



Högskolan
Kristianstad

Högskolan Kristianstad
291 88 Kristianstad
044 250 30 00
www.hkr.se

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**The corona pandemic's impact on the sales-
function and the sales-associates ability to
create value during a crisis**

An exploratory study on the mobile-operator sector in Sweden

Daniel Blomqvist och Monawar M. Hashem



Author

Daniel Blomqvist & Monawar M. Hashem

Title

The corona pandemic's impact on the sales-function and the sales-associates ability to create value during a crisis – An exploratory study on the mobile-operator sector in Sweden

Supervisor

Lisa Källström

Examiner

Karin Alm

Abstract

The amount of people in Sweden who were made redundant during the corona pandemic exceeds both the Swedish financial crisis in 1990 and the global financial crisis in 2008. The negative economic development led to more pressure on people to work harder and perform better in order for their firm to survive. The purpose of this thesis was to explore if and how the value creation process between service providers and their customers, from a business perspective, had been influenced by the corona pandemic. A conceptual model based on service-logic was created to shed light on potential disruptions affecting the value creation. Empirical data was collected through qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews with sales-associates employed by a mobile-operator firm in Sweden. Findings resulted in five main insights of disruptions that impact the provider and its value-creation with its customers. These include managerial decisions, unreasonable goal-setting, social distancing, new provider-customer frictions and foot-traffic, which all stemmed from decisions taken by the firm and government restrictions.

This dissertation has contributed to additional insights in how the service-logic and its various concepts regarding value creation, from a firm's perspective, is affected during a major crisis. The difficulties experienced by sales-associates during the corona pandemic is two-fold. The sales-associates have to adhere to decisions made by the firm which often leads to more pressure to perform, and the restrictions implemented by governments leads to poor conditions for creating customer-relationships in turn. These conditions impact the firm's ability to facilitate and co-create value with its customers.

Keywords

Corona pandemic , sales-function, sales-associates, value creation, value co-creation, value facilitation, service logic, service-dominant logic

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Daniel Blomqvist

Monawar M. Hashem

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1. Introduction

The first chapter begins with a background explaining the current situation with the corona pandemic that has affected us all which then leads on to an introduction and explanation of the service-based logic paradigm. The chapter then follows with a problematization discussing the relevancy for the conducting this study, and the chapter concludes with the research purpose and research question.

1.1 Background

The corona pandemic that started in 2019 did not only affect people's health and concerns relating to it, but also the global economy. The number of people who have been made redundant in this time period exceeds both the Swedish financial crisis in 1990 and the global financial crisis in 2008 (Johansson & Selberg, 2020). The pandemic has wreaked havoc in many sectors of the global economy, and some retailing- and service industries have been hit harder than others (Fernandes, 2020). Many businesses in these industries are shutting down and competition amongst surviving firms increases further, leading to ever more pressure on employees within these firms to deliver and perform better in order to create better conditions for their firm to survive this pandemic (Fernandes, 2020).

The corona-virus called Covid-19 was declared a threat to human health by the world health organization on January 2020, and the threat was later declared to a global pandemic (Ludvigsson, 2020). Compared to a lot of other countries, Sweden's strategy during the corona pandemic has not involved any general lockdowns except for strong recommendations of physical distancing at first. Mandatory rules when it comes to physical distancing was applied in March 2020, when it comes to bars, restaurants, cafés and events (Ludvigsson, 2020). In January 2021, the Swedish government changed approach and made physical distancing in shopping malls mandatory as well which has restricted the retail sector when it comes to the number of customers that is

allowed in retail stores. Every customer must have 10sqm of space in the store or else the retailer risks high fines or at worst a shutdown (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2021).

Consumer behaviour has changed due to the detrimental impact of the corona pandemic. There are indications that many consumers have become more goal-oriented with their shopping, by researching beforehand and not wasting any time due to fear of being infected and the discomfort associated with the restrictions and rules regarding face masks, social distancing and other hygiene restrictions (Hofmann et al., 2020). Restrictions and the pandemic have led retailers to put certain routines in place in order to minimize health-risks (Yang et al., 2020). Around the world, face-masks are forced on individuals or at least suggested like in Sweden (Hofmann et al., 2020). In Sweden, face-masks are not legally required in retail environments but a lot of retailers still make the employees wear face-masks to minimize health-risks and to fit in to the institutional norm shaped by both social and market demands (Yang et al., 2020).

Having discussed the pandemic and how it has affected and continues to affect the relationships between businesses and customers, it is also of importance to mention and discuss a stream of research in the relationship paradigm, called service-based logic, that has been developed since the 1980's. This service-based logic is founded on many of the same ideas, premises and concepts as the general relationship paradigm, and important aspects include market orientation, relationship marketing and service dominance (Källström, 2019). According to the researchers behind the service logic and service dominant logic, value is created through a value-creation process with both the retailer and the consumer in a joint sphere by collective goals, and value-in-use is ultimately affected by the consumer's experiences of resources, processes, and the outcomes (Grönroos & Voima, 2013).

Consumer value as a concept and subject has become more relevant through important research contributions that highlight and extend the different aspects of the value-creation concept. Prominent contributions and new perspectives include those of Grönroos (1982, 2011, 2013) with the concept of service logic and Vargo and Lusch

(2004, 2008) with the concept of service-dominant logic. Research on service logic and service-dominant logic highlights the importance of the social interaction between customers and sales personnel where both actors play an active role in the value-creation process, in which both parties affect the other part. From this school of idea, it is argued that value is always created by the customer, and the supplier or provider acts mostly as a value-facilitator that offers various value propositions from which customers can then decide to use to create real value, also known as “value-in-use” (Grönroos,2008; Grönroos & Voima, 2013; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). From this standpoint, value-in-use is seen as social construct, which constitutes a major difference from the other spectrum of theories that originates from the product-dominant logic. This product-dominant logic sees the supplier or service-provider as the value creator that offers products who possess objective value on their own, regardless of the social interaction between the two parties that takes place during the trade (Grönroos & Voima, 2013).

The service-based logic was the basis of this study because we believe that the most important part of customers value-creation in a retail environment occurs during the interaction between the sales associate and the customer. The firm offering products and services acts as value-facilitator and offers different value-propositions and the interaction between them and the customer gives the firm an opportunity to influence the customer’s value-creation process, and if done right, the firm is able to co-create value together with the customer. Furthermore, the key focus of this study was about the value-facilitator, more specifically the role of the sales function because as stated above, we believed that the interaction between the sales associates and their ability to co-create value together with the customer is well researched already. We argue that this is a relevant study because to the best of our knowledge the salesperson’s ability to co-create value with customers in times of a pandemic in a retail environment has not been researched and we believe that the value-creation process has been affected by the pandemic in some way or form.

For this study we identified one of the biggest mobile-phone operators in Sweden. There were a few reasons for choosing this particular line of business for this study. For one, many customers purchasing phones and subscriptions want to discuss available

options for their needs. Secondly, the stores in this line of business are generally relatively small compared to other retail sectors, which means that the corona restrictions and regulations potentially could affect these firms particularly hard. Lastly, firms in this line of business usually have a high customer flow in relation to the size of the stores, which means that the few sales-associates working there have loads of customer interactions daily under normal circumstances.

The firm that we have chosen to analyse provide both products and services and the firm has retail locations in almost all of Sweden's biggest shopping malls with over forty retail locations. Furthermore, the research not only included sales-associates, but store-managers as well, because we believed that the discomforts and restrictions of the pandemic affected both the provider sphere and the joint sphere of the value creation. To get a better understanding, employees with managerial positions were also chosen for the study to cover a broader perspective of the provider sphere. The chosen firm offer both services and physical products, generating sales both in physical retail stores as well as online and through phone. It is in this case and context that the theories previously mentioned are discussed and analysed throughout the thesis.

1.2 Problem statement

According to the service base logic, the customer is in charge of the value creation and through direct contact by dialogical process, the sales associate can influence the customers value creation process and become a co-creator of value if interaction takes place. We argue that the value creation process is important to analyse through the retailer's perspective due to the many current restrictions that affect the interaction between customer and retailer such as face-masks, social distancing and other corona pandemic related issues within the sales function and its value propositions. Tarki et al.,(2020) stated that normally while all retailers strive to provide the best service they can to maintain existing customers and attract new ones, to be able to do so in a time of crisis and uncertainty is much harder and more complex than usual. Furthermore, Rosenbaum and Russell-Bennett (2020) discussed how the services marketing discipline originates from a time when social interactions between customers and

employees (e.g. sales personnel) were encouraged to form new and long-lasting relationships, especially since most service-encounters back then equated social encounters compared to the growing e-service as of today. Restrictions following the corona pandemic has impacted social relationships between customers and sales personnel by either completely preventing them from occurring, or by severely limiting the availability and quality of these interactions. This begs the questions, “What are service encounters without the ability to engage in proper social interactions with customers? and how does this affect the value-creation processes in turn for service organizations and their customers? And what theoretical and practical implications may this potentially lead to in the future?”

Most literature on Marketing theory has been and are discussed and applied under normal economic circumstances, without major disruptions to both consumption and production in a national and global context considered. For that reason it is of much interest to explore how the value-creation between businesses and customers possibly has been altered and is applied during these new specific circumstances. Therefore it was also important to study the sales function and how its and processes had been affected by the corona pandemic. The service logic paradigm is under-researched in context of a crisis which affect service-providers and customers (Rosenbaum & Russell-Bennett, 2020). What is discussed and concluded in much research within the field of service logic may have changed or been altered in some way due to this unprecedented situation of the corona pandemic.

Within the field of service logic there is a gap to be explored, which could potentially lead to the discovery of some form of theoretical and/or managerial implications relating to the research question presented on the next page. The gap identified for this study and when we researched the area was to improve the understanding of if and how the sales function and its ability to create value has changed under current circumstances, and what it means for both the sales associates and the firm by using theoretical concepts from primarily service-logic, including value facilitation from the provider side, as well as the creation and co-creation of value, and well as the role and

importance of interactions between firms and its customers. We have reason to believe that the value-creation process is affected because of the many restrictions and rules set by the retailers and that it is much more difficult giving the consumers the right service and experience for them to create value and as retailers to still be legitimate in the eyes of the public. The corona pandemic as previously discussed has impacted the entire world in both health- and economical ways. For this study, the corona pandemic and the potential disruptions it has brought with it is the problem that is being studied, by exploring in what ways it potentially influence service-providers and retailers. However, the corona pandemic is also the empirical context for this study as it is was conducted in the midst of this very pandemic, with all of its negative societal effects and restrictions applied because of it still being active during the time of the study. As the corona pandemic and its potential disruptions on service-providers in retailing is the problem that is studied, the next chapter (theoretical background) will continue and start of with the discussion of the corona pandemic to make it clearer for the reader that the other theories will be used with this problem and context in mind.

1.3 Research purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore if and how the value creation process between a service provider and their customers, from a business perspective, had been altered because of the corona pandemic. An in-depth investigation is required to gain a deeper understanding and knowledge about what consequences the pandemic may have for the service provider acting as value facilitator and their ability to co-create value together with customers.

1.4 Research question

RQ: How has the sales function of a service-provider been impacted by the corona pandemic? And how has its ability to offer value propositions to and co-create value with its customers been influenced?

1.5 Disposition

Chapter 1 introduces the background for the study, including a problematization in order to frame the relevance of our research purpose and research question. Chapter 2 covers the theoretical background on which this study is based on. Chapter 3 discusses the theoretical methodology which describes epistemological considerations which relates to research philosophy and concepts, and the chosen method is also discussed from an empirical perspective. Chapter 4 covers the empirical findings and analysis. Chapter 5 consists of a discussion about the findings and analysis presented in the previous chapter. Chapter 6 consists of a conclusion, where the thesis is first summarized, which is then followed by a conclusion and theoretical- and practical contributions. This chapter also presents the limitations of this thesis and suggestions for future research.

2. Theoretical Background

In order to explore if and how the sales-function's ability to contribute to the customer's value-creation process has been altered by the corona pandemic, the following section will consist of a literature review of relevant concepts for this study. A brief discussion on the corona pandemic's effect on retail was placed first in this chapter to remind the reader that it is in this context that the concepts and theories are applied on for this thesis. The next sections include a definition of the role of sales-function, service logic as a foundational framework for this thesis, the concept of value and the value creation process, including value co-creation and interaction between firms and customers, and change in consumer-behaviour during a crisis and what businesses can do to foster value-creation processes mitigate the negative consequences in these difficult times in terms of service quality. However, most theories and concepts presented under the subheadings of "the role of the sales function" (apart from Rackam & DeVincentis 1999, and Lyus et al., 2011) and "from goods-dominant logic to service-based logic" will not be expanded upon further or be used in the remaining chapters to any notable extent. Instead these sections serve to provide knowledge and understanding for the reader to more easily follow along this study and its context for the remaining chapters . The chapter concludes with a presentation of a conceptual model based on the literature review and theories discussed in regards to service-based logic and the corona pandemic. This conceptual model will aid the analysis in further chapters.

2.1 Corona's effect on retail

As was stated in chapter one, we have reason to believe that the corona outbreak has had an effect on the retail industry in Sweden because of all the regulations and restrictions that have been put in place by the government. Our hypothesis was that the covid-19 outbreak has had an impact on the dialogue between sales-associates and customers in the retail-setting which might affect the value-creation process between the firm and its customers. We argue that the value-creation process is of vital importance for retail companies in order to maintain and increase sales. There have not been as

severe restrictions on people's freedom since the second world war (Pantano et al., 2020). There are some research that has been conducted in recent time about the effects of the corona pandemic and how it has affected the retail industry but most of the research is focused on the consumer point of view hence the reason that we have conducted this study to investigate the effects of corona pandemic from the retailers and sales-functions perspective. All retailers are striving to provide outstanding service to its customers, however in recession and uncertain times it is much more difficult and complex than ever before (Tarki et al., 2020). Although the corona pandemic has affected the entire world and all economic sectors within it, Fernandes (2020) states that service-oriented sectors have been particularly affected, with reduced number of customers and revenue which ultimately lead to more people losing their jobs within these sectors. Policymakers in different countries and economies of the world made assumptions about what kind of goods and services people would need to maintain a basic standard of living, especially considering all restrictions, health-risks and stay-at-home policies. One service sector that has been considered essential and thus been allowed to remain open in most countries of the world are the internet and phone providers (Storr et al., 2021). Especially since most education has become digital and more and more firms let employees work from home.

