their motives for using digital marketing methods.

1.3 Research Questions
RQ: What are the objectives for using digital platforms for B2B wholesalers?

RQ: How have the use of digital channels affected the effectiveness within communication and relationship-building with retailers.

1.4 Purpose
The purpose of this study is to investigate and gain an understanding of how B2B wholesalers communicate and build digital relationships with retailers
2 Theoretical Framework

The following chapter will clarify the theoretical concepts related to relationships, communication and digital marketing. This chapter will provide the conceptual framework serving as a guideline for the empirical findings and analysis.

2.1 Communication

2.1.1 Integrated marketing communication

Integrated marketing communication (IMC) is now accepted by researchers and specialists as a path of moving forward in this multifaceted platform and digital landscape that is a part of our everyday life (Mortimer & Laurie, 2017). IMC is found to be a valuable approach among researchers but is interpreted and defined in several different ways (Tafesse & Kitchen, 2015).

Porcu et al. (2017) suggests an organizational view since the entire organization is complex and involved in IMC and flexibility is needed to adapt to changes, defining IMC as follow:

“The stakeholder-centred interactive process of cross-functional planning and alignment of organisational, analytical and communication processes that allows for the possibility of continuous dialogue by conveying consistent and transparent messages via all media to foster long-term profitable relationships that create value”
Porcu et al. (2017 p.694)

Porcu et al. (2017) discuss the importance of interactivity and two-way communication as a necessary element for a dialogue between businesses and stakeholders and the brand. The advancement in communication and information technologies plays an important part as technologies help improve interactivity (Porcu et al. 2017). Organizational orientation is crucial and refers to vertical and horizontal communication process, same company goals and values among both managers and employees. Cross-functional collaboration and coordination is a crucial aspect (Porcu et al. 2017).

Shultz and Shultz (1998) definition of IMC has a crucial impact and importance of the strategic part of IMC as a business procedure, compared with its first conception, the
view of IMC as a simple organisation tool for marketing communication. Schultz & Schultz (1998 p.8), define IMC as follow:

“IMC is a strategic business process used to plan, develop, execute and evaluate coordinated, measurable, persuasive brand communication programs over time with consumers, customer, prospects and other targeted relevant external and internal audiences” Schultz & Schultz (1998 p.8)

One of the most crucial features of this definition is that it draws attention to the business process in which all actions and communication activities can be organized and planned and thereafter applied and evaluated according to the customer value for the business. Every business has different approaches to IMC, it all varies depending on the business nature, strategies, support from managers and what channels the business rely on (Schultz & Schultz, 1998).

Duncan, & Caywood, (1996) suggest IMC can bring several benefits with its synergistic effect contribute with improved revenue on marketing investments made by companies, which is crucial since pressure is high. Two things affecting IMC is development in expertise and different functions in marketing communication, which has evolved from customers to all stakeholders (Duncan, & Caywood, 1996). Controlling and encouraging dialogue, influence messages create and nurture profitable relationship strategically.

“The process of strategically controlling or influencing all messages and encouraging purposeful dialogue to create and nourish profitable relationships with customers and other stakeholders” (Duncan, & Caywood, 1996 p.18).

Which highlighting on long-term outcomes such as brand loyalty and nourishing relationships. Duncan also expanded IMC to include employees regulators, stockholders and other parties who are involved indirect or direct in a business operation and success (Duncan, & Caywood, 1996). Several studies have underlined the effect relationship marketing has on IMC. Duncan & Moriarty (1998) imply the social nature of business is usually and especially in marketing reliant on relationships. Knowledge and
understanding of the part communication have for upholding beneficial stakeholder relationships is a main aspect Duncan & Moriarty (1998).

Peltier, et al. (2003) consider IMC from the outcome perspective it can be described as a solution for reaching synergy in marketing, execution and planning with outcomes such as improved productivity, effectivity and performance. The increase growth of new electronic media has changed IMC planning. Interactive media such as e-mail, world wide web, wireless communication devices and linked systems. This new media is rejected and seen as an additional marketing tool by some while others embrace it and experts view the potential benefits for these media to change the way marketing and marketing communication is viewed. One challenge for marketers is to discover a great way to implement new tools for enhanced marketing communication (Peltier, et al. 2003)

Mortimer & Laurie (2017) declare the importance of a company having enough training, support and guidelines to help taking advantage of IMC and make changes for the better to strengthen the company performance (Mortimer & Laurie, 2017). There are also three main issues identified: Initially, the difficulties to understand therefore not make changes due to the perceived risk. Second, not in control or lack of authority over the organization our poor involvement from executive level. Third, companies may not have a strong and clear function in the execution of IMC (Mortimer & Laurie, 2017).

Kliatchko (2008) argue how IMC has developed from from a narrow view of a synchronizing communication tool to a strategic procedure. Kliatchko (2008) define IMC as:

“IMC is the concept and process of strategically managing audience-focused, channel-centred, and results-driven brand communication programmes over time” (Kliatchko, 2008 p.140)

Kliatchko (2005) view IMC with three different pillars, audience focused which is referring to when an organization interacts with and deals with various publics and stakeholders in multiple markets. An audience focused IMC impact the relationship where the audience is treated with respect and not for making profit out of. The
organization is viewed as market-oriented. Channel-centered refers to planning and using multiple channels for communication and is referring to everything from advertising to sales promotions. The third pillar is result driven, referring to valuing customers and identify markets and estimate the return on customer investments, the the purpose to track effectiveness of integrated marketing communication (Kliatchko, 2005).

2.1.1.1 Communication channels
Being able to communicate is often associated with success and normally it is a complex process linked to receiving, sending and interpret messages in a business setting for example, where noise can hinder the perceived value of shared understanding (Danielewicz-Betz, 2016). Going back a few years Shannon (1949) suggest a communication system consisting of five parts: information source, transmitter, noise source, receiver and destination a model for how people communicate (Shannon, 1949). Shannon (1961) showing how the two-way communication channels outputs is linked to the inputs and vice versa and the issue to communicate in both ways as effective as possible. Examining the complex coding of two-way channels and how communication can be carried out in the most effective way to decrease errors (Shannon, 1961).

Mohr & Nevin (1990) have argued that the outcome of the communication channels is regulated and adjusted by the influence of the channels settings such as structure, control and climate. Affecting the outcome of the channel such as satisfaction, commitment, coordination and performance. Once the communication strategy matches the channel settings the channel outcomes will be improved compared with having a strategy that does not match the channel settings. Describing communication channels as the key aspect in channel distribution. Communication issues are a major reason of channel complications. Ineffective communication can result in incorrect strategies, frustration and misunderstandings (Mohr & Nevin, 1990).

Keller (2001) claims researcher have for a long time been focusing on studying the communication channels separately and as a result missed out on the opportunities that comes with integrated communication between different channels. Suggesting an implementation of a communication programme, which propose taking both individual and several communication channels together into account (Keller, 2001). Marketers
today have to be aware of different marketing communication alternatives, changes and growth in the marketing communication landscape have created numerous new communication alternatives and sources where customers can retrieve information from which has led to marketing communication programmes being larger and a lot more diverse. A solution to this issue is to change and create an integrated marketing communication plan, meaning evaluate all the potential communication channels and select the most appropriate (Keller, 2001).

