Digital media use towards relationship initiation in marketing

A qualitative study of Swedish Micro-firms in a B2B context

Xian Li

Master thesis, 15 credits

Two-year master's degree / Marketing

Autumn term 2022

Supervisor: Christopher Nicol

Page Left Intentionally Blank

Abstract

This thesis aims to explore what and how Swedish micro firms use digital media towards relationship initiation in a Business-to-Business (B2B) context. Digital media has been increasingly studied in marketing over time, but it has been predominated by Business-to-Customer (B2C) context, while the Business-to-Business context lacks attention, micro B2B firms even less in particular. Moreover, previous studies show that micro B2B firms lack knowledge of how to leverage digital media and thus they have not fully exploited the benefits in relationship marketing. Therefore, this thesis anticipates gaining a better understanding of the phenomenon of digital media use by micro B2B firms towards customer relationships and focuses on the initiation stage due to its importance in the relationship marketing process as well as the limited knowledge in existing literature.

This thesis employs a qualitative and multi-case study approach to explore the focal phenomenon. Four micro companies which have less than 10 employees from the life science industry participate in the empirical study. The data comes from semi-structured interviews and observation of their websites and social media accounts. Each firm has conducted two interviews. The data analysis follows the Gioia methodology, including within case and across cases analysis, as well as the theory elaboration study.

This study shows that Swedish micro B2B firms rely on their own websites, email, and social media mainly LinkedIn to communicate with potential customers, hence fostering relationship initiation. These digital media have been used to trigger the interest of potential customers, establish credibility by knowledge sharing, and create value. The findings contribute to the literature by extending the knowledge of what and how digital media is used by micro B2B firms towards relationship initiation. They are in line with extant literature showing that digital media enables companies to attract customers, engage their participation, and meet as well as provide services online. In addition, they confirm that digital media can enhance their trustworthiness due to increased communication and interaction. Furthermore, the findings identify the processive process of the case firms and their potential customers from unfamiliarity to relationship initiation, which illustrates three levels of interactivity in sequence: message-based level, knowledge-based level, and participant-based level. The progress of interactivity indicates the development of the trust of potential customers.

This thesis sheds light on what digital media micro B2B firms use and how to use towards relationship initiation with unfamiliar potential customers. Also, it provides insights into how micro B2B firms could establish and increase their trustworthiness in the market. Additionally, this thesis extends the managerial implications to the society and other stakeholders.

Keywords: Digital media, Relationship marketing, Business-to-Business marketing, Trust, Customer relationship initiation

Page Left Intentionally Blank

Acknowledgement

I am grateful to my supervisor, Christopher Nicol, for his engagement and patience throughout the thesis process.

I am deeply thankful to my family for their love and support during the process. Without your encouragement, I would not have been able to complete this thesis.

I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to all of the participants in my study. Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to be interviewed. Your experience and insights have helped me to make this thesis a success. Without your contribution, my study would not have been possible.

I am grateful to everyone who gives me help, support, consideration and encouragement throughout this process and every day.

Xian Li

Page Left Intentionally Blank

Table of content

List of Tables and Figures

1. Introduction

Firstly, this study will start by presenting the problem background for the influence of digital media on B2B micro-firms. Secondly, how to arrive at the research problem will be explained and it is followed by the purpose of this study. Lastly, the focus, delimitations and limitations will be underlined.

1.1 Problem Background

Digital media, defined as any communication media that operates in conjunction with various encoded machine-readable data formats (e.g., Emails, social media, Search Engines), has been extensively used in marketing activities in recent decades (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015, p. 633; Krings et al., 2021; Pandey et al., 2020). It has hence caused the industry fundamental changes (Chen et al., p. 1025; Herhausen et al., 2020, p. 276). An emerging body of literature suggests that digital media provides opportunities for new revenue and value creation, as well as changes to business models (e.g., Parida & Wincent, 2019, p. 6; Kamalaldin et al., 2020, p. 306; Verhoef & Bijmolt, 2019, p. 342). In addition, digital media reshapes the traditional interaction approach between customers and suppliers (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015, p. 633; Izakova et al., 2019, p. 350) and gives more power over the customers in the buyer-seller relationship (Agnihotri et al., 2016, p. 172) due to the increasing frequency of communication. Despite extensive research on digital media in marketing, research and practice of using digital media in marketing have been predominantly from a Business-to-Customer (B2C) perspective, while the Business-to-business (B2B) context lacks attention (Andersson & Wikström, 2017, p. 1098; Lashgari et al., 2018, p. 730; Hofacker et al., 2020, p. 1161). Particularly micro-firms, which have a small scale of employees or turnover, obtain even less attention (Nikunen et al., 2017, p. 173).

Micro-firms play an important role in the Swedish economy, and accounts for 74% of the number of firms and 17% of employment (OECD, 2019). In the digital era, they need to tackle more difficulties due to rapid change and fierce competition than ever before. Particularly, B2B micro-firms seek long-term relationships with their customers instead of one-off trades (Arslan et al., 2022, p. 52; Taiminen & Ranaweera, 2019, p. 1760). They must deal with the complex purchase process and rich involvement of resources during the transaction in terms of multiple decision makers, and high complexity of product specification and pricing (Harrison et al., 2017; Herhausen et al., 2020; Cortez & Johnston, 2017, p. 92). Many scholars (e.g., Wang et al., 2020; Rose et al., 2021; Hänninen & Karjaluoto, 2017) suggest that digital media can benefit relationship development, but Nakunen et al. (2017) find that most studies have focused on larger companies. There is limited knowledge about how digital media is utilized by micro-firms towards their relationship development.

One of the major challenges for micro-firms lies in relationship initiation when accessing a new customer (Gilboa et al., 2019, p. 152). While relationship maintenance (e.g., customer satisfaction and retention) has received overwhelming attention (e.g., Agnihotri et al., 2016; Rose et al., 2021; Hänninen & Karjaluoto, 2017). Organizational buyers seek a supplier with competence and credibility to reduce risks, which means the supplier should be able to offer good products but also be reliable and dependent (Robson et al., 2016, p. 104). Due to the lack of relational capital (Krings et al., 2021, p. 176), it is difficult for an unknown micro-firm, especially an entrepreneurial firm, to gain the trustworthiness of customers when lacking a strong reputation and position in the market. Micro-firms traditionally depend on physical meetings and offline contacts since they believe face-to-face conversations could enhance the trust of customers (Arslan et al., 2022, p. 50). While more and more businesses have been shifting online since the lasting pandemic has broken the movements and offline interactions for a couple of years. There is no doubt that digital media reduces geographical distances. While prior studies have limited understanding of whether and how digital media impact social distance (Anderson, 2001, p. 173) where the suppliers and buyers are unfamiliar with each other. In the extant literature, a few of scholars (e.g., Agnihotri et al., 2016; Rose et al., 2021; Hänninen & Karjaluoto, 2017) suggest digital media can enhance the trustworthiness of suppliers through digital communication and interaction between suppliers and customers. It is because they believe high-quality and validated information provided by the firms could enhance the confidence of clients (e.g., Setkute & Dibb, 2022; Gruner & Power, 2018; Taiminen & Ranaweera, 2019; Lashgari et al., 2018). In addition, Arslan et al. (2022) find in their research that the involvement of partners can increase reliability when accessing new clients. The case illustrates the benefits of the positive involvement of other stakeholders in overcoming difficulties in approaching new customers. Nevertheless, prior studies show that micro-firms have not fully leveraged digital media in their marketing activities (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, p. 2015, p. 643, Izakova et al., 2019, p. 349). Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to this area and examine how digital media can be used towards trust enhancement.

This thesis aims to explore the phenomenon of Swedish Micro-firms using digital media towards relationship initiation, it hence anticipates contributing existing literature on digital relationship marketing and B2B micro-firms in the following ways. First, this manuscript could enrich the literature by focusing on Micro-firms which use digital media for relationship marketing from the supplier perspective; Second, this thesis may specifically provide insights into the utilization of digital media in micro B2B firms in Sweden, since it calls for "more efforts could be made to address the lack of digitization among SMEs" in Sweden (Country Report Sweden, 2018, p. 9). Finally, it is expected to contribute to the limited stream of research in relationship marketing in the initial stage.

1.2 Arriving at the Research Problem

This research problem originates from the academic field of relationship marketing. The importance of relationships and interaction has been always known by businessmen (Gummesson, 2017, p. 16), while scholars did not know until 1970 the concept of relationship marketing originated when consumerism emerged (Thaichon et al., 2020, p. 676). Afterwards, it was first used in 1983 by Berry et al. (Hunt et al., 2006, p. 73) with the definition as "all the activities of a firm to build, maintain and enhance customer relations" (cited by Agariya & Singh, 2011, p. 203). It emerged in the industry field (Payne & Frow, 2017, p. 11) hence being emphasized by B2B firms due to the fierce competition (Hunt et al., 2006, p. 72). Zhang and Du (2020) believe a large portion of the revenue of B2B firms comes from few but big buyers. Moreover, due to the complex purchase process mentioned above, B2B firms pursue long-term and stable relationships rather than one-off transactions. Thereby, in the past four decades, relationship marketing has been obtaining increasing interest both in academic research and business practices due to the importance of customer retention in the B2B market (Payne & Frow, 2017; Steinhoff & Palmatier, 2021). Nevertheless, relationship management in the industry area remains less than the others in the literature (Das, 2009, p. 336).

Over time, relationship marketing has been evolving (Thaichon et al., 2019; Le et al., 2021, p. 3). Especially, when digital technologies are emerging, it has fundamentally changed the traditional ways of business such as communication and interaction with customers (Chen et al., p. 1025; Herhausen et al., 2020, p. 276; Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015, p. 633; Izakova et al., 2019, p. 350). Relationship development becomes even more critical and more challenging (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015, p. 634; Steinhoff & Palmatier, 2021, p. 111). Despite the increasing number of studies on digital media, most of research focuses on B2C, while B2B seems to have been overlooked (Hofacker et al., 2020, p. 1161; Pandey et al., 2019, p. 1191; Andersson & Wikström, 2017, p. 1098; Lashgari et al., 2018, p. 730). B2B marketers do not really brace the digital tools (Andersson & Wikström, 2017, p.1098) despite the benefits such as communication and relationship improvement, market extension and collaboration enhancement. One of the reasons is the lack of knowledge of how to leverage it (Michaelidou et al., 2011, p. 1155). There is thus an urgent need for a better understanding of the roles of digital media in relationship marketing.

Relationship marketing is a dynamic and ongoing process with various statuses (Zhang et al., 2016). It is also reflected in its definition regardless of versions, including creating, strengthening, and maintaining stages in the relationship marketing process (Agariya & Singh, 2011). While one of the most difficult issues counts on acquiring new customers and relationship initiation since B2B clients are more cautious against the risks and uncertainty. The majority of previous digital relationship marketing literature has studied from a broader perspective by highlighting customer loyalty and retention, limited knowledge we know about relationship initiation (Valtakoshi, 2015; Aarikka-Stenroos et al., 2018), namely the starting point of relationship development. In addition, recent successful practical cases such as IBM applying digital tools (Lasroda et al., 2022; Pandey et al., 2019) and greatly large body of existing literature rely on large companies (Nakunen et al., 2017, p. 173). Small-scale firms which suffer a shortage of resources and expertise need more attention (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015, p. 634). It thereby leaves room for further investigation into the phenomenon of how small-scale firms initiate relationships with customers.

Trust theory has been discussed in the digital relationship marketing field (e.g., Gilboa et al., 2019 Chien et al., 2012; Gounaris, 2005; Agag, 2019) even though there is no specific theory that explains how digital media address social distances between unfamiliar buyer and seller. Given the most relevance to the relationship initiation, it seems high-quality in terms of professional, relevant, and valuable information via various channels provided by the firms could enhance the confidence of clients, which may provide insights to this study. In addition, Arslan et al. (2022) discover their research participants in Finland gain benefits from the involvement of their partners. It thus indicates positive reviews from the anticipation of others can help a small-scale firm to reach its potential customers. While previous studies have focused on customers themselves but ignore the other stakeholders' influences (Hunt et al., 2006; Payne & Frow, 2017). This thesis thus aims to learn trust building of customers from an extended perspective.

This study will be conducted in Sweden. Sweden has a strong position in digitalization in Europe, whereas the degree of digital tools usage by small-scale firms seems to be behind the development of digitalization. (Country Report Sweden, 2018). Therefore, small-scale firms, especially micro-firms, still need more efforts to exploit the potential of digital media. Moreover, from the academic research perspective, there seems to be a considerable gap in the B2B digital marketing research in Sweden compared to the USA, UK, and China (Pandey et al., 2020). Hence, it is believed the empirical setting in Sweden needs more attention in this field, where this study may provide valuable insights into both practices and research.

1.3 Purpose and Research Questions

To create a context for the anticipated contributions, the purpose of this thesis is to better understand how Swedish micro firms use digital media towards relationship initiation in a B2B context. Regardless of the increased acknowledgement of the impacts of digital media towards relationship marketing, the research in this field is still fragmented and underdeveloped. Simply put, there is a lack of clarity about the association between digital media and relationship initiation in B2B marketing. Furthermore, along with the development of digital technologies, a set of various digital media has been integrated into marketing. However, there is uncertainty about what kind of digital media being assigned to the specific relationship development process phase due to the variation among executives (Krings et al., 2021, p. 176; Nikunen et al., 2017., p. 175). Therefore, the overarching research purpose is decomposed to the following two questions:

1. ***What digital media do Swedish Micro B2B Firms use towards relationship initiation?***
2. ***How do Swedish Micro B2B firms use digital media towards relationship initiation?***

1.4 Focus and Delimitation

This thesis focuses on micro-firms in the B2B context. In accordance with the definition of micro-firms (European Commission, 2016), firms should be very small, with fewer than ten employees. ***In addition,*** firms will only target organizations, while individuals and hybrid customers will be excluded. ***Furthermore***, it has been decided to focus on the experiences of micro-firms that have used digital media towards relationship initiation in the relationship marketing process. Other topics such as partnership and relationship equity will not be discussed since these topics tend to reflect a more mature relationship between the provider and the buyer during the relationship marketing process. Studies in this area are, however, also of interest.

As far as delimitation is concerned, ***firstly,*** this study will take place in Sweden. Since social phenomena are generally embedded in a national context, where factors such as policies and economy influence the process, geography should be considered. With Sweden aiming to be a leader in the digitalization revolution (DESI, 2018), this study can have a more realistic context. ***Secondly,*** this study does not address the role of the human capital of participants. Despite the human capital of Swedes allowing digital media to be widely applied, this thesis studies the experiences of micro-firms using digital media for relationship initiation rather than examining their antecedents. ***Thirdly,*** a delimitation of the effects of a pandemic on digital media applications will be provided. Although there have been great changes for business during the pandemic due to the broken offline contacts, it does not intend to distinguish between pre- and post-pandemic. The investigation covering both periods will therefore not be compared. ***Lastly,*** there will be no discussion of preferences for using digital media by different customer segments, such as public and private. There may be differences in attitude and behavior between subjects, however, that is not the purpose of this thesis.

2. Theoretical Frameworks

This chapter reviews relevant literature related to the topic of this study. It begins with an overview of relationship marketing, allowing readers to gain an understanding of the chosen topic. Afterwards, digital media will be presented in the context of B2B relationship marketing, especially towards relationship initiation. It is followed by trust theory which is critical for relationship initiation. Additionally, the geographic scope of this study is presented.

2.1 An Overview of Relationship Marketing in a B2B context

This section will provide a deep understanding of relationship marketing in a B2B context. It consists of two modules: the first subsection will introduce the concepts of relationship marketing, including definitions, importance, and factors of relationship marketing. It is followed by the second subsection which presents relationship marketing in a B2B context, and a dynamic setting.

2.1.1 Concept of Relationship Marketing

Definitions have no consensus

Relationship marketing has been defined variously during the past four decades. Many scholars (e.g., Mogen & Hunt, 1994; Grönroos, 1996; Hunt et al., 2016; Gummesson, 2017; Payne & Frow, 2017; Ndubisi & Nataraajan, 2016) provide various descriptions of it. The significant divergence among the definitions relies on the scope of conceptualizations: on one hand, it is suggested a broader view involving stakeholders, as Peng and Wang (2006, p. 26) state: "it can be defined as all marketing activities directed towards building customer loyalty to provide values to all the parties involved in the relational exchanges". On the other hand, many researchers emphasize the customer-supplier dyadic relationship (Das, 2009, p. 327), which refers to the "strategic management of relationships with customers, involving appropriate use of technology" (Payne & Frow, 2017, p. 12). Although many scholars believe that relationship marketing should not restrict to customer relationships and regard the customer relationship as a subset of relationship marketing (Hunt et al.,2006; Frow & Payne, 2009), these two concepts are often interchangeably used and even successfully merged since they both strongly focus on win-win buying-selling relationship (Yuri et al., 2020; Agariya & Singh, 2011, Gummesson, 2017; Sin et al, 2005). Likewise, Rosa and Rua (2020) indicate that relationship marketing eventually aims for a long-term sustainable relationship with customers hence increasing profit even though they can vary in contexts. Nevertheless, this study focuses on customer relationship from a strategic perspective, where the firms implementing relationship marketing ultimately strive for stable and collaborative customer relationships without excluding the involvement of other parties. It implies a broader perspective that does not limit to dyadic interaction with customers. ***Therefore,*** this thesis defines it as all marketing activities based on the interaction within networks relationship towards establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges with customers, which is consistent with Gummesson (2004).

Relationship marketing plays an important role

Although no well-established definition has been universally accepted (Heiens et al., 2019, p. 2444), numerous studies in a variety show that relationship marketing has been highlighted in both research and business practices. As it is known, the trend of modern business has substantially changed (Agariya & Singh, 2011; Khoa, 2020) which calls for a more efficient and effective strategy for firms to achieve positive results such as profits and market positions (Yuri et al., 2021). This challenge can be met by relationship marketing which provides unique and distinctive responses. Its value in literature can be summarized as three aspects: ***firstly***, from the competitive perspective, it enhances the competitive advantages for firms (Romani & Kumar, 2008, p. 27). Hunt et al. (2006) explain that relationship marketing allows suppliers to provide more benefits to customers from the relational exchanges which exceed the cost customers pay out. For instance, customers reduce search costs and risks since they believe the supplier could provide reliable products with quality. Then more and more customers are driven by the economic motivation to be attached to the supplier hence it turns out to be the resource advantage in competition when considering customers as resources. In addition, a good relationship with customers increases loyalty, which strengthens the barriers to competitor entry (Rosa & Rua, 2020). In this case, sellers stand in a stronger position in the market compared to their competitors. ***Secondly***, from the perspective of return on investment, many studies emphasize customer retention which reduces marketing costs, hence increasing profitability. For example, Reichheld and Sasser (1990, p. 105) find in their research that the profit potential of firms can increase up to 75% when reducing the 5% customers lose. Similarly, Feinberg and Kadam (2002, p. 432) state that customer retention rates increasing by 5% can increase profits by 25% to 80%. Moreover, it can increase profits by cross-selling. Furthermore, Athanasopoulou (2009, p. 583) concludes the cost of acquiring new customers is five times that of keeping existing ones. **Yet,** Agariya and Singh (2011) question the performance since they notice the outcomes of implementing relationship marketing are not as good as expected. Regardless of the argument, there is no doubt of the importance of customer relationship development for the business. ***Thirdly***, from the equity perspective, relationships nowadays have been endowed with more value than ever before. Gummesson (2004) believes customers become the equity of firms in terms of the combination of value, brand and retention. Binder and Hanssens (2015) carried out a study which covers 6000 cases between 2003 and 2013 to prove that customer relationship value has increased from 9% to 18% which also being reflected as assets in the balance sheet, and such companies with strong customer relationship value become preferable in the acquisition. Rosa and Rua (2020) also discuss the intangible assets that relationship marketing creates. ***However***, despite the significance of relationship marketing, it is limited known how to positively carry out relationship development in marketing activities.

The factors for relationship marketing

The majority of existing literature on relationship marketing focuses on mechanisms such as constructs, objectives, and outcomes (Sharifi et al., 2013; Das, 2009). For example, Agariya and Singh (2011) identify fifty constructs in their research and find the most often discussed ones are trust, satisfaction, loyalty, commitment, quality, and communication. Likewise, Hunt and Arnett (2006) develop a model covering a set of factors from different perspectives and the rational factors for relationship marketing success are trust, commitment, cooperation, keeping promises, shared values, and communication. Ndubisi (2007) outlines trust, commitment, communication, and conflict resolution. Pan et al. (2012) highlight satisfaction, trust, value, quality and brand. Meng and Elliott (2008) identify the predictors of relationship quality for luxury restaurant customers are product quality, satisfaction, communication, and fairness. Whereas Chattananon and Trimetsoontorn (2009) propose the objectives of relationship marketing as customer satisfaction, customer delight and loyalty. The outcomes are distinguished by relational outcomes such as trust (De Wulf & Odekerken, 2003), and financial outcomes such as sales and profit increasing (Parlmatier et al., 2007). Interestingly, several indicators are not bound to a specific dimension, such as trust and commitment but are cross-functional and overlap (Lasrado et al., 2022). More significantly, trust seems like the cornerstone and core of the business (Lages et al., 2008). Regardless of the expanding volume of studies in the relationship marketing field, the B2B market area remains understudied (Das, 2009, p. 336).

2.1.2 Relationship Marketing in a B2B context

Why the B2B firms highlight relationship marketing?

Relationship marketing emerged in the industry and service field (Payne & Frow, 2017, p. 11; Gummesson, 2017, p. 17). Surprisingly, the research mainly focused on B2C (Ndubisi & Nataraajan, 2016, p. 227; Gummesson, 2017, p. 17). Considering the focus of relationship marketing relies on long-term sustainable relationships with customers rather than a one-off transaction, it seems more crucial for B2B firms due to several reasons: ***firstly***, the scale of customers. B2B marketing targets organizational rather than individual customers (Andersson & Wikström, 2016, p. 1099). It implies the revenue of a firm depends on a few but big buyers (Zhang & Du, 2020). There might be a large proportion of sales loss when customers switch to competitors. ***Secondly***, the cost of the transaction. Completing a B2B transaction usually consumes a lot of resources such as time and effort because of the negotiation with multiple decision makers, high complexity of product specification fulfilment and pricing negotiation (Harrison et al., 2017; Herhausen et al., 2020; Cortez & Johnston, 2017; Karampela et al., 2020). Therefore, the short-term even one-off purchase could not really make profits for vendors in this sense. ***Thirdly,*** the need to overcome uncertainty (Ndubisi & Nataraajan, 2016). One key characteristic of the modern business environment is uncertainty which is not only for sellers but also buyers. Buyers prefer suppliers who have a business relationship with them since it gives them more confidence in risk reduction (Robson et al., 2016; Seppänen et al., 2007). *Although* B2B firms highlight and invest in customer relationship development, the outcome of implementation is not satisfactory due to the high failure rate (Agariya & Singh, 2011, p. 204). As a result, if we could enrich the understanding of relationship marketing in the B2B market, it would be beneficial to the effectiveness of B2B firms.

Relationship marketing is a dynamic process

An understanding of relationship marketing requires a dynamic environment (Zhang et al., 2016; Hofacker et al., 2020). As a context-dependent social process, its evolution can be viewed from macro and micro perspectives. The ***first point to note*** is that relationship marketing has changed over time as social and technological developments have progressed (Gummerus et al., 2017, p. 2) from a macro perspective. There has been much discussion about paradigm shifts (e.g., Gummesson & Polese, 2009; Gummesson, 2016; Payne & Frow, 2017; Yuri et al., 2021). According to Gummesson (2016), B2B relationship marketing has experienced three paradigms of evolvement with different focuses in line with the social context changing, including 1) by the 1970s, where B2B relationship marketing identifies customer centricity but without relationship focus; 2) 1970s-2000s, where B2B relationship marketing has been introduced and distinguished from B2C, as well as focused on value and satisfaction; 3) from 2000s to date, where it emphasizes service domination and stakeholders theory. Given the changing focus, it is important to treat B2B relationship marketing as a complex case associated with the era context.

The second point from a micro perspective, in terms of the dynamic nature of the relationship, reflects a life-cycle process from the relationship initial to the relationship end between suppliers and buyers (Hollmann et al., 2015). Such a relationship thus evolves through distinct stages, which can be caught as a general glimpse from the definitions such as creation, development, and maintenance. ***Yet,*** many scholars give more specific definitions, for example, Laksitamas et al. (2021) state it experiences beginning-trust-partnership; Johnson and Selnes (2004) believe supplier and buyer start as acquaintances and hence develop into friends eventually become partners; Netzer et al. (2008) propose the status of relationship evolves from dormant to occasional and last to act. Jap and Ganessan (2000) as well as Jap and Anderson (2007) agree that the relationship consists of exploration, buildup, maturity, and decline. Kring et al. (2021, p. 175) explain that B2B relationships start from a pre-relationship phase, and then enter a development phase when establishing a relationship, to a termination phase when buyers switch to other solutions. Zhang et al. (2016, p. 57) summarize the life cycle framework as “an initial neutral or transactional state, a positive relationship state, and a negative relational state”. Sushi (2012) proposes the relationship stages develop as connection, interaction, satisfaction, retention, commitment, advocacy, and engagement. She also divides the stages into four cells as a matrix based on the degree of relational exchange and emotional bonds from both low degrees to both high degrees. Despite an absence of consensus, it is significant to look at the specific stage accordingly. However, the understanding of this area in relationship marketing seems fragmented. (Gummerus et al., 2017, p. 2).

The divergence of each stage relies on the state of exchanges between suppliers and buyers, including transactional and relational. The transactional exchange could be understood as a financial objective which aims for repeat purchases. The relational exchange refers to non-finance objectives since it emphasizes satisfaction, trust and loyalty (Ndubisi & Nataraajan, 2016). Sheth (2017) insists on the shift from transactional exchange to relational exchange. However, these two dimensions are not substitutes, instead, they are co-existing and interplay with each other but take on different levels of the state. Raggio et al. (2014, p. 10) propose the relationship between supplier and buyer starts with the repeat purchase. **Yet**, there are some cases where the buyers stay with transnational exchanges but do not go deep with relational exchanges. Hence, Hollmann et al. (2015, p. 275) suggest that relationship building impacts the development of the relationship process. Notwithstanding, Gummerus et al. (2017, p. 4) claim that short attention is given to relationship initiation as the extant literature in this field has been dominated by relationship maintenance.