What makes the corona pandemic more severe than previous crises throughout history, is the fact that it is a global crisis that has spread to and affected all economies and not just low-middle GDP countries. It is also due to the fact that the world is much more integrated today which also leads to spill-over effects throughout supply-chains in the world. Lastly, the world is experiencing simultaneous destruction of both demand and supply (Fernandes, 2020). These developments increase the risk that the negative impacts caused by the pandemic will lead to long-term effects, with changing businesses-models and consumer behaviour. Hofmann et al. (2020) argue that consumer behaviour already has changed due to the detrimental impact of the corona pandemic.. They argue that many consumers have become more goal-oriented with their shopping, by researching beforehand and not wasting any time due to fear of being infected and the discomfort associated with the restrictions and rules regarding face masks, social distancing and other hygiene restrictions. This poses a difficult challenge for service-providers' ability to co-create value with its customers as the

customers minimize both the time spent shopping, while also spending less money when they do go shopping. The sales performance and customer-engagement of service-providers are impacted by lesser time spent during interactions with customers (Swimberghe et al., 2014).

Some researchers (Milaković, 2021) argue that marketers and sales-personnel will be advised to adopt the role of informing and educating their customers about the products and services offered and their benefits, and the ways of acquiring these during and after the crisis. Furthermore, while communicating with their customers (e.g. advertising, live interactions, sales calls) the marketers and sales personnel need to emphasize the accessibility and availability of their products and services, and thereby improve the firm's dialogue with their customers during their product promotions (i.e., value propositions) in these hard times of a pandemic (Milaković, 2021). Grönroos (1982) also states that accessibility is of high importance and that the firm's products and services must be accessible in an attractive manner in order to ensure the service quality of the retailer. While the previous statement by Grönroos (1982) was proposed under normal economic circumstances a long time ago, it is noteworthy how this statement still holds and is applied in research made during rougher crises such as the corona pandemic. Furthermore, Rackham and DeVincentis (1999) also discussed the importance of the organization's adaptability to be ready for urgent changes that occur, which also coincides with Milaković's (2021) arguments regarding how sales-personnel will be advised to act during the corona pandemic.

2.2 The role of the sales function

Marketing scholars have long been keen on learning more about the role of the marketing function and its interdependence with other functions within firms (e.g., Day 1992; Homburg et al., 1999; Moorman and Rust 1999; Varadarajan 1992; Webster et al., 2005). During the 1990s, new discussions started to emerge within this field, with a movement toward ideas of thinking of marketing less as a function itself, but more as a set of values and processes in terms of an organization-wide market orientation (Kohli & Jaworski 1990; Moorman & Rust 1999). Marketing practitioners and managers are under more pressure than ever to show their worth and their value to the firm (Goetz et al., 2013). However, the marketing function will not be able to perform to their best

ability unless it is sufficiently connected with what is happening in the marketplace, according to Lyus et al., (2010). They argue that the sales force, through their connection with the market and in direct contact with customers and business partners, are most aware of changing customer needs and how the firm's competitors are developing.

Furthermore, Rackham and DeVincentis (1999) stress how sales departments need to be both adaptable and ready for quick changes in order to respond to both organizational- and market dynamics, and they argue that the sales function is a critical link between these two forces. Additionally, Brozovic et al., (2016) discuss how the sales function through direct interactions with their customers need to be flexible in order to understand their customers and act upon their changing needs. Brozovic et al., (2016) also discuss the idea that sales associates, through their open dialogue and interaction with their customers can be seen as part-time marketers (Gummesson, 1991) and customer-engaging employees (Normann, 2000), and that their ability to improvise, be flexible and creative are of utmost importance.

Moreover, the provider can signal its intention to be flexible during customer interactions by optimizing the conditions and increase the likelihood to be perceived in that light, by adopting several human resource practices (Bhattacharya et al., 2005). For instance, hiring the best suited staff through a proper screening and selection, and administering them with meaningful and versatile tasks as well as providing useful feedback to their personnel and being open to discuss eventual problems can signal important intentions for their customers (Beltrán-Martín & Roca-Puig, 2013). Furthermore, by ensuring that the personalities of the sales-associates align with the values of the firm, and by promoting cross-functional collaboration and flexibility within the firm, also increase the likelihood of higher customer satisfaction (Evans et al, 2012). The specialized knowledge, skills and core-competencies of the sales-associates can be referred to as operant resources, which are paramount for the firm to gain competitive advantage have more satisfied customers than its competitors (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008).

Other researchers (Morgan et al., 2014) also state that flexible sales-personnel contributes better to the firm's service climate, by being able to act more freely to find solutions to their customers' problems. Matsuo (2006) also notes how flexible salespeople have a unique and specific boundary-spanning role, since they have the potential to coordinate the marketing efforts, stemming from the marketing function, to their customers and personalize the marketing message. Thus, the sales function seems to be instrumental in both formation and implementation of strategic plans (Piercy & Lane, 2005).

In much of the contemporary research within marketing and sales, the dyadic relationship and interdependence between the marketing function and sales function can be understood with a loop metaphor (Lysus et al., 2011), where the marketing function suggests and provides strategies that the sales function need to implement to ensure that changes happen, and in turn the sales function report the findings and results back to the marketing function, who then analyses the information and formulate new strategies and so forth. The researchers (Lysus et al., 2011) suggest that this ultimately drives organizational change, as the sales employees possess the necessary experience, knowledge, skills and relationships that are specific to the market segment they cover and are responsible for, the information gathered and provided back to the marketing function is crucial for the organizational development. Evans et al., (2012) also states that “*sales people play an essential role in identifying and defining market opportunities for their company*”.

Furthermore, there has also been a change concerning the role of sales, where a shift has taken place, moving from the idea from the “selling products and services” model of the twentieth century to a model in which the sales function is focusing more on making sales with the intention of building and maintaining long-term relationships with their customers. In *Harvard's Business Review's* special issue on sales (2006, Vol. 84 No. 7/8), it is argued that the employees within the sales function are *increasingly acting as a relationship manager than the traditional order taker*. Despite the increasingly realized importance of understanding integration, connection and interdependence

between the marketing function and the sales function, this thesis will focus on and take the perspective of how the role of the sales-function possibly has changed due to the recent pandemic.

In business-to-consumer organizations, the basic activities carried out by the sales function may be reduced to include contacting, selling the product or service and managing information received from transactional interactions between the seller and the buyer. However, the function also consist of more strategic and specialized roles, including customer partner and service provider, market analyst and planner, sales forecaster, customer behaviour expert, customer-seller team coordinators to mention a few (Meunier-Fitzhugh, et al., 2011). Whatever the role may be, Plank and Dempsey (1980) argues that an effective salesperson will understand the interactive nature and importance of personal selling and how it relates to the organization's objectives and strategies. Furthermore, customers are also becoming more sophisticated, demanding and better-informed (McDonald et al., 2000; Ingram et al., 1992), which increases the likelihood to find sales organizations under intense pressure to meet these expectations. These authors argue that a credible sales function is essential for forming long lasting relationships based on trust in order to handle this difficult challenge. Accompanying this trend is a shift from goods-based marketing theory to a service-based marketing theory (Vargo & Lusch, 2004).

As was mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, most of the theories discussed and mentioned under this subheading (apart from Rackham and DeVincentis, 1999 and Lyus et al., 2011) will not be used or referred to any notable extent when analyzing the empirical findings. Neither will they be used in the discussion and conclusions. This subheading and its text was included to provide a bit of knowledge and history about the role of the sales-function in order for the unaware reader to better understand the sales-function, it's different and unique roles in firms. As it is the sales-function's value-creation abilities and processes and how the corona pandemic possibly has influenced these that is the focus of this study, this section is still relevant to follow along with the main theory of the service-based logic.

2.3 From Goods-dominant logic to Service-based logic

The first scholars studying the concept of marketing inherited a model of exchange from the field of economics. In this model, focus was placed on distribution and exchange of commodities and manufactured products and the functions that were necessary to facilitate this exchange of goods through marketing institutions (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). This exchange of tangible products was considered a dominant goods-logic. According to Vargo and Lusch (2004), it originates from a time when resources were considered to be “stuff” that were both static and fixed, which could be captured and become embedded with value and utility during the manufacturing process. Within this goods-dominant logic, all decisions of the firm were geared toward profit maximization, achieved by increased production efficiency through standardization of products that could be inventoried until the demand from consumers occurred (Meunier-Fitzhugh et al., 2011). Within this school of thought, customers have been seen as passive consumers who are targeted, segmented and marketed to, in order to create financial profit for the firm. Over the last fifty years there have been much discourse about the idea that resources equal only “stuff” that is tangible and static, and that is infused with embedded value. This discourse is further criticizing the view that the producer and/or seller of these resources provide value for their customers (Constantin & Lusch, 1994; Vargo & Lusch, 2004).

With this previous school of thought based on goods-dominant logic, customers constituted an *operand* resource that had to be acted or performed upon to produce an effect. *Operand* resources can be compared and contrasted to *operant* resources, with the latter being defined as resources that produce effects, and they are often invisible and intangible in nature; as they often are core competencies and organizational processes that produce effects (Constantin & Lusch, 1994). Service-based logic instead views customers as *operant* resources, that is not static, but dynamic resources that have the capability to act upon others to produce an effect, and the service-based logic therefore rejects the ideas of “promoting to” and “marketing to” philosophies of goods-dominant logic. Rather, service-based logic embraces the philosophy of “market with”, in which the customer is seen as a partner who can create value in cooperation with the organization, through a dialogue between the two parties (Vargo et al., 2008). Vargo

and Lusch (2004) state that times are changing, with focus shifting away from tangible resources and toward intangible resources (i.e. skills, information and knowledge). Focus is also being directed toward the importance of interactivity, connectivity and long-lasting valuable relationships through dialogue. The shift from goods-dominant logic to service-based logic marks a shift from the focus of mechanics to one on dynamics, where marketing is considered a continuous series of economic and social processes that mostly focuses on operant resources that firms use and strive to make better value propositions than their rivals (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). This subheading serves to provide knowledge about the shift that has taken place in terms of how the term value is both defined and viewed in today's marketing literature and in the service- and retailing landscape. The distinction between and transition from the goods-dominant logic to the new paradigm of service-based logic will not be taken further into the analysis, discussion and conclusions. It is however important to know the difference in how value is conceptualized and created in according to the service-based logic to follow along this thesis with the research purpose and research question in mind.

2.4 Service-based logic

The Service logic paradigm mainly consists of and encompasses two main streams of ideas, namely: Service logic, developed and conceptualized by Grönroos (1982, 2006, 2011) and Service-dominant logic proposed by Vargo and Lusch (2004, 2008). While both perspectives capture and discuss many of the same fundamental concepts, there are a few disagreements on some foundational premises. For this thesis and the purpose presented however, the two perspectives will not be separated or discussed independently, but will instead both be incorporated in the term *service-based logic*, a term proposed by Källström (2019), for simplicity reasons in order to reduce confusion and increase clarity. The essential focal point of service-based logic is that the role of firms is about assisting and supporting their customers value-creation processes in which they are better off than before the interaction, rather than producing and distributing output considered by the goods-dominant logic (Grönroos & Voima, 2013). In line with the “market with” orientation mentioned previously, Grönroos (2008) discuss how customers actively assess and determine the value of goods they purchase on the basis of the performance or utility the good provide *in-use*, which basically

means that it does not matter whether the customers purchase physical goods or services – the customers always acquire service experiences. The term “service”, within service-based logic, is defined as the basic characteristic of all exchange and is therefore considered to encompass experiences that arise from both direct interactions with the service-providers and indirect interactions through and with manufactured goods. (Ballantyne & Varey, 2008).

2.4.1 The concept of value

The concept of value is a very complex concept to comprehend. When asking questions of what value is, how it is created and by whom or where, the real complexity is revealed (Voima et al., 2010). According to previous researchers and literature, value concepts often imply that value is some form of assessment of benefits against sacrifice (Grönroos 2011). Vargo et al., (2008) outline that "value is uniquely and phenomenologically determined by the beneficiary". According to the service-based logic, value is defined as value-in-use which means that firms can, through the market, propose offerings that help customers with value-creation through usage (Voima et al., 2010). From this perspective it is a clear distinction between the company and the customer, and the value-creation is a series of activities performed by the firm (Vargo et al., 2008). From a customer-dominant logic point of view, the value is not always an on-going process. The value can be created consciously or unconsciously through emotional, cognitive and mental processes in which the customer reconstructs an accumulated reality where the real value is embedded in (Voima et al., 2010).

Vargo and Lusch (2011) state that specific parties cannot create value for other parties or individuals but only make offerings with potential value for the customer. Value can be defined through many points of views, and value for one customer can be a vacation and for someone else it is the possibility to meet new people through the vacation that is the true value. For another person value can be perceived already before the vacation when the person is dreaming about the vacation or when organizing the trip. Furthermore, the memories, experiences and new friendships enabled by the vacation

can be the value for a certain customer. For someone else it can be all of the above that is the real value (Grönroos & Voima, 2013). Grönroos (2011) states that for the last centuries, value-in-use was disguised behind the labor-based value beam within the goods-dominant logic paradigm. As mentioned previously in this thesis, it was not until the 1980's that the service logic paradigm started to emerge, that unified various schools of knowledge in major areas (i.e., market orientation, relationship marketing, services marketing etc.).

The concept that value only can be created by the customer when (s)he uses or possesses certain resources including the mental states and experiential benefits during this process, was originally postulated by Vargo and Lusch (2004). This has been a fundamental idea within the discussion of the service-based logic according to Grönroos (2011), as it challenged the foundation of economics, which was to make and distribute things with embedded value to be sold for profit with maximum efficiency to the lowest cost. Moreover, Grönroos and Helle (2010) discuss how providers must adjust their processes and activities to those of the customer. In other words, a provider needs to fully understand how its customers create value in their unique and specific individual contexts, and how the provider could or should provide assistance, and how it could enhance the benefits of their customers. By making relevant adjustments to its activities, resources, competencies, processes and products, the provider is more likely to achieve a match that enables the value creation (through value facilitation) and value co-creation with its customers.

Value through value in-use, according to service-based logic, may be created either in the customer's own sphere, without any direct interaction with the provider, and/or in the joint sphere through direct interactions with the provider. As discussed previously, the firms themselves cannot create value or deliver value, but through direct interactions between the service provider and its customers, the provider may co-create value jointly with its customers, and the providers themselves may receive service in return from their customers that renders value for them. For instance, the customers may provide inputs into product and/or process developments which in turn lead to financial value,

all gained by providing service to their customers in a merged and dialogical process (Grönroos, 2011). When customers create value independently in their own sphere, with only indirect interactions with the firm possible, their value creation through value-in-use is influenced by several factors that are not related to the service-provider, for instance through interactions with family, friends, social media and colleagues (Grönroos & Voima, 2013). Hence, the customers' independent creation of value through value in-use (customer sphere) may derive in both individual or collective phases, where they are influenced by their social networks and environments (Vargo & Lusch, 2008).

Furthermore, Voima et al (2010), state that the customer's experience through value in-use is a *“constantly evolving process that makes value creation a temporally accumulative process emerging through past, present and future (envisioned) experiences”* and that value not only is created in visible physical interactions but can emerge through mental and invisible actions. Following this reasoning, Helkkula et al (2012) also argue that experience through indirect interactions can also be imagined, or gained through word-of-mouth with other peers, or through advertisements and reviews.gained through word-of-mouth with other peers, or through advertisements and reviews.