Integrated marketing communications (IMC) aims to deliberately provide a consistent message. For an effective practice of IMC businesses must incorporate the concept into their company philosophy to make sure to deliver a consistent message to the customer (Luck & Moffatt, 2009; Blakeman, 2014). IMC can be viewed as strength and business philosophy that can assist in both unplanned and planned communication situations among businesses, the brand, the customers and other internal and external parties for creating a two-way interchange of information (Blakeman, 2014). Keller (2009) suggests for IMC to use its full potential the nature and accessibility of the communication has to be understood. Aim of communication is to evaluate the nature of the communication alternatives accessible to the business that is working with IMC. This involve digital communication since the company have to be where the customer are, which present continue to increases online and very few communication programs is without some kind of digital marketing communication (Keller 2009). Luck & Moffatt (2009) describe IMC as a system of principle or commitment, surrounded by an organization's culture underlined by communication and driven by senior management and technology. Changes related to the technological revolution affecting the accessibility of information with IMC in marketing, creating potential for many businesses. Business industry can utilise IMC as an inclusive and broad business model to handle their business communication, which is one of the main drivers. Open collaborative communication will improve the brands value and multiple digital tools can assist strengthening the existing collaborations (Luck & Moffatt, 2009).

Many companies aim is to create long-term beneficial relationships and engage in sending existing customers personalized messages through different marketing channels. Previous research that has studied the communication with intention of building relationship and results imply that there is a level of communication that will
make the customers negatively affected and not return for a purchase. There is a difficulty in determine if there exist such a thing as an ideal communication level. Managers have to find out which channels is best suited for reaching the targeted customer and prevent using less effective marketing channels (Godfrey et al. 2011).

2.1.2 Communication-based marketing model for managing relationships

2.1.2.1 Communication based model
The marketing mix or the 4Ps of marketing developed by McCarthy; Product, Price, Place and Promotion are a guideline with a set of variables that a company use to target and influence a part of the market (Kotler, 2016). The communication based model for managing relationships reviews the fourth P to reflect on the relationship aspect. Duncan & Moriarty (1998) proceeds on a communication perspective rather than a persuasion perspective of the fourth P. Beyond the relationship focus, concepts that is relating to communication and marketing are; exchange, signals/signs, channels, feedback and information. These are additional factors that supports when looking into how communication and marketing are connected and how communication is shifted to a relationship focus. Channels and feedback drives interactivity, information and signs/signals send out messages for integrated marketing and relationships and exchange integrate customers and other stakeholders (Duncan & Moriarty, 1998).

2.1.2.2 Integration perspective
The model, figure 1, is designed by Duncan and Moriarty (1998) and explain the communication and marketing intersections with signs/signals, feedback, relationships, exchange and transactions, channels and information as a communication platform. The integration of communication in marketing can be shown when separating new marketing approaches from traditional approaches (Duncan and Moriarty, 1998).

The fourth P is traditionally associated with persuasion, a one-way communication focus where aspects, related to communication purposes in relationships, are missing such as informing, answering and listening. A one-way communication involve an active sender and a passive receiver and the more companies realize the importance of relationships the more limited is the persuasion approach (Duncan and Moriarty, 1998). Duncan & Moriarty (1998) argues that a communication platform is where relationship
is built. For a communication based model of relationship, marketing communication is
the integrative part that minimize the distance between companies and external parties
in order to meet the individual's specific needs and demand through interaction and
dialogue (ibid). Relationships are dependent on communication, and should be viewed
as a critical factor while trust and commitment should be viewed as effects of
communication (ibid).

The information flow, processing and sharing are fundamentals in relationships, a
relationship is connected through information. Information reduce uncertainties that can
occur in relationship due to unstructured and unorganized situations. According to
Duncan and Moriarty (1998) information processing is a dominating factor within
market communication, arguing that information processing can be managed and
controlled. Information can strengthen brand image and support integration of
organizations and support implementation of strategies. This type of information
enables close communication and is a good foundation for relationship building (ibid)
Feedback refers to the response the sender gets from the receiver, explained as a
reversed communication flow. The sender will see how the message is interpreted from
the receiver's point of view and are able to react instantly. From a two-way
communication aspects feedback is crucial, when the sender send out signals it is crucial
to know how the receiver interpret and understand the message. Feedback start a two-
way communication which in turn initiate a relationship. For feedback to fulfill its
purpose and be a two-way communication feedback need to be retrieved, handled and
then interpreted with mutual understanding. Feedback relates to both internal and
external communication and interpretations (Duncan and Moriarty, 1998).

Signs and signals are referring to interpretation, where shared interpretation and values
is a more efficient way for companies connect to their audience. Duncan and Moriarty
(1998) argues that signals interpreted by people are derived from experience.

Duncan & Moriarty (1998) proceed from Schramm’s basic communication model where
there is a information flows through different communication channels. The
communication through channels can be either upstream i.e. supplier – vendor
relationships or downstream i.e. distributor-customers. The common denominator
between these two relationships and channels are that through these channels there is either a product flow or information flow (Duncan & Moriarty, 1998).

When proceeding from the presented figure it is believed that everything sends a brand message with the need for strategic consistency for positive perceptions, a focus on both stakeholders and customers and that the communication are interactive. A consistent message creates trust and ensure consistent perceptions from stakeholders - Customers, suppliers and resellers. Interactivity, i.e. two-way communication, distinguish the shift in communication and if relationships are the aim in B2B, it needs to be supported by personalized, interactive, communication (Duncan & Moriarty, 1998).

Figure 1 Communication and marketing intersection of a communication based marketing model for building relationships (Duncan and Moriarty, 1998)
2.1.3 Effective Communication

According to Yates (2006) most businesses would have an advantage from developing their communication process. Enhancing the communication process will generate a better position in the future which lead to increased market shares, higher revenue and employee engagement. A wider range of communication tools will assist in improving communication and two-way communication will simplify employees feedback into decisions (Yates, 2006).

According to (Goldhaber, 1993) the value of organizational communication demonstrate the relationship between an effective communication system and an improved overall performance for the corporation. Communication being fundamental for any organization and information is vital for efficient communication, business leaders highlight the importance of great communication in their businesses (Goldhaber, 1993). According to Gulati & Soni (2015) companies identify the communication between both internal and external contributors to learn how to assist in adding customer value.

Effective communication and involvement will depend on emerging strategies that acknowledge and explore the relationships each business have with its distance customers. Expectations from the customer are changing and individuals find new ways to stay connected to businesses (Gulati & Soni, 2015). Other aspects effective communication assist in is; decreasing uncertainty, form expectations, help if misunderstandings occur and have a positive effect on the customer’s perception of the relationship quality (Hung & Lin, 2013).

2.2 Digital Marketing

2.2.1 Digital marketing definition

Digital marketing refers to the use of digital technologies when promoting products or services, it gives access to information at any place and any time and involves all kind of digital communication. Information is shared on digital platforms and enables marketing to be measured, monitored, tested and improved (Chaffey & Smith, 2013). According to Smith (2012) digital marketing is the use of digital channels such as
computers, mobile phones, smart phones or other digital devices when promoting products or services.

The digital technology has advanced the way companies can communicate with their customers, offered businesses a way to connect with a broader spectrum of customers (Ryan, 2016). According to Leeflang et al (2014) the present use of digital channels for firms includes e-mail, web pages and social media and the interactions with customers continue to increase and has changed and opened up new possibilities through digital media. Businesses struggle to stay ahead with the changes that comes with digital technologies that are out of their control and dealing with them is a challenge.

Suggestions are made companies need to develop skills within analytics and abilities regarding the use of digital platforms. Companies trying to build their brand through traditional media will soon notice it is not effective since brands nowadays are not defined by the marketers positioning statement it is the customer that hold the power (Leeflang et al. 2014).

### 2.2.2 Digital business strategy

Barker (2013) discusses the internet sensation with communication that has opened up new possibilities for marketers reaching new customers but also increased the competition and the amount of information to take in. The author define communication as a strategic activity where integrated communication occurs and where the information is created and distributed in order to create a mutually beneficial relationship between the company and its stakeholders with the use of integrated new tools (Barker, 2013).