Initiation as the first stage of the relationship

In the B2B relationship marketing field, initiation is depicted as the first stage in the relationship development process, where suppliers and customers get to know each other and establish expectations about future interactions and shared values (Ozdemir et al., 2020). Aarikka-Stenroos et al. (2018) define relationship initiation as the period of first contact before any business development. It starts with a superficial interaction and lasts until they decide if they can collaborate based on the in-depth information acquired. More specifically, Valtakoshi(2015) points out that the end of the initiation phase depends on the agreement of tentative norms and expectations of the relationship between the potential buyer-supplier. This stage corresponding to the relationship initiation model proposed by Haber(2014) consists of five steps (p.142-143): the first step starts with contacts associated with a transactional exchange; secondly, both supplier and customer share basic information such as social obligation and expectation; the third step is regarding emotional sharing such as opinion and feeling, which is believed as a dialogue for better understanding of each other(Deszczyński et al., 2017); the fourth step undergoes common interests and objectives sharing, and probably both parties need to deal with the conflicts; the last step creates mutual empathy which implies the trust building between each other. Aarikka-Stenroos et al. (2018, p. 82) specifically identify the activities in the relationship initiation process consisting of two sections, the first section refers to pre-initiation undergoing social contacts to increase awareness and need recognition of business opportunities, then assessing the credibility and competence of counterparties. The second section defined as actual initiation conducts negotiations regarding exchange defining, conditions establishing and future interaction forming. Accordingly, Deszczyński et al. (2017) emphasize three issues during this process: communication, involvement of internal and external parties, and the creation of understanding with economic utility values. Despite a set of factors that influence relationship has been highlighted in the existing literature, especially trust and commitment, Valtakoski (2015) claims many factors such as commitment does not impact relationship initiation, while trust is conceptualized as the central construct, which potentially explains the relationship initiation in his study. Despite the emerging attention from marketing research on the importance of relationship initiation and the practical need that firms need repeatedly build new relationships, knowledge in this stage of B2B relationship development remains scarce (Valtakoski, 2015; Aarikka-Stenroos et al., 2018). Therefore, this thesis will examine the initial stage of relationship marketing to gain a deep understanding.

2.1.3 Concluding Remarks

In short, relationship marketing has not been well established and also lacks a consensus of definition. This study refers to all marketing activities based on the interaction within relationship networks towards a process of relational exchanges. Nowadays, relationship marketing as a significant strategy for a firm does not only enhance competitive advantages but also increases the financial outcomes as well as equity. However, prior literature is predominated by the B2C field, despite relationship marketing being more critical for B2B firms given the transaction nature and characteristics. Many studies identify the indicators that impact relationship development which should vary in the effects on the relationship marketing process. This hence leads to a dynamic process, which appears differently at distinct stages associated with the social context. Within the stages, relationship initiation needs more attention due to the less focus in the existing literature in addition to its impacts on later phases of the relationship process. Therefore, when relationship marketing shifts to the digital era, it is of interest to better understand the relationship initiation for B2B firms, which will be discussed in the following section.

2.2 Digital Media and B2B Relationship Marketing

The importance of digital media, particularly social media, has been demonstrated in many aspects, such as 1) customer access (e.g., Karjaluoto & Mustonen, 2014; Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015; Zhang et al., 2020;), 2) brand building (e.g., Karjaluoto& Mustonen, 2014; Ahmed et al., 2019; Ho & Wang, 2020; Habibi et al., 2014), and 3) co-creation (e.g., Mpandare & Li, 2020; Alam, 2021; Rathore et al., 2016). Digital media breaks the barriers of geography and time hence enabling the firm to reach a greatly larger population efficiently. In addition, firms keep high exposure in the various digital channels and create online communities to better communicate and interact with customers. Digital media has dramatically influenced the B2B market, ***however,*** in the extant research and practices, the B2B field is far behind the B2C (Andersson & Wikström, 2017; Lashgari et al., 2018; Hofacker et al., 2020; Jussila et al., 2014). ***More significantly,*** Dung Le et al. (2021) claim there is an insufficient investigation of digital media on relationship marketing thereby the understanding of digital media's potential depends on the exaggerated prediction. Considering the importance of relationship development in the B2B contexts mentioned above, there is thus a call for more attention to digital media towards B2B relationship marketing.

A few scholars (Taiminen, 2016; Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015; Zhang & Du, 2020) note the main reason that digital media has not been fully applied in B2B firms depends on the lack of understanding of it. ***In general,*** B2B marketers do not have a proper strategy to integrate digital media into their business and marketing process because of the shortage of skill and sophistication (Andersson & Wikström, 2017). ***Moreover,*** Krings et al. (2021) in their investigation have observed that the majority of executives define digital media as specific professional networking sites. ***On the other hand***, mistakes in customer service often turn into a crisis for vendors due to negative information like viruses spreading online (Ginger & Kristy, 2015; Karjaluoto & Mustonen, 2015). Thereby, the B2B executives either consider digital media irrelevant or hesitate to use it on account of uncontrolled conversation online.

However, globalization and fierce competition in the modern economy force vendors to rethink their approaches to relationship development in the customer-centric context, which urgently needs to fully exploit the potential of digital media. Therefore, in order to better respond to the call for B2B vendors, we need to better understand the concept of digital media first-hand.

2.2.1 An Understanding of Digital Media in a B2B context

Prior literature has not clearly defined digital media and thus there exists some interchangeable terms such as new media and social media, hence leaving room for people to explain it according to their knowledge and experience (Guinibert, 2022). Shankar et al. (2022) concisely define digital media as “media that rely on signals and data that can be discretely represented by a series of digits, unlike traditional or analogue signals and data, which are continuous” (p. 541). Thus, the forms of digital media usually vary in use according to the different preferences and evolvement over time. Dung Le et al. (2021) highlight Email and Websites, Search Engines, and social media being important media in digital marketing. Taiminen(2016) analyses the usage of three types of digital media including Website, Email and social media in different levels of marketing communication. Nikunen et al. (2017) notice that vendors in general use Blogs, Emails, Websites, social media, Search Engines, content marketing and analytics tools. Also, they identify the specific digital tools being applied associated with the activities. One interesting thing is that when Taiminen and Karjaluoto(2015) investigate the use of digital media, it shows in their survey that the most frequent use of digital media is Company’s own website, social media, and Search Engine. However, in their interview research, the interviewees present the company's own website, email, and social media. Notwithstanding, based on these various application types which can be used as digital marketing channels, this study summarizes the classification of media including:

- Company’s own website: as an early digital media, it is regarded as the home of the brand. The company has high control over information delivery due to its one-way communication. Also, the information demonstrated should be able to respond to the different groups of visitors.
- Email: it is also an early digital media used in marketing activities. It has multiple usages such as knowledge sharing, promotion, and relationship development. It can be two-way communication as natural but also one-way communication when sending newsletters. Due to it, there is a warning to avoid overrunning this media.
- Social media: a popular media which has been rising recently. It has a set of various types to provide and promote services, including blogs, social networks, content communities, forums and content aggregators (Keinänen & Kuivalainen, 2015). It helps firms with knowledge sharing, social networks expanding, customer relationship development etc. It is two-way communication that customer-driven, thus vendors have less control over communication. However, Alamäki and Korpela (2021) show their finding that social media is less important in B2B contexts.
- Search Engine: it provides organic search results in response to the keywords that consumers search, which benefits firms visibility online. Since it is offered by the

search engine companies such as Google, vendors who pay for it do not have much control over it and it is a one-way communication.

A few scholars highlight the different characteristics of the communication and interaction function of digital media. For instance, Sora et al. (2017) emphasis the real-time and immediacy in the interaction which fosters a great sense; Bala and Verma (2018) claim shareability and interactivity which implies content visibility and accessibility; similarly, Winer (2009) highlights interactivity, but also digital as the characteristics. Despite it, the comprehensive understanding of digital media can be described as any communication media that operates in conjunction with various encoded machine-readable data formats. However, there lacks an understanding of the effectiveness of media in combination and the association with specific process phases (Krings et al., 2021).

2.2.2 Digital Media as a Marketing Communication Tool

The majority of existing literature on digital marketing in B2B contexts concentrates on communication using digital media (Pandey et al., 2020, p. 1194). In line with the statement above, it is noted that digital media facilitates communication due to it enables information exchange and modification among users. Digital media allows a diversity of communicators to broadcast massive content. Also, the multiple channels could better cater to the personalization of customers and better interactivity. Furthermore, it enables vendors to measure and evaluate the effects of communication. Accordingly, the digital communication model has been greatly changed compared to the traditional communication pattern from various perspectives. For example, Murphy and Sashi (2018) conclude the characteristics of digital communication as 1) real-time feedback; 2) diverse media; 3) simultaneous support; 4) user control; and 5) re-processable in the same context. Meanwhile, Taiminen and Karjaluoto (2015, p. 635) conclude that communication channels in terms of digital media as one-way and two-way communication according to interactivity. For instance, Own Website and Search Engine are typically one-way communication, as they are used to send information from the firm to the customer such as newsletters and product catalogues. Two-way communication such as social media allows firms and customers, even other non-customer users interact online. Yet, there is an interesting finding in the study that Email is often used one-way instead of two-way to send newsletters to customers, while social media which is supposed to be the two-way communication channel with customers is primarily used to post news. Nevertheless, it can be represented by the Mass Communications Model (Winer, 2009, p. 109, cited Hoffman & Novak, 1996), showing the complicated interactivity in the digital environment has significantly impacted the elements in the communication model, consisting of focus firm, content, media, customer, and feedback. As a result, it is vital to have proper strategic thinking in digital communication according to the context. However, this is rarely known digital media in B2B communication (Shankar et al., 2022, p. 550)

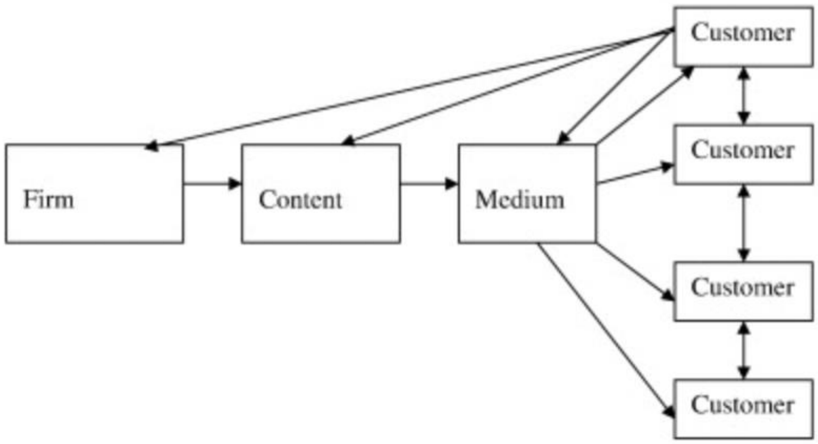

Figure1: Mass Communication Model: Winer (2009, p. 109)

Digital communication in a B2B context

As far as the communication mechanism is concerned, communication in B2B contexts has unique characteristics. In terms of each element for instance, the communication contents tend to be rational rather than emotional (Zhang & Du, 2020); multi-channels are needed as information resources (Müller et al., 2018); message receivers in B2B are more specialized who usually have strong knowledge background (Zhang & Li, 2019) and it can be more source and receivers in the communication since digital media allows a large group of both sides in terms of buyer and supplier to consistently communicate in the same place at the same time (Murphy & Sashi, 2018). More importantly, there is no clear definition of information source and receiver since in two-way communication, the customer also can be the one initiating dialogue. It shows digital communication between B2B suppliers and customers moves from solely presenting to actively interacting with other users. It is thus not a surprise that two-way communication has been emphasized in a business setting since the more communication and interaction, the more loyal customers are (Li et al., 2020; So et al., 2016). Compared to traditional communication in the B2B context which is likely less care about customer relationship development and interaction (Karjaluoto & Mustonen, 2014), digital media that highlights online communication and interaction plays a critical role in customer relations for businesses (Rose et al., 2021). More importantly, Alamäki and Korpela (2021, p. 299) suggest customers nowadays tend to gather information actively before contacting sellers and by then make 60% purchase decisions. Furthermore, the authors believe by 2025, 80% B2B sales interaction between suppliers and customers will be conducted on digital channels.

However, Müller et al. (2018) do not think digital media is important in B2B contexts since B2B marketing remains relying on personal experience rather than widely used digital media by account managers and employees. Conversely, a number of researchers insist that B2B firms can gain benefits in customer relationship development from digital media due to its integrated, targeted and measurable communication function (Setkute & Dibb, 2022; Jussila et al., 2014; Taiminen & Ranaweera, 2019; Murphy & Sashi, 2018; Holliman & Rowley, 2014; Cartwright et al., 2021). Likewise, Murphy and Sashi (2018) in their study find out that digital media has developed and strengthened B2B relationships through interactive discussions online. However, the extant researchers focus on large-scale firms (Nakunen et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2019) and the later phase of relationship development in terms of maintenance (Agnihotri et al., 2016; Rose et al., 2021; Hänninen & Karjaluoto, 2017), about small-scale especially micro firms and relationship initiation even less is known.

2.2.3 Digital Media and Relationship Initiation for Micro-firms

It seems digital media has not been widely applied by micro-firms, where the reasons might be a shortage of human capital and resources, managerial decision power, absence of long-term goals, and preferences for the traditional approach (Yoon et al., 2021; Setkute & Dibb, 2022; Karjaluoto et al., 2015; Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015). Therefore, although digital media can provide them with more opportunities towards the increasing challenges in the market competition, micro firms do not fully exploit the benefits. One of the main challenges that micro-firms face is relationship initiation in the B2B context (Gilboa et al., 2019) as mentioned above. On one hand, this phase is critical for the entire process of relationship development hence influencing the marketing performance, on the other hand, according to Sharifi and Esfidani (2014), this phase is trick and at a tactical level since the customers just have relationship intention where they are willing to develop a relationship but may terminate into short-term behaviours. Therefore, it is necessary to explore how digital media can be used to tackle this problem for micro firms.

However, a few of light has been shed on the understanding of digital media in relationship building for micro-firms in the existing literature. For instance, Nikunen et al. (2019) investigate how digital tools impact the five elements of relationship development: attracting customers, engaging customer interest and participation, retaining customers, learning customer preferences, and relating to customers. Taiminen (2016) concludes three levels of usage of digital media consisting of being present, meeting customers online and serving customers online in secondary research. However, these studies do not really explain how digital media address the difficulty for micro-firms in relationship initiation with potential customers, which is that micro-firms, especially entrepreneurial firms lack trustworthiness due to unknown reputation and brand in the market (Krings et al., 2021) when the organizational buyers seek the supplier with competence and credibility to reduce risks (Robson et al., 2016). Thus, this thesis will investigate this issue based on trust theory.

2.2.4 Concluding Remarks

Digital media has gained much attention from both researchers and practitioners recently but in the B2B market, especially in the relationship marketing field, digital media has not been fully exploited. The main reasons rely on the lack of understanding and the concern about the uncontrolled online discussion. The most popular digital media being discussed in the literature consists of Own-Website, Email, social media, and Search Engines. These various types of digital media provide users with one-way and two-way communication channels, which facilities the B2B supplier-buyer relationship development. However, there is scarce research on how digital media is used towards relationship initiation, and micro-firms even less care. Previous studies mention that micro-firms depend on physical meetings to establish contacts and conduct dialogues with potential customers. While along with the shift from offline to online, it is necessary to leverage digital media since it has played a crucial role in customer relationships in terms of communication and interaction. Therefore, as far as the lack of trustworthiness of customers, when micro-firms are challenged in customer initiation, scholars believe communication can foster the trust of customers. It is due to the delivered information with high quality and verifiability via various channels that can increase their confidence when they look for a trustable supplier who can always fulfil the requirement as expected. As far as the difficulty is concerned, where micro-firms lack relational capital that could not prove reliability and credibility, extant literature is scarce and fragmented, which needs a better understanding of how digital media can be used to enhance trust hence impacting relationship initiation for B2B micro-firms.

2.3 Trust Theory

2.3.1 Trust in B2B Relationship Initiation

Trust as one of the most important constructs of relationship marketing has been highly emphasized (e.g., Lasrado et al., 2022; Hunt & Arnett, 2006; Lages et al., 2008; Arun & Singh, 2011; Andrew et al., 2016). It is even believed as the cornerstone of the business (Luo, 2002; Doney et al., 2007) due to the risk and uncertainty in the B2B and especially in the digital business age (Ratnasingam, 2005). In terms of relationship initiation, Robson et al. (2016) indicate the vendors should be "reliable, dependable and able to fulfil all obligations" (p. 104) otherwise any absence of these attributes would discourage the buyers from going into the relationship. Likewise, Zhang and Li (2019) also highlight capability, benevolence, and integrity since when a buyer trusts the vendor implies the buyer depends on the vendor's action and believes they will act as expected. Accordingly, the trustworthiness of a vendor will be examined from various dimensions due to the high risk and uncertainty in the B2B purchase. Although Ashnai et al. (2016) suggest that trust can be classified into inter-personal and inter-organizational, however, this study would not distinguish them. It is because firstly micro firms usually do not have a specialized organization system but depend on their own-managerial function (Karjaluoto & Huhtamäki, 2010) and secondly, the inter-organizational trust is built and maintained by individuals in the B2B setting (Zhang & Li, 2019).

There are other expressions of trust in the relationship marketing literature. For example, Kring et al. (2021, p. 176) propose "relational capital" representing trust as the mediator to alleviate the risk and uncertainty in B2B marketing. Andersen (2001, p. 173) presents "social distance" to describe a situation where both parties of the relationship are unfamiliar with each other. Regardless of the different terms, it is shown the lack of trustworthiness hinders the relationship initiation of the relationship between suppliers and customers (Doney & Abratt, 2007). In the past, micro-enterprises relied on physical meetings and offline contacts for initiating B2B relationships since face-to-face conversations could enhance trust from customers. Swani et al. (2014) claim offline communication cannot be replaced by online channels. While the lasting pandemic has broken the movements and offline interactions (Arslan et al., 2022) for a couple of years, people had to switch online and now become familiar with it. As a result, the writer of this thesis argues that micro-firms should adopt a strategic method in terms of digital media use.

2.3.2 Trust and Communication Using Digital Media

Trust is important but difficult to achieve in the digital environment when engaging remote customers (Holliman & Rowley, 2014). As communication is regarded as one of the most significant approaches for relationship initiation (Murphy & Sashi, 2018), many scholars suggest digital communication and interaction can enhance the trustworthiness of suppliers (Agnihotri et al., 2016; Rose et al., 2021; Hänninen & Karjaluoto, 2017; Setkute & Dibb, 2022; Gruner & Power, 2018; Taiminen & Ranaweera, 2019; Lashgari et al., 2018). In line with the communication model, a body of studies provide insights into the understanding of digital media influences the trust of customers from various perspectives:

1) Emphasizing the quality of delivered information in the B2B digital communication (Shankar et al., 2022; Murphy & Sashi, 2018; Huotari et al., 2015; Holliman & Rowley, 2014). The quality entails credibility, relevance, usefulness and real-time (Pandey et al., 2020; Fink-Shamit & Bar-Ilan, 2008). F**irstly**, the form of content is important which should have both static (e.g., texts) and dynamic rich media content (e.g., video) (Holliman & Rowley, 2014; Müller et al., 2018; Shankar et al., 2022). It is because the diverse forms of information can be more understandable but also enhances the efficiency of information delivery. **Secondly**, the tone of the content should be also considered, for instance, Murphy and Sashi (2018) distinguish rational and emotional manners are necessary for long-term relationship development. Swani et al. (2014) confirm that B2B marketers deliver more emotional information. However, it seems that rational content better suits B2B marketing than emotional since it will show the profession of vendors (Zhang & Du, 2020; Swani et al, 2017). This study which focuses on the initial phase of the relationship believes the rational description can create a professional impression to potential customers since the contents in B2B digital communication usually are related to industry phenomena such as issues and trends (Taiminen & Ranaweera, 2019). **Thirdly**, the volume of content needs control. Despite the idea of providing a large amount of information to customers, Sharifi and Esfidani (2014) argue that overload information would prevent customers from the relationship. **Lastly and most importantly**, the value of the content is the key in B2B communication as it is believed that the content should help customers with learning or problem-solving, and the more valuable the more engagement hence more trust (Wang et al., 2019). Therefore, B2B communication messages would highlight the facts in terms of function and performance (Valos et al., 2015). More importantly, apart from service quality in terms of technology, function and perceived value, communication reflecting customer orientation and open communication also positively influences the trust of customers (Doney et al., 2007).

2) The synergic multiple media may increase the trust of customers (Merrilees & Fenech, 2007; Murphy & Sashi, 2018; Ancillai et al., 2019). **Firstly,** the B2B market is more likely to depend on direct and personalized communication media to deal with rich information and complexity in the business (Valos et al., 2015). Hereby, the various options allow customers to choose one-way or two-way channels and "convenient, acceptable, and appropriate" platforms for customer engagement (Taiminen & Ranaweera, 2019, p. 1760). A mix of one-way and two-way communication is required to increase trust since one-way is not sufficient for buyers to decide to enter a relationship with suppliers, and thus suppliers can show their fairness and honesty to customers when conducting a dialogue (Anderson, 2001). **Secondly,** multiple channels using can create synergy effects which may enhance the credibility of information B2B firms post (Vieira et al., 2019). **Thirdly**, multiple channels enable buyers to be more informed and to triangulate the authenticity of information (Müller et al., 2018). Furthermore, integrating multiple media which allows the audience (potential customer) to easily enter a further investigation, especially from static texts to interactive conversation would positively influence the trust of buyers (Doney et al., 2007). Meanwhile, due to the confidentiality in the B2B industry, Karjaluoto et al. (2015) propose that communication between vendors and customers on public platforms would affect relationship creation. Thus, providing a more private and secure conversation context would allow buyers to freely interact with suppliers.

3) The external parties' involvement seems beneficial for the relationship initiation between buyers and suppliers. Karjaluoto et al. (2015) indicate people tend to trust peers more than vendors on the internet. Hence, the dyadic communication between buyer and supplier can be extended to multilateral dialogues by involving other external stakeholders in the communication since the buying firms may actively engage in conversations with "other customers of the potential supplier, the supplier's distributors, suppliers and even competitors" (Andersen, 2001, p. 173). The involvement of other stakeholders could be direct or indirect. **Firstly,** direct involvement allows external stakeholders to participate in the interaction of supplier-customer. For example, Arslan et al. (2022) find in their research that the involvement of partners can increase reliability when accessing new clients. Even though online interaction mainly occurs between suppliers and customers at present, digital media especially social media still manifests the potential for stakeholder engagement and, the corporation that obtains more comprehensive monitoring from external stakeholders is more likely to gain positive influence upon the others (Hoffmann & Lutz, 2015). Likewise, Doney et al. (2007) also confirm the positive relationship between social interaction and buyer's trust in B2B relationship development. **Secondly,** indirect involvement relies on online comments and feedback from stakeholders. B2B buyers usually investigate the suppliers before purchasing and are more interested in the buyers' feedback (Decarlo and Hansen, 2022; Steward et al., 2018). It thus implies the importance of word-of-mouth in B2B buyer's vendor selection. Hsu et al. (2013) explain the origin of positive WOM comes from the satisfaction and trust of the existing customer which may imply the reliability and credibility of the supplier. Nevertheless, the lack of control over WOM online still hinders micro-firms from going into digital communication.

2.3.3 Concluding Remarks

In the B2B market and digital era, the high risk and uncertainty lead the organization buyers to seek highly trustworthy suppliers who can always fulfil the expectations of buyers. In this case, the supplier has to prove their competence, integrity, and benevolence. However, for an unknown micro-firm, it is difficult to gain the trustworthiness of customers who lack relational capital. Many scholars highlight that communication using digital media may enhance the reliability and credibility impression to customers. They suggest ways that may increase trust from various perspectives, including generating high-quality content, adopting multiple channels to deliver information and involving multiple stakeholders regardless of whether directly or indirectly. Nonetheless, the existing studies in this area are fragmented, which leaves room for this thesis.

2.4 Geographic Scope

The geographic setting of this thesis is the micro-firms in Sweden. This setting is appropriate and relevant to explore a better understanding of how digital media is used by Swedish micro-firms towards relationship initiation with customers. **Firstly**, micro-firms play an important role in the Swedish economy, which accounts for 74% of the number of firms and 17% of employment (OECD, 2019). Considering the increasingly fierce competition and risk in the business environment, it is necessary to pay more attention to micro-firms which have fewer resources. **Secondly**, Sweden has a strong position with a high rank in terms of digitalization in Europe, and the high level of the human capital of Swedes allows digital media to be widely applied. However, the degree of digital tools usage by small-scale firms seems like behind the digitalization development (Country Report Sweden, 2018). Therefore, small-scale firms, especially micro-firms, still need more efforts to exploit the potential of digital media. **Thirdly**, from the academic research perspective, there seems to be a considerable gap in the B2B digital marketing research in Sweden compared to the USA, UK, and China (Pandey et al., 2020). **Lastly**, there is a call for Swedish firms especially entrepreneurial firms positioned in an international market rather than focusing on local domestic domain (Sweden government, 2015, p. 15). To address the geographic distance and efficiency of business development, digital media plays an important role in reducing cost and time. Hence, it is believed the empirical setting in Sweden needs more attention in this field, where this study may provide valuable insights into both practices and research.

2.5 Synthesis

In summary, the statement above suggests that Sweden is a relevant and proper empirical setting. It is because the underdeveloped and fragmented research field of digital media usage in B2B relationship marketing provides a limited understanding of how Swedish micro-firms can enhance performance in marketing. The majority of studies in this area focus on the B2C market and large firms. However, with the trend of businesses switching online, particularly due to the breakout of the pandemic, micro-firms need to adopt a systematic strategy of using digital media to follow the dynamic market. Moreover, the special characteristics of B2B purchases and the high risk in the process require suppliers to show their reliability and credibility to customers, especially in the initial stage where both parties do not know each other and lack relational capital. While it is difficult for micro-firms to gain the trust of potential customers due to unknown brands in the market. Scholars propose that communication and the stakeholders' involvement may address this challenge. Considering the applicability and efficiency of meeting with potential customers, digital media has demonstrated unique advantages in this sense. Surprisingly, the degree of digital media applications in micro-firms seems relatively low and less cared for. The main obstacle to digital media adoption in micro-firm marketing relies on the lack of understanding of digital media. Therefore, in order to respond to the calls for both digitalization and interactional view for Swedish firms, the selection of this thesis aims to contribute to both B2B and relationship marketing literature both theoretically and empirically by investigating the digital media use in Swedish B2B micro-firms towards relationship initiation with potential customers.