2.4.2 Value creation & Value co-creation

Value-creation is a very elusive concept and we know very little about when it occurs, what is included or when it ends (Grönroos 2011). Value creation has many different theories and spectra's but according to the service base logic which will act as a foundation for this study, the value creation is a process in which the customer becomes better off in some way (Grönroos 2008), or that it increases the consumers well-being (Vargo et al., 2008). Grönroos (2008) defines the value creation process for the customers as:

Value for customers means that after they have been assisted by a self-service process (cooking a meal or withdrawing cash from an ATM) or a full-service process (eating out at a restaurant or withdrawing cash over the counter in a bank) they are or feel better off than before

There are two sides of the value-creation concept, one side concerns the value for the customer and the other side concerns financial value for the firm (Grönroos & Voima, 2013). According to Grönroos (2011) and the service-based logic, value creation cannot mean anything other than the customer's experiential perception that derives from usage or possession of resources that through the process becomes value-in-use. Conventional theory about value creation puts the firm in charge of the value-creation and that the customer is invited to join as co-creator (Grönroos & Voima, 2013). With the service-based logic point of view it is the customer that is in charge of the value-creation and the firm could be invited to join the value-creation process as co-creator (Grönroos, 2011). To consider both the firm and the customer as value-creators on equal terms would be a faulty statement with the value-in-use concept in mind (Grönroos, 2011). To get a better understanding of the value creation process, the research about service-based logic describes the value creation spheres. The value creation sphere consists of the provider sphere in which the firm produces resources and processes for the customer to use (Grönroos & Voima, 2013). By providing potential value to the customer the firm can be characterized as value-facilitator (Grönroos & Voima 2013). Furthermore, there is the joint sphere in which the customer has a twofold role, both co-producer of resources and processes but also value-creator together with the firm (Grönroos & Voima, 2013). Lastly there is the customer sphere, and this section is closed to the firm and the customer creates value independently through value-in-use without any direct interaction or co-creation with the provider (Grönroos & Voima, 2013). Based on the service logic theory, for the provider to become co-creator, a dialogical process of interaction with the customer must occur in order for the firm to influence the customer's value creation and become co-creator. If there is no direct interaction with the customer then no value co-creation is possible (Grönroos & Voima, 2013).

2.4.3 Interactions

According to the service marketing literature, the interaction concept is of vital (Grönroos, 2011). Recent study has shown that the service interaction between the sales associate and the customer has a positive effect on the customers value-creation process (Hong et al., 2020). Interaction is a mutual process between the firm and the customer in which they both have an effect on each other in regards to business reasons (Grönroos, 2011). Grönroos (2011) and Vargo & Lusch (2004,2008) emphasize the

importance of letting sales-associates be flexible to find the best solutions during the interactions with customers. In line with these arguments are those of Lyus et al. (2016) Other researchers (Morgan et al., 2014) also state that flexible sales-personnel contributes better to the firm's service climate, by being able to act more freely to find solutions to their customers' problems. According to (Beltrán-Martín & Roca-Puig, 2013), by hiring the best suited staff through a proper screening and selection, and administering them with meaningful and versatile tasks as well as providing useful feedback to their personnel and being open to discuss eventual problems can signal important intentions for their customers and the potential value-creation.

According to traditional goods-marketing, there is no specific interaction unless prompted by the customer and without interaction, there is no possibility for any party to influence one another because no service encounters take place (Grönroos, 2011). According to the service-based logic there are however two types of interactions that can occur, indirect interactions and direct interactions. Direct interactions refers to the process between the customer and the firm that occurs simultaneously through a dialogical process. It is usually a coordinated process that refers to the personnel, system and service-landscape (Grönroos & Voima, 2013).

Indirect interactions occur when the customer uses the firms' products or services which is an outcome of the firm's previous service process (Grönroos & Voima, 2013). Indirect interaction can also occur beforehand of direct interactions for example when customers check the firm's website or read brochures with product information or other offerings (Grönroos & Voima, 2013). In a retail environment, the sales performance of the retail associate is impacted by the interactions with customers, through the ability to cross-sell, up-sell and close sales in general (Swimberghe et al., 2014). It is important to understand that interactions do not necessarily mean that the firm automatically gets access to the customers value-creation, it is more a possibility for the firm to influence the customers value-creation. However, the interactions can influence the customer's value-creation in a positive way, a negative way or not at all (Grönroos & Voima, 2013). During the corona pandemic, when firms are struggling to bring in customers

and influence their value creation during the direct interactions compared to normal circumstances, it is more important than ever that the firms both adhere to the restrictions and regulations set by authorities, as well as emphasizing the accessibility and availability of their products and services, and thereby improve the firm's dialogue with their customers during their product promotions (Milakovic, 2021).

2.4.4 Value facilitation

Researchers behind service-based logic argue that customers (users) create value for themselves by integrating resources or processes provided by firms with their own resources or processes independently and without direct contact with the provider, through a self-service process in a closed sphere (Grönroos, 2008, 2011). This central premise within the service-based logic paradigm that firms are unable to create real value themselves constitute a major difference to the prior goods-dominant logic, where value was determined by the producer and embedded in the operand resources (goods) and these were defined by their "exchange-value" (Vargo & Lusch 2004). When value is defined as value in-use, Grönroos (2011) argues that "*the production processes of service-providers, including the research and development, design, manufacturing of resources, and back-office is not part of the value-creation*". These production processes within the firm are necessary and lead to potential value in-use for their customers, but **not** to their customer's value-creation.

Furthermore, the goods, services and information offered by the firm also have to be delivered to their customers either before or during the time of use, and all the processes or resources involved from development to delivery are required to enable the customers real value-creation. In this view, the firm acts as a value-facilitator that offers value propositions to customers it can either accept, reject or not react to. These value propositions are, according to Grönroos and Voima (2013), a promise made by the firm, that the customers of the firm can derive some value from the offers. Within the service-based logic, the operand resources (e.g., specialized knowledge, skills and core-competencies) are paramount to obtain competitive advantage. In order to provide the desired benefits for its customers, the service-provider must develop and coordinate

these processes and resources in a structured manner (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008). Additionally, Grönroos and Voima (2013) stress that many of the firm's production processes that take place in the provider sphere have no impact on the real value-creation process for its customers.

As previously discussed, the firm's processes and resources only lead to the production of potential value, as expected value in-use by the customers. By subscribing to this view, the employees of service-providers might avoid using customer-averse and generic terms like "this firm delivers value to our customers", as it contradicts with the idea that value is created by the customers and not the provider, who instead facilitate value (Grönroos, 2008, 2011). However, the service-provider may, through direct interaction with customers in the joint sphere, actively manage, influence and co-create value with its customers in this sphere. Thus, the service-provider is not restricted to only facilitate value or offer value propositions, but also has an opportunity to access and influence the customers value-creation process in addition.

2.5 Service quality

An important part of the service marketing literature is the aspect of service quality because the consumer can and will evaluate the different resources and activities that is connected to the production-resources and processes when forming an opinion about the service and its quality (Grönroos, 1982). According to Grönroos (1982) the service offering is a key element of the service concept. The service offering is something intangible that has been derived from certain specific elements in order to transform it to a concrete service offering. There are certain elements to consider of importance when it comes to creating this concrete service offering. First of all, accessibility is of importance, and it means that the products or services must be accessible to the customers in an attractive manner. It is the main objective of the firm to be as accessible as possible, but the customers can have an effect on accessibility as well. For instance, customers may cause long queues which can have a negative effect on the service quality in terms of the functional quality. However, a full audience in a concert hall can

have a positive effect on the atmosphere if the hall in turn improves the quality of the concert (Grönroos, 1982). A second element of importance is the *interactive customer/personnel communication* concept, because the customer will in most scenarios, especially in retail, see and meet sales associates in the buyer/seller interaction process (Grönroos 1982). It is of critical importance how the sales associate treats the customers, how they behave and what they say because it will influence the customers view on the service received (Grönroos, 1982).

Gumesson (1991) emphasizes the importance of satisfied employees, and they can become satisfied by being part of the internal production process and viewing themselves as internal customers, and then in turn become part-time marketers for the firm. Gumesson (1991) further emphasizes on the importance for employees to be a part of and embrace the firm's different goals, systems and strategies in order to successfully represent the firm. Furthermore, another aspect that can be used to improve the service quality is *auxiliary services*, also mentioned as "extras". This can for example be the TV in the hotel room or all-inclusive arrangements offered by travel agencies etc. the right auxiliary services can contribute to the customers feeling that the service is outstanding compared to competitors. Auxiliary services are a part of the integrated service offering in the minds of consumers which makes it a competitive advantage and also the reason why firms have to be careful when removing such extras in order to avoid dissatisfaction (Grönroos, 1982).

In retail nowadays it is very common for firms to offer different kinds of return policies, firms return-policy strategies have shown to most likely improve sales, however it can also go the other way and generate more returns (Ertekin et al .,2020). The return policy is another area where the service interaction could play a big role in the customers perception of the service quality. Recent surveys made by researchers showed that among 300 participants who had returned something bought from retail, 62% of the returns was connected to the service interaction with the sales associate, according to the customers in the survey it was more specifically because of improper expectation

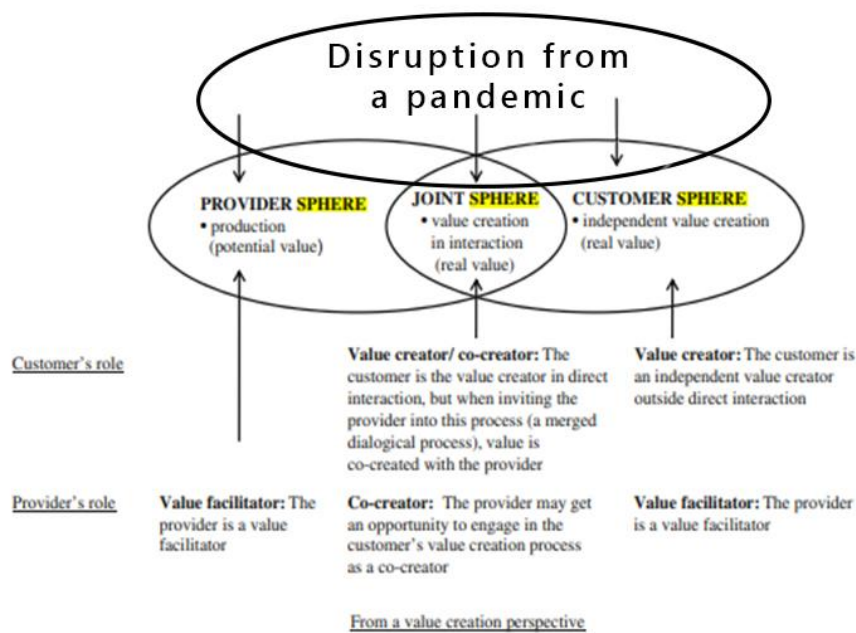
setting, disinformation or providing limited information from the sales associate at time of the purchase that was the reason (Ertekin et al., 2020).

2.6 Conceptual model

To the best of our knowledge there is no past research covering the area of how the corona pandemic has affected the retail-industry in Sweden from the firm’s point of view, and therefore, we have constructed a conceptual model (see figure 1 on the next page), which is based on the service-based logic theory and model by Grönroos and Voima (2013). The model is constructed with the service logic and its different spheres in mind, but our thesis will only explore the provider and joint sphere since the focus was on the sales function and their interactions with customers. The model was used as a guideline to explore if and how the effects of the pandemic has influenced the firm’s possibilities to co-create value with its customers and also how and if it has had any effect on the provider sphere in general.

Figure 1

Conceptual model on potential disruptions stemming from the corona pandemic



Note. Modified conceptual model based on Grönroos and Voima (2013). Retrieved from Grönroos, C., & Voima, P. (2013). Critical service logic: making sense of value creation and co-creation. *Academy of Marketing Science*. 41, 133–150. Page 141.

To the left of this model is the provider sphere, which constitutes the firm and all of its resources and processes. The provider-sphere is something the firm is in control of by acting as value-facilitator and the processes can take both psychical and virtual form (Grönroos & Voima, 2013). In the middle of the model is the joint sphere, and it constitutes the connection between the provider and the customer. The Joint-sphere is focused on the dialogical process between the sales-function and customer's where the service-provider may influence the value-creation process together with the customer and co-create (Grönroos & Voima, 2013). To the right of the model is the customer sphere and this sphere is closed to the firm, and it is the customer's independent value-creation process through value-in use (Grönroos & Voima, 2013). The conceptual model is an illustration of how the different spheres are affected by a pandemic. As shown in the model we have reason to believe that disruption from the pandemic overlap on all spheres.

3. Methodology

In this chapter we discuss the research methodology and the empirical design used in this thesis. It starts with descriptions of the different research philosophies, approaches and strategies, in which we also motivate the choices made for this research. It follows with presentations of data collection, research method, the selection of participants, interviews, analysis of empirical data and concludes with trustworthiness.

3.1 Research philosophy

Research philosophy refers to a set of various beliefs concerning how data should be collected, analyzed and used within the field of scientific research (Bryman & Bell, 2019). Having knowledge of research philosophy could guide researchers towards the optimal choice and most suitable design in relation to the context and purpose of the study. According to Bryman and Bell (2019), there are three different research philosophies which explain how humans view the social world and what underlying assumptions humans have about their physical surroundings. The three research philosophies are realism, positivism and interpretivism. Realism as a research philosophy consists of the belief that phenomena or objects exist regardless of the human mind. Researchers with this philosophy in mind tend to investigate objects or phenomena that affect or impact humans, rather than investigating humans as objects themselves. Positivism advocates for the application of methods used in natural sciences in order to study social reality and all its aspects within business research. Positivism is therefore associated with quantitative data, and the main purpose of theories is to generate hypotheses that can be tested and duplicated in order to generalize and explain results.

Furthermore, the belief is that real knowledge only can be derived from using our senses and science should be value free in all regards, or in other words objective (Bryman & Bell, 2019). Interpretivism on the other hand challenges the idea that researchers can envisage complex phenomena and objects within the social world from an objective position (Denscombe, 2017). For this reason, interpretivism is associated with

qualitative data, with focus on exploration rather than the generalization of objective knowledge and results, and the formulation of definite laws.

