PUBLICATIONS OF
THE UNIVERSITY OF EASTERN FINLAND

Dissertations in Social Sciences and Business Studies

UNIVERSITY OF EASTERN FINLAND

JONNA KOPONEN

Sales communication competence in modern B2B relationship selling

UNIVERSITY OF
EASTERN FINLAND

PUBLICATIONS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF EASTERN FINLAND
DISSERTATIONS IN SOCIAL SCIENCES AND
BUSINESS STUDIES

N:o 260

Jonna Koponen

SALES COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE IN MODERN B2B RELATIONSHIP SELLING

ACADEMIC DISSERTATION

To be presented by the permission of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Business Studies for public examination in the Auditorium MS300 in Medistudia Building at the University of Eastern Finland, Kuopio, on December, 3, 2021, at 12 o'clock.

University of Eastern Finland
Faculty of Social Sciences and Business Studies
Joensuu 2021

PunaMusta oy
Joensuu, 2021
Editor in-Chief/ Editor: Markus Mättö
Sales: University of Eastern Finland Library
ISBN: 978-952-61-4382-8 (print/nid.)
ISBN: 978-952-61-4383-5 (PDF)
ISSNL: 1798-5749
ISSN: 1798-5749
ISSN: 1798-5757 (PDF)

Author’s address:	UEF Business School University of Eastern Finland KUOPIO FINLAND
Doctoral programme:	Doctoral Programme in Business Studies
Supervisors:	Professor Anu Puusa UEF Business School University of Eastern Finland JOENSUU FINLAND
	Professor Raija Komppula UEF Business School University of Eastern Finland JOENSUU FINLAND
Reviewers:	Professor Pauliina Ulkuniemi Department of Business University of Oulu OULU FINLAND
	Professor Kaj Storbacka Department of Business Hanken School of Economics HELSINKI FINLAND
Opponent:	Professor Pauliina Ulkuniemi Department of Business University of Oulu OULU FINLAND

Koponen, Jonna
Sales communication competence in modern B2B relationship selling.
Joensuu: Itä-Suomen yliopisto, 2021
Publications of the University of Eastern Finland
Dissertations in Social Sciences and Business Studies; 260
ISBN: 978-952-61-4382-8 (print)
ISSNL: 1798-5749
ISSN: 1798-5749
ISBN: 978-952-61-4383-5 (PDF)
ISSN: 1798-5757 (PDF)

ABSTRACT

Business-to-business (B2B) relationship selling is now at a crossroads, as sales move towards digital platforms. The fast advancement of new technologies, expansion of e-commerce, and customers' growing expectations hinder opportunities for long-term customer relationship building. Furthermore, the recent global COVID-19 pandemic has rapidly forced companies and organizations to change their working habits and move their businesses and customer interactions online. Sales interactions, and the customer relationship development process tend to occur increasingly online. Therefore, it is important to investigate what sales communication competence salespeople need to communicate in a competent manner with their customers in modern B2B relationship selling environment.

This dissertation focuses on sales communication competence in a modern B2B relationship selling context. Relationship selling is a process that focuses on securing, building, and maintaining long-term profitable customer relationships. Furthermore, the modern B2B relationship selling environment is characterized by rapid technological progress and digitalization, global competition, active customer roles, the need to build and maintain long-term customer relationships, the need to build solutions and bring value to the customer and the need to communicate with customers via multiple communication channels. All these changes in the B2B relationship

environment demand a new understanding of sales communication competence of salespeople.

The dissertation consists of three articles. The first article investigates how is the interpersonal communication competence of salespeople constructed in international B2B relationship selling context in which salespeople create complex solutions for their customers. The qualitative data includes expert interviews (N = 39). The transcribed interviews were analysed using abductive logic applying a theory-driven theme analysis.

The second article focuses on digital sales communication and investigates social presence in B2B chat conversations between salespeople and customers. Online chat conversations (N = 157) were analysed with a theory-driven theme analysis.

The third article focuses on long-term customer relationships and investigates the long-term development of B2B customer relationships at the interpersonal level from the perspective of social penetration theory focusing on the salesperson's self-disclosure and relational cost and reward evaluation. The data consists of expert interviews (N = 47) with sales professionals. The transcribed interviews were analysed using a theme analysis.

The findings of the first article conceptualize a new theoretical construct, namely sales communication competence, which consists of four dimensions. The dimensions are (1) the behavioural communication dimension, (2) cognitive communication dimension (3), affective communication dimension, and (4) sales acumen. The findings provide an in-depth understanding of the content of the behavioural, affective and cognitive communication dimension as well as sales acumen.