Bharadwaj et al (2013) have identified four attributes of a digital strategy from a resource and capabilities based view 1) The scope of digital business strategy 2) The scale of digital business strategy 3) The speed of digital business strategy 4) The source of business value creation and capture in digital business (Bharadwaj et al. 2013) To form relationships to firms, industries and the external environment a company need to understand the scope of a digital business strategy and how to increase the effectiveness of a digital strategy. The strategy involves taking advantage of digital resources of the product- and service design and how it works together with other platforms, the digital strategies have the power to line up new strategies. Companies need to consider opportunities and developments within their field and use it to their advantage.
(Bharadwaj et al, 2013). The scale of a digital business strategy drives profitability, referring to an infrastructure that becomes more and more digital and need to be considered in both a physical and digital way. Platforms increase a network effect where the value of goods and services increases as partners evolve the service. As digitalization is increasing scaling is based on partnerships where digital assets is shared with other firms, digital assets where a company does not see a competitive advantage, referring to booking systems, use of applications or web services. An effect of digitization is the increased speed when launching new products, taking decisions, form networks and the supply chain where the strategy need to leverage value from information and business models, capture value from networks and appropriating value from the digital architecture of the company (Bharadwaj et al, 2013).

2.3 Relationships

As Gronroos, (2004) argued having a relationship approach refers to taking care of interactions with customers and can be traced back to the history of commerce and trade. Berry (1983) introduced the concept of relationship marketing and discussed strategies for service organizations and two years later Jackson (1985) introduce relationship marketing in a B2B context and suggest building and maintaining customer relationship including a number of things and also consistency over time. Tools, resources and synchronization is needed to meet the customer's current and future requirements (Jackson, 1985).

Gronroos, (2004) mention important aspects for an effective relationship strategy such as the interaction process and value as the yield of relationship marketing and having a planned communication process assisting in the development and improvement of relationships. Main part of the definitions of relationship marketing refers to relationship marketing as a process. All the marketing activities used are aimed towards the managing of this process (Gronroos, 2004).

In marketing communication an approach towards integrating communication elements into a two-way integrated marketing communications outlook has been developed which is influenced by the relationship viewpoint in marketing. A commitment to two-way communication and the intention is to receive a response from those individuals to whom the IMC programs has been aimed at, adapting to the customers communication
needs and wants and start the same process again (Gronroos, 2004). For successful relationship marketing all marketing communication activities is required to assist in the upholding, creation and enhancement of relationship with customers and stakeholders. Therefore, management of IMC is required in relationship marketing despite of the source of communication messages (Gronroos, 2004).

Comprehend and managing services in the relationship is a fundamental part of building relationship and maintain them and relationship marketing is supported by other aspects such as network building. Hakansson & Snehota (1995) argues researchers and academics have neglected business-to-business relationships and little attention have focusing on the communication among them. Hakansson & Ford (2002) discuss networks and relationships with aim to gain knowledge regarding how companies interact in business networks. Relationships assists companies in handle the increasing digital reliance on others and the need to adapt offerings to more individual requests. When any exchange between activities and resources occur in a relationship there will be either a negative or positive effect among them. The events occurring in one relationship will be affected of what is happening in all the relationships involved. Business relationships are the results of its actions and strategy. However the business itself is the result of those relationships and the events of what has occurred in them Hakansson & Ford (2002).

Hunt & Lambe, (2000) discuss the increasing complexity of relationship marketing due to the changing roles of competitors, customers and increasing collaborations. Achieving competitive advantage often involves collaborative relationships with other parties or network that regulate a business interaction with its markets, relationship marketing is seen as networks, relationships and interactions. Creating collaborative business relationship among customers and stakeholders is significant to understand and to manage those relationships. One aspect of relationship is the exchange that takes place linking elements; i.e. exchange aspects, including communication, commitment, trust, adaptation, cooperation and social bonds. Making commitment is a crucial relational aspect when maintaining relationship, suggesting ongoing relationship being an important factor to secure its endurance. Competence in managing relationship contribute to achieving a competitive advantage through collaboration and taking advantage of eachother's resources and expertise (Hunt & Lambe, 2000)
Biggeman, (2012) discuss how business relationships derives from the interchange of actions between people in ongoing communication. Changes in a relationship is often related to variations in the arrangement of the relationship. Communication strategies in marketing channels illustrate the significance of a communication strategy that matches the channel settings (Biggemann, 2012). Communication and interchange is also discussed by Ballantyne, (2004) as a way of growing and get knowledge from one another. Business relationships evolve through communication, which lead to increased trust. Interchange opens up to new knowledge among businesses and internal at the company. Which bring value to both supplier and buyer, and solutions and marketing issues can easier be solved (Ballantyne, 2004)

2.4 Conceptual Framework

As discussed in the theoretical framework business relationship is created through communication and interactions to create long term customer relationships. IMC and Communication-Based Marketing model focus on building relationships through an interactive communication approach. Communication is affected by the digitization and digital strategies are implemented in order to use digital channels to build and maintain relationships through digital communication.

![Figure 2 Conceptual Framework](image-url)
3 Methodology

The following chapter will describe what method and approaches that are used to conduct the research. Research approach and research design are presented and motivations for the chosen method are given.

3.1 Research Approach

Decisions and choices made throughout the research project is easier to understand if the philosophical aspect of research is comprehended. A research position will tell why, what and how research is conducted and by this receive a broader and richer perspective of the research which enable the research to have a stronger aim in a broader perspective (Carson et al, 2001). Bryman & Bell (2015) discuss the importance to be aware of our own bias and questioning our assumption throughout the study. Ontology and Epistemology are two terms which we have to reflect upon to understand our own view and philosophical position in research. Epistemology refers to what knowledge is, how do we know what knowledge is acceptable? How knowledge should be interpreted? Our research takes an interpretivist approach which means our assumptions are a result from interpretations (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

Ontology is a concern about the nature of existence and our research takes a constructivist positioning which declares the world as in constant change and shaped through social interactions. Suitable in our research studying communication and digital channels which is in constant change and development because of technology, the view of constructivism is therefore suitable in qualitative research since aiming to see different perspectives (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015).

According to Ahrne & Svensson (2015) in research a main aspect is to show how the research have been conducted and describe our choices made throughout the research process. The methodological choices made have a large impact on the result of the study and we aim to give the reader an insight in our working process (Ahrne & Svensson, 2015). The authors claims there are no such thing as a correlation between what is wrong and right to a certain research question, in the end it is a question regarding the researchers choices and justifications of them (Ahrne & Svensson, 2015).
3.1.1 Qualitative Approach

In this study a qualitative approach is used with the intention to understand how the interviewee use digital channels to communicate with retailers. The choice of approach is made since a qualitative approach according to Creswell (2013) aims to understand and explore the human or social issues by an individual or a group of people and allows the researcher to interpret data (Creswell, 2013).

According to Eriksson & Kovalainen (2015) one advantage with conducting qualitative business research is that it gives us the possibility to embrace a reflective and critical thinking approach regarding the social business world and its main practices. Also gain knowledge why things work in a certain way and how we can understand to be able to make improvements. When choosing a qualitative approach it is of high significance to demonstrate the decisions taken under the study, which have led to our findings. Qualitative approach aims to understand and interpret while quantitative on the other hand involves statistical analyses and testing of hypotheses. Since qualitative approach is used in business research and social science we found this approach suitable for our study to understand and gain knowledge (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015).

According to Gummesson (2003) all sorts of research are dependent on interpretation and one way to gain an understanding is to rely on the idea of hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is a methodology for understanding and explaining as this is something all individuals do, aiming to gain an understanding of the world we live in. All research conducted and mainly in qualitative approaches interpretations is made. Hermeneutics can assist in business research to discover meaning and give us explanations. Research should be a process where interpretation is made and re-interpret findings again since aiming to increase our understanding are an important aspect (Gummesson, 2003). Which we have aim to do during the research having ongoing discussion regarding our findings.