Bryman and Bell (2019) further state that researchers advocating for interpretivism highlight the importance of understanding the differences between humans as social actors. They argue that there is a major difference when conducting research with and among humans compared to objects or natural phenomena. Interpretivism as a philosophy therefore focuses on developing knowledge and insight about human's beliefs, experiences and behavior, and more specifically, the "why" and "how" of their social actions. Thus, this philosophy requires a deep understanding of the subjective meaning and nature of the social actions that occur and how humans navigate their surroundings and interpret their experiences (Bryman & Bell, 2019). Since the aim of this study was to explore if and how the value-creation process between the sales function of service providers and its customers was influenced by the corona pandemic, interpretivism was chosen as it was most aligned with our view on knowledge and given the purpose and context of this study. The value-creation between firms and their customers is a social construct, and the people within the sales-function's subjective interpretations and experiences will have different meanings depending on the person. Our emphasis was on understanding the sales-people's individual experiences and perceptions regarding their value-creation and interactions with customers before and during the pandemic.

3.1.1 Research approach

The research approach refers to how the researchers view and use theories to either predict or form explanations to answer research questions. When conducting a research, there are three different research approaches to consider. These are either deductive, inductive or abductive approaches (Denscombe, 2017). Which approach to choose depends on a number of various factors, such as the objective of the research and the research philosophy and design of the research. Bryman and Bell (2019) discuss that the three approaches can be separated on the basis of where the research process begins. Within the deductive approach, theories have a prominent role, both as a starting point and throughout the research (Lind, 2014). Bryman and Bell (2019) state that researchers who use this approach build and base their research on a theoretical ground.

They do so by investigating theories and reviewing existing literature that is deemed to be relevant and meaningful for the research. Following this procedure, hypotheses are formed and tested that originates from the theories studied. This research approach can therefore be described as a theory testing approach (Lind, 2014).

The inductive approach, in contrast to the deductive approach, focuses less on theory usage. Instead, the intention is to develop theories, concepts and models from empirical material. Researchers using this approach start out by gathering empirical data which is then used to generate new theories. Thus, the inductive approach can be described as a theory generating approach.

The last research approach is abductive, and it is described as something in between the deductive and inductive approach. Like the deductive approach, the abductive approach has a relatively clear and relevant theoretical starting point, although it is not always formalized or expressed in specific models, concepts and hypotheses. Similarly, the theory connection is not done after the empirical data has been gathered like with the inductive approach. Instead, the theories used are integrated with the empirical part of the research in order to test, generate and develop prior and new theories altogether (Lind, 2014). The abductive approach is therefore characterized as a theory-developing approach. As the aim of this thesis was to explore how the corona pandemic has influenced the value co-creation process between the sales-function of a service-provider and its customers, the abductive research approach was the most appropriate and therefore used for this thesis. The abductive approach allowed for us to both review and analyse prior relevant theories while also embracing new possible findings or generating theories from the empirical data throughout the entire research.

3.1.2 Research Strategy

Research strategy in business research consists of two distinctive orientations one can choose from, namely *quantitative* and *qualitative*. According to Denscombe (2017), quantitative research uses numbers, gathered from statistics measures and samples, in order to test hypotheses and as a basis for analysis. Qualitative research instead uses words and visual images, by interpreting and reflecting on complex phenomena, as a

basis for analysis. As the purpose of this thesis was to explore if and how the value co-creation process between a service provider and their customers, from a business perspective, had been altered because of the corona pandemic, the qualitative research strategy was applied. The reason for this is that we wanted to explore and get an understanding of the participants' subjective perceptions and experiences. Furthermore, Denscombe (2017) states that qualitative research tends to provide more detailed and sufficient explanations to relatively unexplored research areas, as well permitting more than one explanation to the social phenomena studied. Therefore, qualitative research is argued to be better suited than a qualitative strategy when the objective is to gain a deeper understanding of complex social phenomena (Denscombe, 2017).

3.2 Data Collection Method

The following section will provide the reader with information about how data has been collected. Data collection serves as a basis for any research project regardless of the scope and extent of the research, and there are many methods to consider (Bryman & Bell, 2019). Data can be collected in two ways, either by collecting primary data, or secondary data. What determines if the data is considered primary or secondary is the relationship between the researcher and the data. If a researcher derives data from his or her own conducted interviews, it is considered primary data. When data is collected from the work of other researchers, it is considered secondary data (Bryman & Bell, 2019). For this thesis, the main data we collected was primary data as we conducted a total of six semi-structured interviews and we also constructed and prepared an interview guide ahead of time.

Through the rest of this rest of the chapter we will discuss research method, , participant selection, interview guide and interviews.

3.2.1 Research method

In order to collect the empirical data needed to analyse in order to be able to answer our research question, we used semi-structured interviews. As the purpose of this thesis was to explore if and how the value co-creation process between service-providers and

customers has been altered because of the corona pandemic, it was deemed relevant to conduct semi-structured interviews since that method is linked with both a qualitative and exploratory study (Bryman & Bell, 2019). Additionally, Denscombe (2017) argues that research interviews focus on self-reporting, which consists of what people say that they do, what people say they believe, and the opinions that they say they have. For this reason, he states that interviews are highly appropriate when one wants to get a deeper insight and understanding about people's experiences and perceptions about a certain issue, which is the focus of this thesis. Moreover, he argues that interviews are best suited for when the intention is to explore complex and subtle phenomenon, which includes the opinions, perceptions, feelings and experiences of the respondents. It is also highly appropriate when the focus is on complex questions in how various factors and systems are linked together, and when there are possibilities to reap privileged information of key people who potentially can provide valuable insights based on their experience and position.

There are however, some disadvantages with using interviews in business research. One disadvantage is the "interviewer effect", which can occur to various degrees as the identity of the interviewer can influence the participants and compromise the credibility and honesty of their responses. This issue is more likely to occur when the questions are either sensitive or when they are perceived as too personal for the participants (Denscombe, 2017). As a result of this, the participants could potentially provide answers that they feel are expected of them rather than what they actually think. They could also provide answers that are viewed favourably by others (e.g., the firm or other employees), which is also known as the social desirability (Denscombe, 2017). As a way of overcoming this disadvantage, the decision was made to conduct face-to-face interviews in order to reduce self-representation to make certain that the participants provided open and honest answers. We believed that the advantages outweighed the disadvantages for this thesis.

Semi-structured interviews were therefore conducted in order to get insights in how the people within the sales-function of a service provider perceive that their role and ability to provide service has changed during the corona pandemic. With the method of semi-

structured interviews, the interviewer completes a list of various themes to be dealt with, and questions to be answered. However, Denscombe (2017) argues that compared to structured-interviews, semi-structured interviews allow for the interviewer to be flexible and to not strictly follow the order of the questions. Furthermore, emphasis is on letting the interviewee elaborate on his or her ideas and to speak more in more detail about the themes and questions that the interviewer wishes to discuss. What is more, this method allowed us to control the interviews more freely, and we had the opportunity to direct the discussion into certain new topics that were illuminated during the interview. Lastly, this method allowed us to ask follow-up questions on every question which proved to be very beneficial in our case, since we could go deeper on certain aspects that we found particularly interesting and necessary.

3.2.2 Participant selection

The sales-associates from the firm were chosen from two different retail locations in different shopping malls. We wanted to explore whether the corona pandemic has affected the services-providers ability to co-create value with customers and if or what has changed in the role as value-facilitator offering value-propositions in times of a crisis. We decided to study one of the biggest mobile-phone operators in Sweden with retail locations in almost all major cities. The firm was kept anonymous in order to ensure the best possible findings and to ensure the integrity and safety of the respondents. To get a much broader and accurate report we decided to choose sales-associates from different locations and different environments instead of only choosing one location in a strategic way. We took a *purposive approach* in choosing the stores because one of the stores is much bigger and more centrally situated in a shopping mall whilst the other one is much smaller and situated in a shopping mall a bit outside of the town. The store locations will be anonymous, but to keep track of the stores we call them store A and store B as listed below in *table 1*. Furthermore, we wanted to see if the location of our study would make any difference in our findings but also because it increases the credibility since we retrieve data from two different locations which are quite different atmospherically and geographically.

Table 1

Presentation of Stores

Store	Space (Sqm)	Location	Store appearance
A	70	Centrally located	Newly renovated
B	10	Outskirts of city	Old design

Note. Store-characteristics of the two locations visited.

In order to conduct our research study, data was gathered through interviews with sales-associates and employees with managerial positions in order to answer the research question. Since we wanted to examine how the corona pandemic has affected the sales-function we aimed to find sales-associates who had worked in the firm for at least two years, and in order to receive the most accurate results, the employees had to have experienced the same work prior to the pandemic in order for the research question to be answered. There were a total of four sales-associates working in each retail-location and the rest had not been working in the firm for more than 6 months which was not suitable for our report. To find the right respondents for our report, *purposive sampling* was used (Bryman & Bell, 2018). According to Bryman and Bell (2018) purposive sampling is used when participants are chosen in a strategic way in order to be relevant for the study. *Purposive sampling* cannot be generalized outside of the case which makes some characteristics such as gender, religion or age irrelevant (Bryman & Bell, 2018). *Purposive sampling* is best suited when the researcher has a certain purpose in mind when choosing a sample as in this case where we wanted to examine if and how the corona pandemic had impacted the sales-function. Therefore, in collaboration with the firm and the four sales associates were chosen who had worked there for at least two years, two from each store.

Furthermore, in order to fully investigate the sales-function, we felt it was necessary to also collect data from employees with managerial positions. Even though purposive sampling allows researchers to select the most strategic and advantageous selection of participants, the method may lead to a bias because it is not a random selection. Furthermore, the findings may not be representable for the study population as the researchers may select respondents for the purpose to support their own bias. However,

in qualitative research reports, a representative sample is not necessary because it allows the researcher to explore and focus on smaller samples to generate a more in-depth report and generate ideas for unexplored research areas (Denscombe, 2018). Both store-managers from store A and B were chosen in order to fully understand the impact of the corona pandemic on the sales-function from a hierarchical and organizational point of view. We met all of the respondents face to face and we interviewed them one by one in their office alone in order for them not to be influenced by other employees while answering the questions. The participants selected for the study were between 23-35 years old and the sample consists of four males and two females. The only characteristics included is role, location of store and employment time summarized in *table 2*. In order to ensure anonymity and to facilitate the analysis, the participants were given fictitious names.

Table 2

Presentation of Participants

Name (Fictive)	Role	Store	Experience
Måns	Retail sales-associate	Location B	6 years in the firm
Abbe	Retail sales-associate	Location B	2 years in the firm
Josefin	Retail sales-associate	Location A	3 years in the firm
Oliver	Retail sales-associate	Location A	7 years in the firm
Edvin	Retail store-manager	Location B	6 years in the firm
Sophie	Retail store-manager	Location A	6 years in the firm

Note: Work-role, work-location and work-experience of the six participants.

3.2.3 Interview guide

According to Bryman and Bell (2019), an interview guide consists of a number of questions that the researchers want to discuss with their respondents. Bryman and Bell (2019) further explain that it is highly important that the researchers clarify what information they need to gather in order to be able to answer their research question when structuring the interview guide. It is also discussed how beneficial it is to sort the different questions under different themes that are necessary in order to provide a better

and more coherent answer to the research questions. Additionally, there are several types of questions that should be asked as different questions have different purposes, are related to different concepts and provide varying depths of answers. For instance, questions that introduce the participant to the purpose of the research, and follow-up questions which allow for the participant to expand on his or her thoughts, and by allowing for pauses to signal to the participant that he/she got an opportunity to reflect on and amplify their answers. We also used specified and both direct and indirect questions depending on what we wanted to hopefully retrieve from different questions. The questions (see appendix 1 and 2) were formulated in a way that would help us to answer the research question of this thesis. We tried to not make the questions too specific, and we used a language that was comprehensible and relevant to the people we interviewed. This meant that we did not explicitly explain or describe the service-based logic to the participants, but rather formulated questions that could be understood by the employees and that we then would translate or code into our conceptual model.

We conducted our interview guide with our conceptual model in mind, and the questions formed were sorted under the concepts of the conceptual model (appendix 1 and 2). The themes for the questions consisted of the personal and company-wide *provider sphere* that refers to the value-facilitation concept of the service-based logic, and the personal and company-wide *joint sphere* in which value co-creation between the firm and customer is made possible by interactions in a dialogical process. Furthermore, most questions from both themes had a clear connection to *the disruption sphere* in the conceptual model, either implicitly through comparing their perceptions and experiences from before with how they were during the pandemic, or explicitly through direct questions about the influence of it. Examples of questions that covered the provider's sphere and their value facilitation and how it had been influenced by the pandemic include “*How has your role changed and how has your requirement to deliver changed?*” and “*Do you feel that you promote the same customer value today as before the pandemic?*”.

Examples of questions that cover the joint sphere and the value co-creation concept and how it has been influenced by the pandemic include “*How do you feel that your ability to assist the customer with their needs has changed since the pandemic began?*” and “*How do you as a salesperson feel that your sales pitch and service have changed during the pandemic compared to before?*”.

3.2.4 Interviews

In total, six interviews were conducted in order to gather the data for this thesis. The interviews lasted between twenty-four to thirty minutes. Three interviews were conducted with employees of a larger mobile-operator store located in central Malmö, who had at least two years of employment. Three other interviews were conducted with employees for the smaller store located in the southern outskirts of Malmö, also with a minimum of two years of work experience in that store. As mentioned previously, the minimum of two years of experience was required as they had experience from both before and during the corona pandemic, and they could therefore potentially provide valuable insights for this reason.

Prior to all interviews being conducted, we asked for permission to record the interviews and informed them that the audio-files and transcriptions would be deleted as soon as the thesis got passed. Furthermore, each and every respondent was informed that information concerning age, gender, and name would be anonymous throughout the project. In interviews, it is not only what is being said or mentioned that is important, but nearly equally important is how they say it (Bryman & Bell, 2019). For this reason, six of our interviews were conducted face-to-face in order for us to also take notes on how the body language of the respondents was when answering or discussing different topics.

Bryman and Bell (2019) also state that it could be beneficial to inform the participants about the questions that we wanted to discuss before the actual interview started in order to strengthen the dependability of the study and to prepare the participants slightly for what was to come. We therefore explained what the interview was about, why we were doing this, how the interview was structured and the types of questions we were

going to ask. For all interviews conducted, we were both present and we both had the opportunity to act as a mediator and as an observer. While the mediator asked the questions from the interview guide (see appendix 1-3), the observer would assess the overall development of the interview and keep an eye on the questions covered. The observer was also able to intervene at any point if he felt that an issue needed to be further elaborated on or if the questioning needed a change of direction or if something was missed from the interview guide. Bryman and Bell (2019) suggest that while the use of more than one interviewer led to a more informal atmosphere, there are also disadvantages in terms of costs and resources regarding time in particular. However, we felt that the benefits outweighed the costs for this research.