3. Scientific Methodology

This chapter consists of four parts: the first part will introduce the choice of subject. The second part will explain the author's pre-understanding on this subject. The third part will present the chosen philosophic approach. The last part will present the design and literature search.

3.1 Choice of Subject

The chosen research topic was generated from my previous thesis project in the International Business Program, which focuses on social media usage in science-based entrepreneurial firms. In the empirical research process, I realized all the participants target organizational customers, and they highly rely on social networks and customer relationships for business. However, they do not adopt systematic strategies to utilize social media regardless of the degree they use social media for their business. It also shows they rely on traditional ways of marketing activities such as physical conferences or making calls. It seems they do not have fully leverage digital media, especially social media. Also, the lack of resources constrains the investment in experts, which hinders the adoption of the digital approach in the business. Moreover, the marketing courses offered by the business school provided me with a foundation of knowledge in this field, which allowed me to notice and further think about this phenomenon. Consequently, my interest and motivation in this subject increased and I decided to investigate the underdeveloped field of digital media in micro-firms.

3.2 Pre-understanding

Pre-understanding refers to previous knowledge, including preconceptions, biases, and past experiences, which is vital for the interpretation of research (Geanellos, 1998). In line with the motivation and interests of selecting the subject as mentioned above, there are a few previous understandings of this subject being obtained that I believe relevant and valuable. Firstly, I was involved in a couple of marketing projects during my education at the business school, which collaborated with the local micro-firms. These projects focused on local markets and various sectors, which they offered me the opportunity to engage in real business and obtain an understanding of the situations of micro firms and consideration of marketing strategies. Secondly, the learning obtained in my previous thesis study and internship working in micro-firms, especially the internship experience in which I mainly worked on digital communication, allowed me to gain an understanding of digital communication strategy. Thirdly, as an individual customer in daily life, I am involved in the vendors' marketing endeavors via digital media such as email newsletters and social media. These experiences provide me with awareness of relationship marketing and digital media use from a customer perspective. Also, I individually use digital media in daily life for personal. All these experiences and learning have given me a general idea of the subject in this thesis study. However, my individual experiences in terms of digital media in the B2B market are limited. While undertaking thorough literature research I believe it can make up for the shortage.

3.3 Research Philosophy

Research philosophy refers to the truth, reality, and knowledge that the researcher perceives (Ryan, 2017, p. 14), which guides the research study to be designed and conducted. A research philosophy is a framework consisting of a set of beliefs and values that reflect ideas about reality and nature. Winit-Watjana (2016) believes that research philosophy is chosen as an appropriate methodology to answer a research question. He indicates that research philosophy as an overarching term includes four research paradigms (positivism, post-positivism, interpretivism and pragmatism) and four assumptions (ontology, epistemology, axiology, and logic of inquiry). In order to identify the most appropriate methodology for this thesis, I will discuss the assumptions and research philosophy as follows:

3.3.1 Philosophy Assumptions

There are four assumptions directly related to research philosophy which shape the research questions, research methods and research conclusions (Winit-Watjana, 2016). They are ontology, epistemology, axiology, and logic of inquiry.

Firstly, Ontology refers to the assumption about the nature of reality (Saunders et al., 2007, p. 108), which is associated with the beliefs that explain what can be known as real and what is considered true (Ryan, 2017). According to Winit-Watjana (2016), this assumption relates to the question of "what is to know" (p. 429). This thesis aims to deeply explore the use of digital media in Swedish B2B micro-firms towards relationship initiation with potential customers. It is thus deemed to be falling into the domain of subjectivism when social actors create social phenomena from their perceptions and consequent actions (Saunders et al., 2007, p. 108). On the other hand, the objectivism aspect believes that social entities exist external to social actors (Saunders et al., 2007, p. 108), which is not the case in this thesis. It is because the social actors, namely the case firms I plan to study could use digital media in varying ways according to their business nature and their understanding of the performance and availability. The actions and reactions they perform will be the consequences of their interaction with their internal as well as external environment and the interpretation of the situation. Therefore, the phenomenon of digital media use in the study cases is not outside the influence of the social actors.

Secondly, epistemology refers to the assumption about knowledge in a field. It is the belief that guides how to know the world (Ryan, 2017). It corresponds to the question "how to know about it" proposed by Winit-Watjana (2016, p. 429). The central question for epistemology depends on how researchers consider the information or data collected to be objective and real. There are two main beliefs concerning, namely, positivism and interpretivism (Saunders et al., 2007, p. 103-106). Positivism suggests a separate existence between researchers and objects since there is no bias but independent evidence. Bryman (2008, p. 24) indicates four principles to explain positivism, including 1) phenomenalism; 2) deductivism; 3) inductivism; 4) objectivity. Thereby, the facts can be proven and will not vary among persons (Ryan, 2017). While interpretivism argues that researchers should be part of reality since knowledge is constructed through researchers' interpretation rather than objective realities

(Winit-Watjana, 2016, p. 430). Interpretivism emphasizes the differences from natural science that researchers access people's behaviour hence interpreting from their point of view. Accordingly, positivism does not suit this thesis since this study aims to examine the phenomenon of digital media use in Swedish B2B micro-firms, rather than testing hypotheses. Moreover, the phenomenon will be studied through my perception, value and understanding, it thus tends to be more subjective. Consequently, this thesis is based on interpretivism.

Thirdly, axiological refers to the role of value and ethics, which corresponds to the question of "what is the role of values or ethics?" according to Winit-Watjana (2016, p. 429). Shaw et al. (2018) explain axiological means what is of value and what it is that is worthwhile to know (cited Heron & Reason, 1997). There are two opinions that existed towards this issue: one is value-free since it is believed that the social entities are independent existing, which are not influenced by researchers' knowledge. On the other hand, there is an argument insisting the research is value-laden (Winit-Watjana, 2016, p. 430). For example, Saunders et al. (2007, p. 108) believe that value guides all our actions, such as choosing this topic, selecting a philosophy methodology, and adopting a data collection strategy. These choices reflect the value that the researcher holds. Moreover, they point out there are various values involved in the research since both researcher and the parties being studied hold their own value. These different values will lead to the decisions making. This thesis therefore is guided not only by my value but also the others including the studied parties and even the business school in the topic selection and the process of conducting research.

Lastly, the logic of inquiry refers to research reasoning, which traditionally has two methods, namely, deductive reasoning in terms of a theory-driven approach and inductive reasoning in terms of a data-driven approach (Shaw et al., 2018; Winit-Watjana, 2016). The deductive method focuses on hypothesis testing, which could be regarded as a quantitative method. It first generates hypotheses according to the theoretical or model-based predictions, hence conducting an experiment or a study to identify if the hypotheses work (Toomey et al., 2020, p. 228). By comparison, the inductive method is usually employed by qualitative research, which eventually generates theory according to the collected data related to the research question. It is applicable to the study of new fields which are unpredictable and complex (Shaw et al., 2018, p. 228). Inductive thereby suits for the exploration and discovery of human behaviour and experience. In terms of this thesis, according to the differences concluded by Saunders et al. (2007, p. 120), it seems that inductive is more appropriate than deductive, since this study aims to explore the phenomenon of digital media use in the Swedish B2B micro-firms towards customer relationship initiation, which lacks knowledge in the extant literature.

In short, this thesis aims to deeply explore the social phenomenon in terms of digital use in Swedish B2B micro-firms towards customer relationship initiation. It starts with the event of digital media use, which is created by the participants whom this study contacts hence gaining a better understanding of this field through interpreting the experiences shared by the studied parties. Also, values and ethics seem not to be unified among people and they guide the research procedure such as the topic chosen and data collection as well as drawing conclusions. In this case, the inductive and qualitative approach is therefore appropriate for this study when examining the social actors' experiences and gaining a better understanding through the interpretation of collected data.

3.3.2 Research Paradigms

A research paradigm refers to "a philosophical framework or set of beliefs that guide action on research" (Winit-Watjana, 2016, p. 429). It sets up the intent, motivation, and expectation for research (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). Mac Naughton, Rolfe and Siraj-Blatchford (cited by Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006) propose that a paradigm consists of a belief about the nature of knowledge, the methodology and criteria for validity. There are various research paradigms with numerous terms, while four paradigms are mentioned frequently in the literature, including positivism, postpositivism, interpretivism and pragmatism (Winit-Watjana, 2016; Ryan, 2017; Turyahikayo, 2021; Shaw et al., 2018). However, Saunders et al. (2007) and Bryman (2008) highlight positivism and interpretivism as the main paradigms for business management research. Positivism is more likely to be adopted for nature science towards law-like generalization, while interpretivism which emphasizes the variety among people and the complexity of social phenomena is more suitable for social science when exploring human behaviour and experiences (Saunders et al., 2007, p. 103; Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006, p. 193). In this study, I argue that interpretivism is a more suitable option, which will be explained as follows.

Firstly, from the nature perspective, this thesis falls into the domain of social science instead of natural science, especially doing a study in the business management field. Due to the complexity and dynamic of the field (Saunders et al. 2007, p. 107), it is, therefore, more likely to adopt the interpretivism paradigm. **Secondly,** from the objective perspective, this thesis aims for an exploration of a social phenomenon in terms of digital media use in the Swedish B2B micro-firms towards customer relationship initiation rather than a law-like generalization (Saunders et al. 2007). In this case, there will not start with hypotheses according to the existing model hence testing the outcomes of hypotheses whether acceptable or not (Bryman 2008). Instead, it will initially look into the local event in terms of digital media use in micro- B2B firms hence collecting data based on the formulated questions. It eventually will generate a theory in line with the analysis of collected data. Due to it, interpretivism is more appropriate for this thesis. **Thirdly,** from the perspective of objectivity, it is believed that the social actors, including both researchers and the studied participants, are part of the phenomenon rather than being outside. Moreover, the entire process of research could be influenced by their perception, worldview, and value since these values guide the decisions making for research development (Shaw et al., 2018). More importantly, it is hard to say whether the values they hold are consistent or unified. Thereby, it probably varies in the experiences and interpretations among different people, which might not be able to be reflected by positivism. **Lastly,** from the perspective of data collection methods, this study will apply the qualitative method to collect data for analysis since the qualitative method allows me as the researcher to deepen my understanding of the event that I examine. In contrast, the quantitative method highlights the facts observed by an experiment or a study in a specific field. However, this thesis aims for a better understanding by investigating the behaviours and experiences of contacted participants which will be reflected by texts, stories, or images (Winit-Watjana, 2016, p. 430). Consequently, it is deemed that interpretivism is an appropriate paradigm for this thesis.

3.3.3 Research Method

Research methods are defined as data collection and analysis tools or procedures (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). Essentially, there are two options in terms of qualitative and quantitative methods being used in the research (Winit-Watjana, 2016; Bryman, 2008). Yet, some scholars (e.g., Onweegbuzie et al., 2009; Shaw et al., 2018; Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006; Saunders et al. 2007) propose the third method, namely the mixing method in terms of combing qualitative and quantitative. The choice of the method relates to the research philosophy and paradigms; hence the qualitative and quantitative methods differ with respect to their ontology and epistemology as well as principal orientation (Bryman, 2008, p. 32). Bryman (2008) concludes that quantitative relies on the deductive method by testing theories, positivism, and objectivism, conversely, qualitative adopts the inductive method, interpretivism and constructionism which is consistent with the subjectivism proposed by Saunders et al. (2007) I mentioned above. The mixed method applies both qualitative and quantitative methods in the data collection, analysis and drawing of conclusions in the research when the single method seems to be superficial for researchers (Shaw et al., 2018).

In line with the statement above, this thesis adopts a qualitative method for data collection, analysis and drawing conclusions. **Firstly,** according to O'Brien et al. (2014, p. 1248), a qualitative method would be the best-suited choice for the study when addressing the research question with "how" associated with a social event or phenomena, which is in accordance with the research question of this thesis. **In addition**, due to the purpose of this thesis depending on gaining an understanding of Swedish micro firms' experiences and behaviors in terms of digital media use, it, therefore, highlights the insights and feeling rather than numbers which the quantitative method deals with (Sileyew, 2019, p. 7). **Moreover**, this thesis aims to contribute to the literature by extending knowledge of Swedish B2B micro-firms using digital media towards customer relationship initiation, which is absent in the extant literature. It is reasonable to choose the qualitative method in line with the opinion of Huberman and Miles (1994), who think it is best to adopt the qualitative method in the research of gaining a new perspective or new way of a view. All in all, it is believed that the qualitative method is being most appropriate approach for this study.

3.3.4 An Overview of the Path Reaching the research philosophy choice

According to the statement above, it was believed that this thesis fell in the subjective and value-laden philosophy assumptions. Therefore, the interpretive and inductive methods should be more appropriate to deeply explore the social phenomenon of digital media use in Swedish B2B micro-firms towards customer relationship initiation. As shown in figure 2, this study adopted a qualitative method instead of a quantitative one to examine the interested social phenomena.

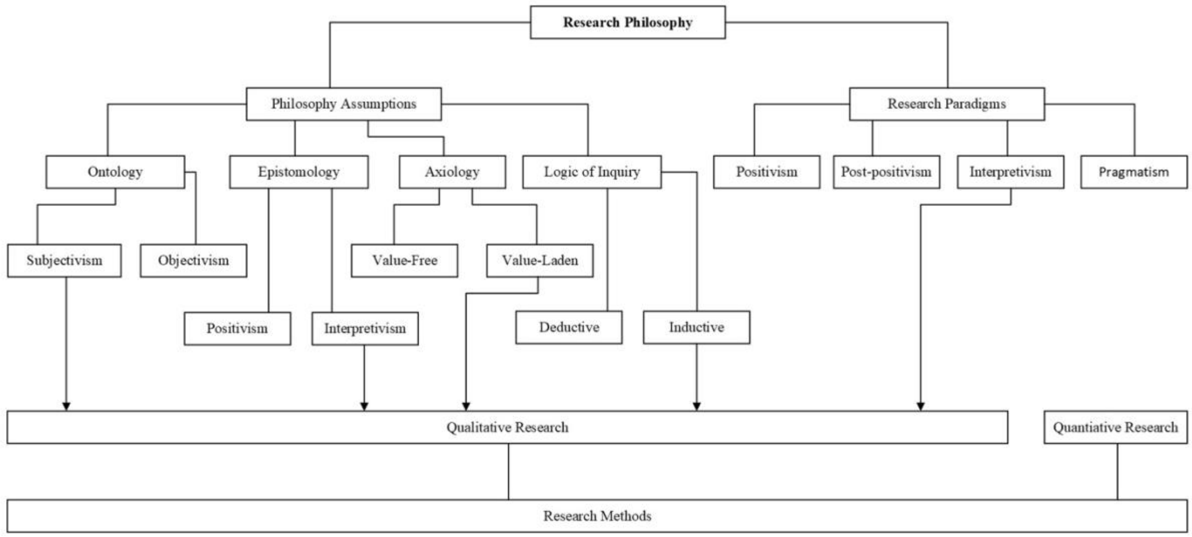

Figure 2: The path reaching the research philosophy choice: downwards arrows corresponding to the philosophy choices of this thesis.

3.4 Literature Research

3.4.1 Literature Research Process

A systematic literature review is depicted as a systematic way of previous research collection and synthesis (Snyder, 2019). It enables researchers to gain a foundation for the research, which provides an understanding and insights into the studied field (Saunders et al., 2007). Compared to the traditional narrative review, the systematic review is more comprehensive and unbiased (Tranfield et al., 2003, p. 215), which not only enables literature research to be more transparent and scientific but also offers specific and detailed procedure guidance for researchers to conduct research and report results (Hu et al., 2015). In the light of some scholars (e.g., Pandey et al., 2020; Vallaster et al., 2019; Yun et al., 2019; Hu et al., 2015), this thesis also follows the three-step method proposed by Tranfield et al. (2003), namely, planning review with a scoping study, conducting a review to filter and select best quality literature, and reporting the descriptive results.

Firstly, the review was initiated with the definition of relevance and the topic area of digital media and relationship marketing. While it was noted that there are alternative terms for digital media in the literature due to its definition, such as online media, digital tools, digital channels, e-commerce, and social media. Meantime, since many scholars indicate that the usage of digital media is limited in the B2B market, it was thus kept in mind that needs a review. **Additionally**, digital media use in relationship marketing has been defined in many aspects, such as communication, brand awareness, loyalty, and satisfaction. In order to obtain a comprehensive view of the field, all the research papers have been included in this study. **On the other hand**, I set up the criteria for exclusion to assure the studies I searched is highly relevant and recent, for example, the peer-reviewed papers were included to ensure quality and suitability otherwise they would be excluded; the papers published before 2000 were excluded since the digital media especially social media has been fundamentally changed the way of business recently, and the non-full-viewed papers were also excluded to avoid the risk of taking out of context.

Secondly, based on the criteria of inclusion and exclusion, I started the literature review with database selection and the identification of keywords and search terms (Tranfield et al., 2003, p. 215). Following the suggestion of the Umea University business school, the online database of Umea University has been primarily used. Meanwhile, Google Scholar as a complementary source (Vallaster et al., 2019) was also applied in the case of no open access to the Umea University online database. **Afterwards**, the following terms were identified and included in the literature research: relationship marketing, B2B relationship marketing, industry relationship marketing, B2B relationship building, B2B relationship initiation, digital marketing, B2B digital media use, B2B social media marketing, B2B online marketing, B2B e-commerce and their combinations. In the light of requirements of the business school, the literature comes from articles and the resources such as books and conference papers were excluded. This step consists of two stages, one is selecting papers and the other focuses on the analysis of searched papers. Hereby, I read all the papers' abstracts and conclusions, and some of them have been fully read through. Simultaneously, I evaluated the quality of the content of the literature and integrated similar statements into groups. It was considerably time-consuming as Tranfield et al. (2003) state, however, it provided a robust and solid foundation for the knowledge of this field. This selection and evaluation process followed a funnel function, which starts from a broader view and hence generally narrows down to the most relevant to the research question and topic, for example, relationships marketing developed into B2B relationship marketing hence the initiation stage of B2B relationship marketing then B2B relationship initiation in micro-firms.

Thirdly, based on the findings of the literature, the outcomes of selection could be reflected in two ways according to Tranfield et al. (2003), namely descriptive analysis and thematic analysis. However, this thesis is an empirical study by multi-cases rather than a conceptual paper, it thus did not identify and distinguish the aspects of research methods, geographic areas and industry sector (Hu et al., 2015). Instead, it embraced all the qualified papers including conceptual and case studies, qualitative and quantitative, single keywords, and combined terms as a mix as long as they were highly relevant. A total of 163 relevant studies were selected and categorized by the keywords (Pandey et al., 2020, p. 1192) into various groups. Four main themes were identified through categorizing and sub-categorizing, including 1) gaining an overview of B2B relationship marketing; 2) focusing on how digital media is used in B2B relationship marketing; 3) reviewing the critical indicator, namely trust for relationship initiation 4) addressing the geographic setting.

In summary, this thesis adopted a systematic review following the three-steps method proposed by Tranfield (2003). The review process indeed provided a solid foundation that underpinned the understanding of digital media use in B2B relationship marketing. Given the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 163 articles have been selected and reviewed from a broad view to a narrowed perspective as a funnel function. Consequently, they were categorized into four themes and led to the research gap in terms of digital media use in the Swedish B2B micro-firms towards customer relationship initiation.

3.4.2 Source Criticism

Source criticism plays an important role in literature research when dealing with the false or deceptive information probably involved. It is a process of critically and systematically investigating all the sources, including investigating the origins of sources, the alternative sources that verify the information from sources and the information contained in the sources (Steensen, 2019). Saunders et al. (2007) list various resources applicable to the study, however, the researcher should always bear in mind whether the source provides reliable and relevant information in line with the research purpose. Bertilsson (2021) proposes four criteria concerning the source criticism, namely authenticity, dependency, tendency, and the notion of time, which have been taken into account in this thesis as following aspects:

To ensure the liability of sources, this thesis **first** chose reliable online databases, which primarily relied on the Umeå University database and took the Google scholar database as a complementary option. Although most literature this thesis referenced are academic research papers, there was a couple of government report also selected in the geographic scope section in the theoretical frameworks, government websites were hence the sources to prevent false information. **Secondly,** this thesis mainly includes peer-reviewed papers as sources, however, it is not available to set the filter as peer-review on the Google scholar database. In this case, I swished to search for the same one on the Umeå University database and checked if acceptable or should be rejected. **Thirdly,** Steensen et al. (2022) suggest considering the credibility of both sources and source materials since not all the information is a fact but has been interpreted. While the majority of qualitative studies usually lack empirical research data presentation. In order to deal with the possible questioning of the reliability of the findings and conclusions of the research, I also examined the journals and the authors' backgrounds which might justify the credibility (Tranfield, 2003).

As far as the tendency is concerned, this thesis adopted a systematic approach guiding the literature research process and a critical review to keep it transparent. Steensen (2019) highlights that every piece of information has its tendency. Therefore, based on the keywords and their combinations, this thesis selected literature with variety. **Also**, critical thinking, even though it does not have to consider the studies negatively, allowed this thesis to be unbiased and neutral (Saunders et al., 2007).

Another issue should be considered in terms of source criticism depending on the relevancy of the literature selected. **Firstly,** in addition to the keyword research, this thesis decided to opt for the original papers which can be identified if relevant, making sure of the independence of selected references. However, there were a couple of papers referenced by the sources that could not access the original studies, in this case, I searched the other papers for triangulation and assessed the information from various sources. **Secondly,** I read all the abstracts and went through the bulk of the selected papers to prevent the interpretation out of context. This played a critical role in obtaining a deep knowledge of this field when approaching the concepts and context rather than merely terms. **Lastly**, this thesis tried to search the papers as latest as possible. Bertilsson (2021) highlights the importance of time since he believes the nearer to the event the more reliable and relevant. Given the topic of this thesis, which aims to examine digital media and B2B marketing, it is particularly significant following the trends and dynamics of the evolvement of focused social phenomena.

4. Practical Methodology

This chapter will present the process of practical research of this study. It will go through how the practical study being systematically designed first. Afterwards, the data collection process will be explained, and followed by an analysis of collected data and results presentation.

4.1 Practical Research Design

As stated above, it was deemed that qualitative methods are the most appropriate for this study. In order to obtain a deep understanding of the research field, this thesis adopted a multiple-case study approach since Eisenhart and Graebner (2007) suggest that multiple cases could contribute to a "more robust, generalizable, and testable theory than single-case research" (p. 27). Given the previous fragmented literature, this study aims for building theory based on rich and empirical descriptions of digital media use in Swedish micro firms' relationship marketing. Hence, it was necessary to systematically design the empirical research, including research industry setting, sampling method and data collection strategy.

4.1.1 Life Science Industry as the Research Setting

This thesis selected the life science industry as the research industry setting according to its theoretical and practical significance. **Firstly,** considering the quality of a multiple-case study, the cases from a specific context could prevent "extraneous variation" (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 537) that might not be controlled in the process. Lashgari et al. (2018) also insist that it could enhance the robustness of a finding when it could be replicated across cases. Additionally, according to the study experience of Zou and Ghauri (2010), focusing on the industry could increase the comparability of data. **Secondly**, the life science industry contributes greatly to Sweden's economy in line with the national strategy of being a leading life science nation (Government office of Sweden, 2020), and micro-firms account for a large number in the life science industry and have dramatically increased in the past years (Vinnova, 2011). In addition, due to a call for born global, Swedish startups in the life science industry have turned to an international view when they were created (Romanainen et al., 2016), which highlights the critical significance of digital media in addressing geographic distance and communication problems. It was therefore believed that the life science industry would be the proper research setting for this thesis.

4.1.2. Purposive Sampling Method

This thesis is an inductive study towards theory build, purposive sampling was hence utilized to acquire rich and related information in an underdeveloped field by recruiting multiple cases (Suri, 2011). Goulding (2005) indicates that purposive sampling underpins theory building and it usually occurs before the data collection. This study aims to deeply examine the digital media use in Swedish B2B micro firms' relationship marketing rather than hypothesis testing, thus the selected cases should be able to reflect the focal phenomena carefully and provide the similarities and differences to theory building (Eisenhardt, 2021). Moreover, purposive sampling enables rich information about the research question, which suits for the different research objectives rather than generalizing an understanding to a large population like random sampling (Shaw, 1999). Consequently, to ensure that the involved participants would provide rich data about the digital media use in customer relation initiation, it was decided to apply the following criteria which would help the author in this thesis select proper cases to gain better knowledge in this research field:

- Case-firms should satisfy the definition of a micro-firm
- Case-firms should perform B2B business for a minimum of three years
- Case-firms should be active in accessible digital media, such as own-website, social media platforms

As well as satisfying the grounded definition of a "micro firm", namely the case-firms should have less than 10 employees and the annual turnover is below two million Euro, case-firms should target organization customers rather than individuals. More importantly, inspired by Shaw (1999), a requirement that case firms have been trading for three years allows the author of this thesis to access the understanding of the participant's way in relationship marketing. Relationship marketing is a dynamic phenomenon, and the customer relationship building takes place over time, a stipulating of three years seems fair for examination. Furthermore, case-firms have to be active in accessible digital media, which enables the author to visit and examine how case-firms conduct digital communication with audience. As a result, meeting the above criteria ensures close correlation between the research field and the realistic environment that participants embedded.