Aim of our research study is not to generalize but to gain rich in depth material from the interviews at company X (Bryman & Bell, 2015). A recurring argument in the methodological literature and also for ourselves for choosing a qualitative approach is for us to make our own interpretation and to understand (Gummesson, 2003; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015; Creswell, 2013).
3.1.2 Abductive, Deductive and Inductive Approach

The relationship between empirical and theoretical findings can take an inductive, deductive or abductive approach (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

The inductive approach derives from empirical data, which the researchers analyses and draw conclusions from. It is the empirical findings that direct what theoretical material shall be collected. Inductive approach is controlled by the interpretations, which may vary depending on who interpret them, which makes it highly individual (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The deductive approach theory direct the empirical findings that is collected to test if reality is in line with what the theory claim. In deductive approach the result lack the researchers own interpretations and emotions and should be objective (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Alvesson & Skoldberg, (2009) draws attention to the fact that a deductive approach often has elements of induction and vice versa. Studies are usually conducted with some form of abduction, an alternation between empirical and theoretical reflections. Our study consists of both deductive and inductive elements.

This study is based on a deductive starting point with elements of induction. The starting point is deductive, because of the collection of our theoretical framework, which was studied and then selected before collection of empirical material from the interviews. The collected material is supported by the theoretical material however this have been adjusted during the process and time period the study was conducted. Theories that we did not found relevant for the empirical material have been rejected and new theories have been added which we found more relevant considering our empirical findings. After gaining more knowledge regarding the subject in combination with a continuous dialogue with our tutor we have changed our theoretical framework and the empirical material has contributed to the design of the theoretical framework.

3.2 Case Study

In this study the aim is to investigate how B2B companies communicate and build digital relationships with retailers, to achieve this a case study is suitable. A a case study can contain one single or several cases and in this study focus is on one single case (Eisenhardt, 1989; Bryman & Bell, 2015) A case study involves a comprehensive and exhaustive analysis and is a well-used research approach in business research (Bryman & Bell, 2015). One main issue when conducting a case study and only investigate one
single case is the quality of the academic analysis in which the researcher gets involved. Questions to ask are whether the data support the theoretical arguments made and if the theoretical analyses give suitable insights (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

It is usual for researcher when conducting case study to make statements on rather small findings and this makes it easier to draw impulsive conclusions, therefore, emphasize it put on interpretation of data collected. To conduct a great case study different perspectives have to be taken into consideration and reflections have to be made (Stake, 1995). Analyzing empirical data is a difficult task and the collection of information and knowledge involves a constant shift between theory and empirical data (Eisenhardt, 1989).

The main issue was the time limit, therefore a single case study was selected, if the time frame would not have been restricted we would have been able to conduct additional interviews and perhaps made a multiple case-study to receive a broader perspective from additional empirical material from a larger sample size and more in-depth data.

3.3 Data collection

Primary data is collected for the specific study being conducted, it is adjusted to the research area and purpose of the study and enabled researchers to collect data that is up to date (Saunders and Thornhill. 2003; Bryman & Bell, 2011) For this study the data will be gathered through interviews with company representatives and analyzed material. To receive a deeper understanding of how B2B companies work with communication and building digital relationship with customers. As stated previously a case study approach is applied for this study. In a case study using as much sources as possible is efficient and advised (Yin, 2009). and therefore both interviews and material will assist in gathering data for the empirical chapter. Digital material will be studied; The material is gathered and analyzed with the aim to gain a wider understanding and a stronger foundation for analysis. The data collected through interviews is conducted face to face and the questions semi-structured in order to ask open questions where the interviewee are able to elaborate the given answers with follow up questions in order to further explore the respondent's answers.
3.3.1 Semi-structured interviews

A semi-structured interview is referring to an interview method where the interviewer asks general- and open-ended questions. It enables the respondent to give detailed responses about the issue and enable both the respondent and interviewer to elaborate on the answers (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Horton et al. 2004). The interviews is conducted face-to-face and nonverbal communication will be taken in consideration, the interviewer will ask the respondent to exemplify and elaborate on replies. Since both the interviewer and the respondent can elaborate on answers and the interview guide is flexible the interview will be recorded and the recordings will later be transcribed for analysis.

Potential language and translation biases are related to collecting data in another language than the research paper and translating it into another (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The semi-structured interviews was conducted in Swedish for the respondents to be able to express their answers in an native language. Bryman & Bell (2015) list several aspects identified by Xian (2008) that need to be taken in consideration to avoid language biases (i) Linguistics which are referring to using words with no equivalent translation in the other language (ii) Socio-cultural which are referring to errors when translating idioms between two languages (iii) Methodological which are referring to acknowledge and work with the translation difficulties and not overlook the potential biases. For the authors to avoid potential language biases, attention were aimed towards the translation. The questions were formulated in English, then translated to Swedish and then, by an external person, translated back to English to ensure that the questions had the same meaning in both translations. The transcribed interview was later sent and verified by the respondent. The questions are formed in an interview guide, consisting of a series of questions, the order can vary and is flexible in the interview context and applicable on all five interviews (See Appendix 1).

3.3.2 Interview Guide

According to Bryman & Bell (2015) an interview guide is defined as ...” the form of a series of visual prompts related to a subject” ... or is referring to ...” the brief list of memory prompts of areas to be covered”... The interview guide is used as a flexible guide to what areas and topics that are going to be addressed in the interview and to
assist the interviewer in directing the interview and give an overview of the nature of the interview (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The authors formed an interview guide to ensure that relevant information is gathered in all five interviews (See Appendix 1) However to be critical to our choices the interview guide could have contained additional concepts/topics within the area of communication and digital marketing to be able to obtain additional in-depth answers.

3.3.3 Selection of respondents

The respondents are selected from different functions within the company with different experience levels in order to gain an understanding of all aspects of the subject being studied. In order to answer the research questions an understanding from a strategic level to execution and performance is needed to see the actual effect the digital strategy and material have on communication and relationships when it is applied in real life. The respondents have different responsibilities within the organization and the wider spread will enable the researchers to gain empirical data from several aspects i.e strategic, creation, operational and execution.

3.3.4 Respondent overview

This table will present an overview of the respondents within Company X, the time and their specific set of knowledge within the purpose of the study.
For the analysis the researcher will include both data collected from five semi structured interviews (See 3.3.1) and material gathered and given to us from Company X. The audio material gathered from interviews with representatives at the company (See 3.3.4 for respondent overview) was transcribed for analysis together with the material gathered. The authors have decided analyse the transcribed material by drawing keywords and concepts from the theoretical foundation and applied it on the empirical findings.
3.5 Empirical findings overview

Empirical data was gathered through five interviews with company representatives and we also got access to digital material; the internal sales app, website and digital platforms to strengthen the empirical foundation. Since our case study never will deliver a result with statistical significance, to support this more evidence is needed to support our conclusion. Since conducting a single case study using several sources of support, triangulation, is used which is essential to strengthen the accuracy of qualitative data. Triangulation refers to looking at the research from different perspectives to give a richer and broader representation. This is of particular interest with qualitative data collection (Stake, 1995).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Digital platform</th>
<th>Material</th>
<th>Target</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sales application</td>
<td>The application include presentation about the brand, sales pitched-presentations and value content for salespeople to use in the meeting, all material is created with the purpose to intrigue the customer and value Company X</td>
<td>Provide digital material to salespeople meeting retailers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LinkedIn</td>
<td>The material on the platform includes news and value-added content such as unique selling proposition. Salespeople are trained in networking to perform on this platform</td>
<td>Shared by Company X representative profiles to target representatives from B2B customers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>Material created on this platform includes product information and news</td>
<td>Targeted towards the end-consumers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instagram</td>
<td>Digitally share photos from events, fairs etc. and sharing inspiring photos within the field</td>
<td>Targeted towards the end-consumers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Website</td>
<td>Material on website include, contact channels, news, product information, information about the company</td>
<td>Targeted toward both customers and end-consumers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.6 Quality Criteria