Bryman and Bell (2019) also argue that the place in which the interviews are conducted sets the base for the quality of the interview. Moreover, they argue that it is beneficial if the interview is conducted at a location where the risk of interruptions and other disruptions like overall noise is as low as possible. All of our interviews had to be conducted in the back-office of the two stores. There were two reasons for this. Firstly, it was not possible to find suitable locations nearby inside these shopping malls, especially considering all restrictions related to the pandemic that were applied during this time. Secondly, we were made aware of the time-limitations that these employees had to abide by, given the lower turnover and customers at this time compared to normal circumstances. This meant that they were allowed to put aside their work responsibilities for no more than thirty minutes in total. This led us to accept the premise of interviewing the participants in their back-office, in order to be sure that the interviews could be completed within the timeframe, and preferably with some margin as well, in order to ask follow-up questions depending on their answers.

Conducting the interviews in the back-offices of the respective stores could have an effect on the answers provided by the participants, particularly in regards to their honesty when answering the questions, as the possibility of them being overheard through the door or walls would most likely influence their answers. This potential issue is related to the trustworthiness, and more specifically the credibility of the study, which is discussed more in-depth further below. However, to minimize this potential effect, we

tested how well one could hear through the door prior to the interviews taking place. We also made sure to ask if there were any sound or camera recordings of the office in order for the participants to feel as relaxed and honest as possible. One downside related to the time-limit that the participants had to abide by was that we as researchers perhaps got a bit stressed too during the interviews by knowing that the time was relatively short, which could have an effect on the quality of the interviews. However, most retail stores and service providers were under-staffed during this time due to losses in turnover and revenue during this pandemic, and the few employees staffed are expected to make sales and generate revenue perhaps more than ever in order for their companies to avoid shutting down. Hence, despite the difficult and peculiar circumstances, we still believe that the interviews and answers provided by the participants were relevant and meaningful.

3.3 Analysis of empirical data

Analysing and interpreting data in qualitative research reports can be very challenging for researchers because qualitative reports usually contain an overflow of data. Furthermore, the interpretation becomes vital as the important and relevant data has to be distinguished which can be difficult (Bryman et al., 2019). According to Bryman et al. (2019) a commonly used way of analysing data is through a *thematic analysis* which is used when topics or themes reoccur over and over in the data which correlates back to the research area. However, just looking for themes reoccurring in the data is an insufficient way of analysing data, the most important part of the *thematic analysis* is for the recurrence in the data to be relevant for the research area (Bryman et al., 2019).

According to Denscombe (2018), the best way to analyse and interpret data is to divide the process into different steps. First step is trying to understand the data better by familiarizing with the data after it has been collected and, in this study, it was done through listening to the recorded interviews and reading the transcripts. The second step is to code the qualitative data which was done first by dividing the empirical data using the labels for the questions that we derived from the conceptual model (see Figure 1) which is the providers sphere and the joint-sphere, hence the customer sphere was left

out due it is not of importance to our report. These two labels from the conceptual model were then used to easier find underlying themes from the data to answer our research question. From these two labels we divided the data into five different main themes such as managerial decisions, unreasonable goal-setting, social distancing, provider-customer frictions and less foot traffic which were recurring themes from the interviews. The themes that were identified was interpreted as disruptions and thereby chosen in the study to answer the research question. In the third step the most important and relevant findings related to the themes were identified as sub-themes to explore if and how the corona pandemic had affected the co-creation process in retail environment from the sales-functions point of view. The themes and sub-themes that were identified were in direct correlation with the covid-19 pandemic, which will be further explained in chapter four.

3.4 Trustworthiness

Regardless of what method is used in a study, Bryman and Bell (2019) argue that it is important to always be critical and reflective of the outcome of the studies. Furthermore, they argue that studies are evaluated differently depending on if the research approach is quantitative or qualitative, and when having a qualitative approach, it is relevant to discuss the trustworthiness of the empirical data that has been gathered. For a qualitative study, Bryman and Bell (2019) and Denscombe (2017) discuss four different criteria that need to be considered to ensure the trustworthiness, namely credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

The first criteria of credibility is arguably the most important criteria to consider, as it relates to how researchers have to prove that the data is both accurate and valid, by linking the findings of the study to the social world. That is to say, the extent to which the findings are understood and accepted by other social beings and how the results are applicable to the social world (Denscombe, 2017). In other words, credibility concerns how the researchers have to prove that the data they present is valid and accurate. For this study, we focused a lot on the sample of respondents, and we required and focused on interviewing sales-associates who had worked in the store for a minimum of two

years in order for them to provide insight on what has changed or been influenced by the pandemic. Furthermore, we chose to interview sales-associates within this organization in two different stores that had different layouts, capabilities and customer-traffic. Lastly, the interviews were conducted at the end of respondents shifts in order for them to perhaps provide better and more accurate answers with their experiences fresh in mind. All of these actions were taken in order to increase the credibility. We also used a process called respondent validation to further increase credibility. This process implied that the respondents would be informed after the interviews regarding the findings we suggested, in order for them to see if these were accurate and that there was a good correspondence to the respondents' perspectives and experiences (Bryman and Bell, 2019). The respondents were thus contacted after the interviews had been conducted where we gave them a brief summary of how we had perceived their data, with the possibility for them to either accept or reject our interpretations, or suggest adjustments.

The second criteria called transferability refers to what extent the findings of a study can be generalized and applicable to other social contexts since qualitative studies tend to be quite narrow (Bryman and Bell 2019). However, as the focus of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding, a small sample of participants were selected based on their relevance for the purpose of this research. Thus, we cannot say that the findings presented by the participants within this mobile-operator organization can be applicable or generalized to other types of sectors of stores, as it may differ greatly.

The third criteria called dependability, refers to if proper procedures were taken in the study, and if the findings would be the same if the study was conducted by other researchers, all other things being equal (Denscombe, 2017). In order to increase the trustworthiness in this regard, Bryman and Bell (2019) state that an "auditing" approach is necessary. By keeping and continuously analysing the empirical material throughout the process, including audio recordings, transcripts, thematic coding and other empirical data related to the study, the objectiveness is increased as other researchers can more easily follow along the various steps and considerations taken. One potential issue that might have influenced the dependability of this research has to do with the fact that all

of the interviews conducted were held in the Swedish language in order to make the participants more comfortable and to provide more extensive and accurate answers. Thereby, as some material had to be translated to English afterwards, this could potentially influence the accuracy a bit, as the translation process could differ depending on the person. The last criteria to consider regarding the trustworthiness called confirmability, refers to the objectiveness of the study, and whether the researchers have acted in good faith, and not let emotions or values influenced or swayed the conduct of the research and the findings derived from it (Bryman & Bell, 2019). To reduce the potential subjective effect, we read each other's transcriptions and coding to see how we both perceived the audio recordings and transcribed material. In our study, we perceived it the same way, and no personal values or beliefs were applied in this present study.

4. Empirical findings and analysis

This chapter covers the empirical findings from our conducted interviews and an analysis based on our conceptual model and theoretical framework. The findings are presented as quotes from the interviews that we connected to the theories of our conceptual model.

The conceptual model shown in Figure 1 on the possible disruption of the corona pandemic on the provider- and joint spheres was used to facilitate the empirical data and analysis of how the value co-creation process between a service provider and its customers has been altered in a mobile-operator context. In relation to the research question stated in chapter 1.4, the thematic-analysis made in the previous chapter was of much help to in order to identify new different themes that were needed to explore how the two different spheres of value-creation have been affected by the corona pandemic and what this means for the service-provider. Moreover, the analysis also helped to identify themes in order to explore if there were any differences in perceptions and experiences between the different sales-employees and store managers regarding the impacts and outcomes of the pandemic regarding the firm. In this chapter, the various themes that surfaced during the thematic analysis are presented and discussed by analysing the answers of the respondents with the service-based-logic concepts and the conceptual model in mind.

4.1 Managerial decisions

Based on the conceptual model, different relevant questions were asked to the respondents to better explore what kind of disruptions the pandemic has brought forward and how it affects the role of sales-function. A recurring theme that was discovered was how different managerial decisions affected the provider sphere during the pandemic and how that in turn affected the value-proposition the sales-staff offered as value-facilitators. Elements in the provider sphere on how the service-provider offers

potential value can be measured through activities performed by the firm that the firm is in charge of, both in physical and virtual form (Grönroos & Voima, 2013). The findings showed that different managerial decisions from upper management were taken during the pandemic that affected the sales-function. According to our findings *new job tasks* without the proper implementation of the decision was a recurring theme. One participant stated:

[...] We have installed a computer where we call out to customers and where we will try to sell to them through phone as well. It has never happened before in the company's history that retail-associates have to cold-call customers from the store. Now we have to sit in the back and dial a certain number of calls a day when there is less traffic. – Participant josse

Regarding these changes in their job-task the same participant further stated:

I do not think it is a good idea at all because we work as retail sales-associates and that is hopefully what we are good at. If I had been good as a telephone salesman, I would not have been here, but somewhere else. I understand that the company tries to do everything they can to increase sales, but I think it's a strange way to keep us going like that, as we do not work in that field. There are still two very different jobs. And if you are not comfortable with calling out and have never done so before, it is something completely new. – Participant josse

Furthermore, As the participant above stated, to not be able to close sales through the phone caused the self-esteem to drop which in turn might affect the interaction with customers on the sales-floor. Another participant stated:

When it comes to the cold-calling business, I see it as an extra task that should be salary negotiated before implementation. It's not really part of your job as a retail-store associate. The sales-associates here should sell to the customers who come into the store. Participant Edvin – Store manager

This statement indicates that these managerial decisions were made from top management hence the store manager did not even approve or believe in the firms' adjustments. As Gummesson (1991) states it is important to have satisfied employees in order for them to be a part of the internal production process and act as part-time marketers. Furthermore Gummesson (1991) states that it is important for employees to be a part of and embrace the firm's different goals, systems and strategies in order to represent the firm in the best way possible. Another participant stated:

We hardly sell anything through phone and that is not the job we are hired to do. We are employed to sell in stores not to be telephone salesmen. - Participant Måns.

These statements indicate that decisions regarding the organization were made with disregard of the outcome of sales or the opinions and feelings of the sales-staff which ultimately affects the staff's job-experience. However, one participant stated:

We have had telephone-sales going on for around a month and a half and it is still new. It may just be a subscription here and there, but that may be what makes us reach our budget. So absolutely, I think it is good with this initiative instead of there being three sales-associates in the store when it is completely empty and no customers on the floor. Participant Sophie – Store manager

Which contradicts the other participant's statements since all the other participants agreed on the same view on the matter of telephone-sales. Another aspect of the *new job tasks* captured through the interviews was related to the restrictions. One participant stated:

Because we have such a small store, it can happen quite quickly that more customers enter than what is allowed. You (I) become a bit like a guard and as there are only two customers at a time we get to have at all times, I have to make sure we adhere to these restrictions. Participant Edvin – Store manager

This statement highlights another *new job task* that has emerged during the pandemic which affects the store-managers which is an interesting aspect on how their job-role has changed due to managerial decisions. Another theme that was discovered during the

interview was the *lack of education & training* in connection to the *new job tasks* implemented through different managerial decisions. When questioned about the new job tasks regarding telephone-sales, one participant stated:

You need training and experience of that. It can also cause your self-esteem to drop and you may miss out on customers out there in the store. We have had these new tasks for around 1-2 months and I have probably sold a single subscription by phone so it has not given any great results in my opinion. - Participant Josse

In regards to the aspect of *lack of education & training* one participant stated:

I think a better education would have been needed for the sales-associates to get a grip on how to actually sell over the phone, it is not the same as selling with the customer in front of you. Had you put a little more time, focus and energy on actually having good training with all sales people and not just with the store managers who will then pass on that education down. I think it would have given a better outcome. Participant Edvin – Store manager

This statement further concurs with the other findings that there are managerial decisions being made without any proper *education or training* for the sales-staff or any proper information on the implementation and strategy of the decisions. To conclude this shows that the effects of different managerial decisions during the pandemic affect the sales-function through new job tasks that are implemented with lack of education & training that indicate a change in the role as value-facilitator which affect the potential value-proposition.

4.2 Unreasonable goal-setting

The sales function within any firm is instrumental in both the formation and implementation of strategic plans (Piercy & Lane, 2005). These strategic plans often revolve around the planning of budgets and other financial goals that the corporate management wishes to be reached. These goals can be either reasonable or unreasonable. Unreasonable goal-setting for the sales-function depending on the situation and environment that firms operate within may lead to increased *stress-levels*

and lesser *motivation* of their employees. We will argue throughout this chapter how these two interrelated psychological mental states, due to the impact of the corona pandemic, may influence the service provider's ability to offer value propositions and co-create value with their customers in the provider sphere and joint sphere, respectively.

During the interviews with both the sales-associates and the store-managers, we asked questions regarding if and how their requirements to deliver results had changed and if and how this had affected their *stress-levels*.

One participant stated:

There has been more sales stress. My requirement to deliver is about the same as before the pandemic, but as there are fewer customers to work on, it has become more stressful – Participant Måns

Another participant expressed similar feelings and stated:

The company has very high demands on us sales-associates. You want to sell a lot and feel a certain peace and joy when you are at work... But it has disappeared because you are stressed about not achieving your goals and to lose your job.

– Participant Oliver

These statements indicate that the demands from higher up regarding the goals for sales, set by the corporate-management in this firm, remained nearly the same despite the difficult circumstances they found themselves in. The four sales-associates that were interviewed had all experienced increased levels of stress due to the unrealistic goals that were still in place. The statements also indicate how the increased levels of stress since and due to the pandemic have influenced their emotions, especially the fear of potentially losing their job if their numbers are not met. We also noticed that two sales-associates got a bit more emotional when answering these types of questions, and it was expressed how the increased stress and anxiety was also extended to their leisure time and affected their everyday lives.

The interviews also revealed how all the sales-associates could afford to lose out on some sales from customers entering their stores before the pandemic compared to now. For instance, they discussed how some particularly annoying and hard-to-sell-to customers would receive less attention and that there would be fewer attempts to try to upsell to these customers compared to the normal or “good customers” that were easy to handle. That is no longer possible according to the participants.

One salesperson participant stated:

Before, you might have been able to afford to lose out on a couple of sales, but you can no longer afford that [...] Every single customer that comes in you have to try to sell to these days and we have never had this amount of pressure on us before - Participant Abbe

This indicates, that the sales-associates experienced increased levels of stress due to the goals being nearly the same as prior to the pandemic, even though they have a much smaller customer traffic we argue affect the levels of service provided. Customers will notice how the sales-associates behave and what they say during the interactions in the joint sphere, and will ultimately influence the customers view on the service perceived. Stressful sales-associates may become more agitated or pushy, and this would in turn influence the social interactions in the joint sphere. As we discussed in chapter 2.2, the sales-associates, through their direct and open dialogue and interaction with customers can be seen as part time marketers, and they are an essential part of the service provider as they make or break an experience for the customer.