4.1.3 Data Collection Strategy

To maintain effectiveness and construct validity, this thesis used various sources for data collection. Within a qualitative study, non-numerical data such as words (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 534; Harrison & Reilly, 2011) could be collected through primary and or secondary sources. The primary source refers to information and facts that researchers collect for a specific research problem at first-hand, including words, images, and sounds generated in the observation or questioning. While secondary data is gathered by others for their purposes instead of the researchers' selves, which could be organizational reports personal sources, magazines and so on (Hox & Boeije, 2005; Robianski, 2003). In this study, both sources were involved in the data collection process due to their complementary advantages, for example, primary data could provide direct and straightforward information which specifically addresses the research questions (Eisenhardt, 1989), whereas secondary data could enable researchers to access a large amount of information with low cost in terms of time and hands (Ellram & Tate, 2016). Accordingly, the data collection involving various sources in this study undertook three phases, which was believed to alleviate the concerns of Rabianski (2003) in terms of reliability and validity:

1) The first phase of the study focused on the identification of case firms based on the pre-determined criteria. It searched websites, social media platforms and previous documents to select the proper participants who were expected to provide rich information.

2) The second phase conducted semi-structured physical individual interviews for primary data collection. It examined the experience and knowledge of case firms on how digital media is used towards relationship initiation and trustworthiness building.

3) The third phase sought different sources for triangulation and validated the collected data. It included an extensive review of accessible digital media platforms that case firms have such as websites and existing social media platforms in terms of the updates within the recent three years.

4.1.4 Concluding Remarks

This thesis as a qualitative inductive study aims to deeply explore the phenomenon of digital media use in Swedish B2B micro-firm relationship marketing, especially towards trust building in the customer relationship initiation stage through digital communication. Due to the fragmented and underdeveloped previous understanding, this thesis aims to build theories regarding this field. In order to achieve this purpose, this study decided to focus on a specific industry, namely the life science industry and expected to gain rich insights into the multiple cases in terms of their similarities and differences. The recruited case firms are supposed to fulfil a set of criteria, including being micro-firms, targeting organization customers for a minimum of three years and being active on digital media. Also, both primary sources in terms of semi-structured interviews and secondary sources including a set of reviews were recruited to ensure the reliability and validity of gathered data.

4.2 Data Collection Process

This section will describe in detail how the data was collected and what has been done during the process to maintain the data's validity and reliability. It starts with thematic case selection, hence presenting how the primary data was collected and followed by data triangulation and ethical considerations.

4.2.1 Sampling Process

As the statement above, this study follows a purposive sampling method for rich information collection, which has set up a set of criteria that the recruited case-firms have to fulfil, including:

- Case-firms satisfied the definition of a micro-firm
- Case-firms performed B2B business for a minimum of three years
- Case-firms were active in accessible digital media, such as own-website and social media platforms.

In addition to the criteria, the geographic proximity and accessibility to case firms also were considered Hence, the sampling process in this study undertook 4 steps: I **first** started to online search for entrepreneurial firms in the life science industry through local institution's websites as entrepreneurial firms are usually small-scale. It provided a list of local firms covering a broad range of players within the research industry. **Afterwards**, I screened out 18 candidates who remain in active status according to their websites and social media platforms. **The third step** included further examinations of the backgrounds of these candidates and identified whether they met the criteria for this study. Allablog websites, companies' websites, and existing social media platforms were utilized to check their background, employment scales, annual turnover, and business performance. This step resulted in eight cases that were suitable for the study. **The last step** to acquiring participants lies in the willingness and commitment of the firms identified. I sent out interview invitations by email to them with a short introduction regarding this thesis project and my situation. Four cases replied with positive feedback immediately. Due to time constraints, four cases thus were confirmed for the primary data collection first and the rest cases were set aside as backup in case of insufficient information generated from the four participants. As in a qualitative multiple-case study, the quantity of samples relies on data saturation rather than a pre-defined number and it allows the addition of cases in the data collection process (Eisenhardt, 1989), it was therefore deemed to start data collection with the four case firms.

In conclusion, this study adopted purposive sampling methods based on a set of pre-determined criteria to recruit suitable participants for rich and valid data. The process started with a broad range of screening through secondary sources and undertook four steps to identify the case firms that satisfied the criteria (Table 1). Eventually, four firms provided positive responses and considering the limited timeline of this thesis project, it was deemed to start interviews with four cases.

Table 1: Sampling Process

Steps	Activities	Sources	Results
1	Searching firms in the life science industry	Institution websites	A broad range of startups
2	Selecting candidates and investigating the status	Own websites existing social media platforms	18 firms being selected
3	Examining firms whether met the criteria	Allablog websites, companies' websites, existing social media platforms	8 cases being identified
4	Inviting candidates to interview	Email	4 cases being recruited

4.2.2 Primary Data Collection Process

Both Eisenhardt (2021) and Gioia (2021) highlight the importance of a well-designed data collection in a multi-case study towards theory building, since the theories generate from the data collected in the experience sharing of informants. In order to acquire high-quality data for the study, it is of importance to have a well-built interview portfolio, which consists of two phases: developing a proper interview protocol and carefully conducting interviews.

The first phase: Formulating interview protocol

Firstly, it made the decision that primary data would be collected through individual semi-structured in-depth interviews. Compared to the other methods, semi-structured interviews not only allow this study to focus on the research questions but also enable informants to share freely their experiences, knowledge and insights which would be new concepts from pre-identified constructs in the previous literature reviewed (Gioia et al., 2013). There are other popular methods available for qualitative research such as focus groups and observations (Hox & Boeije, 2005), however, they do not suit this study as observations only reflect participants' behaviour in the present but not in the past (Rabianski, 2003) and focus groups are too complex to implement (Sim, J.,1998). **Secondly**, a set of open-ended questions were well developed based on the constructs identified from secondary research including previous literature and knowledge about selected case firms. The option of open-ended questions was expected to give the case firms floor to talk about their experiences and views of digital media use towards customer relationships initiation, while the unstructured questions would generate abundant useless information being a burden to analysis (Gioia et al., 2013) but close-ended questions usually are employed in quantitative research (Charef et al., 2019). Consequently, a four-part interview guide allowed the participants first to introduce their business and themselves. The second part referred to the firms' challenges in customer relationship initiation. The third part included questions regarding the firms' strategy for digital media selection, as well as approaches that firms use digital media to communicate with audiences. The fourth part focused on the external stakeholders' communication through digital media in customer relationship development. This interview guide according to the suggestions of Gioia et al. (2013) focused on research questions and cover thoroughly the anticipated issues. Moreover, it avoided leading questions that would hinder the study's exploring the truth. **Lastly**, a pilot study through an in-depth interview was conducted as soon as the interview questions were developed to increase the quality of research as well as reliability and validity (Malmqvist et al., 2019). Along with going through all the interview questions, it was identified the necessity to modify some questions since the wording seems ambiguous or hard to understand. Also, the order of questions has been slightly changed to ensure a smooth connection. More importantly, the pilot interview provided me with insights into the life science industry which allowed me to better interact with participants in the main interviews. As a result, the revised interview guide has been settled as Appendix.

The second phase: Conducting interviews

As stated above, four firms were recruited in the semi-structured interviews and the participants were the CEO of these companies. As soon as they consented to participate in the project, a follow-up email was sent out which left interviewees to suggest a time and place for an appointment since a familiar and comfortable interview atmosphere would allow interviewees to feel relaxed and free to interact with researchers (Elwood & Martin, 2000). **In addition**, the purpose and topic of this study statement, an outline of questions and consent confirmation were attached to the email. The informants thus understood what we would talk about, hence were able to recall related experiences ahead but did not prepare the answers to specific questions. **Consequently**, one informant scheduled a Zoom meeting through his booking system whereby the rest chose to meet physically in their office meeting rooms. Both approaches were acceptable since online Zoom meeting was believed to provide high-quality and rich information the same as physical meeting (Reñosa et al., 2021). Meanwhile, I slightly adjusted the interview protocol based on the secondary research on each case firm to treat the elite informants more personalized and flexibly (Solarino & Augunis, 2021). Moreover, I kept the question relatively broad to encourage the informants to answer the questions as deeply and freely as possible. Also, it may result in higher accuracy in research (Ambos & Birkinshaw, 2010)

Each case had two semi-structured in-depth interviews to unpack the experiences of micro-firms using digital media towards customer relationship initiation (Table 2). The first interview followed a similar protocol with sight variety which provided a holistic picture of each case. On the other hand, there were some specific themes generated in the first interview that permitted us to explore further. Therefore, the follow-up interview deeply investigated the specific themes of each case accordingly to obtain richer information on how each case firm utilizes digital media to build trust in their customer relationship initiation process.

Table 2: Interviews

Case Number	No.	Participant	Date	Means of interview	Duration (Minutes)
Case 1	1	CEO	December 1	Online	34 min
	2		December 20	Online	43 min
				Total	77min
Case 2	1	CEO	December 5	Physical meeting	47min
	2		December 20	Physical meeting	25min
				Total	82min
Case 3	1	CEO	December 19	Physical meeting	55min
	2		December 20	Physical meeting	52min
				Total	107min
Case 4	1	CEO	December 22	Physical meeting	37min
	2	CEO	December 28	Physical meeting	44min
				Total	81min
	Total: 8				Total: 347min

The first interview stage:

At the beginning of the first interview, I asked for permission to record and restated the confidentiality of the data collected from the interview. It was considered to show respect to the informants but also may lead to honest responses (Solarino & Augunis, 2021). Due to only a single researcher in this study, I also did observation and took notes when asking questions. To maintain the accuracy of collected information, I used two devices for recording in case of unexpected interruption. After a short introduction of myself and the project, we moved forward to the main interview. As mentioned above, the interview consisted of four parts of open-ended questions. It started with their background and business development journey, which allowed them to speak freely and comfortably. All these questions started with “how” or “what”, leaving the space for interviewees to talk as much as possible. Here I kept flexibility in each interview, following up on questions when noting new concepts that emerged in the speaking. Also, I followed the interviewees’ flow to react to their answers rather than sticking to the pre-determined order of questions. Accordingly, four cases demonstrated similarities in the protocol but differed in the proceeding and outcomes. All the interviews were conducted in English and lasted different durations from 34 to 55 minutes. When approaching the end of the interview, I realized that it would be necessary to conduct a follow-up interview due to the emerging themes could not be addressed in one interview. As a result, I thanked the interviewees for providing a holistic picture of their experiences but also proposed a follow-up interview to further discuss some specific events. This request was accepted by all informants.

The follow-up interview stage:

Afterwards, the records were transcribed immediately, and the transcription was taken into a preliminary analysis for each case before the follow-up interview. It was described in terms of their practices, focusing on the types of digital media used, one-way communication, two-way communication and external stakeholders involved in digital communication with potential customers. These summaries were presented as PowerPoint slides and sent to each participant. Also, the emerging themes for each case were highlighted and informed that would be discussed further. The follow-up interviews started with a conclusion of the first interview. I explained what relevant themes were identified and then asked informants to elaborate on how they involved external stakeholders in digital communication and unpack the outcomes of digital communication towards customer relationship initiation. Apart from it, the informants also explained why they use digital media in such ways and how digital media should be involved in business in the future. By the end of the interview, I noticed I had obtained rich information. All the participants played a role as CEO in the company and had extensive and exclusive experience as key decision-makers (Solarino & Aguinis, 2021). Especially in the high-tech field, they not only took responsibility for business decisions but also fulfilled the technical support duties for their clients, which implies they frequently interacted with customers. While further interviews could not provide more insight into this topic, it hence was believed the information reached saturation. Accordingly, four cases were the size scale for this study despite the backup cases. According to Eisenhardt (1989), the number of participants relies on information saturation rather than a pre-determined number, and he also indicated that there is no ideal number. The case scale differs in the qualitative research in the international business and marketing field, a few of studies even only have three cases such as Zou and Ghauri (2010) and Aarikka-Stenroos et al. (2018). As a result, four cases that provided sufficient information for theory building were deemed reasonable and appropriate.

In conclusion, four companies’ CEO as informants participated in the primary data collection. The process consists of two interviews for each case. The first interview followed a similar but slightly adjusted interview protocol. It provided a holistic picture of what and how micro firms use digital media towards customer relationship initiation. The follow-up interview based on the preliminary analysis of the first interviews further explored the emerging themes such as the influence of digital media use towards relationship initiation. To ensure the quality of primary data collection, the interviews were carefully prepared. Firstly, all the case firms were treated specifically. For example, before the first interview, I investigated each firm and then adjusted the interview guide to better suit each specific case. Also, I sent each participant PowerPoint slides to present the findings from the first interview since they mentioned that they preferred concise but clear statements. Secondly, all the cases were allowed to be flexible and free in the interviews, for example, they were free to choose their preferred approach to meeting, and they were encouraged to share their experiences freely without any interruption. Finally, during the entire process, I kept transparent and showed respect to all the informants, which aimed to create a comfortable and reliable atmosphere for the interaction between the researcher and interviewees. Consequently, the four cases provided extensive knowledge to this study and a variation of duration between 77 to 107 minutes consisting of two interviews. When the informants could not bring any new insights into the theory, the data collection reached saturation hence the primary data collection was ended.

4.3 Data Analysis Process and Results

The data analysis process follows the Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2013). This study aims to develop theories of digital media use by micro B2B firms towards customer relationship initiation with trust building as the previous understanding in this field is fragmented and scarce. It therefore not only intended to describe the meaning of collected data and categorize them as a qualitative content analysis, but also to interpret the data and find out the relationship among the constructs (Cho & Lee, 2014). Moreover, as one of the qualitative and inductive approaches, the Gioia methodology not only suits international business research when building grounded theory but also can ensure the rigorousness and credibility of the research process (Magnani & Gioia, 2022). Due to multiple cases participating in the empirical study, the analysis process has six steps:

1): Generating open codes of each case by analyzing the original transcriptions

2): Identifying relevant codes within each case

3): Comparing the similarities among cases and developing first-order concepts

4): Organizing first-order concepts to second-order themes

5): Developing aggregate dimensions from second-order themes

6): Conducting a theory elaboration study (Fisher & Aguinis, 2017)

Step1: Generating open codes

The first step was to generate initial open codes from the interviews of each case. According to the “24-hour rule” (Zou & Ghauri, 2010), all the interviews were transcribed as soon as it was done. In order to reduce the mistakes in automatically transcribed documents, the researcher has repeatedly listened to the audio recordings and compared them with the texts to ensure consistency. The texts kept all the conversations except the modal particles such as "ums" and "ha". Based on the knowledge obtained of each case during the sampling process, I got more and more familiar with their stories along with the reviews of the documents of audio and texts. Meanwhile, all the texts relevant to the topic were marked up and the impression of each meaning was stated aside in the document. According to Magnani and Gioia (2013), descriptive and low-inference words were used to reflect the understanding of the informants' experiences. Therefore, it allowed not only to write down whatever impressions occurred (Eisenhardt, 1989) regarding the digital media being used in the customer relationship initiation process but also to maintain the transferability of informants' experiences. Afterwards, the generated open codes of each interview were cleared up by eradicating duplicated ones, hence all of them were kept as it was unknown which codes would be useful in the later analysis steps. Also, the participants were labelled as numbers 1,2,3,4 according to the chronological order of the first interview. As a result, 336 relevant codes were generated from 8 interviews of 4 cases (Table 3).

Table 3: Open Codes Results

Case No.	First interview codes number	Second interview codes number	Total	Percentage of total codes
1	56	32	88	26%
2	52	31	83	25%
3	59	31	90	27%
4	45	30	75	22%
Total	212	124	336	100%

Step 2: Identifying relevant codes

The second step focused on the identification of the relevant code. All the open codes of each case generated in the first step were moved to a separate document with the corresponding original texts. Then they were evaluated repeatedly in line with the topic and purpose of this study, 222 codes relevant to the digital media used in relationship marketing towards trust building in the initial stage of customer relationships were identified (Table 4).

Table 4: Relevant Open Codes

Case	Number of codes 1st interview	Number of codes 2nd interview	Total
1	36	22	58
2	32	23	55
3	38	22	60
4	22	27	49
		Total	222

Step3: Developing first-order concepts

This step aimed to organize the first-order concepts based on the comparison among the multiple cases. On one hand, it was to make sense in the overwhelming number of open codes, on the other hand, it aimed to identify the relationship among them (Gioia, 2021). Firstly, the identified relevant open codes of each case and their corresponding extracted texts were moved to Microsoft Excel. The extracted texts were kept in their original format and to ensure they could reflect the integrality of the meaning that informants expressed, they were retained as whole sentences or entire paragraphs. Afterwards, the research started to identify the similarities and differences across cases (Eisenhardt, 1989; Gioia, 2021). Similar codes were collected and categorized into a concept. However, there were a few codes left as no category could fit into hence being set aside while a few codes could fit into more than one concept. Consequently, this step resulted in 23 first-order concepts (Table 5). Here, the first-order concepts maintained the same level of interpretation as open codes in a descriptive wording style to keep faithful to informant terms (Gioia, 2013; Magnani & Gioia, 2022).

Table 5: First-order Concepts

Within-cases codes	First-order concept
• Searching related companies in the industry through LinkedIn • Looking for persons with specific titles of positions in the industry on LinkedIn • Searching for key persons in the target company through LinkedIn	Searching potential customers through LinkedIn
• Investigating backgrounds of potential customers through LinkedIn • Learning what the target organizations are doing currently	Investigating potential customers through LinkedIn
• Recoding video to deliver information to audiences • Sending short texts to attract potential customers • Sharing knowledge in image to potential customers considering the language barrier	Adopting the most suitable digital format to attract potential customers
• Delivering non-advertisement to gain the trust of potential customers • Presenting self and model to potential customers through LinkedIn • Sending the product lists to potential customers by email	Delivering useful messages to potential customers through LinkedIn and email
• Sharing published scientific papers on LinkedIn can gain more attention • Showing collaboration with academic research groups could increase attention	Presenting scientific evidence could attract more attention from potential customers
• Involving other people in the posts could increase spreading • Showing the interaction with other industry peers can increase visibility • Sharing the progress of customers	Showing online interaction with external stakeholders could enhance the brand's spreading
• Posting sponsor events on LinkedIn and own websites • Spreading the news of the collaboration with well-known partners through digital media could access more customers	Posting offline events on LinkedIn and own website could increase trustworthiness
• Website and LinkedIn are the main digital media being used • Using LinkedIn and own-website two platforms to present information • Being active on both social media and own website	Employing multiple digital media for knowledge sharing
• Leading potential customers to look for more detailed information on own website from LinkedIn • Updating potential customers with new data through both Email and LinkedIn	Keeping information synergic across different digital media platforms
• Posting a movie on LinkedIn to invite potential customers for meeting • Sending invitation via LinkedIn message for Team-meeting • Linking email with own website to initial dialogue with potential customers	Leading potential customers to online dialogues
• Presenting individual background • Presenting the experience in the industry • Sharing academic achievements	Presenting the background and capabilities of the company
• Showing certification and regulatory documents to show the competences of products • Presenting the examples of products' application on own-websites and LinkedIn • Sending the technologic features of products to customers by email • Describing the model functions to potential customers • Providing insights into customers' problem by online interaction • Building own website as a library covering as much as related knowledge	Displaying the competencies of products

• Updating new data to potential customers through both Email and LinkedIn • Presenting the new application scenarios • Presenting the progress of technology development in complex analysis	Updating the development of technology and products through email and LinkedIn
• Sharing customer stories could increase trust of fellow-country potential customers • Sharing collaboration with big customers can increase trustworthiness • Sharing the progress of previous customer helps increase trustworthiness	Sharing existing customers' stories can increase confidence of potential customers
• Quoting anonymized comments on own websites from existing customers is beneficial • Spreading positive sounds from industry peers on own websites	Spreading positive words of customers to enhance trustworthiness through own website
• Sharing the experiences of being invited by a company for staff training • Sharing the online events as a speaker in European projects conferences	Showing participation in social events could prove the competence
• Inviting potential customers to online meetings through LinkedIn messages • Sending invitations for zoom meetings through emails	Sending online meeting invitations to potential customers
• Presenting digital messages calling for contact actions • Setting up contact forum on own websites for potential customers to send questions	Encouraging potential customers to initial dialogue
• Sending video of cases to inquire potential customers whether have similar problems • Sending emails with questions to ask potential customers • Organizing face-to-face online meetings for problem discussions	Identifying problems of potential customers through online interaction
• Presenting specific information to potential customers when meeting online • Providing knowledge sharing from various participants' perspectives • Explaining the solutions and competitive advantages	Developing solutions for identified problems of potential customers
• Searching new analysis methods for potential customers • Recommending alternative solutions • Outsourcing extra technology to develop the product for potential customers' needs	Providing alternative solutions to meet needs of potential customers
• Fast responding to emails can build trust of potential customers • Answering emails quickly and explaining how the products efficiently	Fast responding to customers' questions through email
• Instructing customers install the equipment by email • Sending a video to customers to explain the quote • Providing support by email immediately when customers have problem when using products	Providing service support to customers through email

Step 4: Developing second-order themes

The fourth step involved a process of sorting and reducing the first-order concepts and moving to a more abstract level (Gioia, 2013). The step implied that the analysis developed from informants-center to theory-center data. The Gioia methodology highlights an abductive process that combines existing theories and empirical data to provide new theoretical insights into the phenomenon (Magnani & Gioia, 2022), additionally, it could enhance the credibility and generalizability of the study (Eisenhardt, 1989). This step therefore constantly compared the generated data and previous literature until developed the second-order themes. For example, I used the literature on digital media in relationship marketing (e.g., Holliman & Rowley, 2014; Taiminen & Ranaweera, 2019; Thaichon et al., 2020) to interpret the first-order concepts on the experiences of micro-firms using digital media to attract potential customers. The first-order concept consists of three types of behaviour in terms of using digital media, including identifying potential customers, delivering high-quality content, and showing interaction with other stakeholders. They also reflected a developing process from targeting objective audiences to make awareness afterwards obtaining their interests. Similarly, I interpreted the first-order concept that micro-firms use digital media to prove their competencies by knowledge sharing. The first-order concepts illustrate two types of approaches in terms of channel and content in connection to the relevant literature such as Vieira et al. (2019), Karjaluoto et al. (2015), and Doney et al. (2007). Also, it shows three different ways of performing digital media including providing multiple channels for potential customers to better understand the competencies of the company, self-presenting professional competence, and third-party validating the competence. Consequently, the first-order concepts were organized into second-order themes and this step resulted in 9 more abstract codes (Table 6).

Table 6: Second-order Themes

First-order concept	Literature	Second-order themes
1a1: Searching potential customers through LinkedIn 1a2: Investigating potential customers through LinkedIn	Digital media, particularly social media helps with customer access (e.g., Karjaluoto & Mustonen, 2014; Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015; Zhang et al., 2020)	1A: Proactively connecting potential customers through LinkedIn
1b1: Adopting the most suitable digital format to attract potential customers 1b2: Delivering useful messages to potential customers through LinkedIn and email	It is of importance to have both static such as texts and dynamic rich media content such as video (Holliman & Rowley, 2014) since the diverse forms of information can be more understandable but also enhance the efficiency for information delivery. The contents in B2B digital communication should be relates to the industry phenomenon such an issues and trends (Taiminen & Ranaweera, 2019)	1B: Delivering high-quality messages through digital media to attract potential customers
1c1: Presenting scientific evidence could increase attention 1c2: Showing online interaction with external stakeholders could enhance the brand's spreading 1c3: Posting offline events on digital media could increase trustworthiness	Thaichon et al. (2020) propose signaling theory, where they believe high-quality information provided by the firms could enhance the confidence of clients. Arslan et al. (2022) find out in their research that the involvement of partners can increase reliability when accessing new clients.	1C: Presenting social interactions with external stakeholders can increase visibility
2a1: Employing multiple digital media for knowledge sharing 2a2: Keeping information synergic across different digital media platforms 2a3: Leading potential customers to online dialogue	Multiple channels can create synergy effects which may enhance the credibility of information B2B firms post (Vieira et al., 2019).	2A: Utilizing integrated digital channels for sharing knowledge with potential customers
2b1: Presenting the background and capabilities of the company 2b2: Displaying the competencies of products 2b3: Updating the development of technology and products through email and LinkedIn	high-quality and validated information provided by the firms could enhance the confidence of clients (e.g., Setkute & Dibb, 2022; Gruner & Power, 2018; Taiminen & Ranaweera, 2019; Lashgari et al., 2018). Doney et al. (2007) confirm the influence of technology, function, and perceived value on trust formation.	2B: Presenting self-competence and products' value
2c1: Sharing existing customers' stories can increase the confidence of potential customers 2c2: Spreading positive words of customers to enhance trustworthiness through own websites 2c3: Showing participation in social events could prove the competence	Karjaluoto et al. (2015) state people tend to trust peers than vendors on the internet.	2C: Presenting third-party validation of the competences
3a1: Sending online meeting invitations to potential customers 3a2: Encouraging potential customers to initial dialogues	digital media due to its integrated, targeted, and measurable communication function benefits customer relationship development (Setkute & Dibb, 2022; Jussila et al., 2014; Taiminen & Ranaweera, 2019; Murphy & Sashi, 2018; Holliman & Rowley, 2014; Cartwright et al., 2021) Murphy and Sashi (2018) in their study find out that digital media has developed B2B relationships by interactive discussion online. Karjaluoto et al. (2015) propose that communication between vendors and customers on public platforms would affect the relationship creation	3A: Initiating direct contact through digital media

3b1: Identifying problems of potential customers through online interaction 3b2: Developing solutions for identified problems of potential customers 3b3: Providing alternative solutions to meet needs of potential customers	Wang et al. (2019) believe the content should help customer with learning or problem solving, and the more valuable the more engagement hence more trust. Zhang and Li (2019) also highlight the capability, benevolence, and integrity since when buyers trust the vendors it implies that the buyer depends on the vendor's action and believes they will act as expected.	3B: Solving problems through online interaction
3c1: Fast responding to customers' questions through email 3c2: Providing service support to customers through email	Sora et al. (2017) emphasize the real-time and immediacy in the interaction which fosters a great sense	3C: Providing high-quality services through digital media

Step 5: Developing aggregate dimensions

This step focused on developing aggregate dimensions at an even higher conceptual level by continuously comparing the literature, research questions and case documents (Eisenhardt, 1989). They remained at second-order theory (Gioia, 2013) but reflected a broader concept compared to second-order themes. This step iteratively reviewed all the materials and went back and forth among data analysis steps to develop appropriate theories for the research questions and purpose of this study. For instance, one of the categories is showing professional competence through knowledge sharing, which is used to understand how digital media is used in one-way communication towards customers' trust building. Thus, the axial codes that described micro-firms using digital media to show their credibility were grouped together, including self-presenting competencies, presenting third-party validation of competencies, and integrating multiple channels for sharing knowledge with potential customers. Afterwards, they were compared to the relevant literature (e.g., Merrilees & Fenech, 2007; Murphy & Sashi, 2018; Ancillai et al., 2019). This step resulted in 3 dimensions (table 7) that were consistent with existing relationship marketing literature but also uncovered a new understanding of digital media use towards customer relationship initiation.