3.6.1 Validity
One of the most crucial quality criteria in research is validity which involves the integrity of the results from the research (Bryman & Bell, 2015). By interviewing five employees with different roles at Company X different perspectives was given on the questions, which strengthen the validity of the interviews. The interviewed was the marketing manager, product and marketing manager assistant, sales manager & two salesperson. Therefore, a perspective from both a sales and marketing view is given. A semi-structured interview approach was used and the interview was recorded and later transcribed, The interview guide was applied on all five interview meaning that the same questions was asked during all interviews and follow-up questions was asked depending on the participants answers. To increase our empirical foundation and the validity of the interviews, material from the company and the digital platforms were analysed. According to Yin (2009) the internal validity can be rather week in a qualitative study since it can be difficult to cover all the aspects of the research, there is also a possibility there could be alternative conclusions that we have not considered Yin (2009).

3.6.2 Reliability
Reliability refer to whether the results of the research are repeatable and consistent. A high reliability have been achieved if the results is the same if another researcher choose to repeat the study under the same circumstances (Bryman & Bell, 2015). According to Yin (2009) this can be prevented by going through and document our research and describe the process as much in detail as possible. Which is something we aim to do in this study to as high degree as possible. However our case-study is based on qualitative interviews which is very difficult to replicate. Five structured interviews is conducted and if the same study would be conducted again with different respondents the answers would be different. This due to the fact that we are asking individuals how they use digital channels to communicate with retailers and questions concerning relationships which answers will be personal. The degree of reliability in our study is enhanced by recording and transcribing the interviews and the transcribed material was sent back and verified by respondent. This enabled us to go back and ensure that the empirical
findings are correct and accurate. The interview guide (Appendix 1) is attached in order for the same study to be able to be done again.

3.6.3 Credibility
According to Bryman & Bell (2015) a studies truth findings is a concern regarding credibility which is a key concern when evaluating qualitative research. Credibility is whether the evidence is free from faults and alteration, whether the documented source is biased if our findings from the study is credible (Bryman & Bell, 2015). To strengthen credibility of our study the transcribed interview was sent and verified by the respondent. In our case access to extra material in terms of digital material is collected to strengthen credibility; the internal sales app, website and digital platforms to strengthen the empirical foundation.

3.6.4 Conformability
Conformability is to aim to be as objective and unbiased as possible when conducting the study. It is not possible to be completely objective however this should be the aim and also something we have to consider throughout the research project (Bryman and Bell, 2015).

The transcribed material was read through and approved to make sure that opinions and views have gotten through and was not overly affected by our own views and interpretations of the answers. Such as Bryman & Bell (2015) argues the research should be conducted in a clear manner and the researcher should do everything they can to exclude personal values and be objective.

3.7 Ethical considerations
Ethical aspects have to be considered when conducting a study and events that may occur during the research project and the way chosen to collect information. Getting access to a suitable source, which enable the researcher to answer the research question and fulfill the studies aim. In a research setting ethics refers to the suitability of the researcher's behavior and taking the individual's rights involved in the study. Meaning we have to act ethical to all parties involved and affected by our study, this is a topic which touch upon morals and ethics and behavior towards other people (Saunders, 2011).
Ethics in research relates to question regarding formulation of research subject, how we gain access to information, gather data, analyse data, basically everything related to writing the thesis in a trustworthy and ethical way. Making sure the study is defensible both morally and the methodological part as well (Saunders, 2011). According to Saunders (2011) several aspects have to be taken into consideration during a project:

- Privacy of contributors
- Chosen nature of taking part in the study not forcing anyone to take part in the process
- Approval and potential dishonesty of contributors
- Protection of the discretion of information provided by participants or identifiable contributors and their anonymity
- Effects of contributors to the way in which information is retrieved, involving stress, embarrassment, discomfort, harm and pain.
- The way the researcher act, behave and being objective.

The avoidance of harm is a main principal of the ethical issues. For instance if allowed permission to interview, information might be confidential avoiding to cause harm to the people interviewed is therefore of high importance. Interviews in our case might cause the involved stress, which also should be avoided (Saunders, 2011). The ethical aspect is taken into consideration as the company in our study is referred to as Company X and the participants are kept anonymous.
4 Empirical Findings

Following chapter consist of five interviews at company X with the marketing manager, marketing coordinator with digital responsibility, a sales manager & two salespeople. The empirical material retrieved from the interviews are presented in headlines and connected to theory.

4.1 Digital platforms

Company X aim to create a digital platform where retailers can utilize the value of the company as a tool for their target audience i.e. end customers and for Company X to make sure the right product information and company image is communicated throughout the chain, from the company to retailers to consumer (Respondent, A, 2017; Respondent B, 2017; Respondent C, 2017) Another reason for Company X to be present digitally is because of market expectations, evaluation of options and information on company standpoints is increasing in importance for actors on the market (Respondent A, 2017; Respondent B, 2017; Respondent C, 2017)

The difficulties in choosing the most appropriate channels is related to how the digital landscape is continuously changing. Company X do not want to restrict themselves to only use one channel and instead maximize presence over several platforms and be experts on how to use the platforms to their advantage (Respondent B, 2017) Company X define using a platform to their advantage as using a platform in the most efficient strategic way, meaning creating the right content for the right channel, using the right channel for targeting a specific audience and by handling the information and analytics digital tools can provide to the company's advantage. Respondent C (2017) says that Company X do not aim to compete with price, but rather on the value of the company and the quality of offerings. It is important to communicate the value and create an image and for the most part this can be done over digital channel i.e. shared LinkedIn posts, Facebook posts or with newsletters. Respondent A (2017) argue how the new generation are more complied with purely digital meetings and a digital relationship.

Digital sales material is used when meeting with retailers, presenting news, product information and the material is convenient and easy to get access to through the sales
app (Respondent D, 2017; Respondent E, 2017)

4.2 Strategy

For Company X it is important to strategically be present and act on digital platforms. Sales representatives, both with higher level of experience and on a lower level of experience, use LinkedIn as a tool for contact, communication, sharing and spreading information about the company and the field they are operating in. One topic that is related to the company image is environmental responsibility and digital communication channels are used to communicate this certain aspect of the company. Facebook is a digital tool that is not prioritized at the moment but Company X sees opportunities in using it for B2B purposes in the near future, employees are individuals and individuals are employees that interact on social media tools such as Facebook, with the right strategic content it open up possibilities when marketing to B2B (Respondent A, 2017; Respondent B, 2017; Respondent C, 2017).