Not only did the sales-associates experience increased levels of stress in this case, but the managers too. They were aware and acknowledged how the stress had increased since the pandemic started. When the managers were asked about what problems and worries their employees might have during the pandemic one manager stated:

I think it is the goals that worry them. The firm sets high goals for us. I think the sales-associates probably feel stressed due to that. They probably feel that it is expected a lot of them and that they are not always successful and it becomes a

high pressure for them [...] Less to work on but equally high goals, which puts pressure and stress on us because we have a performance and commission-based work – participant Edvin – Store manager

This statement indicates that the managers who mostly operate in the provider sphere with very limited customer-interactions also experience increased levels of stress and this impacts the firm's ability to offer value propositions as well. Furthermore, it indicates how the manager are aware of the issue, but after answering some other questions, it became clear that they are unable to change the goals set by the higher management, even if this manager stated that he would have if it was possible.

Related to the new job-tasks discussed earlier, regarding how their role had become “*a bit like a guard*”, it was also revealed how the managers had experienced increased stress due to this, as they had to nag a lot on customer's not reading the signs stating the maximum amount of people in the store.

You (I) have also become more stressed due to the fact that I now have to be constantly aware of the amount of people who are in the store at the same time [...] I can never fully relax and focus on my normal tasks in the same way anymore. I always have to keep track of this – participant Sophie – Store manager

This further indicates how the provider's ability to facilitate value has been influenced by the pandemic. The manager's quintessential tasks normally revolve much around making the store run properly and that the processes behind closed doors for the customers are working optimally, however they have to spend more time on acting like a guard which does not contribute to the firm's value facilitation ability.

All in all, the sales-associates and managers experienced different levels of *stress* related to what was expected from them. We argue that this stress stemming from the various consequences and demands put in place since the pandemic started, affects the firm's ability to both facilitate value and especially influence, manage and co-create value with the customers. Stress can impact the levels of *motivation* of sales-associates, and high levels of stress has been shown to be detrimental to the motivation of sales-associates (Khusainova et al, 2019). Sales-associates in today's retail industry have to combine the selling of products with the provision of high-quality customer service as

well as balancing the traditional selling objective with a new focus on building and maintaining relationships with customers.

During the interviews with the sales-associates, they were asked about if and how their motivation to work had changed during the pandemic compared to before, and how this in turn had affected their service provision towards their customers. It was quickly revealed that all participants had experienced lesser motivation, mostly for the same reasons, although there were discrepancies regarding the service provision. One participant stated:

My motivation was much higher before the pandemic and that has had a negative effect on the service I provide to customers. My working day has gone from being motivated to losing motivation quickly. You go to work excited and sometimes it takes maybe three hours before you get the first customer [...] then it is a service-matter you have to solve and no sales [...] then you lose all your motivation and it affects my entire working day – Participant Abbe

Another participant expressed similar opinions regarding their motivation and service provided. The participant stated:

I am always motivated when I go to work but my motivation can drop quickly when I notice that the day will not involve many customer meetings and sales. As for my service (provided), I think the quality drops when my motivation drops [...] Maybe you (I) become a bit unpleasant... Some customers may notice that, especially if it has been a really quiet day and the customer that enters only wants help with a service-matter and no sales... – Participant Josefin

These statements indicate how the lesser motivation influence the service provided by the employees. As the motivation drops the service-provision drops. The lesser motivation has to both to do with the fact that the sales-associates become bored during the days with low customer flow as well as it has to do with the pressure stemming from the stress due to the quota that they have to fulfil every month. When the sales-associates notice that the customer entering is only there for a service-errand they may

sometimes provide worse service. What is interesting is that they cannot possibly know what kind of errand the customer has until the direct interaction actually happens in the joint sphere, and it is likely that the customers will notice how the sales-associates mood change or how they behave during this encounter when the purpose of their visit is revealed. One participant agreed to some extent with how the other employees felt, but expressed that the service provision was relatively the same regardless of if the motivation was lower in general. This participant stated:

My motivation is not the same as before the pandemic started. The service is perhaps affected a little. I try to keep the service at a high level regardless. But we are above all else here a sales company [...] We do not sell as much anymore, so the motivation has dropped of course, but I believe and hope that the service is where it was before – Participant Oliver

This statement perhaps indicates and aligns with the arguments made by Beltrán-Martín and Roca-Puig (2013), whereby they discussed how hiring the best suited staff through a proper screening and selection can signal important intentions for their customers. This difference in perceived service quality provided by the employees indicates how this could potentially matter and influence the value co-creation in the joint sphere. As better or more qualified sales-associates could potentially provide same levels of service despite the difficult circumstances.

All of the sales-associates expressed that their motivation to work had dropped, due to the pandemic, which in turn affected the service provided negatively. According to service-based logic, the service provider has the ability to become co-creator of value within the joint sphere through a merged dialogical process. We argue that the lower motivation and lesser service-quality provided by the sales-associates has had a negative effect on the service provider's ability to co-create value with their customers. *Stress* and *motivation* firstly affect the employees in the provider sphere and then it is also realized in the joint sphere, as the effects of these two psychological mental states can be seen and experienced by the customers. Thus, it overlaps and influences both sphere's value processes.

4.3 Social distancing

To understand whether the interaction or service has been impacted during the pandemic in the joint-sphere, questions regarding how the pandemic has affected their everyday work and what the most difficult struggles in their everyday job-tasks during a pandemic are were asked. A recurring theme was the aspect of *social distancing* but several sub-themes was also extracted from the findings in connection to how social distancing has affected the joint-sphere.

One participant said the following:

My ability to help customers has changed in such a way that you can no longer be as personal with customers as you would like. You do not get the same contact with the customer and most often it can be because they may have a mouth guard and I a protective-visor so we do not see each other's faces and we do not hear each other well enough either. Usually, they are a little further away and the conversation does not feel welcoming at all compared to before the pandemic. - Participant Måns

For value to be determined or assessed by the customer, it must first be experienced or perceived for example through dialogical a process in direct interaction with a sales-associate (Grönroos & Voima, 2013). On the question if the firm still offer the same value-proposition one participant stated:

No, we do not. We cannot be as personal and close with the customers. Customers probably feel that it becomes more rigid, superficial and distanced. Customers can probably experience that the sales-associates may not be as committed and welcoming. - Participant Edvin – Store manager

These statements indicate that the dialogical process between the sales-associate and customer is affected in a negative way due to *less personal contact* with customers, *poor communication* due to mouth-guards and protective-visors which are direct effects

of social distancing. These are elements which affect the service-provider's ability to co-create value through direct interaction. Another participant stated:

I'm quite happy with the personal contact with customers, and I find it more difficult to create and manage in these times. It helps to feel that we are a 5-minute friend as well, that we farm on a more personal level to also know more about what the customer may need and so on. It was easier before, then maybe it's mental in myself too, I do not know. But it feels like everyone has some distance and is not interested in this right now. The personal interaction with the customer is more difficult to create as well. - Participant Oliver

This participant's statement is similar to the previous ones which shows that it is more difficult to create and manage meaningful relationships with the customers in times of a crisis. The participants feel like it is more difficult to befriend customers in light of the social distancing. When asked how and why it is more difficult to establish the close and personal contact with customers in these days the participant further stated:

Yes, but you know we're going to touch their phones and create a relationship with them at the same time, and we're standing with safety-glass between us and we have safety-visors on us and it looks like the world is going under but we'll still try to sell something to them. So, it's a little harder than before. - Participant Oliver

On regards to the safety-visors the sales-associates has to wear another participant stated:

Many people react to the fact that they look very sci-fi as well. I think mouth protection is more common and people have become more aware of it, but visors look very kind of outwardly scary. It's almost like we're in a hospital. - Participant Josse

Both of these statements highlight another theme which has emerged through the findings which is the *atmosphere* of the retail environment. The participants mention

that it looks like the world is going under, that it looks very sci-fi and that it is a hospital feeling. As Grönroos (1982) states, there are different elements to what determines service quality. Firstly, is the *accessibility*, for the products or services to be accessible in an attractive manner which we argue in the light of these findings is not possible due to the change in atmosphere. Secondly, it is the *interactive customer/personnel communication* which refers to how the customer is treated by the sales associate which seems to have changed due to less personal contact and poor communication. Thirdly, it is the service-providers ability to offer *auxiliary services* which we however through the findings haven't found any big changes in. Overall, it may be said that social distancing is a key element affecting the joint sphere through less personal contact, poor communication and through the change in interaction-atmosphere.

4.4 Provider-customer frictions

While some of the restrictions and regulations are implemented and enforced from the government in the form of temporary laws, other regulations are implemented and enforced by the company as a whole. For instance, restrictions regarding the maximum number of customers allowed at any given time is enforced by the government, depending on the size of the store and the current situation with the pandemic. Failing to comply with these restrictions may result in large fines, and the potential social boycott and bad public relations. Other regulations regarding the protective visors were implemented by the firm. When analysing the transcribed interviews, we noticed how the restrictions and regulations had created new frictions between the provider and their customers. We also noticed some patterns in their answers regarding how these restrictions and regulations impact the customer meetings, which is the direct interaction enabled in the joint sphere, which affects the value co-creation. We discovered three themes during the analysis of the interviews, namely, *missed opportunities, irritation and specific errands-customers*. These were all effects of the restrictions and regulations.

When we asked the participants about what type of measures had been taken and what adjustments had been made in the store in reference to the government's nation-wide legislations as well as the company's own regulations one participant stated:

We cannot have as many people in the store anymore. We have a limit of four customers in this store at the same time. In some cases, it may be that we lose some customers, as queues are formed and people move on. – Participant Måns

Another participant stated:

We miss out on some customers if a queue is formed. They may choose to go to another store... I have seen it happening. - Participant Oliver

These statements indicate that the missed opportunities stemming from the restrictions of the maximum number of customers allowed in the store affects the firm. The loss of customers due to the restrictions further increase the stress and reduced motivation as the sales-associates have to perform and deliver despite the pandemic. Watching many customers leaving the formed queues outside their store to potentially visit some of their competitors would logically influence the employee's ability to co-create value with their customers.

Furthermore, it was also discovered through the interviews how the queues caused some customers to become a bit irritated during the encounters when they were allowed in, and that they also had less interest to stay there longer than what they had to, thus also influencing the firm's ability to co-create value in the joint sphere with irritated customers.

A salesperson from the smaller store was a bit critical towards the regulations made by the firm and expressed disappointment and how the irritation could occasionally be experienced by the customers and employees. The participant stated:

We can have a maximum of two customers in the store, it is not followed so well by the customers. It becomes more of a problem when you tell them that we can only have two customers in the store at max. It creates irritation most of the time actually. – Participant Abbe

The manager in the smaller store expressed himself in a similar way and stated:

The restrictions have made it difficult for us. When we have two customers in the store and there are more who want in, we have to ask them to wait outside... they can become irritated. Participant Edvin – Store manager

The irritation and frustration between the employees and customers regarding the maximum number of people allowed in the store and the compulsory demand that the employees use visors must affect and influence the value co-creation in the joint sphere as conceptualized by the service-based logic. Irritated customers who potentially decide to not waste their time in the queues and decide to go to one of this firm's competitors has a detrimental effect on the already low customer flow experienced by the firm. This in turn leads to higher stress levels and worsens the service quality provided.

Apart from being told to wait outside due to the restrictions, some customers also have to be told to split up if they are a family up to a certain amount, thus not breaching the maximum allowed people in the store rule. This could also cause irritation. One participant from the larger store stated:

It is difficult when we get some families entering occasionally. Some may have three-four children, and then it is very difficult to ask them to leave half of the family outside. Most often it is the parents we talk to, and sometimes they may have small kids. A kid who is one year old, is it considered a person that should be included in the count regarding the restriction? This has been a little difficult to limit and tell customers at times – Participant Oliver

The store manager for the smaller store expressed himself similarly and stated:

Some customers come as a whole family and then you also have to ask them to wait or that all the children are not allowed to go in and then they can take it badly sometimes. Participant Edvin – Store manager

We also got to witness a situation like this when we were coming back from a coffee-break in-between the interviews. A family was attempting to enter the larger store that

allows for a maximum of four customers at the same time. This family consisted of two adults and two teenagers. During this time, there were three other customers inside the store, and we saw from a distance how one salesperson was telling the family that only one could enter at the moment. One of the adults entered while the other three people stayed outside and the person allowed inside occasionally went towards the entrance to communicate with the family. The irritation and friction between the firm who are only trying to adhere to the temporary laws and its customers, we argue, is influencing the firm's ability to co-create value with their customers in the joint sphere.

Furthermore, it would appear that most customers who actually bothered to wait in line when queues were starting to form, due to the restrictions, usually had specific errands. They knew what they wanted to be fixed or what to buy, as they had planned it out before visiting the store. When asked about what restrictions and regulations that the firm had to adhere to or had implemented, and how this in turn had affected the sales, one of the store-managers stated:

The spontaneous customers who come in and look around have become fewer and fewer. If these customers see that the store is full, they may not stay and wait outside to enter [...] They move along...perhaps to competitors. The customers who come here with a specific case or problem that needs to be solved, they queue. We lose a lot of sales because these spontaneous visitors do not enter the store to the same extent anymore. When I worked as a salesperson before this pandemic, I could sell a lot to this type of customer, by getting to know them and maybe attract them to our company and our services. Participant Sophie – Store manager

This statement indicates how a reduction of customers who like to spend time in the store browsing, chatting and getting a bit more personal than your specific-errands-customers also affect the sales for the firm. The other store-manager expressed himself almost identically, and we asked a follow-up question to both of these managers why they thought this was the case. They both mentioned how it probably had to do with the fact that the pandemic had impacted private finances and that this in turn would lead to less shopping overall. Those who actually decided to visit the store during the pandemic therefore mostly had a specific errand and no interest in spending more time or money

than necessary. We argue this makes it even more difficult for the firm to co-create value with their customers, as these types of customers are less interested in forming closer relationships. This applies to the sales-associates as well, who are more aware that most of their customers entering are only there for specific errands these days. With the pressure to deliver and reach the goals set by the firm despite the difficult circumstances the sales-associates find themselves in, they may not be as interested as either in forming personal relationships for this reason like they are under normal circumstances. Having analysed this theme regarding the new provider-customer frictions it becomes clear that this influences the value co-creation capabilities for this firm. Furthermore, it is also an antecedent for the themes relating to stress and motivation, as it is under the premise of the restrictions and regulations that the interactions between employees and customers takes place during the pandemic.