Table 7: Aggregate Dimensions

Second-order themes	Literature	Aggregate dimensions
1A: Proactively connecting potential customers through LinkedIn 1B: Delivering high-quality messages through digital media to attract potential customers 1C: Presenting social interactions with external stakeholders can increase visibility	Nikunen et al. (2019) identify that the impacts of digital tools towards relationship development includes attracting customers, engaging customer interest and participation, retaining customers, learning customer preferences, and relating to customers.	Triggering interests of potential customers through digital media
2A: Utilizing integrated digital channels for sharing knowledge with potential customers 2B: Presenting self-competence and products' value 2C: Presenting third-party validation of the competences	Robson et al. (2016) indicate the vendors should be "reliable, dependable and able to fulfill all obligations" (p. 104) otherwise any absence of these attributes would discourage the buyers go into the relationship The multiple channels can increase trust (Merrilees & Fenech, 2007; Murphy & Sashi, 2018; Ancillai et al., 2019) since buyers can be more informed using multiple channels and the information can be checked and validated for its authenticity.	Establishing credibility by knowledge sharing through digital media

3A: Initialing direct contact through digital media 3B: Solving problems through online interaction 3C: Providing high-quality services through digital media	Doney et al. (2007) suggest that customer orientation, open communication and value of service offering influence trust building hence positively influence B2B relationship marketing outcomes.	Creating value for potential customers through online interaction

Step 6: Conducting theory elaboration study

This step aimed to conceptualize this empirical research and develop new insights into digital media use towards customer relationship initiation. Based on the existing understanding regarding the topic, this step worked towards discovering new logic to extend the knowledge by specifying, contrasting, and structuring theoretical constructs and relations (Fisher & Aguinis, 2017, p. 443). Therefore, this step first contrasted the concepts from both horizontal and vertical perspectives to better identify the republications and differences across contexts and levels. For example, own products presenting, third party-validation by others' feedback presenting and multiple channels for knowledge sharing demonstrate the credibility of micro-firms from three different perspectives. They are from the horizontal aspects generated from specific contexts which belonged to various sub-categories, which vertically are at the same level and consist of a higher category. Moreover, it was conducted to examine the relationship between the three aggregate dimensions (triggering interests, establishing credibility, and creating value) and the main concepts in theoretical frameworks including digital media, online communication, customer relationship initiation and trust building. By positioning the three dimensions in the customer relationship initiation setting, a process to build trust by using digital media to communicate with potential customers was noted. Although the existing literature provides knowledge explaining the digital media use as communication tools in relationship marketing which influences customer trust building, the theory elaboration extends the understanding by showing a developing process in terms of relationship initiation along with establishing trustworthiness that had barely existed.

4.4 Data Triangulation

Triangulation aims to employ multiple methods or perspectives to collect and interpret data hence confirming or completing the data (Foss & Ellefsen, 2002). As stated above, this study employed both primary and secondary approaches for data collection. Apart from the interviews validating the information collected from secondary research, the data collected in the semi-structured interviews also were triangulated afterwards. A set of secondary data sources were applied to validate the information on how case firms use digital media such as own-website and LinkedIn to communicate with audiences, particularly customers (Table 9). Hence, the content, the format, as well as the channels of digital media, were examined, including a large body of photos, statements, videos, and comments. According to the informants, their own websites, LinkedIn, and Email are the main digital media they use to attract, share knowledge, and interact with customers towards relationship initiation. Due to the accessibility of the interaction through email and online meetings between customers and case firms, it was unavailable to validate how case firms use two-way communication digital media to gain the trust of potential customers, hence establishing the relationships. However, according to the experience of the researcher conducting interviews with them and the feedback from their clients and other parties, it was deemed reliable of the experiences and behaviours in terms of interactive communication with potential customers through digital media. Moreover, Case 3 is the only one that uses search engines as a marketing tool. It was unavailable for cross-case analysis since none of the other informants uses search engines in marketing. Also, it was unable to identify the performance in customer relationship initiation despite it seems like a beneficial tool to attract customers (Nikunen et al., 2017), since I tried various key concepts cited from the company's website and their combinations but could not search out this company. As the informant stated, it was not in the high rank of search results and also very few customers were led to him by the search engine, even less about customer trust building. As a result, search engines would not be regarded as the main digital media being used by case 3 in customer relationship marketing towards trust building.

Table 8: Secondary data sources for triangulation

Case	Own website	Social media (Mainly LinkedIn)	Email
1	Photos, statements, videos	Photos, statements, videos reactions on the page	Logo, contact information, Links to another channel
2	Photos, statements, videos	Photos, statements, videos reactions on the page	Logo, contact information Links to another channel
3	Photos, statements, videos	Photos, statements, videos reactions on the page	Logo, contact information Links to another channel
4	Photos, statements, videos	Photos, statements, videos reactions on the page	Logo, contact information Links to another channel

4.5 Ethical Considerations

All the data analyzed in this study were derived from four selected case firms. In qualitative research, the selected informants in this thesis co-produced knowledge with the researcher through interaction (Gioia et al., 2013) thus they inevitably got affected in the data collection process (Svend & Steinar, 2005). Hence, it is necessary to ensure that moral consideration has been undertaken throughout the entire process, which aims to protect the informants and minimize harm as possible (Athanasakis, 2020). However, the difficulty in qualitative research lies in how to balance collecting as much data as possible and respecting the informants' free will. Scholars (e.g., Svend & Steinar, 2005; Athanasakis, 2020) suggest establishing trust and harmonious atmospheres for the interviews to obtain rich and accurate information. Therefore, consent, confidentiality and empathy have been taken into account in this study data collection process.

Firstly, the researcher sent a short introduction of thesis topic and purpose by email to all informants when inviting them to participate in the study and thus a statement of consent was obtained from each case. Meanwhile, the interview place and time were also determined by the informants. It will lead informants to feel comfortable and relaxed and thus alert to recall and share their experiences while interviews are proceeding (Athanasakis, 2020). All the cases conducted two interviews and the follow-up interview was scheduled as the same procedure as the first one, for example, all the informants were invited by a statement of purpose, then conducted according to the consent of the informants.

Secondly, before each interview, the researcher reassures the confidentiality of the data in addition to the voluntary, and their anonymity was constantly kept throughout the research process. This study used case numbers to represent them. Also, the researchers asked for permission for audio records and started recording when they agreed. Moreover, the informants were informed that they could skip uncomfortable questions and quit the interview whenever they wanted. Informants were encouraged to talk as much as possible without any interruption.

Thirdly, after each interview, all the audio recordings were transcribed to text immediately and were repeatedly compared to keep consistent. The collected data was presented to informants and obtained confirmation. Hence, this study kept informants transparent at all stages of the data collection process, which not only showed respect for them but also gained their trust.

4.6 An Overview of the Empirical Methodology

This chapter presents the process of empirical research. As a qualitative and inductive study, the research adopted the most appropriate by comparing with the other qualitative research methods for this thesis. The choices in terms of methods allowed the research to collect rich data hence developing theories to better understand this field (Table 9).

Table 9: Overview of empirical study

Research stages	Methods
Sampling	Purposive sampling Four cases
Data collection	Primary data from semi-structured interviews Secondary data collection Data triangulation
Interviews	Semi-structured interviews Both online meeting and physical meeting Two interviews per each case
Analysis	Ground theory Inductive method
Research ethics	Confidentiality Anonymity Transparency

5. Empirical Findings

This chapter focuses on the results of the empirical research in line with the research questions and purpose of this study. It started with case descriptions and followed by the presentation of data structure. Afterwards, each dimension regarding how case-firms use digital media in customer relationship initiation will be explained.

5.1 Case Description

According to Eisenhardt (1989), this study wrote up a detailed case study per each case to be familiar with them. The empirical research was conducted in Sweden and four cased were selected. All cases shared their experiences of using digital media in the customer relationship at initial stage and illustrated the trust of customers building process. In the following sections, each case will be introduced in terms of background, types of digital media they use and how embedded digital media into communication towards relationship marketing.

5.1.1 Company 1

Company 1 was established in 2007 based on analytical chemistry background. It provided solutions to pharmaceutical companies to produce and purify substances in manufacturing process in addition to other industries such as nuclear. The company has four employees and has launched in 35 countries all over the world.

Digital media use

This company built the digital communication channel as soon as it started. The main digital media they use are own-website, email, and social media in which LinkedIn specifically helps access potential customers even though the firm also has other social media platforms such as Facebook.

"The platforms that we're using are mainly LinkedIn and our website. We are present but not active on Instagram and Facebook. Those are not important, but we have them. Facebook, that's a lot of noise"

"We could send them an email, or we could send them a PDF or something with information or newsletters and those type of things"

In addition, the company has good teamwork to create digital content such as making movies and copywriting, and they also have built their own system for content creation. LinkedIn and its own website have been used consistently for knowledge sharing, focusing on the technical features of products and the cases towards typical problems that potential customers might have. It hence attracts potential customers to further contact and discussion. Also, meetings are the most important for communication with potential customers.

"Our website and sharing knowledge here is one way of communicating too, with the intentional capture leads. And then we signed up for a meeting. I should say that the meetings are the most important".

However, the company faces the challenge of consistently creating valuable content to engage the audience, hence showing its trustworthiness.

"Being consistent and creating valuable content, we are not there yet that we get the type of engagement. we need to increase the quality of what we are sharing and giving away more knowledge that that's what people are liking... How we can move on in terms of convincing people that we are a trustworthy supplier of our solution that they are looking for."

The company believes highlighting sales would not help with trustworthiness but should commit to helping customers solve their problems. Therefore, they focus on the problem per se when meeting with potential customers, providing the best solution they know to customers, even if it might be from their competitors.

"One way could be that we say that our technology is not the one they should go for that we recommend another technology if we find it more suitable for."

The CEO stated that they do not really adopt any strategy in terms of digital media use, but they have been trying and testing what they could do better. For example, he realised that Video format might not be the best for LinkedIn, thus started turning to images instead.

"Our video is getting more attention, but now I'm turning a little bit that an image is better on LinkedIn than a video. Because on LinkedIn people don't look for videos."

5.1.2 Company 2

Company 2 was created in 2015 as an academic entrepreneurial firm. It targets pharmaceutical companies and most of them are startups since the big pharmaceutical companies are difficult to step in. The company has four employees including two co-founders. It hardly has local customers but mainly from the US and a few from other European countries. Therefore, digital media plays an important role in customer management and marketing performance. All the digital media platforms are overseed by the CEO, who also participates in this study.

Digital media use

In general, the company has its own website, social media and email as its communication channels. Also, LinkedIn is the main digital media in the business which helped acquire most customers.

"Have used LinkedIn, e-mail and website. I mean we have a Facebook page, but it's not the place for our clients. They don't go to Facebook in that sense."

The company explained that it usually starts looking for potential customers on LinkedIn. It searches the potential customers with certain titles and then investigates them. Afterwards, trying to connect them and leading them into more interaction.

"It's me working on LinkedIn, getting Connections with the like header, research or whatever. I send them a bit of data, ask them if they're interested in learning more then we can have a meeting, and that's how it all starts".

"This short Thing is asking for connection, and then when I get the connection, I send more data, I send a manuscript and. I ask for the. E-mail address because it's easier to do it by e-mail. And when they give me the e-mail address, I continue."

For company 2, email is the main channel that manages to deliver updated information to potential customers. Its own website and LinkedIn also have been updated consistently.

"I have this distribution list right with all emails where I send out if we have a press release or if I want to send something new about the model or whatever so that that I do by e-mail and I mean it's way easier than doing it on LinkedIn, because when I do the distribution list then I get all of them at the same. I think they would have to click on like 6000 different people. Of course, I post on LinkedIn as well."

The company likes digital media for online meetings to talk with potential customers and team-meeting and zoom meetings have been the only way to meet customers since the pandemic started.

"In February it will be 3 years since I went to the US last time. So, for three years we have been just doing you know the video conference".

5.1.3 Company 3

Company 3 was established in 2014 and formerly was within a corporate group. It produces cost efficiency chemical analysis products within specific areas of chemical analysis that connect different types of machine devices. The customers are small pharmaceutical companies around the world. Its marketing channels rely on distributors while very few end-users. Currently, the company has three employees.

Digital media use

Company 3 uses four types of digital tools: its own website, social media, email and search engine. It has various social media accounts but mainly LinkedIn. There is not much interaction on social media, instead, it is used as an awareness tool. However, it is the starting point for further contacts.

"That's more common as awareness tool, I would say to make additional customers aware that we exist and what We can do. It's less discussion there sometimes. It's more a point of contact and then to take discussion further somewhere else."

Company 3 uses its own website to provide product-specific and application examples to current and potential customers. It highlighted the information in texts and image rather than video due to the language barrier of current and potential customers. This channel also provides online services support, so that customers can learn, or contact the company, for example, to solve the problem that emerged in installing products.

"We have tried to build the website with examples that the search customer in mind. We try to have all collaborator instruments there, all competitor instruments there, and columns from different manufacturers. Our products in different analysis so have different contexts. So, sort of build the library".

The company explained that it uses email as the main interaction channel with potential customers. Moreover, it relies on texts rather than online meetings. It is because the customers come from non-English speaking countries, and thus they barely met regardless of physically or online.

"E-mail is the main communication channel often with pictures, either sketches or photos or both and we also try to make manuals. That way it's not only text, but also visual, and sometimes videos. online meetings, but that's rather rare."

In addition, company 3 also pays for search engines to attract potential customers heading to the website, where search traffic catches. In terms of search engine per se, it does not really work for customers' trust building, and it does not gain high rank in the search results.

"And we also use Google ads and Microsoft ads to direct customer for visits to our website. We cannot get the highest ranking, but we pay. It doesn't build our trust in any way."

5.1.4 Company 4

Company 4 was established in 2016 and has two employees. The company develops diagnostic products and distributes other products in the field. Institution research groups predominate targeting customers and distributing products are manufactured in emerging countries. The company uses digital media to contact suppliers of distributed products and customers as well.

Digital media use

Company 4 uses its own website, social media and email to potential customers in general. As soon as it started business journey, all the digital channels were established. Also, it puts emphasis on the technical nature and has to conduct frequent communication with potential customers.

"Because in this special segment field, the purchase manager they have very good background thus should build the trust first. So, it's very important to communicate frequently."

Company 4 has various social media accounts and uses them according to the customers. For example, it uses LinkedIn to European customers but uses WeChat with Chinese customers. However, LinkedIn is the main one being widely used: making awareness and connecting potential customers, as well as updating interesting posts to attract followers to interact.

"On LinkedIn, mostly I always show Participation in some conference, for example, to show people I'm a professional person. Also, there's some other like very interesting papers you can post on and to alert people that we are doing this kind of business, which is very useful, very valuable and good for the society. Just try to make awareness. Of course, try to connect as many as possible. Also, I try to connect the expert and the entrepreneurs and some professional people working in this field."

The company uses its one website as a knowledge sharing platform to provide products and business information to potential customers.

"We have a website that people can learn some general information about our product."

The company highlights the importance of email in communication with current and potential customers. It not only presents product information to potential customers through email but also organizes digital meetings through email for further discussion with them.

“The e-mail I think is top one. Most communicate by e-mail"

“Of course, you should provide product information to show the proof, I mean all the regulatory documents like I said the medical product they have special laboratories. So, we need to show the document. You can match their requirements. And then. Later, setting up a meeting. On the digital meeting can discuss details”.

5.2 Data Structure

Case firms identified 3 main types of digital media being used in 23 areas related to customer relationship initiation (Figure 3). Informants identified examples of good practices and areas for digital media use in terms of one-way communication and two-way communication to initial relationships with targeted organizational customers towards the trust of potential customer enhancement. A key distinction between these aspects was their outcomes in terms of the relationship distance between potential customers and the case firms, where the potential customers increased interests and engagement with the more understanding and trust of case firms hence entering relationships with them. I was able to group these concepts into nine themes related to digital media use in the process of customer relationship initiation. Finally, I consolidated the themes into three aggregate dimensions: triggering the interests of potential customers, establishing credibility by knowledge sharing through digital media and creating value for potential customers through online interaction. These 23 key areas related to the digital media use by Swedish B2B micro-firms in customer relationship initiation are discussed in the next sections to answer to the research questions.

The aggregate dimension 1: Triggering the interests of potential customers through digital media consists of three themes: 1A) Proactively connecting potential customers through LinkedIn; 1B) Delivering high-quality messages through digital media to attract potential customers; 1C) Presenting social interactions with external stakeholders can increase visibility.

The aggregate dimension 2: Establishing credibility by knowledge sharing through digital media consists of three themes: 2A) Utilizing integrated digital media channel for sharing knowledge with potential customers; 2B) Presenting self-competence and products’ value; 2C) Presenting third-party validation of the competences.

The aggregate dimension 3: Creating value for potential customers through online interaction consists of three themes: 3A) Initialing direct contacts through digital media; 3B) Solving problems through online interaction; 3C) Providing high-quality services through digital media.

Given the inspiration by Downes and Mcmillan (2000), there are three levels of interactivity between micro-firms and potential customers through digital media in the relationship initiation process. The first level is the message-based level, which indicates the communication between suppliers and potential customers based on the messages that suppliers send to potential customers through digital media. The second level is the knowledge-based level, which specifies the communication focuses on suppliers consistently presenting reliable and detailed information to potential customers to demonstrate their competence and credibility. The third level is the participants-based level, which means that suppliers and potential customers conduct interactive communication through digital media for value creation.

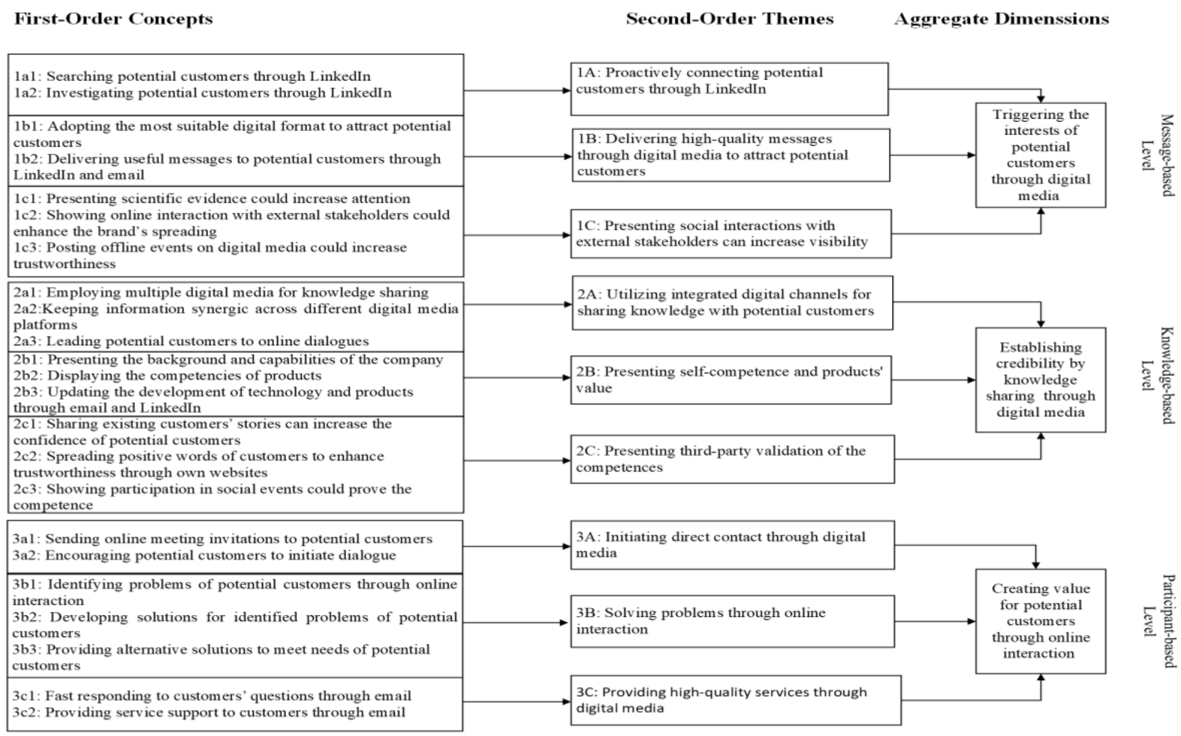

Figure 3: Data Structure

5.3 Findings Presentation

Case firms identified three main types of digital media related to B2B customer relationship initiation: own-website, social media, and email (Table 10). They were categorized into two communication channels: one-way and two-way. In addition, it is shown that LinkedIn dominated the social media platforms that case firms use even though they have various types of social media accounts. Moreover, Email was used as the most important digital tools, which not only focused on information presenting but also played an important role in interactive communication with potential customers due to the text exchanges and face-to-face meeting conducted online.

Table 10: Types of Digital Media being used

Aggregate Dimensions	Digital media	Communication channel
Triggering the interests	LinkedIn, Email	One-way communication
Creating credibility	LinkedIn, Email, Own-Website	One-way communication
Committing to value creation	Written Email, Email team-meeting, Zoom-meeting	Two-way communication

5.3.1 Aggregate Dimension 1: Triggering the interests of potential customers through digital media

This section corresponds to the aggregate dimension 1(figure 3), triggering the interests of potential customers through digital media. The findings of this study reveal that customer relationship initiation starts with micro firms how to access customers and attract them to pay attention.

The aggregate dimension 1 of interest triggering is composed of three themes: 1) proactively connecting potential customers through LinkedIn; 2) Delivering high-quality messages through digital media to attract potential customers; 3) Presenting social interactions with external stakeholders can increase visibility. The findings indicate that digital media is an effective tool for embarking on customer relationships in terms of successfully attracting potential customers to be interested in the firms.

1A: Proactively connecting potential customers through LinkedIn

LinkedIn is used to connect potential buying companies as well as communicate objects in those companies. The connection is built on the knowledge about the buyers, whether there is a need for the products from suppliers and who are the decision-makers in the organization. Case 1 and case 2 both use LinkedIn to investigate potential customer firms and connect to them. It shows that digital media, particularly LinkedIn, plays an important role in potential customer identification to initiate a relationship.

"We are targeting those that have a very specific title. Like group leader Biocatalysts or head of biocatalysts. Then we know that everyone with that title is a potential customer. (We target them) mainly through LinkedIn" (Case 1)

"I'm working a lot on LinkedIn trying to look into different companies, so read about other companies. Realize that they have this area where we could actually help them and then I contact a lot of people in that company saying we have this and that and I would like to connect with you." (Case 2).

However, case 3 tends to rely on search engines to lead potential customers to get interested in their products. Even though they formulated various competitive keywords for searching, the outcomes like "*maybe on a buy monthly" (Case 3)*. The participant does not yet suggest search engine is a trust-building tool.

1B: Delivering high-quality messages through digital media to attract potential customers

Small suppliers use digital media to send high-quality messages to potential customers, which are expected to evoke awareness and interest. The high-quality message is reflected in two perspectives, including form and content. Firstly, the findings in this study show that an appropriate form of the message is important for organizational customers since it would lead to whether to check or read the message. Case 1 and Case 2 identified the most proper form that could involve potential customers in interaction. In case 1, small firms noticed that their customers are not interested in texts but pictures and especially video.

"*It's all the users are consuming media claim text doesn't get the attention because people are too lazy to read it. A picture might get attention. Our video is getting more attention." (Case 1)*

Case 2 believed that short texts lead to connections, otherwise the message would not be read. Likewise, case 3 also realized that the message on digital media should not be long, so they synergized their own website in case the potential customers are interested in more detail.

"When do the contact on LinkedIn you have like 200 characters or something that you can write as the first connection. Because when I asked myself if I was requested for connection from somebody, and they have written, you know, like. And I got like I don't want to read it, but if it's like 3-4 lines then, of course, I read it just quickly through." (Case 2)

"Part is the visual impact, so there is always an image and then there is a text that's not too long and it always points to some more information on the website" (Case 3)

In addition, useful information plays an important role in embarking on relationships with potential customers. In case 2, the firm according to the potential customer's background sent short texts with data, which would the potential customer be looking for or interested in.

"They have that small text that we have this unique preclinical model that spontaneously. Develops chronic inflammation of fibrosis because they always want this spontaneous thing. Because that's not around, they always have the induced models. So that's like a password. We have a unique spontaneous model, and so that's basically it's very short because I don't want them to read something wrong." (Case 2)

Likewise, in case 4, the firm sent them product information that potential customers might be interested in based on the knowledge the firm learnt about what project potential customers are doing.

"I first introduce myself, my business and our competence. Of course, you should learn some general information from either research groups or their department, what they are doing. So do they have this demand or not?" (*Case 4)*

Case 1 highlights the value of content, which should be focused on knowledge sharing and problem-solving. Case 1 believes that sending advertisements to potential customers does not help with relationship establishment.

"We have hardly done any advertisements. It's only sort of posting and sharing knowledge, asking them do you have problems with this or are you interested in improving this process? Then you get some more attention and attraction." (Case 1)

However, getting attention can be a challenge for B2B micro suppliers who were small and unknown in the market. As case 4 observed:

"Most of the time they there's no reply at all."

1C: Presenting social interactions with external stakeholders can increase visibility

Although getting connected, as case 4 said the supplier firm which is unfamiliar with potential customers probably has difficulties obtaining their replies. It is vital to leverage social networks in terms of interactions with external stakeholders, including scientific peers, collaborators, and distributors. Case firms use digital media to share social interaction, for example, in case 1, they shared academic activities such as scientific publishments that involved its products on LinkedIn. In case 2, they shared interactions with other companies.

The effectiveness of digital media may be a consequence of its visibility and attention increasing.

"(People know me) through scientific papers and in the beginning, it was mainly through the conferences, the European Union projects it's a digital conference, webinars and those types of events on LinkedIn." (Case 1)

"I always post it we have like a collaboration. If we have a press release something like that. I mean, that's always interesting because that builds trust to see that we interact with other companies" (Case 2).