Employees at the company are active on digital channels and represent the company, for example LinkedIn, where communication and relationships with retailers can be initiated and retention of already existing retailers. Digital material, such as presentations etc. are used in a customer meeting. LinkedIn is also used as a tool for relationship building and acquisition of new customers, the ambition is to use LinkedIn for sales and new business (Respondent C, 2017) Organic marketing where the marketing department advise the sales department to actively inform and share digital content that is created on LinkedIn or Facebook, it is a complex approach since without some sort of survey it is difficult to see if the retailer contacting Company X actually comes from the digital marketing but within organic marketing campaigns a positive increase can be seen in terms of numbers and engagement both internally and externally. Company X want to engage customers and increase the network and salespeople have been trained in how to network on LinkedIn and other digital platforms, by expert consultants, where the focus is on building relationships in social media (Respondent A, 2017, Respondent B, 2017)

The challenge for Company X when using several digital tools is that is is more strategically difficult and time-consuming to maintain and with the content needed to be
adjusted to the audience that specific platform is aiming to reach. Another option is ad-marketing and Company X see the possibilities and want to use sponsored ads for sharing their values and unique selling propositions (Respondent A, 2017; Respondent B, 2017; Respondent C, 2017)

According to (Respondent C, 2017; Respondent A, 2017) company X use digital marketing to create a demand from the end-customer. An interest and demand from the end customer increase the interest among potential customer for Company X, retailers. A retailer want to satisfy their customers, in this case the end-customer, and for company X to create a demand from the end-customer's side increases the interest amongst retailers. The whole sale process is affected when selling to an informed customer and not only reaching out to retailers without previous knowledge about the company. Company X is operating strictly as a B2B company and do not serve the consumer market themselves, but have in the past used typical B2C channels such as influencers/blogs to create a demand and interest for the product and to communicate the product's value. The end customer becomes interested which leads to retailers, restaurants and workplaces to open up their eyes for Company X offerings and initiate contact. Company X want the end customer to demand their product from retailers, it increases the value of Company X as a partner and enables them to choose who to partner with. This strategic approach began to form a couple of years ago when Company X did a tv-commercial that was targeting the end-customer, the retailers did not appreciate the approach company X were taken but it later on forced the retailers to actively work with Company X. “Everyone wants to own the end customer” (Respondent, A, 2017). This strategic approach enables them to be competitive and to be competitive Company X can not leave it all to the retailers. The effect that have been seen while using this approach is that it generates new businesses, the strategy is supported by search engine optimization that confirm what it is that people are searching for in order to create interesting content and to get higher ranking hits and conversions from that digital ads that can be formed where Company X creates noise and gain attention.

The material shared for the consumer market, are shared on the digital platforms which focus is on the end-customer's Instagram and facebook, Company X are using the same strategy as B2C companies does. Intriguing news, content that is recognizable and
likeable for a consumer audience. The B2B focused digital platforms, the sales application and linkedin, focus on material regarding news, the brand, unique selling propositions, relationship focus and are more interactive.

4.3 Relationships

Respondent C (2017) claims that the sales process is moving from a persuasion approach to a relationship-building approach, where the communication can be initiated by both parties when selling to informed customers. A negative aspect recognized by Respondent C (2017) are that the customer’s expectations are higher when information are gathered upon the time of the meeting but the initiation of contact is on both the customer’s terms and company X terms. The challenge with marketing and selling to informed customers is that the requirements and expectations are higher, they expect the little extra beyond what they already know which is a challenge all businesses are facing with the digitalization (Respondent A, 2017; Respondent C, 2017; Respondent D, 2017; Respondent E, 2017)

At a sales meeting both companies are aiming to build a relationship and work together to satisfy the market. When it comes down to relationship building it is to the extent traditional tools that are being used with face-to-face interactions, meetings and phone calls, at least in the beginning of the relationship. The digitalization has affected how Company X strengthen relationships in terms of supporting and building relationships, digital platforms enable Company X to give continuous attention, reminders of existence and smaller updates on news and happenings. The problem with using digital tools in the beginning of potential longer relationship is that a digital platform for communication can be limited in body language, reactions and facial expressions and weaknesses that derives from that limitation is that it is harder to connect with someone and the risk of misunderstandings is higher. In Company X the beginning of relationship building still rely on traditional tools, but when a relationship has been established digital tools are a great tool for retention and increase visibility (Respondent A, 2017; Respondent B, 2017; Respondent D, 2017; Respondent E, 2017)
Company X use both traditional and digital meetings but the more the younger generation is integrated the digital meetings increases, today orders are made through phone calls or personal meetings, the younger generation do not have any problems with digital meetings i.e. shared screens, e-mail communication and ordering online, time-saving meetings is more appreciated (Respondent B, 2017). The process of a digital meeting in a new relationship is longer, several additional meetings is required to get to know someone as you do in a traditional face-to-face meeting, digital meetings are not as euphoric as traditional meetings and there is a need for information to be repeated and communicated in several ways. When you lose the aspect of facial expression and body language the interpretation gets harder and the friendly approach can be put aside (Respondent A, 2017; Respondent B, 2017; Respondent D, 2017; Respondent E, 2017).

4.4 Communication

Communication with retailers are carried out with traditional tools but with digital material. Digital material is created to be used in a sales meeting i.e. power point presentations, digital layouts, tools to advance the sales meeting beyond the traditional sales meeting and material to support the values the company wants to be communicated in every meeting (Respondent B, 2017) This material is created and develop from the marketing department and distributed through an app developed by the company. The app is later used by salespeople meeting retailers. Printed material does still exist but Company X is steadily decreasing the use of it, only when customer specifically ask for it. The app also includes product information, presentations about the company, values, production presentations and education (Respondent A, 2017; Respondent B, 2017) Digital presence on digital channels and digital material simplify communication between salespeople and retailers and enable for Company X to sell on demand. The communication carried out digitally today in Company X are with newsletter with information about current offers and company news or through email with retailers. E-mail contact with retailers and newsletter is supported by physical meetings with the customer (Respondent A, 2017; Respondent B, 2017; Respondent C, 2017).
From a sales department perspective digital marketing should drive leads and new potential customers, make Company X attractive to partner with and enable easy accessible communication. A physical meeting and phone calls can today not fully be replaced by digital communication in Company X according to Respondent C (2017), physical meetings where company X sales people visit the customer on site and on site support is still more dependable. Company X sees a movement towards the digital platforms for communication even though the importance of traditional tools is still high. Products are adapting to digitalization and coffee machines are digitized, Company X sees the window of around 30 seconds they have with the consumers as a great opportunity to communicate short digital messages about the company, product or values. The visual short digital messages can highlight the product and add value. In all communication Company X wants their brand to be centered and communicated, the challenge in a loud digital landscape is to stand out from the noise and be visible (Respondent A, 2017; Respondent B, 2017; Respondent C, 2017).
5 Analysis

The analysis part will be built on linking the empirical data with the theoretical framework presented earlier with the aim to fulfill the purpose of the study. The chapter is divided into four different headlines: digital platforms, strategy, relationships and communication.

5.1 Digital platforms

Duncan and Moriarty (1998) argue how signs and signals send out messages to integrate the marketing and communication approach and how signs and signals are one of the important elements in two-way communication. Company X thrives to digitalize their organization to the largest possible extent and integrate communication activities on digital platforms. Digital platforms enable an easy accessible, faster communication and Company X argue how digital platforms are a great tool for maintaining existing relationships where a relationship is already established. As Barker (2013) suggest with the easy accessibility of information opportunities increases as well as the competition.

For Company X opportunities with digital marketing means that a large audience can be reached. Additional knowledge is needed to take the right decisions and implement strategies to get the most value out of the digital business network (Bharadwaj et al, 2013). Information shared on the platforms consist of news and small reminders on unique selling propositions, this makes the digital platforms more suitable for existing customers to keep up to date with their supplier. New customer would need a more comprehensive introduction to the company and its products that is harder to replace with digital efforts, a salesperson establish a personal connection that contribute to the relationship the customer have with the brand. The problem with digital platforms occurs when the personal connection where the salesperson can adapt to change of behaviour and facial expressions of the customers is missing. At initiating relationships, Company X feel that digital platforms are lacking important aspects of communication such as body language, voice tone and facial expressions in order to be effective.