4.5 Foot-traffic

A consequence of the pandemic has been customer's higher health concerns which has led to the skyrocket of online shopping (Pantanoa, Pizzi, Scarpi, & Dennis, 2020). For the service-provider to have an opportunity to influence the customers experience in the joint-sphere and get access to the customers value-creation as a co-creator, a direct interaction is needed (Grönroos & Voima, 2013). For direct interactions to take place in a retail environment, customers must visit the store. To better understand how the flow of customer-traffic has changed, questions regarding how the number of customers visiting has changed and how the pandemic has affected their everyday work were asked. Furthermore, questions regarding if and how the sales-associates sales-pitch or service has changed were also asked. A recurring theme in our findings was the difference in *foot-traffic* that has affected the sales-function in many different ways. One participant stated:

Yes, the sales-pitch and service has changed, because you do not have as many customers and the customers who come are usually service matters, i.e., repairs, etc. and then you do not have energy in the same way. If you have sold a lot one day, you can handle these problem cases as well with enthusiasm, but if you have not sold anything and the first customer is a repair case, then you do not have the energy and the service provided becomes worse. - Participant Abbe

This statement indicates that the change in foot-traffic has affected the sales-associates in a negative way. The decline in foot-traffic leads to *less energy* amongst the sales-associates which in turn worsens the service provided. As Grönroos and Voima (2013) states, the interaction must be handled very carefully hence it can become both co-creative or co-destructive. The findings indicate that the decline in foot-traffic affects the sales-associates in a negative way which correlates back to the service being offered. When asked how the pandemic has affected their everyday work another participant stated:

Hadn't said that it has affected me but that it has limited my everyday work. There has been less foot-traffic to the store. Less chance of being able to sell that affects one's salary and one's private finances and of course affects our everyday life. Participant Edvin – Store manager

This statement further indicates that the decline in foot-traffic restricts their everyday work which ultimately affects their *salary* hence they work on commission-based salary which is another important aspect. When asked how the pandemic has affected them mentally another participant stated:

Mentally I would say is the toughest part. Before the pandemic, you knew that there would be a customer rush at 2 pm, a rush at 4 pm, and then a rush at 6 pm. While now you do not know if there will be any people on the whole day. Today it has been very quiet, we have not had anything to do, while on Monday we were full. Customer traffic really varies a lot more now, nowadays you should almost be lucky to have a day where you have a lot to do. In general, it is much calmer and it is difficult mentally, because you come here with certain expectations and hopes of doing a certain job, and then it does not happen because there are hardly any customers who come in. Before that, we knew that we had an average of 280 customers daily to meet and work with and sell to. – Participant Josse.

This further indicates that the loss of customer traffic challenges the sales-associates mentally through certain *expectations* that are not fulfilled. The uncertainty and the loss

of customers have also had a negative effect on the *hopes* of employees which is a direct disruption correlated to the foot-traffic. Another participant stated:

You are used to having a certain standard of selling a certain number of subscriptions and earning a certain amount of money each month. And if you do not have as much to work with, then everything will go downhill. So, it has affected everyone here negatively. – Participant Oliver

The participant agrees with the other participants' view that the effect of less foot-traffic affect them in terms of salary, expectations and hope, which in turn affects everyone negatively. One manager contradicted the other participants and shed some light to something positive in regards of the loss of foot-traffic and stated:

The perception I have gained is that we have more efficient sales in relation to the number of customers who visit us compared to a year ago. Which is interesting in a way. – Participant Sophie - manager.

This indicates that there is a participant that feel the loss of foot-traffic gives the sales-associates more time with each customer and encourages them to close more sales in a more efficient way. To sum up, this shows that the decline in foot-traffic is a problem throughout the study. The huge loss of foot-traffic affects the sales-associates negatively in terms of expectations, hope, less energy and salary which has a negative effect on their everyday life and their service provided as well as their possibility to co-create value with the customer is affected.

5. Discussion

In this chapter, we present the findings that were discovered which are a part of the disruption sphere stemming from the corona pandemic. How these factors influenced either the provider sphere and/or the joint sphere and to what extent they influenced the spheres will be discussed here further.

The previous chapter emphasized on the empirical data that was retrieved from the interviews. This discussion chapter will analyse, interpret and connect the empirical data to the theoretical framework. The research purpose was to explore whether the impact of the covid-19 pandemic had altered the sales-function and sales-associates possibility to co-create value together with customers. Findings showed that there had indeed been disruptions as a direct effect from the covid-19 pandemic that affected the sales-function and sales-associates possibilities to co-create value together with customers which can be seen in Figure 2. To be able to discuss the findings, a connection to the theoretical framework is needed.

The customer is always the creator of value and the service provider can have the opportunity to join the process as co-creator of value and affect the whole process and influence the customers value experienced or perceived (Grönroos 2011). For the service-provider to have the opportunity to co-create value with customers, a direct or indirect interaction is needed (Grönroos & Voima, 2013). According to Grönroos and Voima (2013) the value-creation process can be divided into three specific spheres, the providers sphere where the service provider offer potential value through specific activities in which they act as value-facilitator. The joint-sphere where the interaction between the service-provider and the customer takes place is the service-providers possibility to join the customers value creations process and co-create if handled carefully by the firm (Grönroos & Voima, 2013). The customer-sphere is the customer's independent value-creation process which is closed to the firm and is referred to as the experiential sphere without influence from direct interactions (Grönroos & Voima, 2013). The study focused on the sales-associates and the sales-function perspective

which also reflects the findings which means that the customer-sphere is not taken in to consideration.

The findings showed that there had been disruptions affecting both the provider sphere and the joint-sphere. In the provider sphere the aspect of managerial decisions by top-management such as new job tasks affected the sales-function through improper implementation of the strategy through lack of education & training for the sales-associates. Findings proved that the disruption through new job tasks such as telephone-sales was not appreciated by the sales-associates. A job task that caused lower-self-esteem in case of failure, and failure was a fact the majority of the time. The main intention from the firm is good because it opens for new possibilities to increase sales, however to properly implement the strategy is of importance for the firm to be sure that the firm co-creates value together with customers, and not co-destruct value by adding these new tasks. The firm must be ready to use the direct interaction with customers and do it successfully because it is a platform for co-creation, if used unsuccessfully value-destruction may occur instead of co-creation and the perception of the firm might change negatively (Grönroos & Voima, 2013).

The findings further proved that these direct interactions were not carefully handled which has a negative effect on the value-proposition as well as the interaction with customers. For the sales-associates to be able to join customers in the value-creation process and co-create value, opportunities must arise where the direct interaction takes place (Grönroos 2011). When assigning sales-associates to the office for cold-calling, this opportunity is taken away and the sales-associate misses the chance to co-create value with the customers in the store. Furthermore, if the service-provider creates interaction uninvited by the customer, for example cold-calling them, then there is always a risk for value-destruction because the firm is unaware of the customers mental state or what situation the customer is in (Grönroos & Voima, 2013).

Furthermore, some findings showed how other disruptions from the corona pandemic affected both the provider sphere and subsequently the joint sphere, where the effects would be realized during the direct interactions with customers. According to Vargo et al. (2008), service providers propose value to its customers based on the competences and capabilities of the provider. The internal back-office processes of service providers

are where potential value is created to be offered to customers in form of value propositions (Grönroos, 2011). Goal-setting by firms, which is a back-office process, can be either reasonable or unreasonable depending on what situation or circumstances the firm and market is in. Findings in our case revealed how unreasonable goal-setting led to increased levels of stress and lesser motivation for the sales-associates. This was found to be one disruption in this case that influenced the firm's ability to offer value propositions and co-create value with its customers.

The firm studied in this case had nearly the same goals that the sales-associates had to relate to and achieve as before the pandemic, despite a much lower customer flow. While it on one hand is understandable that the firm keeps holding on to the previous set goals to be reached despite the very different and more difficult circumstances they find themselves in, with the hopes of perhaps outperforming competitors and surviving, it can potentially affect their offered value propositions and the value co-creation in the joint sphere. More stressed and pressured sales-associates who simultaneously have less customers to work with, will not have the same commitment and engagement to form new and meaningful relationships with customers and provide the same level of service as prior to the pandemic.

Findings also demonstrated that all the sales-associates were so stressed about reaching their quota, that when some customers entered with mere service-matters and no interest in purchasing new services or products, some sales-associates lost their motivation. This loss of motivation could also spill over and affect the quality of their service provided to some degree, as the sales-associates could become a bit more unpleasant and lose some of their patience. These sales-associates also revealed how some customers could potentially notice this. This finding coincides with what Grönroos (1982) discussed, in how customers will notice how the sales-associates behave and what they say during the interactions in the joint sphere, and this will ultimately influence the customers view on the service perceived. Findings in this study demonstrated how the unreasonable goal-setting, in the context of the corona pandemic, increased the levels of stress which further lessened the motivation and ultimately, the service provided in the joint sphere.

Unreasonable goal-setting thus constitutes a disruption of the corona pandemic that impact both the provider sphere and its internal processes and resources, and the joint sphere through the dialogical and direct interactions with customers.

The aspect of social distancing was another aspect that was discovered through the findings which affected the joint sphere in several ways. The findings showed that it was difficult for the sales-associates to become personal with the customers, that the communication was affected in a negative way due to mouth-guards and a protective visor due to social distancing. Furthermore, the findings showed that the customers felt a change in atmosphere connected to social distancing which gave the store a hospital feeling or the feeling that the world was going under. Grönroos (1982) points out that it is of importance how the customers are treated by the sales-associates, what the sales-associates say and how they behave in direct interaction with customers, hence it is critical in the way customers perceive the service. Grönroos and Voima (2013) states that the company's value-propositions can be seen as a promise made by the firm that the customers can derive some sort of value from the offers. The firm's specialized knowledge, skills and core competence are of vital importance to gain competitive advantage. Furthermore, the firm's processes and resources has to be developed and coordinated in a structured manner in order to reach the desired benefits required by the customers (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008). The findings showed that the sales-associates skills and core competence and the firm's processes was affected negatively due to the different restrictions such as mouth-guards, social distancing and all other regulations which is all a direct effect due to the covid-19 pandemic.

The service and the service quality of the sales-associates is of vital importance because it can determine future buying behaviour amongst customers (Grönroos 1982). We argue that if the direct interaction becomes less personal and if the communication worsens, the service quality goes down and the chance of value-destruction increases which affects the joint sphere. When it comes to atmospherics Grönroos (1982) states that accessibility is of importance for the customers perception of service quality, the products or services must be accessible in an attractive manner which affect the service quality perceived.

The findings also revealed how the restrictions and regulations, implemented as a response to the corona pandemic by both the government and the firm, had created new frictions between the provider and its customers. As the firm had to adhere to the restrictions about the maximum amount of customers allowed in the store, depending on the sq. feet of the store, this eventually led to missed opportunities, irritation between sales-associates and customers and to the fact that more and more of their customers who decided to visit only had specific errands. The restrictions lead to queues being formed outside the store, which lead to some impatient customers. Furthermore, it also led to customers visiting the firm's competitors instead due to fear of the virus when ques were formed. Moreover, some parties of customers were told to split up as the store cannot risk having more people than what is allowed, and this often led to irritation and ultimately co-destruction of value. Even if the firm is simply adhering to the law, some sales-associates described how they had to make individual decisions occasionally.

As Milaković (2021) states, the role of the sales-associates will have to change in the way that they have to inform and educate their customers on how to acquire the company's products or services during and after a crisis. Milaković (2021) further states that the sales-associates have to emphasize on the accessibility and availability of their products and services to improve the dialogue with their customers when offering value-propositions during a crisis such as the covid-19 pandemic. The findings indicated that the dialogue between the sales-associates had worsened which makes it difficult for the sales-associates to properly inform and educate customers on what value-propositions the company offers. When not being able to accept all customers in the store and being forced to wear protective-visors with a different atmosphere in the store, the possibility to properly inform and educate customers about their value-propositions worsens.

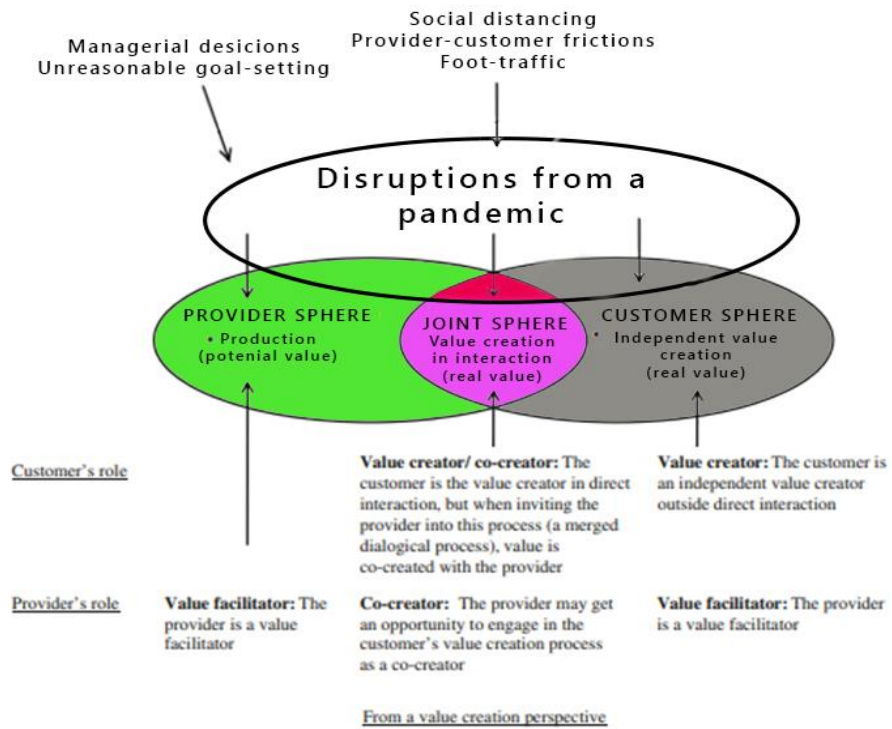
The restrictions also meant that the general customer who bothered to wait in queues had specific errands, which made it difficult for the provider and the sales-associate to upsell to these customers and create deeper relationships with them as they had no

interest to stay there longer than necessary or to purchase additional products or services. These findings suggest that the new frictions between the provider and its customers mostly affect the joint sphere and the firm's ability to co-create value with its customers. As Grönroos and Voima (2013) pointed out, interactions between a provider and its customers affect the experience, and the experience in turn determines the value emerging from the interactions. This in turn may influence how the future service is experienced. Customers who may become irritated or chose to go elsewhere due to the restrictions that the firm adheres to may keep these previous experiences in mind when evaluating the interactions and service quality of the firm.

Lastly, the findings showed that the decline in foot-traffic affected sales-associates in several different ways. Grönroos (1982) states that the sales associates' service-mindedness and customer sensitivity is important for the firm's customer relations. The findings showed that the decline of foot-traffic contributed to the sales-associates having less energy. Furthermore, the findings showed that sales-associates expectations were not met and that their hopes of achieving certain goals were affected negatively due to loss of customers. We argue that the loss of energy, failed expectations and hopes not fulfilled are factors that affect the sales-associates service-quality which in turn affects the direct interactions with customers in the joint-sphere. Moreover, the findings showed that the sales-associates finances were affected due to loss of customers which has had a negative effect on their jobs and everyday life's. Gummesson (1991) states that it is of importance that the sales-associates act as part-time marketers. If their salary is affected, we argue that their job-satisfaction is lowered which can affect their attitude towards the firm and their role as part-time marketers which in turn affects how they treat customers and the service offered is affected negatively.