Concluding on Aggregate Dimension 1

Case firms use digital media to establish the first step of relationship initiation with potential customers, which makes buyers notice the suppliers and get interested in them. In order to achieve the objective, all the case firms rely on digital media, especially LinkedIn to access potential customers and trigger their interests. Due to the large amount of information on digital platforms, case firms would not be able to reach out the potential customers if they have no connection. Therefore, digital media has been widely used to connect with potential customers and obtain knowledge about them, hence helping case firms formulate interesting messages to evoke the interest of potential customers. From the findings of aggregate dimension 1, case firms highlight the message of streamlining, which allows counterparties to be engaged in the messages in the shortest time and the most useful information when trying to attract attention at first sight. Even though the popularity of video, it is merely used in case 1. It depends on both sides of the communication, for example, case 1 has its own employee who can make films by themself, but the other cases do not have such human resources. Also, case 3 uses images instead of video because of the language barriers of audiences since it targets global markets where many countries are non-English speaking. The findings show that, in four cases, the potential customers become interested in the supplier firms also due to external stakeholders, who either are familiar with potential customers or have a strong brand in the market. The consequences of such interests may be starting to investigate the supplies for better understanding.

5.3.2 Aggregate Dimension 2: Establishing credibility by knowledge sharing through digital media

This section corresponds to aggregate dimension 2 (figure 3), establishing credibility through knowledge sharing. The findings of this study reveal that potential customers move forward in the relationship process when they obtain more knowledge about the supplier firms whether capable and reliable. Detailed and rich information shared from various perspectives enables potential customers to further examine the competence and credibility of suppliers.

The aggregate dimension 2 of establishing credibility through knowledge sharing is composed of three themes: 1) utilizing integrated digital channels for sharing knowledge with potential customers; 2) presenting self-competence and products' value; 3) presenting third-party validation of the competences.

Customer relationships develop through an increased understanding of each other. Micro firms demonstrate their credibility from communication channels building (theme 2A) and communication content (theme 2B, 2C). A micro firm can provide multiple digital channels to deliver information to potential customers, which allows them to access the knowledge according to their preferences of digital platforms as well as consistent and synergic information can verify the information towards potential customers. The consequences of this stage will be whether the potential customers would like to go to deeper interaction and engagement. This relies on the perception of credibility of micro suppliers.

2A: Utilizing integrated digital channels to share knowledge with potential customers

All participants expressed that they build up various digital media and synergy them consistently for knowledge sharing since potential customers usually investigate them through websites and social media accounts before they make direct contact with the supplier. For example, case 4 sent email to potential customers with their website address where they state rich information allowing potential customers to learn about.

"(I) send the e-mail and use also with the website link they will just log on our website and have a look then learning enough information. Then they just raise questions to contact us. Of course, they have a lot of questions even you have website." (Case 4)

Participants had no strong consensus on the distribution channel. Typically, their own websites are a general digital platform for knowledge sharing. It enables suppliers to present long-form information in texts, pictures and even videos. Also, it allows them to share various types of products and use instructions within one page for audiences to compare and get answers to their questions. As case 3 said:

"We have tried to build the websites with example that the search customer in mind. we try to have all collaborator instruments there, all competitor instruments there, columns from different manufacturers. Our products in different contexts. Our products in different analysis so have different. So, sort of build the library. If you put it that way that. That would respond to many of Searches or find the heat within many of searches so it's sort of a net that could fish out. That has been the strategy."

In addition, many participants (case 1, 2, 3) suggest consistent behavior across various digital platforms which is important for trust building. For example, case 1 kept consistency in places and believe the most important is the website:

"The platforms that we're using are mainly LinkedIn and our website, but also a little bit, we are present but not active on Instagram and Facebook. Those are not important, but we have them. We have those accounts too. Potentially start there eventually and YouTube. And a lot of other services that we use on the back end of our website."

However, participants from case 2 and case 4 used email to share their technology or product progress and specific knowledge that might be interesting to potential customers. They believed email allowed the information directly and efficiently to engage the audiences, but it was hard to know whether the news reached them when posting on social media such as LinkedIn or updating on website. As case 2 stated,

"I have this distribution list right with all emails where I send out if we have a press release or if I mean I want to send something new about the model or whatever so that that I do by e-mail and I mean it's way easier than doing it on LinkedIn, because when I do the distribution list then I get all of them at the same. I think they would have to click on like 6000 different people. So, when I post, of course, I post on LinkedIn as well. But I think this distribution through email is really focused. It will go directly to you and hopefully, you will see it. Otherwise, you might just delete it, but you see the figure logo at least I mean."

2B: Presenting self-competence and products' value

Participants agreed on the importance of trust towards customer relationship building. They identified that knowledge sharing contributes to credibility creation. Digital media allows them to deliver useful information that could lead potential customers to believe in their competence and perceive the value of their products. As case 1 suggested:

"We should build trust and we should help them to buy from us. That's the sort of the best thing to do the knowledge sharing and to build your trustable image to your customers."

The most shared content was product technology features and using instructions or showcases (Case 1, 2, 3, 4) whereby the firm presents its own competence and value to potential customers. Case 4 summarized the views of the views of others:

"The content is well proving that our products can do what we state so proof of concept or proof of performance to put it. But the other is sort of showing more value in that of the products and then it has to be in a practical context and in a certain type of analysis."

In addition to creating the product details by selves, case 4 also suggested sharing the certification and regulatory reports from third parties, which are strongly proven documents that could demonstrate competence and value. Moreover, case 2 and case 4 also noted that the team members' introduction was potentially able to convince the potential customers of their competence.

"Our group of Members also has some (introduction). He has very good experience in this field. Generally, I mean describe what we are doing in this field and the background so that they can learn. They can get some sense by communication." (Case 4)

However, case 3 noted that the content delivered to audiences should be more understandable since their scientific backgrounds made their posts likely to be academic, which might be difficult for audiences.

"We as scientists I would say, struggle with that we are trained in the right thing that is complex and extremely informative but also hard to access. So, it's often the way we get to the final text or the text

that published is typically that we write them times, write them first in a sort of knowledge packed way and then sort of what can we move of this, how can we make the language easier and also use other people to help with that not as complicated sentences, and so we that's one way we're trying to sort of make the information more digestible."

2C: Presenting third-party validation of the competences

Participants noted that their customers tended to trust peers more than their suppliers. Thus, they suggested customer stories and positive feedback, as well as attended social activities were also interesting content shared through websites and social media sites. Moreover, peers from the same background such as geographic region and industry field would be more convincing. As case 1 noted,

"And the people that are looking, someone else did it. If it's my fellow countrymen. Then it's higher value. So in in China you look for Chinese people that have done the same thing. And it's more value than if an American have done it in America, an American has to have done it before then. It's more valuable in Japan. The same thing in India. You need geographic local person that have Used your technology, then it's verified and proof."

However, due to confidentiality issues in the life science industry, pharmaceutical companies in particular, customers usually have to be anonymous so that very few customers would like to or allow participants to share their information in public. Case 2 and case 3 which targeted pharmaceutical companies suggested getting consent before press releases on digital platforms, even sometimes the names of customers had to be anonymous.

"If we have a press release or something like that. I mean, that's always interesting because that builds trust to see that we interact with other companies, and most of the time I'm not allowed to say who our clients are, unfortunately. But for instance, when we had the assignment therapeutic as a client, and they actually got nice results, and we had a poster together at the AASLD meeting, then of course I posted that a lot. It's not really progressing on the model, it's more like you see we have this client and they got this really nice data." (Case 2)

"The other short version of that is, instead of customer stories that we take customer citations when we get feedback that is positive in emails, we try to extract citations from that and use that on our website as sort of proof of customer satisfaction or something like that. What we have published them again because most customers don't want to tell who they are, which give this feedback. So although we ask for permission to publish these citations, we don't do it with their names, so it's we anonymize them." (Case 3)

Concluding on Aggregate Dimension 2

In short, digital media is an essential tool for customer relationship initiation since it enables suppliers to establish their credibility through knowledge sharing which provides potential customers with a better understanding of the supplier's competence and quality, the value of the product and even the comments from others (2B and 2C). Knowledge sharing relies on one-way communication that delivers information from suppliers to potential customers.

General information is presented on suppliers' own websites or social media platforms which allows potential customers to browse in convenience. When coming to specific information or updates, case firms prefer to use email which is more efficient and directly engages audiences. Meanwhile, they highlight the consistency and synergy of knowledge sharing across digital media (2A), which they believe could meet the different preferences of audiences but also enable potential customers to extend their knowledge of them, for example, the participant (case 3) posted a showcase of their product on LinkedIn, the potential customer followed this post then went to the website where presented many showcases in different scenarios with various instruments. Participants noted that the engagement and trust of potential customers are earned over time and in the B2B industry, it was insufficient to make decisions of purchase. Therefore, in our cases, knowledge sharing in terms of one-way communication usually leads interested potential customers to further contacts and meetings.

5.3.3 Aggregate Dimension 3: creating value for potential customers through online interaction

This section corresponds to the aggregate dimension 3 (Figure 3), creating value for potential customers through online interaction. Online interaction means suppliers and potential customers come to two-way communication through digital media. Email is widely used in person-to-person communication either by text or face-to-face meetings. Both parties participate in the conversation and actively engage to solve the problem and create value.

The aggregate dimension of online interaction is composed of three themes: 1) initiating direct contact; 2) solving problems through online interaction; 3) providing high-quality services.

Customer relationship initiation depends on the perceived value of potential customers in communication. Case firms agreed that business relationships benefit from online interaction due to the value creation since digital interaction offers opportunities for customer-specific content exchanges, where the case firms could focus on potential customers, commit to helping them identify and solve their problems, also, provide services to potential and existing customers. The following sections explain the findings of aggregate dimension 3.

3A: Initiating direct contact through digital media

The great opportunity identified by case firms of this study in using digital media is that digital media allows them to conduct person-to-person communication online with potential customers, where the perceived effectiveness may be of its similarity to physical meetings but more convenient and efficient in global business. As case 2 stated,

“We have quite a lot of and then of course the team meeting is amazing to have because they allocate one hour, and it can happen basically whenever. It's not like I am saying I will be in the US between the 12th and the 15th, and during that time I have time to meet with you. It's more like whenever you

have time, we can do it. In that sense, I think digital media is better than the actual, I mean meeting face to face because it gives you the opportunity to actually choose all different time points."

The majority of them stated that online meeting is the most important channel of communication (case 1,2,4). They use email to send invitations to online meetings such as Teams and Zoom according to potential customers' schedules. Also, email is used in interactive communication in terms of text (case 3) due to the language barriers in face-to-face meetings. There was evidence that all case firms were keen to direct contacts in terms of online meeting and email exchanges as a means of solving problems and enhancing the impression as trustable suppliers. As case 1 stated,

"We can move on in terms of convincing people that we are a trustworthy supplier of the solution that they are looking for."

The case firms linked the presence of digital channels to direct contacts. The findings of this study revealed that the interactions between potential customers and case firms tended to be in private circumstances rather than on public platforms such as social media comments. There were two ways that case firms use digital media to initial direct contacts. One is case firms sending online meeting invitations to potential customers through email or social media messages (case 2, 3 and 4). The other is encouraging potential customers to take action for direct contact by setting contact forms on their own websites (case 1 and 3).

"It has always started off by LinkedIn where we have sent a few messages... When they get more data on the model and then in the end, we have a team meeting" (case 2)

"They contact that e-mail us is the typical or user contact form on the website, but that's basically an e-mail and we respond by e-mail and discuss their analysis" (case 3)

However, case 3 also noted that there were a few customers who did not conduct any contacts since they found sufficient information on websites.

"They find the answers to their questions already on the website and they sometimes just place an order that also happens somewhere we never had contact with. And there's an order in usually."

3B: Solving problems through online interaction

A good illustration of how digital media has benefited value creation was the opportunity for customer-specific content exchanges, the case firms (1,2,3) agreed that digital media allowed them to focus on customers' needs and concerns through effective communication and interaction.

"If you're sincerely interested in the customer, and you ask them questions about their problems and you don't... I mean, a lot of salespeople. They start a meeting talking about themselves all the time. And how fantastic products they have and the great benefits. But I don't have any need for it. You should have asked me if I needed this type of service. So, if we ask people OK, do you have problem with this or are you interested in improving this process? Then you get some more attention and attraction." (Case 1)

"Through text, emails we discuss. It can be What is required for what analysis they or their customers would like to perform and what Sort of criteria they have for. That and then also what kind of equipment they want to cause. We sell equipment that needs to be matched or adapt to other equipment. We don't sell a full analysis equipment, but we sell an enhancement, so we discuss what equipment this should be adopt." (Case 3)

However, case 1 and case 3 regarded the application of social media into interaction as problematic. They noted that the language barrier hindered social media to active interaction. Customers from non-English countries tended to static engagement such as browsing websites and text communication in private.

"I would say that many countries are not that active on LinkedIn, so, it's also related to language a bit, I think. Those that are OK with English those countries tend to be. There more old people from those countries and the less active they are so. I don't have any interaction with Japanese customers on LinkedIn." (Case 3)

In addition, potential customers could obtain a better understanding of the product or solution in line with the information in hand from previous online examinations. Case firms (case 1,2,4) noted the importance of further sharing knowledge on issues significant to potential customers, such as unpublished data and problem solution explanation. They were also considered as key trust-building contents.

"We show them like the basics of the model and of course if it's a company that is really interested in chronic inflammation, then we show a lot of chronic inflammation data from the founder, if they're more into fibrosis, well then we go really for the fibrosis part." (Case 2)

"In a meeting. I asked questions based on my background. My colleagues asked about their background and knowledge, more because then we can match and overlap, and as only if we are in the same meeting or that the customer get different knowledge from different persons." (Case 1)

Meanwhile, all case firms agreed that being honest and benevolent was an important factor in their customer relationship initiation and noted that open communication was essential for value creation since they sincerely clarified the boundary of their competencies. Over-promises might jeopardize the trust building and interests of both parties. Participants emphasized keeping promises, case 1 and case 3 even suggested "over-deliver".

"Being honest, benevolent, I think the English word is that you that you have a sincere willingness to help other people. Then you build the trust." (Case 1)

Participants also expressed their views that putting customers' needs over the business should be prioritized in communication instead of promoting their own business could earn the trust of potential customers. The focus of value creation was to solve the problems of customers, whereby the case firms also actively searched alternative solutions for potential customers. As case 4 summarized:

"I think I couldn't do this then I said we have some solution maybe not to match their requirements, but then I contacted one of my friends, they are developing this kind of technology. So then we found the solution that could help them."

3C: Providing high-quality services through digital media

Service quality in digital communications is also a matter of perceived value for potential customers. The findings in this study revealed that a quick response is an important approach to show they were customer oriented and benevolent towards potential customers. As case 3 explained:

"I think we try to stick to the same image so that we are perceived similarly both professional and helpful. Helpful can mean shipping products quickly and it can be answering emails quickly, but it can also be mean explaining how it works quickly"

Moreover, there was evidence that email has been widely used to provide services for the first buying customers (case 1, 3, 4). Participants expressed their views on the value they provided not only lied in products but also the maintenance and technical support, which was carried out through digital communication, for example, in case 1 and case 3, they sent video through email to help customers install the equipment.

"We also support them to a successful installation with the customer. Sometimes we have sent installation videos and that to hold their hands until they're successful with their installation... for the first installation it's often that we need to be engaged more, but then we take that because we understand that in the end that that's important.'' (Case 3)

Concluding on Aggregate Dimension 3

In all four cases, the micro B2B supplier firms used digital media to conduct two-way communication in the process of value creation. The applications of digital media vary from one case to another, depending on the potential customer's preferences. In case 1, case 2 and case 4, they relied on online meetings to engage potential customers in direct interaction, while case 3 due to the language barrier (their customers come from non-English speaking regions) preferred to communicate in the format of texts through email. The findings in this study revealed that social media was not actively used in two-way interaction.

The process of value creation through online interaction involved the engagement of participants from both sides. Case firms used digital media to initial direct contacts in proactive and passive ways. In terms of proactive ways, case firms directly sent online meeting invitations to potential customers to involve them in online interaction (3a1). In terms of passive ways, case firms hence encouraged potential customers to contact them for further discussions (3a2). During online interaction regardless of face-to-face meetings or emails in text, case firms and their prospects committed to solving the problems that prospects might have, where they tried to identify the problems (3b1) and developed feasible solutions to potential customers by presenting more specific information (3b2). Case firms emphasized the attributes of trust-building, namely being honest and benevolent towards potential customers. Accordingly, they told the truth to prospects and developed alternatives when their solution did not match the problem (3b3). Furthermore, case firms highlighted the value also included high-quality services apart from the product per se. There was a view that fast responding was beneficial to trust building by showing customer orientation (3c1). In addition, email was also being used in most cases (1,2,4) to provide technical support such as equipment installation (3c2), which allowed case firms to engage with the customers in the long term. All case firms agreed the perceived value is most important for customer relationships and two-way communication is essential for trust-building. The aggregate dimension 3 indicated the engagement of potential customers became more active and increasing.

6. Discussion

This chapter focuses on the theory development in terms of how Swedish micro-firms use digital media towards customer relationship initiation in a B2B context. Therefore, this chapter will first discuss the types of digital media being used towards relationship initiation, then it will present a model of the utilization of digital media towards customer relationship initiation.

6.1 The Types of Digital Media that Swedish Micro B2B firms Use

This study identified digital media that has been used by firms in the B2B context as communication tools to foster customer relationship initiation including the company's own website, email, social media, and search engines, in line with the previous literature (e.g., Dung Le et al., 2021; Taiminen, 2016; Nikunen et al., 2017; Karjaluoto, 2015; Keinänen & Kuivalainen, 2015). Moreover, this study also supported Taiminen and Karjaluoto (2015) that email focused on the information presented but also was active in interactive communication with potential customers. ***However***, this study extended the knowledge regarding the types of digital media that are used by Swedish micro B2B firms. **Firstly**, it showed that search engines had not been widely used in customer relationship marketing. In this study, only one case used search engines. More importantly, search engines seemed not to contribute much towards customer relationship initiation. This firm spent its budget covering a broad geographical market, while it only resulted in one or two customers visiting the company's website per month. It showed the performance of search engines as unsatisfactory, and it seemed difficult for the firm to control contacts with audiences. **Secondly**, in terms of social media, it was shown that LinkedIn dominated the social media platforms that all the case firms use frequently despite having various types of social media accounts. They suggested that other social media such as Facebook did not work for business, especially in the life science industry. Also, due to the preferences of social media users in a global business context, case firms used other social networking sites such as WhatsApp and WeChat to communicate with customers from specific countries. Yet, they used social networking sites for short messages but switched to email or online meetings when having further discussions on business.

Table 11: The types of digital media in literature and findings

Previous literature	Findings of this study
Company's own website	Company's own website
Email	Email
Social media	Social media (LinkedIn)
Search engines	Search engines (Less important)

6.2 The Use of Digital Media towards Customer Relationship Initiation

According to the results of this study, we may see that digital media can be used in a variety to create and strengthen the trust of prospective customers. This thesis identifies three areas that digital media helps Swedish micro-firms in the life-science industry approach their target objects and initial relationships with them: 1) triggering interests, 2) establishing credibility and, 3) creating value. More importantly, it indicates a progressive process of customer relationship initiation, where digital media plays different roles in stages towards trust building. It shows that the trust of prospects increases along with the interaction and engagement through digital media, from where they are unfamiliar with the supplier to relationship initiation. Meanwhile, it reflects three different levels of communication between suppliers and prospects: 1) message-based level, 2) knowledge-based level and 3) participants-based level. The three levels also imply the increasing interaction and engagement of potential customers through digital media use.

6.2.1 An Overview of The Model

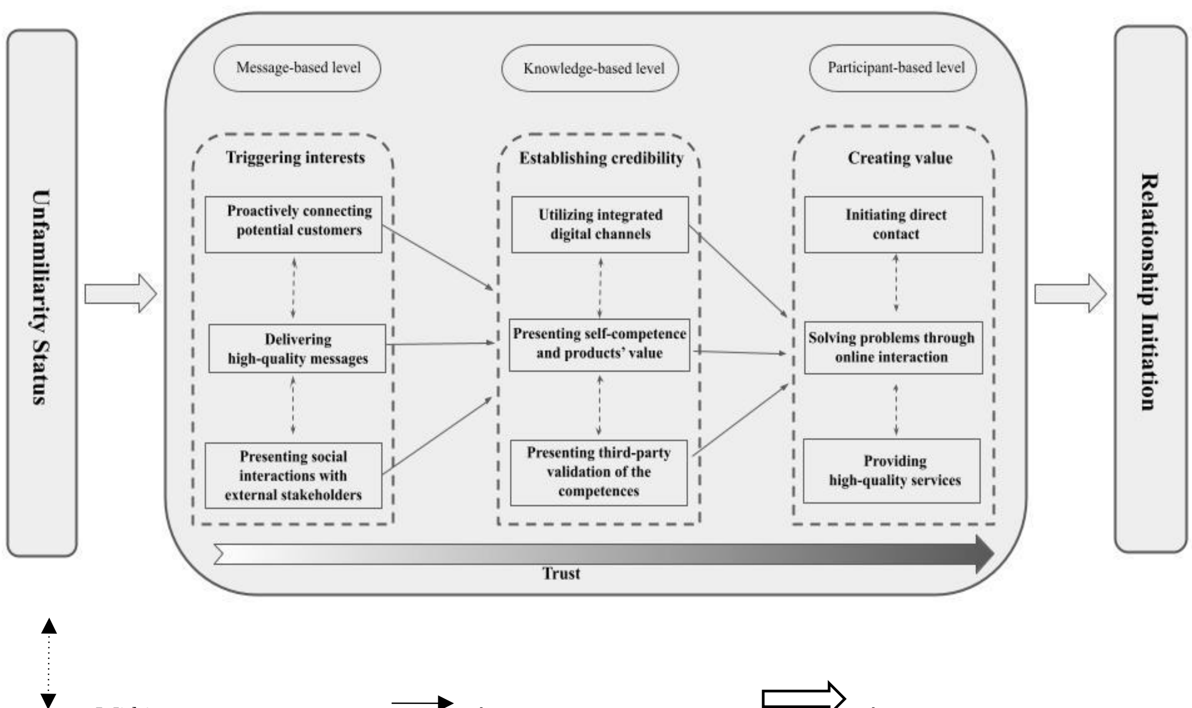

Figure 4: Process of customer relationship initiation through digital media communication. Dash rounded rectangles corresponding to the aggregate dimensions, small rectangles in dash rounded rectangles corresponding to the second-order themes.

The model (figure 4) illustrates the process of how digital media is utilized to facilitate customer relationship initiation where Swedish micro B2B firms from unfamiliarity with the potential customers become to be trusted by them as well as be able to start businesses with them. It is concluded as three dimensions: triggering interests, establishing credibility, and creating value. These three dimensions demonstrated increasing engagement and interactivity of potential customers. It thus simultaneously presented a progressive process of trustworthiness building, which meant that potential customers generate more and more trust in the suppliers due to communication through digital media. The communication between suppliers and prospective customers from one-way that the direction was suppliers presenting to potential customers developed to two-way communication where they conducted interactive conversations and engaged in the value creation. The communication enhancement between suppliers and prospects, as shown in the figure, experienced three levels interactivity between micro supplier firms and their potential customers, including message-based level, knowledge-based level and participant-based level. The findings of this study extend the theory of Downes and Mcmillan (2000) by knowledge-based in addition to message-based and participant-based level. The message-based level refers to the interactivity through digital media between suppliers and customers depending on messages. The knowledge-based level implies that suppliers present rich information to potential customers as well as update progress of business to show their competence and reliability. By then, the direction of communication mainly lies in one-way from suppliers to potential customers. Although audiences (potential customers) engage in the communication, their interactivity tends to be statically, such as accepting messages and browsing websites. The participant-based level means that both parties, including suppliers and potential customers, have been involved in communication and actively interact with each other. The three levels show the progress of communication and overlap with each other.

This model illustrates the relationships in two orders: vertical and horizontal. In horizontal order, there are two levels of progressive process. The thick rightwards arrow shows the first level in terms of relationship status change. It develops from unfamiliarity between the customer and supplier, experiencing communication and interaction process through digital media illustrated as the rounded rectangle in the model, leading to the outcome of relationship initiation. The second level of progress refers to the communication process, as the rounded rectangle in the middle of model indicates the sequence of three stages of communication corresponding to aggregate dimensions, as the dash rounded rectangles shown. Each stage corresponds to a specific level of interactivity according to the subject, for instance, the first stage: Triggering interests of potential customers corresponds to the message-based level, which implies at this stage suppliers communicate with potential customers focusing on sending short and concise messages to evoke the attention and attract them into engagement. The second stage turns to knowledge-based level interactivity, where the suppliers share knowledge and information on their digital channels allowing potential customers to explore their competences and reliability. The third stage shows that potential customers actively engage in dialogues with suppliers for value creation. This stage thus highlights the interaction between both sides of participants, where they switch to two-way communication. In line with Alamäki and Korpela (2021), customers gather information at the early stage through digital channels before they contact the supplier. The sequence of these three stages represents potential customers' trust in the supplier increasing, as the gradient arrow in the rounded rectangle shows. Additionally, the interactivity of the fore stage leads to the next stage. Interactivity in vertical order mainly occurs within the stages, which means the activities that suppliers conduct through digital media reach a common outcome. The dash up-and-down arrows indicate the interplay with each other among the activities within the stage. For example, in the first stage (Triggering interests), three activities including proactively connecting potential customers, delivering high-quality messages, and presenting social interaction with external stakeholders, correspond to second-order themes in the data structure (figure 3) under aggregate dimension 1. In this study, the informants send requests through LinkedIn to connect with target potential customers (1A) hence attracting attention real-time by attaching well-developed messages in terms of designed format and elaborate content or generating interests afterwards when they notice the messages that suppliers present regarding the external stakeholders(1C).

Generally, this model confirms the suggestions of previous literature that digital media enables micro firms to attract customers, engage their participation, present, and meet customers online, provide services and enhance interaction towards trustworthiness (Nikunen et al., 2019; Taiminen, 2016; Agnihotri et al., 2016; Rose et al., 2021; Setkute & Dibb, 2022; Gruner & Power, 2018; Taiminen & Ranaweera, 2019; Lashgari et al., 2018). More importantly, this thesis identifies the progressive process of micro B2B firms and their potential customer from unfamiliarity to relationship initiation, as well as the trust building process through digital communication simultaneously. Additionally, it shows the communication development from one-way to two-way. The following sections will explain the interactivity in terms of digital communication in B2B context within each stage.