The content can be targeted towards a smaller segment but not customized to a specific customer and adjusted to how the situation is proceeding, with digital tools the target
Porcu (2017) define integrated marketing communication as follow: “allows the possibility of continuous dialogue by conveying consistent and transparent messages via all media to foster long term profitable relationships that create value”. Company X argues how a physical meeting makes it easier to get to know the individual and create stronger bonds rather than communicating over and through digital platforms and channels. A consistent and transparent message over time will ensure the customers that the same values are applied throughout the company and will support in creating trust and loyalty when a personal bond is missing. A physical meeting is argued being much more efficient when getting to know the customer. Company X mixes both traditional communication and digital communication, initiating and building relationships with traditional sales meetings and phone calls and support and strengthen the relationships through digital platforms. Looking at how Duncan & Caywood (1998) highlight nourishing relationships as an important element of integrated communication, considering this aspect, digital tools have enabled Company X to keep continuous contact and share value-added activities and nourish the relationship with both retailers and end customers. Collaborative communication improve the brand value and an effective communication system will lead to increased overall performance for the company (Luck & Moffatt, 2009: Goldhaber, 1993). The opportunity to share activities that is being carried out by the company increase brand awareness and strengthen the relationship, activities such as environmental activities is reflected positive on the customer's business as well. The respondents at company X view difficulties in creating digital relationships to the same extent as in physical meetings. The respondents agree upon the difficulties in creating the same trust online that can be done in a physical meeting. With increasing competition due to digitalization and the overload of information the customer are presented with several options and this forces businesses to be innovative and collaborate more with the customers aiming to create a win-win situation and strive for a long lasting relationship.

Schultz & Schultz (1998 p.8) define IMC as follow: “IMC is a strategic business process used to plan, develop, execute and evaluate coordinated, measurable, persuasive brand communication programs over time with consumers, customer, prospects and
other targeted relevant external and internal audiences” Company X aim to handle information, analytical tools and digital platforms to their advantage by maximizing a coordinated presence over numerous platforms, in the most strategic and efficient way possible. Creating appropriate content for the right channel while using the most suitable channel for the targeted audience to benefit the company and add value and maximize the impact of communication. The use of search engine optimization with the aim to create interesting content, get higher conversions and higher ranking from digital ads to increase attention and create noise. The present use of digital channels for businesses and the interactions with customers continue to increase and has transformed and opened up new possibilities through digital media (Leeflang et al 2014; Chaffey & Smith, 2013; Barker 2013).

A company can be active on digital platforms but without anyone knowing it, just uploading information and material is making a company active but it is of high significance for a company to let the audience know about it and where they are. Search engine optimization enables a company to use the right keywords that are commonly used by their target segment. It is important for a company to stand out and deliver great digital content but even more important to make sure that this information is not just lost, high conversions show that the digital content is found and that it has the effect it was intended to bring. The basics of marketing, segmentation, targeting and positioning the company is necessary to make the most out of digital tools, not knowing the audience and what content will get their attention will make the digital content useless.

Company X utilizes digital channels to communicate with retailers and experience the younger generation to be eager to adopt and take advantage of the possibilities within digital marketing. The younger generation are growing up with technologies that did not exist 10 years ago and it is forcing companies to adapt and plan to stay relevant in the future. Ryan (2016) highlights the advantage with communication of being able to connect with a broad spectrum of customers. Company X strategy is to be present on many digital platforms and strategically target different audiences through different channels. The disadvantage of using numerous digital tools is that several platforms are time consuming to maintain since content needs to be tailored to the specific audience that the platform target. Thus, Luck & Moffatt (2009) argues multiple digital tools can contribute with strengthening the existing collaborations with open communication
improving the brand value. Leeflang et al (2014) point out the struggle to stay ahead with the changes derived by digitalization that are out of their control and dealing with them is a challenge, suggesting developing skills within digital platforms. Company X has been trained by expert consultants in how to network on LinkedIn and other digital platforms, focusing on learning how to build relationships on digital platforms. Networking on LinkedIn is not necessarily with potential customers or companies interested in the products, the intention with being present on LinkedIn is to invest in building a stronger awareness about the company and the sales force. For future acquisition of employees, partner companies and customers. Keller (2009) discuss how the company today have to be where the customers are and the importance to evaluate and understand different communication alternatives and Company X is adapting using traditional B2C channels such as blogs for example in their marketing communication. (Keller 2009; Luck & Moffatt 2009) argue how communication have changed through technology and strengthen the collaboration.

Mortimer & Laurie, (2017) argues there is a perceived risk that employees hesitate to use digital platform due to lack of knowledge of utilization. Company X does not yet see the digital ways replacing the traditional ways of marketing altogether. However more knowledge in company X is needed and education and being open to new possibilities as the digital landscape is in constant change.

5.2 Strategy

Bharadwaj et al (2013) view on a digital strategy involves companies taking advantage of the digital resources and effectively work with different platforms. Digital strategies have the power to line up new strategies and companies need to consider using the developments and the potential within their field to their advantage, digital knowledge and a digital strategy can help companies to increase effectiveness in communication. Company X see boundaries in a purely digital relationship with retailers and company X have chosen an approach with its digital platforms where they do not target retailers directly. Company X have chosen to target the digital content, on for example Facebook and Instagram, to the end-consumer of the products. The strategy is formed to create a demand from the end-consumers to pressure retailers to initiate relationships since
retailers target the end-customer and need to adjust to their demands. According to Gulati & Soni (2015) companies must identify the communication between both internal and external contributors to learn how to assist in adding customer value and Company X is stressing on how creating value with retailer relationships is established by creating value for the end consumers. The value for the customers of Company X are in the ability to serve their own customers, the supplier chosen is the one that is going to satisfy the end-user. If the demand from the end-user of the products are fulfilled the demands from the customer are fulfilled as well. If Company X chose to just focus on their customer and not take the end-user in consideration it is difficult, almost impossible, to know what aspect to bring forward or it will be a dead-end. Strategy-wise for a wholesaler it is of importance to look passed the basics of the products and focus on where the value actually is, the value for the customer are not in this case just to receive a supply of their products to a cheap price but to be able to satisfy the end-market.

5.3 Relationships

The empirical examinations highlight the importance for company X to give ongoing attention and reminders of the company's existence and updates on events and news to keep the customer informed. Duncan & Caywood (1996) argued that encourage dialogue to create profitable nurturing long-lasting relationships with both customers and stakeholders. Highlighting the reliant part communication has on brand loyalty and relationships with stakeholders (Duncan & Caywood, 1996). Such as Company X implies aim is to build relationships moving away from persuasion however the customers expectations are much higher today with increased knowledge due to the easily accessed information derived from digitalization. Porcu et al (2017) highlight how the information technology and development in communication plays a great part improving interaction (Porcu et al. 2017). Digitalization have made it easier for Company X to keep customers informed and assist with support when needed however the lack of personal contact makes it a lot more difficult to create social bonds and misunderstandings can easily occur. Duncan & Moriarty, (1998) suggest marketing communication as an interactive part that aim to meet the individual's wants and needs through dialogue and interaction. Pointing out commitment and trust as factors
perceived as effects of communication (Hunt & Lambe, 2000; Duncan & Moriarty, 1998). Digitalization have strengthen Company x relationships and made it easier to support and maintain the relationship. Duncan, & Caywood (1996) view integrated communication as a strategy for building strong relationships with customers. Company X are struggling when using digital channels as a source and a foundation for new relationships and hesitate on using digital platforms to initiate relationships. It is viewed as a source for a first contact and to strengthen an already established relationship. Company X do not necessarily include all involved parties in every channel and does instead target a specific group through chosen appropriate channel. For Company X goal is to gain trust and loyalty and with the digitalization customers are presented with more options on suppliers and the risk of losing a customer to someone else i higher. The chosen channel of communication has to be both credible and accessible for the target segment. As the usage for different types of channels varies in popularity it is crucial to test and evaluate the different options to fit the objectives with the communication. Depending on the aim with the communication the appropriate channel should be chosen, the most influential one at the moment to fulfill the purpose with the communication. It is not necessary that the fastest channel is the most appropriate one in any given situation.