Figure 2

Updated conceptual model (see Figure 1) including revealed disruptions



Note. The green covers the provider sphere. The purple sphere covers the joint sphere. The red sphere covers the focus of our research. The grey sphere covers the customer sphere and was not part of our research objective.

6. Thesis conclusions

This chapter presents a summary of the thesis. It is followed by a conclusion about how the sales-function of a service provider has been impacted by the corona-pandemic and how this in turn has influenced the firm's ability to offer value propositions and co-create value with their customers. Thereafter, theoretical and practical contributions are presented. Lastly, this chapter concludes with limitations of the thesis and suggestions for future research.

6.1 Summary of the thesis

At the end of 2019 the world was hit by a contagious virus that in time reached pandemic levels and subsequently impacted the entire world. In Sweden, the amount of people who were made redundant during the corona pandemic exceeds all previous global crises (Johansson & Selberg, 2020). Various restrictions and regulations put in place and enforced on national governmental level severely limited physical retail-shopping in terms of availability. Additionally, some researchers (Hofmann et al, 2021) also argue that consumer behavior has changed since the pandemic started, as there have been indications that many consumers have become more goal-oriented with their shopping in order to minimize their exposure to the virus, leading to both less time and money spent on shopping. Firms and their respective employees with provision-based jobs in a physical retail and service setting are under more pressure than ever to perform and close sales with reduced numbers of customers in order to not let the business shut down and lose their jobs (Fernandes, 2020). This growing pressure on sales-associates to perform under these difficult circumstances, as well as how and why the value-creation processes possibly has changed due to the corona pandemic sparked the idea for this dissertation to explore. The term value and discourse about what value is and where, how and by whom it is created by between firms and customers has been under much research in marketing in the last couple of decades. Prominent and well-established research and theory on this matter has culminated in a new marketing paradigm called service-logic. This service-logic discuss the importance of the social interaction between customers and sales personnel where both actors play an active role

in the value-creation process, in which both parties affect the other part. The service-logic and its' concepts and premises regarding the term value, however, has been discussed and applied to normal economic circumstances. Thus, the value-creation theories of service-logic have not been studied and scrutinized during a world-spanning crisis that the corona pandemic has caused for service-providers and retailing. Especially not considering how the corona pandemic has limited the availability and quality of social interactions between sales-associates and customers. The purpose of this study was therefore an attempt to investigate how the sales function and sales associates of service-providers' work have been impacted by the corona pandemic and how their ability to offer value propositions to and co-create value with their customers have been influenced.

To explore this area of research, we conducted a literature review based on previous research on service-logic as well as previous, albeit limited, research about the corona pandemic which resulted in a theoretical framework. With support from the theoretical framework, a conceptual model was constructed, which was used as a guideline and tool throughout the study. Through a qualitative approach, we gathered empirical data through six interviews with sales-associates and store-managers that had provision-based work in physical stores, in order to obtain relevant data to gain knowledge and insight about the unexplored gap of research that formed our study. The participants were selected based on purpose as we handpicked individuals that had been employed by the firm since before the pandemic started, thus having experience both prior and during the pandemic which was necessary for this study. We prepared separate interview-guides for the sales-associates and store-managers based on both their work-experience during Covid-19 and if and how there had been new difficulties for them to perform and engage with customers. With an inductive approach, we conducted a thematic analysis to analyse the empirical data gathered in order to search for and find relevant themes and patterns. This allowed us to explore if and how there had been any disruptions on the sales-function and the sales-associates abilities to offer value propositions and co-create value together with their customers. Our conclusions are presented in the section below.

6.2 Conclusion

The results of this dissertation suggest that the impact of covid-19 has had a significant effect on the sale-function and the sales-associates ability to co-create value together with customers. The concepts of service-based logic are widely known and have paved the way for most of the service and market theory today but it has only been applied during normal circumstances. The theory has to the best of our knowledge never been tested or scrutinized in as difficult times as the corona pandemic imposed. The study resulted in five main findings which were later categorized into themes and sub-themes to answer the research question. The main findings discovered were managerial decisions, unreasonable goal-setting, social distancing, provider-customer frictions and foot-traffic as recurring themes from the interviews.

Managerial decisions that were implemented by top-management affected the sales-associates through new job-tasks such as telemarketing without providing them with any proper training or education. The lack of education & training in regards to the new job-tasks contributed to less sales being closed behind the phone and less time on the sales-floor. This resulted in a drop in self-esteem amongst the employees which led to dissatisfied sales-associates. Furthermore, the restrictions applied both by the government and the firm forced the sales-associates to do other new job-tasks such as keeping an eye on how many customers that enter the store to maintain the allowed amount inside the store, almost like a guard which also leaves less time and focus for sales. Gummesson (1991) states the importance of having satisfied employees who embrace the firm's different goals, systems and strategies in order to represent the firm in the best way possible. The managerial decisions ultimately affected the sales-associates mental state which we argue affect the dialogue and interaction between the sales-associates and customers and the risk for value-destruction is imminent. As Grönroos and Voima (2013) states, the interaction between the two parties must be handled carefully because it can be both co-creative or co-destructive.

Another major finding was unreasonable goal-setting. The pressure from top-management by setting unreasonable goals affected the sales-function through lower motivation and higher stress-levels which impacted the sales-associates and managers'

mental states negatively. The firm's goal-setting remained nearly the same despite the difficult circumstances of covid-19 which we claim influence the service provider's ability to offer value propositions and co-create value together with their customers.

Another major theme from the findings which had a great impact on the interactions with customers was the aspect of social distancing which is a direct effect from the covid-19 pandemic. The results of social distancing were that mouth-guards and protective visors were being used when visiting the service-provider which decreased the quality of communication between the sales-associates and customers. Social distancing has led to less personal contact and poor communication between sales-associates and customers, as well as a change in store atmosphere. The corona pandemic had affected the store environment by a change of atmosphere because of the hospital-like feeling because of all the safety measures which may have an effect on the customers' visit in the store and the service perceived. As Grönroos (1982) stated it is of high importance that the products and services of the firm are accessible in an attractive manner. Grönroos (1982) further states that interactive customer/personnel communication is of importance which refers to the dialogue between the sales-associate and the customer and how the customer is treated which has changed due to less personal contact and poor communication as a direct effect of the covid-19 pandemic. Social distancing was a recurring and major finding which ultimately affected the possibility to co-create value with customers because it affects the direct interaction in the retail-store.

The fourth major finding relates to new provider-customer frictions, which lead to missed opportunities for the firm, irritation on both sides and specific errands-customers who make up for a larger share of their customer base since the pandemic started. Provider-customer frictions affected the sales-function due to the many restrictions that the firm had to adhere to. Restrictions regarding the maximum number of customers allowed at any given time is enforced by the government, and the sales-associates had experienced how this in turn led to missed opportunities for the firm, as many customers would not bother to wait in queues to enter. The queues also caused some customers to become a bit irritated when they were allowed inside the store, as they

were told to split up if they were more than a certain number of people, in order for the firm to not breach the maximum allowed people in the store rule. The firm also experienced a loss in spontaneous customers, and had noted that a larger share of their customer base, since the restrictions were put in place, consisted of specific-errands customers. These customers had no interest in staying in the store longer than required which made it difficult for the sales-associates to upsell which has a negative effect on the interaction between the parties and affected the sales-associates possibility to co-create value.

In conclusion, the final major finding was related to the reduction in foot-traffic, which led to sales-associates having *less energy*, as their *expectations were not being met* and their *hopes not being fulfilled* while also being worried about their *income* as they have provision-based work. These findings had a negative effect on the sales-associates attitude towards their job which is providing service to customers. Another finding extracted from the study was how the loss in foot-traffic had affected the sales-associates income negatively which spilled over in the mental state affecting their everyday lives since they were used to certain standards. In conclusion, it is important what kind of actions a service-provider takes in order to ensure that the value-creation with customers is not affected negatively. If the firm enforces the wrong strategy without the right implementation, the risk for value destruction is great. Furthermore, the firm risks creating a negative attitude among the sales-associates by their actions taken, since the coherence between the decisions made and their implementation of the decisions are too weak.

6.3 Theoretical contribution

Previous research has focused on the roles of the service provider and the customer and how the value-creation process can be defined through specific frameworks such as the provider, joint and customer sphere (Grönroos & Voima, 2013). However, to the best of our knowledge, previous research has not explored the aspects of value-creation in the service industry during a crisis. This dissertation contributes to new insights into how the role of the sales-function a retail-environment has been affected by a crisis. The study provides a deeper understanding on what factors that affect the sales-function and the sales-associates possibilities to co-create value together with customers during a

pandemic. The study also extends the theoretical framework with new elements inspired by the conceptual model by Grönroos and Voima (2013) with a new elaborated conceptual model (see figure 2). Based on the findings, this study introduces elements that affect the value-creation process such as managerial decisions, unreasonable goal-setting, social distancing, provider-customer frictions and foot-traffic.

6.4 Practical contribution

This study contributes to new practical findings for firms operating in the retail-sector on what kind of negative effects that can emerge during a pandemic and how it affects the sales-associates role and how that in turn affects the value-creation process. An important aspect of the service-marketing literature is the service quality provided by the sales-associates. Furthermore, as Grönroos (1982) states, for a firm to have satisfied customers, they must also have satisfied employees. Grönroos (1982) further states that because the sales-associates often are the first level of contact for most customers, the sales-associates must be customer-conscious and sales-minded. To be able to handle this crisis or any future crisis the service-provider must be careful in what decisions are made and it is of importance that the strategies of the firms are clearly implemented in order to avoid value-destruction during interactions and in order to have satisfied employees. As Rackham and DeVincentis (1999) states, it is important for the firm to be adaptable during urgent changes, which the covid-19 pandemic most certainly qualifies as. The theoretical framework of service logic has been applied under the circumstances of the pandemic and has proven to work in order to analyze the value-creation process and how it has been affected.

When sales-associates are being directed to new job tasks such as cold-calling the firm takes away the possibility for the employees to co-create value and interact with the customers in the store. Furthermore, as Grönroos and Voima (2013) states, if the service-provider creates interaction uninvited by the customer, the risk for value-destruction increases because the service-provider is negligent of the customer's mental state at that moment. If the service-provider still decides on implementing new job

tasks, the findings show that proper education & training is required. Furthermore, for the service-provider to avoid dissatisfied employees much work has to be done in regards to the sales-associates mental state during a crisis because it affects the interaction with customers, and in turn the value-creation processes. Moreover, Lyus et al., (2011) emphasizes on the dyadic relationship and interdependence between the marketing function and sales function which he refers to as the loop metaphor. The marketing function or in this case top-management suggests and provides strategies that the sales function needs to implement to ensure that changes happen. The sales function in turn reports the findings and results back to the marketing function, for analysis so that they can formulate new strategies. Our study suggests that this loop-function between the marketing function and sales-function is missing, as it seems to be only a one-way stream from top-management down with disregard for the outcome which can lead to value-destruction in a retail-setting.

6.5 Limitations and future research

This study was, like all other research, not without its limitations. It was mainly based on the newer service-based logic paradigm that challenges the previously dominant goods logic regarding how and where value is created. Although the newer service-based logic paradigm is well researched and respected as a new dominant logic in both business and public sectors in the 21st century, other established theories could perhaps have been used in conjunction with this theory to create a synthesis. Other theories could also be used individually in new research to compare the findings and how their respective and specific concepts are affected by a pandemic or other future crisis. As the focus of this thesis was on the perspective and experiences of the service provider in the context of the disruptions from the corona pandemic, it explored two of the three spheres-components of the service-based logic model, namely the provider sphere and joint sphere. The customer sphere and perspective, as well as the customer's role in the joint sphere was excluded which is a limitation on the overall assessment and review of the service-based logic made in this study. One limitation concern how this study was conducted in the midst of an ongoing pandemic, and while finishing this thesis more and more people have received vaccinations in an exponentially accelerating rate. This

in turn will most likely lead to looser restrictions and regulations as time goes by, leading to potentially more normal economic circumstances, even if some effects may linger on for longer periods of time. Regardless of this, the limitation is that future research on this topic will most likely have less information to work with and gather as memories and experiences may get lost along the way and due to the fact that it will be purely retrospective.

Another limitation concerns how the study was conducted in a Swedish context which may differ greatly to the situations experienced in other countries. Due a wide array of factors, including the economic situation in the country prior to the pandemic, the restrictions and laws implemented during the pandemic, and general control of the spreading of the virus and following consequences will perhaps reach other conclusions or find other disruptions affecting the service-based logic concepts depending on the country in which the study is conducted. Moreover, other sectors or lines of business would also be of much interest for future research, as there may be significant differences depending on the industry studied.

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Appendix 1. Interview Guide – Sales associates

What does a typical working day look like for you?

What are your most important tasks?

How has the pandemic affected your work day?

What types of measures / adaptations has the company made in your store, both according to restrictions but also the public health authority's recommendations, but above all on its own initiative?

What do you think of these adaptations?

How do you feel the adaptations work?

What does a typical customer visit look like? And / or How is your type customer in general?

How do you feel that your ability to assist the customer with their needs has changed since the pandemic began?

How do you as a salesperson feel that your sales pitch and service have changed during the pandemic compared to before?

How do you feel that customer traffic has been affected since Corona struck?

How has your role changed and how has your requirement to deliver changed?

How has this affected you mentally?

How do you feel the relationships with your colleagues have changed since the pandemic began?

How do you experience the meetings with customers who wear mouth guards?

Do you feel that customers feel uncomfortable about something with their visit in pandemic times? Do you want to share any situations or experiences where customers have become uncomfortable related to pandemics?

What reactions do you get to your protective visor and protective glass in front of the cash register when you work?

What is the hardest thing for you as a salesperson when you try to sell to customers now during the pandemic?

When it comes to your motivation to work, it is the same as before the pandemic and how does it affect the service you provide to customers

Appendix 2. Interview guide – Store manager

What does a typical working day look like for you?

What are your most important tasks?

How has the pandemic affected your work day?

What types of measures or adaptations has the company made in your store, both according to restrictions but also the public health authority's recommendations, but above all on its own initiative?

What do you think of these adaptations?

How do you feel the adaptations work?

How has your role changed and how has your requirement to deliver changed?

What problems and worries do your employees have now during the pandemic?

What initiative has the company taken to increase sales and how has it gone?

How have routines changed when it comes to physical meetings with employees and has it affected you or the employees?

What has the company done to prevent the spread of infection and in what way has it impacted sales?

Do you feel that you deliver the same customer value today as before the pandemic? (why / why not?)

Do you feel that there have been difficulties with stock and delivery from the suppliers and how has this affected your sales?

How has the set of requirements changed for your sub-employees since the pandemic came?