6.2.2 Messaged-based Level: triggering the interests of potential customers

This section corresponds to the message-based level in the model since the subject of interactivity in this stage relies on concise and attractive messages including self-introduction, product attributes in images or videos and other external stakeholders. Through interactivity through digital media, potential customers become aware of the supplier and are interested in them. It supports the suggestion of Nikunen et al. (2019) that digital media impacts customer relationship development on customer attractiveness.

On the other hand, the findings of this thesis extend the knowledge in this field. **Firstly**, it provides insights into how the supplier could attract potential customers at first sight. To date, there is rare discussion in the literature on such tactics. The results of this study clarify that the communication subject in terms of delivered content should be concise and valuable. Also, the informants highlighted LinkedIn as the most important digital media to know and connect to potential customers in the life industry. This allowed them to identify the target companies and the key persons in the company that should be connected. While other social media such as Facebook did not work in the industry business context. **Secondly**, the findings extend the knowledge about the use of search engines. In this study, only one case firm used search engines, which contradicts Karjaluoto(2015)'s survey findings that search engines are the most frequent use of digital media. The results of this thesis indicate that the utilization of search engines requires budget investments, which might be one of the reasons that micro-firms seldom use them. Moreover, the outcomes cannot be controlled, and are likely to have low rates of return. In the case of this study, the search results had very low ranks which means that people were rarely aware of their existence through search engines if they unknew them. **Thirdly**, the findings indicate that suppliers attracting the attention of potential customers might be due to themselves but also could be others. When case firms sent requests through LinkedIn to connect with target potential customers hence attracting attention in real-time or generating interest afterwards when they noticed the messages that suppliers presented regarding the external stakeholders. These two approaches interplay with each other by strengthening awareness and attracting them to further exploration of the supplier. It extends knowledge by reflecting the dynamic of interests developed over time.

In summary, the results indicate that the micro B2B firms trigger the interests of potential customers through digital media as the first stage of customer relationship initiation. It starts with the connection with potential customers and the engagement level of potential customers at this stage seems to be low since they tend to passively receive messages from the suppliers. Meanwhile, the trustworthiness of suppliers is in their infancy since potential customers have little knowledge of them.

6.2.3 Knowledge-based Level: establishing credibility by knowledge sharing

This section corresponds to the knowledge-based level in the model due to the interactivity subject at this stage focusing on knowledge sharing, which allows potential customers to know better about the supplier, hence increasing their trust in the supplier. At this stage, the engagement of potential customers increases since they start to actively explore the supplier apart from receiving information from them. As a result, micro B2B firms keep sharing information related to products and technologies to show their competencies and reliability. These findings are consistent with Taiminen (2016), where digital media is used to being present. **Also**, the results are in line with the previous studies that emphasize the quality of delivered information, including credibility, relevance, usefulness and real-time (Pandey et al., 2020; Fink-Shamit & Bar-Ilan, 2008). **More specifically**, the shared information by case firms is in a diverse format including texts, images, and videos, which follows the suggestions of previous literature (Holliman & Rowley, 2014; Müller et al., 2018; Shankar et al., 2022). **In addition,** the case firms tend to present information in a rational manner, which supports the literature (Zhang & Du, 2020; Swani et al, 2017). **More importantly**, all the case firms in this study emphasize the value creation in the interaction, which is in line with Wang et al. (2019), who believe the more valuable the more engagement hence more trust. **Moreover**, the findings show that case firms keep synchronous updates across various digital channels, the company's own website and social media in particular. This benefits communication and trust between the micro B2B firms and their potential customers. It is evident from the ideas of previous studies (Merrilees & Fenech, 2007; Murphy & Sashi, 2018; Ancillai et al., 2019). **Furthermor**e, the results of this study indicate the indirect involvement of third parties, especially existing customers, plays an important role in the trust-building of potential customers.

***However*,** this study observed the development of potential customers' engagement and interactivity. Case firms noticed the visit of potential customers, which showed that potential customers started to explore the supplier. This also implied positive signals that potential customers are interested in the supplier and would lead to direct interaction if they found out something valuable. It thus illustrates the transitional role from one-way interactivity to two-way interaction. **Secondly**, the findings illustrate the different highlights of digital media. Case 2 preferred LinkedIn to its own website even though the latter always keeps updating following the former while case 3 aimed to build its own website as a library. It indicates the language effects and the complex process of products and how to use products in the global B2B business. Case 2 targeted Europe and US markets where potential customers used LinkedIn as a main digital tool. Thus, case 2 preferred to present information and update the progress of business through LinkedIn. This finding contradicts the finding of Alamäki and Korpela (2021) that social media plays a less important role in a B2B context. While case 3 targeted a lot of non-English speaking regions where the potential customers do not use much digital media but the company's website. Also, the products of case 3 needed to be integrated into specific instruments. It thus must explain the application cases in detail which might be constrained by social media due to the volume of information. **Thirdly,** this study reveals the difficulties of leveraging other existing customers in story sharing which has a strong influence on the credibility of the supplier. Due to confidentiality issues in the life science industry, the case firms were rarely allowed to share the customers (case 2) or had to anonymize the name of customers (case 3).

Conclusively, the findings in this study identify that the micro-firms in the B2B context utilize digital media, particularly their own websites and social media for knowledge sharing including the products and technologies presenting, customer cases of products use, and the positive feedback of existing customers. Although case firms highlight different types of digital media according to the preferences of potential customers, they expect to enhance trustworthiness through self-presenting and third-parties validation. The results indicate that knowledge sharing allows the potential customers to explore the case firms and leads to the next stage in terms of online interaction towards customer relationship initiation.

6.2.4 Participant-based Level: creating value for potential customers

The section corresponds to the participant-based level in the model. It indicates that micro B2B firms use digital media to create value for potential customers by identifying and solving their problems. Also, potential customers engage in interaction communication online at this stage, where the communication between micro B2B firms and potential customers turns to two-way. All the case firms in this study actively engaged potential customers into direct dialogues through digital tools including email and online meeting platforms, which implies that potential customers got to believe that the supplier may help them address their needs and create value for them. This is consistent with the findings in previous literature (Taiminen & Ranaweera, 2019; Li et al., 2020; So et al., 2016) in terms of the importance of two-way communication in B2B relationship marketing. **Firstly,** social media has not been used much as a two-way communication tool, which is in line with the findings of previous literature (Valos et al., 2015; Andersson & Wikström, 2016) that potential customers preferred direct and personalized communication. **In addition**, both parties in terms of case firms and the potential customers could initiate the dialogue is in line with Murphy and Sashi (2018), who emphasize the fuzzy boundaries of information source and receiver in two-way communication. It is thus no longer that suppliers take the action for conversations. Instead, potential customers will contact the suppliers for solutions if they have sufficient knowledge about the supplier. This finding supports Alamäki and Korpela (2021), who believe that potential customers actively contact the suppliers when they have conducted investigations. **Moreover,** all case firms in this study emphasis the importance of integrity and honesty in the interactions with potential customers, which is in line with Zhang and Li (2019) who highlight capability, benevolence, and integrity in the B2B business. Thus, this study indicates that there is little difference between online and physical interactions.

However, it does not find any evidence that external stakeholders were actively involved in the interaction in this study. The majority of case firms highlighted confidential issues in conversations with potential customers, which might hinder the effectiveness of external stakeholders' involvement. **Secondly,** the findings identify that email is the main digital media to provide service for customers. Most of cases utilized email to help customers with product installation and solve emerging problems. **More interesting,** this study noticed the language impacts in the interactions. Case 3 targeted non-English speaking customers, who thus preferred to communicate via email in texts hence hardly conducting online meetings to address the problems. **Thirdly,** this study noticed the trust of potential customers got to be strengthened according to their perception of the supplier within interactive communication, which became the determinant for customer relationship initiation. All the case firms stated they may initiate relationships with potential customers even though they were not able to solve the problem by then since the B2B business is viewed in the long-term where they may create value for them afterwards. This extends the knowledge of the definition of relationship initiation in literature.

In short, the findings of this study identify that digital media including email and online meeting platforms has been widely used to conduct two-way communication with potential customers. It confirms the suggestions of previous literature in terms of the importance of two-way communication since it determines whether potential customers are willing to initiate relationships with the supplier. The results show no difference between online and physical interactions in terms of communication. The outcomes of interactive communication led to trust enhancement of potential customers and customer relationship initiation. Also, the findings indicate the switch from one-way to two-way communication through digital media and distinguish the differences between them. The one-way communication refers to the digital-mediated interactivity, which relies on presented information in digital forms while two-way communication refers to personal interaction, which focuses on participants and their real time performance in communication. This study extends the knowledge about the definition of customer relationship initiation and illustrates the evolvement of the trust of potential customers.

7. Conclusion & Reflection and Contributions

This chapter will start with the discussions of how empirical findings of this study answer the research questions in relation to what and how digital media is utilized towards customer relationship initiation. It will be followed by contributions including theoretical, practical, and societal recommendations. Lastly, it will present the limitations of this thesis and the suggestions of future research.

7.1 Conclusion & Reflection

The purpose of this study was to explore what and how digital media is used by micro B2B firms towards customer relationship initiation. With respect to the research questions:

1. ***What digital media do Swedish Micro B2B Firms use towards relationship initiation?***
2. ***How do Swedish Micro B2B firms use digital media towards relationship initiation?***

The findings show that the companies' websites, email, and social media are predominated digital media that have been used by Swedish micro firms. To build awareness and attract the interests of potential customers is a first step into relationship initiation (Nikunen et al., 2019). ***However,*** search engines have proved not widely used since only one firm applied it, and the return seems difficult to control. Moreover, it does not relate to trust building towards customer relationships. Therefore, micro B2B firms using digital media need to consider the return of investment. **Secondly**, this study could conclude that the studied firms not only use digital media towards triggering interests, but also utilize digital media towards establishing credibility and creating value through presenting information and meeting potential customers online (Taiminen, 2016). It identifies that the case firms using digital media to communicate with potential customers starts with one-way channel in terms of presenting through email, social media and own websites hence turning to two-way interactions when potential customers completed investigations with regards to their competences and qualities. The findings also support previous literature that digital media could be used to deliver high quality information with elaborate formats and valuable contents (Shankar et al., 2022; Murphy & Sashi, 2018; Huotari et al., 2015; Holliman & Rowley, 2014). ***However,*** it indicates that social media plays an important role in B2B contexts as a useful tool for knowledge sharing, which extends the finding of Alamäki and Korpela (2021). **Thirdly,** it is shown that case firms indirectly involve external stakeholders into digital communication, which could increase their credibility and trustworthiness (Decarlo and Hansen, 2022; Steward et al., 2018; Hsu et al., 2013). ***However,*** there is no evidence showing that case firms use digital media to involve external stakeholders in direct online interactions. In addition, this study extends the prior literature by identifying the language's impacts in digital media use in different areas for the B2B global businesses.

From an overarching perspective, the findings are in line with extant studies showing that digital media can be an effective approach to address the geographic distance and social distance between suppliers and customers. ***However,*** micro B2B firms need time to learn and understand the preferences of customers using digital media. Also, the lack of resources and strategies limits the use of digital media (Yoon et al., 2021; Setkute & Dibb, 2022). **Additionally**, the main digital media has been widely used including the companies' own websites, email and social media. **Interestingly,** social media has been used by micro firms as a presenting tool for knowledge sharing and mainly lies in LinkedIn in the B2B life science industry, and particularly towards English-speaking customers. For non-English-speaking customers, case firms prioritize their own websites, which also allow them to present more product use cases. **More importantly**, this study extends the previous literature by illustrating a dynamic process of customer relationship initiation, which concludes that micro B2B firms use digital media in three focal areas, which represent three stages in sequence. It shows that micro B2B firms trigger the interests of potential customers through digital media use hence sharing knowledge towards potential customers to establish credibility. Afterwards, they may go to direct contacts stage as two-way communication for value co-creation. These three stages respectively correspond to three levels of interactivity according to the subjects involved in the interactivity: 1) message-based level, 2) knowledge-based level and 3) participant-based level. This finding extends the study of Downes and Mcmillan (2000) who identify two concepts of interactivity in their findings: message-based and participant-based by distinguishing the knowledge-based level. **Furthermore,** this study identifies the importance of knowledge-based level interactivity since it not only allows potential customers for exploration which determines whether and when go to further direct dialogues, but also stands for the transition from "computer-mediate interactivity" (Downes and Mcmillan (2000, p. 158) to interpersonal interaction. These three stages interplay and overlap with each other and the progress from the fore stage to the next also indicates the trustworthiness of the micro case firms enhancing with the increasing engagement of potential customers. The outcome of online interaction stage would lead to customer relationship initiation as long as the potential customers believe the supplier could create value for them sooner or later.

7.2 Contributions

7.2.1 Theoretical Contributions

This study conducted qualitative research and obtained a better understanding of what and how digital media is used by Swedish micro B2B firms towards customer relationship initiation. The developed theories contribute to the literature in focal area in the following aspects: **firstly**, this study identified three main focal areas of digital media use in terms of triggering interests, establishing credibility, and creating value towards customer relationship initiation. It responded to the call of Dung Le et al. (2021), who claimed there is an insufficient investigation of digital media on relationship marketing thereby the understanding of digital media's potential depends on the exaggerated prediction. **Secondly,** this study identifies the widely used and most important digital media for micro firms, including company's own website, email and social media, and online meeting platforms if we consider them as independent digital media which usually are included in email such as

Team meetings. It provided insights into the question of Kring et al. (2021) that the effectiveness of media in combination and the association with specific process phases. **Thirdly**, this study illustrated a dynamic process of customer relationship initiation, which extended the knowledge by shedding light on B2B relationship initiation stage which is scarce in previous literature (Valtakoshi, 2015; Aarikka-Stenroos et al., 2018). Also, it specifically provided insights into the understanding of definition of relationship initiation which has no consensus in the extant research. **Finally,** this study responded to Holliman and Rowley (2014) who think trust is difficult to achieve in the digital environment when engaging remote customers by indicating the interplay between trustworthiness of the suppliers and the customer relationship initiation. Trustworthiness developed along with the customer relationship progress, and verse vise. The findings showed that the trust of potential customers increased through digital communication and engagement between suppliers and prospects, hence moving forward to the next stage of relationship initiation process. Verse vice, the relationship progress led to more and deeper communication and engagement, which fostered more trust in suppliers.

7.2.2 Managerial Recommendations

This study first sheds light on how micro B2B firms use digital media towards customer relationship initiation, including companies' own websites, social media, and email. The findings provided implications to other B2B micro firms. For example, it suggests micro firms evaluate the investments on search engines. This study shows how micro firms use LinkedIn to trigger interests of potential customers and as a presenting platform for knowledge sharing to establish credibility. LinkedIn is the most useful tool here when approaching unknown potential customers while it shows that Facebook has not been successful in the B2B business. Companies' own websites are also important in knowledge sharing, particularly towards non-English-speaking customers. This study therefore recommends micro firms to build their own websites well. Online interactions in terms of digital meetings and emails were found to be the most important approaches for two-way communication in customer relationship initiation process. Social media does not play an important role in personal interactions thus this study recommends micro firms use emails and online meeting platforms. **Secondly**, this study provides insight into how micro firms could alleviate the difficulties of lacking trustworthiness hinders the relationship initiation of the relationship between suppliers and customers (Doney & Abratt, 2007). This study found that digital media could foster relationships with potential customers through communication and engagement enhancement. Therefore, this study recommends the application of strategic use of digital media in relationship marketing for micro firms. **Thirdly**, this study reveals the importance of confidentiality of customers' information. It found that customers in the life science industry are very cautious with their contacts and transactions. Thus, micro firms may need to be careful when interacting with potential customers on public digital platforms.

7.2.3 Societal Implications

This study extended the managerial implications to society and other stakeholders. **Firstly,** the wide use of digital media could reduce unnecessary business travel which contributes to the natural environment by addressing the geographic distance between micro firms and potential customers. In the past, micro B2B firms had to attend physical meetings to initiate B2B relationships with customers (Swani et al., 2014). However, 80% B2B sales interaction between suppliers and customers will be conducted on digital channels by 2025 according to Alamäki and Korpela (2021, p. 299), additionally, this study found that micro firms started to conduct more and more digital interactions instead of physical activities. **Secondly,** micro firms play significant roles in the national economy. This study provided strategic insights into marketing performance for micro firms, which may improve their business performance hence driving the market and economy development. More specifically, this study revealed the importance of digital media in B2B relationship marketing, which may evoke the attention of the micro B2B firms towards business development hence leading to jobs creation in case of lacking human resources. **Thirdly,** the application of digital media could enhance society efficiency such as resources allocation and global supply chain. For example, the case firms use digital media for knowledge sharing and competence presenting, which allows other stakeholders such as investors in addition to potential customers to know better about the firms hence helping them making proper investment decisions. Therefore, the utilization of digital media by micro B2B firms follows the trend and policy of digitalization transition, which responds to the call of the government for enhancing the degree of digital tools usage by small-scale firms since it was behind the digitalization development.

7.3 Limitations

The study has some limitations, **primarily** about the generalization of the findings. The scale of studied cases seems limited in terms of four cases. **In addition**, the findings come from a specific context, in this study is with regards to life science industry, which might be difficult to directly generalize to other micro B2B firms in another industry. **Moreover**, this study focuses on Swedish micro firms. As we know, Sweden has a strong position with a high rank in terms of digitalization in Europe, and the high level of the human capital of Swedes allows digital media to be widely applied. This might impact the generalization to another country or region. **Secondly**, this study was conducted by one researcher. It thus might be limited by the authors individual knowledge and insights when conducting qualitative research, especially in data interpretation. **Thirdly,** this study did not consider the human capital that micro firms possess while the difference of human capital would affect the use of digital media and performance of outcomes.

7.4 Future Research

According to the limitations mentioned above, in the future research the scale of participants should be extended for more data collection. Despite the limited cases and specific geographic as well as industry sector of empirical study in this thesis, it provides preliminary insights into the digital media use by micro firms in relationship marketing. Future studies could extend the knowledge based on it. **In addition,** this thesis studied digital media use towards relationship marketing from the perspective of suppliers, however, the perception of customers has not been addressed in this study. Thus, future research could study the digital media use towards customer relationship initiation from the customer perspective.

Moreover, relationship marketing should be a broad concept including various stakeholders. This study focuses on the customers while the other stakeholders have not been examined much. Studying B2B relationship marketing in a broad view would bring new insights into the relationship marketing field. **Furthermore**, future research can examine the signaling role of digital media use in impacting trust and relationship initiation through the lens of signaling theory, which has not been investigated in this study.

Reference List:

1. Aarikka-Stenroos, L., Aaboen, L., Cova, B., & Rolfsen, A. (2018). Building B2B relationships via initiation contributors: Three cases from the Norwegian-South Korean international project business. *Industrial Marketing Management*, *68*, 74-85.
2. Agariya, A. K., & Singh, D. (2011). What really defines relationship marketing? A review of definitions and general and sector-specific defining constructs. *Journal of Relationship Marketing*, *10*(4), 203-237.
3. Agnihotri, R., Dingus, R., Hu, M. Y., & Krush, M. T. (2016). Social media: Influencing customer satisfaction in B2B sales. *Industrial marketing management*, *53*, 172-180.
4. Ahmed, R. R., Streimikiene, D., Berchtold, G., Vveinhardt, J., Channar, Z. A., & Soomro, R. H. (2019). Effectiveness of online digital media advertising as a strategic tool for building brand sustainability: evidence from FMCGs and services sectors of Pakistan. *Sustainability*, *11*(12), 1-40.
5. Alam, S. L. (2020). Many hands make light work: towards a framework of digital co-production to co-creation on social platforms. *Information Technology & People*, *34*(3), 1087-1118.
6. Alamäki, A., & Korpela, P. (2021). Digital transformation and value-based selling activities: seller and buyer perspectives. *Baltic Journal of Management*.
7. Ambos Tina C. and Birkinshaw Julian (2010) How Do New Venture Evolve? An inductive study of archetype change in science-based ventures. Organization Science. 21(6), 1125-1140.
8. Andersson, S., & Wikström, N. (2017). Why and how are social media used in a B2B context, and which stakeholders are involved?. *Journal of business & industrial marketing*, *32*(8), 1098-1108.
9. Arslan, A., Golgeci, I., Khan, Z., Ahokangas, P., & Haapanen, L. (2022). COVID-19 driven challenges in international B2B customer relationship management: empirical insights from Finnish high-tech industrial microenterprises. *International Journal of Organizational Analysis*, *30*(7), 49-66.
10. Ashnai, B., Henneberg, S. C., Naudé, P., & Francescucci, A. (2016). Inter-personal and inter-organizational trust in business relationships: An attitude–behavior–outcome model. *Industrial Marketing Management*, *52*, 128-139.
11. Athanasopoulou, P. (2009). Relationship quality: a critical literature review and research agenda. *European Journal of Marketing*, *43*(5/6), 583-610.
12. Athanasakis, E. (2021). Registered Nurses’ Experiences of Medication Errors—An Original Research Protocol: Methodology, Methods, and Ethics. Canadian Journal of Nursing Research, 53(2), 171-183.
13. Bala, M., & Verma, D. (2018). A critical review of digital marketing. *M. Bala, D. Verma (2018). A Critical Review of Digital Marketing. International Journal of Management, IT & Engineering*, *8*(10), 321-339.
14. Bertilsson, F. (2021). Source Criticism as a Technology of Government in the Swedish Psychological Defence: The Impact of Humanistic Knowledge on Contemporary Security Policy. *Humanities*, *10*(1), 13.
15. Binder, C., & Hanssens, D. M. (2015). Why strong customer relationships trump powerful brands. *Harvard Business Review*, *14*.
16. Bryman A (2008) Social Research Methods. Third edition. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

17. Calefato, F., Lanubile, F., & Novielli, N. (2015). The role of social media in affective trust building in customer–supplier relationships. *Electronic Commerce Research*, *15*(4), 453-482.
18. Cartwright, S., Liu, H., & Raddats, C. (2021). Strategic use of social media within business-to-business (B2B) marketing: A systematic literature review. *Industrial Marketing Management*, *97*, 35-58.
19. Charef, R., Alaka, H., & Ganjian, E. (2019). A BIM-based theoretical framework for the integration of the asset End-of-Life phase. In IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science, 225(1).
20. Chattananon, A., & Trimetsoontorn, J. (2009). Relationship marketing: a Thai case. *International Journal of Emerging Markets*, *4*(3), 252-274.
21. Chen, L., Jiang, M., Jia, F., & Liu, G. (2022). Artificial intelligence adoption in business-to-business marketing: toward a conceptual framework. *The Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing*, *37*(5), 1025-1044.
22. Cho, J. Y., & Lee, E. (2014). Reducing Confusion about Grounded Theory and Qualitative Content Analysis: Similarities and Differences. *The Qualitative Report*, *19*(32), 1-20. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2014.1028
23. Cortez, R. M., & Johnston, W. J. (2017). The future of B2B marketing theory: A historical and prospective analysis. *Industrial Marketing Management*, *66*, 90-102.
24. Das, K. (2009). Relationship marketing research (1994-2006): An academic literature review and classification. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, *27*(3), 326-363.
25. De Wulf, K., & Odekerken-Schröder, G. (2003). Assessing the impact of a retailer's relationship efforts on consumers' attitudes and behavior. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer services*, *10*(2), 95-108.
26. Deszczyński, B., Fonfara, K., & Dymitrowski, A. (2017). The role of relationships in initiating the internationalisation process in B2B markets. Entrepreneurial Business and Economics Review, 5(4), 91-109.
27. Doney, P. M., Barry, J. M., & Abratt, R. (2007). Trust determinants and outcomes in global B2B services. *European Journal of Marketing*, *41*(9-10), 1096-1116.
28. Downes, E. J., & McMillan, S. J. (2000). Defining interactivity: A qualitative identification of key dimensions. New media & society, 2(2), 157-179.
29. Drummond, C., O'Toole, T., & McGrath, H. (2020). Digital engagement strategies and tactics in social media marketing. *European Journal of Marketing*, *54*(6), 1247-1280.
30. Eisenhardt, K. M. (1989). Building Theories from Case Study Research. *The Academy of Management Review*, *14*(4), 532–550. https://doi.org/10.2307/258557
31. Eisenhardt, K. M. (2021). What is the Eisenhardt Method, really?. *Strategic Organization*, *19*(1), 147-160.
32. Eisenhardt, K. M., & Graebner, M. E. (2007). Theory building from cases: Opportunities and challenges. Academy of management journal, 50(1), 25-32.
33. Elliott, K. M. (2008). Predictors of relationship quality for luxury restaurants. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, *15*(6), 509-515.
34. Ellram, L. M., & Tate, W. L. (2016). The use of secondary data in purchasing and supply management (P/SM) research. *Journal of purchasing and supply management*, *22*(4), 250-254.
35. Elwood, Sarah A ; Martin, Deborah G. "Placing" Interviews: Location and Scales of Power in Qualitative Research. (2000). The Professional geographer, 52(4), 649-657
36. Eurofound (2012), Born global: The potential of job creation in new international businesses, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

37. European Union Commission (2018). Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) 2018 Country Report – Sweden.
38. European Union Commission. (2015). User guide to the SME Definition. *Luxemburg: Publications Office of the European Union*.
39. Feinberg, R., & Kadam, R. (2002). E-CRM Web service attributes as determinants of customer satisfaction with retail Web sites. International journal of service industry management, 13(5), 432-451.
40. Fink-Shamit, N. and Bar-Ilan, J. (2008), "*Information quality assessment on the web – an expression of behaviour*", Information Research, Vol. 13 No. 4, available at: http://informationr.net/ir/13-4/paper357.html
41. Fink-Shamit, N., & Bar-Ilan, J. (2008). Information quality assessment on the Web-an expression of behaviour. *Information Research*, *13*(4), 13-4.
42. Fisher, Greg & Aguinis, Herman (2017) Using Theory Elaboration to Make Theoretical Advancements. Organizational research methods, 20(3), 438-464.
43. Foss, C., & Ellefsen, B. (2002). The value of combining qualitative and quantitative approaches in nursing research by means of method triangulation. *Journal of advanced nursing*, *40*(2), 242-248.
44. Geanellos, R. (1998). Hermeneutic philosophy. Part I: Implications of its use as methodology in interpretive nursing research. *Nursing inquiry*, *5*(3), 154-163.
45. Gilboa, S., Seger-Guttmann, T., & Mimran, O. (2019). The unique role of relationship marketing in small businesses' customer experience. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, *51*, 152-164.
46. Gioia, D. (2021). A Systematic Methodology for Doing Qualitative Research. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, *57*(1), 20–29. https://doi.org/10.1177/0021886320982715
47. Gioia, D. A., Corley, K. G., & Hamilton, A. L. (2013). Seeking Qualitative Rigor in Inductive Research: Notes on the Gioia Methodology. Organizational Research Methods, 16(1), 15–31. https://doi-org.proxy.ub.umu.se/10.1177/1094428112452151
48. Goulding, C. (2005), "Grounded theory, ethnography and phenomenology: A comparative analysis of three qualitative strategies for marketing research", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 39 No. 3/4, pp. 294-308. https://doi-org.proxy.ub.umu.se/10.1108/03090560510581782
49. Government offices of Sweden, 2020, Sweden's national life sciences strategy
50. Gronroos, C. (1996). Relationship marketing: strategic and tactical implications. *Management Decision*, *34*(3), 5-15.
51. Gruner, R. L., & Power, D. (2018). To integrate or not to integrate? Understanding B2B social media communications. *Online Information Review*, *42*(1), 73-92.
52. Guide, S. U. (2016). User Guide to the SME Definition. *European Commission, Brussels: Enterprise and Industry Publications*.
53. Guinibert, M. (2022). Defining digital media as a professional practice in New Zealand. *Kōtuitui: New Zealand Journal of Social Sciences Online*, *17*(2), 185-205.
54. Gummerus, J., von Koskull, C., & Kowalkowski, C. (2017). Guest editorial: relationship marketing–past, present and future. Journal of services marketing.
55. Gummesson, E. (2004). Return on Relationships (ROR): the Value of Relationship Marketing and CRM in Business-to-Business Contexts. *Journal of business & industrial marketing*, *19*(2), 136-148.
56. Gummesson, E. (2017). From relationship marketing to total relationship marketing and beyond. *Journal of Services Marketing*, *31*(1), 16-19.