5.4 Communication

The importance of traditional tools is still high even though Company X sees a consistent movement towards the digital. Products are adapting to digitalization and supporting tools are digitized with for example displays where the company take the opportunity to catch the customer's attention. According to Gulati & Soni, (2015) effective communication and involvement will depend on developing strategies that acknowledge the company's relationships with its customers. Expectations from the customer are changing and individuals find new ways to stay connected to businesses (Gulati & Soni, 2015). In all communication Company X aims to put focus and communicate the brand, the challenge in the noisy digital landscape is to be visible and stand out. Presence on digital platforms simplify communication between retailers and salespeople and assist Company X in creating a demand. Digital communication today with retailers in Company X is conducted through emails and newsletter which is
supported with face-to-face meetings with the customer. Respondent C argue that phone calls and physical meetings can today not completely be replaced with digital communication, physical meeting is still viewed as more trustworthy. Effective communication assist in decreasing uncertainties and misunderstanding and have a positive effect on the customer’s perception of the relationship quality (Hung & Lin, 2013). Improve and make the communication system more effective enhance the overall performance of the corporation (Yates, 2006; Goldhaber, 1993) However Company X imply communication in digital channels might be more effective therefore it also comes with the issue that misunderstandings may occur due to the lack of a physical meeting and social bond as can be created in personal contact. (Porcu, 2017; Schultz & Schultz, 1998; Peltier et al, 2003) view integrated marketing as a time-consuming communication activity where the effects are not seen directly but over time. The disagreements between the authors are regarding the process and the effects that can be seen from using an integrated marketing approach. Porcu (2017) and Schultz & Schultz (1998) views IMC as a planning process where the organization needs to be flexible and aligning all functions in order to ensure consistency and execution. Company X ensure that all digital platforms and channels are integrated and coordinated by building a strong foundation with digital material and professional training for employees, the content created are reflecting back on the company’s unique selling propositions and values even if the content is differentiated between platforms. Digital tools are a way of communicating the unique selling propositions without forcing them, for new customers this can be the initial interest to proceed and get in contact with the company. The use of digital channels for increasing the interaction within the company is supported by Porcu (2017) that discuss how digital channels and technology help improve communication processes within the organization. According to Mortimer & Laurie appropriate training is crucial for implementing IMC, organizations today are avoiding making changes as IMC within the organization due to lack of understanding or lack of involvement. Company X do not share the same view, the education and training of employees in how to build and strengthen relationships over digital platforms are crucial but with the purpose to ensure consistency of messages. The respondents agree upon the importance to target the right segment. Face to face communication is still viewed as one of the richest way to communicate for Company X and one of the most effective way of communication in relationship building.
6 Conclusion

Following chapter conclude the purpose of the study by explaining how Company X communicate and build digital relationships with retailers.

RQ: What are the objectives for using digital platforms for B2B wholesalers?

RQ: How have the use of digital channels affected the effectivity in communication and relationship-building with retailers?

Company X has implemented a digital strategy in order to maximize a coordinated presence on digital platforms, target different audiences and utilize the platform to their advantage. By using digital platforms to increase efficiency and integrate all channels of communication Company X strive to deliver consistency, consistent communication of the same message in all platforms. The digital marketing strategy is supported by search engine optimization that confirm what people are searching for in order to create interesting content on the platforms and get higher ranking hits and conversions from that digital ads that can be formed where Company X creates noise and gain attention. The IMC approach have to be adaptable and consistent which can be achieved through synchronization and communication, and the distribution of information across the simplicity in a sender-receiver and a one-way communication lacks the customer focused approach, simply where companies keeps sending out messages and not put emphasize on either interpreting, coding or adjusting to the receiver at the other end. An integrated marketing communication approach focus on long term outcomes where companies invest in customers and where long term effects such as loyalty and stronger relationships are desirable.

Digital marketing makes it easier for Company X to keep customers informed and assist with support. Company X use digital channels to communicate with both end-customers and retailers, where the material shared is strategically picked for the appropriate channel. Digital channels are viewed as a support and a tool to strengthen already established relationships rather than tools that help initiate relationships. For the initial meeting with retailers, traditional tools are still viewed to be the most beneficial in order to avoid the lack of signs and signals. Signs and signals is in the theory stated as an
important element in communication. Company X do argue that the society is moving toward a digital landscape where a new generation no longer will find signs and signals as important as the aspect still is considered to be today. Company X clearly see that retailers with a younger workforce have a more digitalized point of view and where a younger generation value time-efficiency over physical contact and the element will be less important for a generation growing up with digital technology. However, currently physical meetings and traditional communication tools are most commonly used. Perceived difficulties when communicate with retailers through digital channels is to create a social bond due to lack of personal contact in a beginning of a relationship, where a physical meeting is more inclusive than a digital meeting. Misunderstandings can easily occur and effective communication can result in incorrect strategies and frustration.

For Company X to adapt and implement digital strategies and use digital platforms for effective communication and building relationships the company had to take the complexity with taking the end customer in consideration and integrate all parties in the exchange process. Integrating all marketing communication activities forced Company X to execute and evaluate what market each digital platform could satisfy. Company X have recognized the importance to adapt to digital technologies but hesitate on relying on only digital platforms and channels for communication. The most value from integrating all communication activities and digital technologies is derived from combining both traditional and digital approached, this enable Company X to communicate in the most effective way possible. By integrating all functions in the company the digital material is used in the most efficient way, from marketing to sales.

6.1 Practical and managerial implications

Aim with the study is to increase the understanding of the use of digital tools for B2B companies. This is done by a case-study and interviews at Company X to receive an insight of how they communicate and build digital relationships with retailers. Understanding and knowledge regarding communication is a key aspect in maintaining stakeholder relationships. We believe that it is the marketing and sales departments
responsibility to take initiative and take advantage of and use digital platforms and channels and integrate content and all marketing and sales communication in a consistent and efficient manner.

Our study indicates that further research is needed as earlier research and our findings suggests companies facing issues how to increase efficiency with the use of digital platforms. How it has changed the way companies communicate and the increasing digital impact and interference of digital channels in companies. Media and digital channels are still a growing medium that attracts more and more businesses and consumers and there are many valuable suggestions for future studies. The digital landscape is in constant change and the way we communicate will continue to change and evolve in the future.
References


Schultz, D, & Schultz, H (1998), 'Transitioning marketing communication into the twenty-first century', *Journal Of Marketing Communications*, 4, 1, pp. 9-2


**Websites**


29 April 2017)


Appendices

Appendix 1 Interview Guide

Communication

What would you say is the difference between traditional communication and digital communication?
How do you communicate with retailers?
What communication tools are used?
What obstacles have you encountered when using digital tools when communicating with retailers?
What advantages can you see with using digital tools when communicating with retailers?
How has digital tools been integrated in your communication strategy?

Digital presence

What digital tools do you find effective for communication?
What digital tools are used within your organisation and in what way?
What differences are there in interpersonal relationships that are maintained through digital channels in comparison to traditional methods? Traditional methods; Meetings, phones etc.
How do you think the digital meeting with customers can replace a physical meeting?
What attributes of a physical meeting do you think is lacking in a digital meeting?
Describe your digital strategy? What steps have been taken digitally within your department?
What digital material is produced?

Relationships

How do you maintain relationships with retailer?
Do you consider the digitalisation to have facilitated or hindered maintaining a close relationship with your retailers? In what way?