57. Gummesson, E., & Polese, F. (2009). B2B is not an island!. *The Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing*, *24*(5-6), 337-350.
58. Haber, L. H. (2014). The role of formal and informal structures in shaping the corporation's relational capital. Management, 18(1), 136.
59. Habibi, M. R., Laroche, M., & Richard, M. O. (2014). The roles of brand community and community engagement in building brand trust on social media. *Computers in human behavior*, *37*, 152-161.
60. Harrison, L., Plotkin, C. L., & Stanley, J. (2017). Measuring B2B's digital gap. *The McKinsey Quarterly*.
61. Harrison, R.L. and Reilly, T.M. (2011). Mixed methods designs in marketing research. Qualitative Market Research,14(1), 7-26.
62. Heiens, R. A., Pleshko, L. P., & Ahmed, A. A. (2019). A comparison of the relationship marketing outcomes of SMEs vs large enterprises in the Kuwait fast food industry. *British Food Journal*, *121*(10), 2442-2453.
63. Herhausen, D., Miočević, D., Morgan, R. E., & Kleijnen, M. H. (2020). The digital marketing capabilities gap. *Industrial Marketing Management*, *90*, 276-290.
64. Ho, C. W., & Wang, Y. B. (2020). Does Social Media Marketing and Brand Community Play the Role in Building a Sustainable Digital Business Strategy?. *Sustainability*, *12*(16), 1-17.
65. Hofacker, C., Golgeci, I., Pillai, K. G., & Gligor, D. M. (2020). Digital marketing and business-to-business relationships: a close look at the interface and a roadmap for the future. *European Journal of Marketing*, *54*(6), 1161-1179.
66. Hoffmann, C. P., & Lutz, C. (2015). The impact of online media on stakeholder engagement and the governance of corporations. *Journal of Public Affairs*, *15*(2), 163-174.
67. Holliman, G., & Rowley, J. (2014). Business to business digital content marketing: marketers' perceptions of best practice. Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing, 8(4), 269-293.
68. Hollmann, T., Jarvis, C. B., & Bitner, M. J. (2015). Reaching the breaking point: a dynamic process theory of business-to-business customer defection. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *2*(43), 257-278.
69. Hox, J. J., & Boeije, H. R. (2005). Data collection, primary versus secondary. 593-599.
70. Hsu, L. C., Wang, K. Y., & Chih, W. H. (2013). Effects of web site characteristics on customer loyalty in B2B e-commerce: evidence from Taiwan. *The Service Industries Journal*, *33*(11), 1026-1050.
71. Hu, L., & Olivieri, M. (2022). The acceleration of digital communications in the durable goods industry. A study on white goods firms after COVID-19. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, (ahead-of-print).
72. Hu, Q., Mason, R., Williams, S. J., & Found, P. (2015). Lean implementation within SMEs: a literature review. *Journal of Manufacturing Technology Management*, *26*(7), 980-1012.
73. Huberman, A. M., & Miles, M. B. (1994). Data management and analysis methods. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 428–444). Sage Publications, Inc.
74. Hunt, S. D., Arnett, D. B., & Madhavaram, S. (2006). The explanatory foundations of relationship marketing theory. *Journal of business & industrial marketing*, *21*(2), 72-87.
75. Huotari, L., Ulkuniemi, P., Saraniemi, S., & Mäläskä, M. (2015). Analysis of content creation in social media by B2B companies. *The Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, *30*(6), 761-770.
76. Hänninen, N., & Karjaluoto, H. (2017). The effect of marketing communication on business relationship loyalty. *Marketing Intelligence and Planning*, *35*(4), 458-472.

77. Ilavarasan, V. (2016). Social Media Content and Product Co-Creation: An Emerging Paradigm. *Journal of Enterprise Information Management*, *29*(1), 7-18.
78. Jap, S. D., & Anderson, E. (2007). Testing a Life-Cycle Theory of Cooperative Interorganizational Relationships: Movement Across Stages and Performance. *MANAGEMENT SCIENCE*, *53*(2), 260-275.
79. Jap, S. D., & Ganesan, S. (2000). Control mechanisms and the relationship life cycle: Implications for safeguarding specific investments and developing commitment. *Journal of marketing research*, *37*(2), 227-245.
80. Johnson, M. D., & Selnes, F. (2004). Customer portfolio management: Toward a dynamic theory of exchange relationships. *Journal of marketing*, *68*(2), 1-17.
81. Jussila, J. J., Kärkkäinen, H., & Aramo-Immonen, H. (2014). Social media utilization in business-to-business relationships of technology industry firms. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *30*, 606-613.
82. Kamalaldin, A., Linde, L., Sjödin, D., & Parida, V. (2020). Transforming provider-customer relationships in digital servitization: A relational view on digitalization. *Industrial Marketing Management*, *89*, 306-325.
83. Karampela, M., Lacka, E., & McLean, G. (2020). “Just be there”: Social media presence, interactivity, and responsiveness, and their impact on B2B relationships. *European Journal of Marketing*, *54*(6), 1281-1303.
84. Karjaluoto, H., & Huhtamäki, M. (2010). The role of electronic channels in micro-sized brick-and-mortar firms. *Journal of Small Business & Entrepreneurship*, *23*(1), 17-38.
85. Karjaluoto, H., Mustonen, N., & Ulkuniemi, P. (2015). The role of digital channels in industrial marketing communications. *The Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, *30*(6), 703.
86. Keinänen, H., & Kuivalainen, O. (2015). Antecedents of social media B2B use in industrial marketing context: customers' view. *The Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, *30*(6), 711.
87. Killian, G., & McManus, K. (2015). A marketing communications approach for the digital era: Managerial guidelines for social media integration. *Business Horizons*, *5*(58), 539-549.
88. Klein, J. F., Zhang, Y., Falk, T., Aspara, J., & Luo, X. (2020). Customer journey analyses in digital media: exploring the impact of cross-media exposure on customers’ purchase decisions. *Journal of Service Management*, *31*(3), 489-508.
89. Krings, W., Palmer, R., & Inversini, A. (2021). Industrial marketing management digital media optimization for B2B marketing. *Industrial Marketing Management*, *93*, 174-186.
90. Lages, L. F., Lancastre, A., & Lages, C. (2008). The B2B-RELPERF scale and scorecard: Bringing relationship marketing theory into business-to-business practice. *Industrial Marketing Management*, *37*(6), 686-697.
91. Laksitamas, P., Baoguo, L., Kobayashi, S., Run, P., Ling, C., Slater, M., ... & Pongpaibool, P. (2021). A relationship marketing model towards the environment of online customers in digital 4.0 timing. NVEO-NATURAL VOLATILES & ESSENTIAL OILS Journal| NVEO, 10346-10358.
92. Lashgari, M., Sutton-Brady, C., Solberg Søilen, K., & Ulfvengren, P. (2018). Adoption strategies of social media in B2B firms: a multiple case study approach. *Journal of business & industrial marketing*, *33*(5), 730-743.
93. Lasrado, F., Thaichon, P., & Nyadzayo, M. W. (2022). Exploring the role of relationship management and relationship quality in B2B: empirical insights and future research directions. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, (ahead-of-print).

94. Li, M., Teng, H., & Chen, C. (2020). Unlocking the customer engagement-brand loyalty relationship in tourism social media: the roles of brand attachment and customer trust. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, *44*, 184-192.
95. Luo, X. (2002). Trust production and privacy concerns on the Internet: A framework based on relationship marketing and social exchange theory. *Industrial marketing management*, *31*(2), 111-118.
96. Mackenzie, N. & Knipe, S. (2006). Research dilemmas: Paradigms, methods and methodology. *Issues In Educational Research*, 16(2), 193-205.
97. Magnani, G., & Gioia, D. (2022). Using the Gioia Methodology in international business and entrepreneurship research. *International Business Review*, 102097.
98. Merrilees, B., & Fenech, T. (2007). From catalog to Web: B2B multi-channel marketing strategy. *Industrial Marketing Management*, *1*(36), 44-49.
99. Michael J. Valos, Paul Turner, Helana Scheepers & Rosemary Stockdale (2018) Integrating online communities within business-to-business marketing communications: an exploratory study, Journal of Marketing Communications, 24:5, 450-468, DOI: 10.1080/13527266.2015.1085891
100. Michaelidou, N., Siamagka, N. T., & Christodoulides, G. (2011). Usage, barriers and measurement of social media marketing: An exploratory investigation of small and medium B2B brands. *Industrial marketing management*, *40*(7), 1153-1159.
101. Morgan, R. M., & Hunt, S. D. (1994). The commitment-trust theory of relationship marketing. *Journal of marketing*, *58*(3), 20-38.
102. Mpandare, M., & Li, G. (2020). Utilising Enterprise Social Media for Product Innovation: The Role of Market Orientation. *Sustainability*, *12*(9), 1-24.
103. Müller, J. M., Pommeranz, B., Weisser, J., & Voigt, K. I. (2018). Digital, Social Media, and Mobile Marketing in industrial buying: Still in need of customer segmentation? Empirical evidence from Poland and Germany. *Industrial Marketing Management*, *100*(73), 70-83.
104. Murphya, M., & Sashib, C. M. (2018). Communication, interactivity, and satisfaction in B2B relationships. *Industrial Marketing Management*, *68*, 1-12.
105. Ndubisi, N. O. (2007). Relationship marketing and customer loyalty. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, *25*(1), 98-106.
106. Ndubisi, N. O., & Nataraajan, R. (2016). Marketing relationships in the new millennium B2B sector. Psychology & Marketing, 33(4), 227-231.
107. Netzer, O., Lattin, J. M., & Srinivasan, V. (2008). A Hidden Markov Model of Customer Relationship Dynamics. *Marketing Science*, *27*(2), 185-204.
108. Nikunen, T., Saarela, M., Oikarinen, E. L., Muhos, M., & Isohella, L. (2017). Micro-Enterprises' Digital Marketing Tools for Building Customer Relationships. *Management*, *12*(2), 171-188.
109. O'Brien, B. C., Harris, I. B., Beckman, T. J., Reed, D. A., & Cook, D. A. (2014). Standards for reporting qualitative research: a synthesis of recommendations. Academic medicine, 89(9), 1245-1251.
110. OECD (2020), SMEs in the national economy.
111. Onwuegbuzie, A. J., Johnson, R. B., & Collins, K. M. (2009). Call for mixed analysis: A philosophical framework for combining qualitative and quantitative approaches. *International journal of multiple research approaches*, *3*(2), 114-139.

112. Palmatier, R. W., Dant, R. P., Grewal, D., & Evans, K. R. (2006). Factors Influencing the Effectiveness of Relationship Marketing: A Meta-Analysis. *Journal of Marketing*, *70*, 136-153.

113. Palmatier, R. W., Scheer, L. K., Houston, M. B., Evans, K. R., & Gopalakrishna, S. (2007). Use of relationship marketing programs in building customer–salesperson and customer–firm relationships: Differential influences on financial outcomes. *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, *3*(24), 210-223.

114. Pan, Y., Sheng, S., & Xie, F. T. (2012). Antecedents of customer loyalty: An empirical synthesis and reexamination. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, *19*(1), 150-158.

115. Pandey, N., Nayal, P., & Rathore, A. S. (2020). Digital marketing for B2B organizations: structured literature review and future research directions. *The Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing*, 35(7), 1191-1204.

116. Parida, V., & Wincent, J. (2019). Why and how to compete through sustainability: a review and outline of trends influencing firm and network-level transformation. *International Entrepreneurship and Management Journal*, *15*(1), 1-19.

117. Payne, A., & Frow, P. (2017). Relationship marketing: looking backwards towards the future. Journal of Services Marketing, 31(1), 11-15.

118. Peng, L. Y., & Wang, Q. (2006). Impact of Relationship Marketing Tactics (RMTs) on Switchers and Stayers in a Competitive Service Industry. *Journal of Marketing Management*, *22*(1), 25-59.

119. Rabianski, J. S. (2003). Primary and secondary data: Concepts, concerns, errors, and issues. The Appraisal Journal, 71(1), 43.

120. Ramani, G., & Kumar, V. (2008). Interaction Orientation and firm Performance. *Journal of marketing: A quarterly publication of the American marketing association*, *72*(1), 27-45.

121. Ratnasingam, P. (2005). Trust in inter-organizational exchanges: a case study in business to business electronic commerce. *Decision Support Systems*, *39*(3), 525-544.

122. Reichheld, F. F., & Sasser, W. E. (1990). Zero defeofions: Quoliiy comes to services. *Harvard business review*, *68*(5), 105-111.

123. Reñosa, Mark Donald C ; Mwamba, Chanda ; Meghani, Ankita ; West, Nora S ; Hariyani, Shreya ; Ddaaki, William ; Sharma, Anjali ; Beres, Laura K ; McMahon, Shannon. (2021). Selfie consents, remote rapport, and Zoom debriefings: collecting qualitative data amid a pandemic in four resource- constrained settings. BMJ global health, 6(1), 1-8

124. Robson, A., Ojeme, M., & Coates, N. (2016). The SMEs' perspective of trust in a B2B relationship. *Journal of Financial Services Marketing*, *21*(2), 103-112.

125. Romanainen, J., Angelis, J., Fikkers, D. J., Nausedaite, R., Ärenman, E., Henningsson, K., Eljas-Taal, K., Vallistu, J., Maier, F., & Müürisepp, K. (2016). *Nordic Entrepreneurship Check 2016*. Nordic innovation. http://www.nordicinnovation.org/Publications/nordic-entrepreneurship-check-2016/

126. Rosa, D., & Rua, O. L. (2020). Relationship marketing and intangible resources: the mediating effect of loyalty. Review of Marketing Science, 18(1), 117-143.

127. Rose, R., Malmqvist, J., Hellberg, K., Mollas, G., & Shevlin, M. (2019). Conducting the Pilot Study: A Neglected Part of the Research Process? Methodological Findings Supporting the Importance of Piloting in Qualitative Research Studies: Methodological findings supporting the importance of piloting in qualitative research studies. *The International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *18*(1), [1609406919878341]. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406919878341

128. Rose, S., Fandel, D., Saraeva, A., & Dibley, A. (2021). Sharing is the name of the game: exploring the role of social media communication practices on B2B customer relationships in the life sciences industry. *Industrial Marketing Management*, *93*, 52-62.
129. Ryan ,G.(2017). Introduction to positivism, interpretivism and critical theory. *Nurse Researcher*, *25*(4), 14-20.
130. Sashi, C. M. (2012). Customer engagement, buyer-seller relationships, and social media. *Management Decision*, *50*(2), 253-272.
131. Saunders, M., Lewis, P., & Thornhill, A. (2007). *Research methods for business students*. Pearson education. Fourth edition.
132. Seppänen, R., Blomqvist, K., & Sundqvist, S. (2007). Measuring inter-organizational trust—a critical review of the empirical research in 1990–2003. *Industrial marketing management*, *36*(2), 249-265.
133. Setkute, J., & Dibb, S. (2022). "Old boys' club": Barriers to digital marketing in small B2B firms. *Industrial Marketing Management*, *102*, 266-279.
134. Shankar, V., Grewal, D., Sunder, S., Fossen, B., Peters, K., & Agarwal, A. (2021). Digital marketing communication in global marketplaces: A review of extant research, future directions, and potential approaches. International Journal of research in Marketing, 39(2),541-565.
135. Sharifi, S. S., & Esfidani, M. R. (2014). The impacts of relationship marketing on cognitive dissonance, satisfaction, and loyalty: The mediating role of trust and cognitive dissonance. *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management*, *42*(6), 553-575.
136. Shaw, E. (1999), "A guide to the qualitative research process: evidence from a small firm study", *Qualitative Market Research*, Vol. 2 No. 2, pp. 59-70. https://doi.org/10.1108/13522759910269973
137. Shaw, R. L., Hiles, D. R., West, K., Holland, C., & Gwyther, H. (2018). From mixing methods to the logic (s) of inquiry: Taking a fresh look at developing mixed design studies. *Health Psychology and Behavioral Medicine*, *6*(1), 226-244.
138. Sileyew, K. J. (2019). *Research design and methodology*. *Cyberspace*. Rijeka: IntechOpen. 1-12.
139. Sim, J. (1998). Collecting and analysing qualitative data: issues raised by the focus group. *Journal of advanced nursing*, *28*(2), 345-352.
140. Slotte–Kock, S., & Coviello, N. (2010). Entrepreneurship research on network processes: A review and ways forward. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, *34*(1), 31-57.
141. Snyder, H. (2019). Literature review as a research methodology: An overview and guidelines. *Journal of business research*, *104*, 333-339.
142. So, K., King, C., Sparks, B. A., & Wang, Y. (2016). The role of customer engagement in building consumer loyalty to tourism brands. *Journal of Travel Research*, *55*(1), 64-78.
143. Solarino, A. M., & Aguinis, H. (2021). Challenges and best-practice recommendations for designing and conducting interviews with elite informants. Journal of Management Studies, 58(3), 649-672.
144. Sora, C., Jordà, S., & Codina, L. (2017). Chasing real-time interaction in new media: towards a new theoretical approach and definition. *Digital Creativity*, *28*(3), 196-205.
145. Steensen, S. (2019). Journalism's epistemic crisis and its solution: Disinformation, datafication and source criticism. *Journalism*, *20*(1), 185-189.
146. Steensen, S., Belair-Gagnon, V., Graves, L., Kalsnes, B., & Westlund, O. (2022). Journalism and Source Criticism. Revised Approaches to Assessing Truth-Claims. *Journalism Studies*, 1-19.

147. Steinhoff, L., & Palmatier, R. W. (2021). Commentary: Opportunities and challenges of technology in relationship marketing. *Australasian Marketing Journal*, *29*(2), 111-117.
148. Steward, M. D., Narus, J. A., & Roehm, M. L. (2018). An exploratory study of business-to-business online customer reviews: external online professional communities and internal vendor scorecards. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *46*(2), 173-190.
149. Suri, H. (2011), "Purposeful Sampling in Qualitative Research Synthesis", *Qualitative Research Journal*, Vol. 11 No. 2, pp. 63-75. https://doi-org.proxy.ub.umu.se/10.3316/QRJ1102063
150. SVEND BRINKMANN & STEINAR KVALE (2005) CONFRONTING THE ETHICS OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH, Journal of Constructivist Psychology, 18:2, 157-181, DOI: 10.1080/10720530590914789
151. Swani, K., Brown, B. P., & Milne, G. R. (2014). Should tweets differ for B2B and B2C? An analysis of Fortune 500 companies' Twitter communications. *Industrial marketing management*, *43*(5), 873-881.
152. Swani, K., Milne, G. R., Brown, B. P., Assaf, A. G., & Donthu, N. (2017). What messages to post? Evaluating the popularity of social media communications in business versus consumer markets. *Industrial Marketing Management*, *62*, 77-87.
153. Taiminen, H. (2016). One gets what one orders: Utilisation of digital marketing tools. *The Marketing Review*, *16*(4), 389-404.
154. Taiminen, H. M., & Karjaluoto, H. (2015). The usage of digital marketing channels in SMEs. *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development*, *22*(4), 633-651.
155. Taiminen, K., & Ranaweera, C. (2019). Fostering brand engagement and value-laden trusted B2B relationships through digital content marketing: The role of brand's helpfulness. *European Journal of Marketing*, *53*(9), 1759-1781.
156. Thaichon, P., Liyanaarachchi, G., Quach, S., Weaven, S., & Bu, Y. (2020). Online relationship marketing: evolution and theoretical insights into online relationship marketing. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, *38*(6), 676-698.
157. Tranfield, D., Denyer, D., & Smart, P. (2003). Towards a methodology for developing evidence-informed management knowledge by means of systematic review. *British journal of management*, *14*(3), 207-222.
158. Turyahikayo, E. (2021). Philosophical paradigms as the bases for knowledge management research and practice. *Knowledge Management & E-Learning: An International Journal*, *13*(2), 209-224.
159. Vallaster, C., Kraus, S., Kailer, N., & Baldwin, B. (2019). Responsible entrepreneurship: outlining the contingencies. *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour and Research*, *25*(3), 538-553.
160. Valtakoski, A. (2015). Initiation of buyer–seller relationships: The impact of intangibility, trust and mitigation strategies. *Industrial Marketing Management*, *44*, 107-118.
161. Verhoef, P. C., & Bijmolt, T. H. (2019). Marketing perspectives on digital business models: A framework and overview of the special issue. International Journal of Research in Marketing, 36(3), 341-349.
162. Vieira, V. A., de Almeida, M. I. S., Agnihotri, R., da Silva, N. S. D. A. C., & Arunachalam, S. (2019). In pursuit of an effective B2B digital marketing strategy in an emerging market. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *47*(6), 1085-1108.
163. Wang, W. L., Malthouse, E. C., Calder, B., & Uzunoglu, E. (2019). B2B content marketing for professional services: In-person versus digital contacts. *Industrial Marketing Management*, *81*, 160-168.

164. Wang, W., Liang, Q., Mahto, R. V., Deng, W., & Zhang, S. X. (2020). Entrepreneurial entry: The role of social media. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, *161*, 120337-120337.
165. Winer, R. S. (2009). New Communications Approaches in Marketing: Issues and Research Directions. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, *23*(2), 108-117.
166. Winit-Watjana, W. (2016). Research philosophy in pharmacy practice: necessity and relevance. *International Journal of Pharmacy Practice*, *24*(6), 428-436.
167. Yoon, Y. L., Yoon, Y., Nam, H., & Choi, J. (2021). Buyer-supplier matching in online B2B marketplace: An empirical study of small-and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). *Industrial Marketing Management*, *93*, 90-100.
168. Youssef, Y. M. A., Johnston, W. J., AbdelHamid, T. A., Dakrory, M. I., & Seddick, M. G. S. (2018). A customer engagement framework for a B2B context. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 33(1), 145-152'
169. Yun, G., Yalcin, M. G., Hales, D. N., & Kwon, H. Y. (2019). Interactions in sustainable supply chain management: a framework review. *The International Journal of Logistics Management*, *30*(1), 140-173.
170. Zhang, C. B., & Li, Y. (2019). How social media usage influences B2B customer loyalty: roles of trust and purchase risk. *The Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing*, *34*(7), 1420-1433.
171. Zhang, J., & Du, M. (2020). Utilization and effectiveness of social media message strategy: how B2B brands differ from B2C brands. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, *35*(4), 721-740.
172. Zou, H. and Ghauri, P.N. (2010), "Internationalizing by learning: the case of Chinese high-tech new ventures", *International Marketing Review*, Vol. 27 No. 2, pp. 223-244. https://doi-org.proxy.ub.umu.se/10.1108/02651331011037539

Appendix: Interview guide

	Questions
Introduction	Could you briefly introduce yourself and your business?
	What kinds of customers do you target? Could you briefly describe your customer? Such as their purchase behaviors, how they make decision of making an order? How is your business going now?
	What is the drive that you chose this sector as your target market? What is the challenge when targeting these customer groups?
Relationship marketing and relationship initiation	In your point of view, how important is relationship management in your marketing?
	How did your customers know you in the beginning? How was it going afterwards? How did you attract your potential customers in the beginning?
	What challenges did you ever face when trying to get to know your potential customers? How did you deal with it?
Digital media and relationship initiation	How do you define digital media?
	Which digital media do you use for marketing? In what way, personal motivation, or company? What does digital media mean to you and your business? Who is responsible for the digital media management in your company?
	What role did digital media play when you tried to get to know your stakeholders?
	How important is digital communication in relationship building?
	How did you use digital media specifically? What types of content do you deliver via digital media? Who would be the main audience? What was your objective when conducting digital communication? What do you think is important in terms of the content you generated? How did customers respond?
	What challenges did you face when using digital communication? How did you deal with them?
Digital media and involvement of external stakeholders	How important is feedback from previous customers when trying to get to know your new customers? How did you use it in digital communication? What was the response? What do you think is most important from these responses?
Conclusion	Are there any issues that you think are important that we did not cover?