The findings of the second article provide an understanding of interpersonal sales communication and social presence in a digital sales communication context. The findings indicate that social presence varies depending on the stage of the customer relationship. In the data, customers also had different purposes for online chat depending on the stage of their customer relationship.

Findings of the third article reveal that B2B sales communication occurs via multiple communication channels (e.g., social media, email, phone, in-person face-to-face meetings, video calls, videoconferences). The findings indicate

that long-term B2B customer relationships evolve at the interpersonal level through a process of continuous relational cost and reward evaluation and self-disclosure. As a result, three relationship phases were found: becoming business partners, collaborative partners, and collaborative and personal partners. The reward evaluations progress from being business-related to including ever more relational benefits. Disclosure progresses from general business disclosure and general self-disclosure; to strategic business disclosure and personal life self-disclosure; to synergistic business disclosure and private self-disclosure. Mutual understanding and reciprocal self-disclosure were needed between partners to deepen the relationship.

The most important theoretical contribution of this dissertation is a new theoretical construct, *sales communication competence in a modern B2B relationship selling context*, which is produced as a result of all three articles. The managerial implications are connected to sales training and education, digital sales communication, and sales management.

Keywords: business-to-business relationship selling, sales communication competence, social presence, social penetration theory

Koponen, Jonna
Myynnin vuorovaikutusosaaminen modernissa yritysten välisessä suhdemyynnissä.
Joensuu: Itä-Suomen yliopisto, 2021
Publications of the University of Eastern Finland
Dissertations in Social Sciences and Business Studies; 260
ISBN: 978-952-61-4382-8 (print)
ISSNL: 1798-5749
ISSN: 1798-5749
ISBN: 978-952-61-4383-5 (PDF)
ISSN: 1798-5757 (PDF)

TIIVISTELMÄ

Tässä väitöskirjassa tutkitaan myynnin vuorovaikutusosaamista modernin yritysten välisen suhdemyynnin kontekstissa. Tutkimuksen aihe on erittäin ajankohtainen, sillä suhdemyynnin kenttä on muuttunut voimakkaasti digitalisaation ja verkkokaupan lisääntymisen myötä. Myös globaali koronaviruspandemia on muuttanut yritysten välistä suhdemyyntiä yhä virtuaalisemmaksi. Asiakassuhteet rakentuvat entisestä kasvokkaisviestintään ja fyysisiin tapaamisiin perustuvasta vuorovaikutuksesta poiketen verkkovälitteisen viestinnän kautta tai yhdistelemällä kasvokkaista ja verkkovälitteistä viestintää eri kanavissa. Tämä asettaa uusia osaamisvaatimuksia myyjille sekä myynti- ja markkinointijohtajille. Suhdemyynnin tutkimuskentällä on kuitenkin tarkasteltu vielä vähän myyjien vuorovaikutusosaamisen tarpeiden muutoksia, kun asiakasvuorovaikutus tapahtuu verkkovälitteisesti ja kun asiakassuhteita rakennetaan monikanavaisesti yhdistelemällä kasvokkaisia fyysisiä tapaamisia ja verkkovälitteistä viestintää.

Väitöskirjatutkimus koostuu kolmesta artikkelista ja niiden yhteenvedosta. Ensimmäisen artikkelin tavoitteena on tuottaa syvällinen ymmärrys siitä, kuinka myynnin vuorovaikutusosaaminen voidaan määritellä yritysten välisen suhdemyynnin kontekstissa. Toisessa artikkelissa tavoitteena on ymmärtää sosiaalisen läsnäolon merkitystä online chat keskusteluissa, jolloin

myyntivuorovaikutukseen osallistuu myyjiä ja eri asiakassuhteen vaiheessa olevia yritysasiakkaita. Kolmannen artikkelin tavoitteena on ymmärtää ja kuvata asiakassuhteiden kehittymistä sosiaalisen läpäisyn teorian näkökulmasta keskittyen erityisesti itsestäkertomiseen ja asiakassuhteeseen liittyvään hyöty- ja haitta-arvioon. Kolmannessa artikkelissa myyjät ja asiakkaat ovat vuorovaikutuksessa useiden erilaisten viestintäkanavien kautta asiakassuhteen edetessä.

Tutkimus on luonteeltaan laadullinen. Tutkimusmenetelminä käytetään puolistrukturoituja kansainvälisten myyjien, myyntijohtajien ja kansainvälisten myynnin opettajien asiantuntijahaastatteluja (N = 39), case-yrityksen autenttisia myyjien ja asiakkaiden välisiä online chat-keskusteluja (N = 157), case-yrityksen CRM-aineistoa sekä yritysten välisestä kaupasta vastaavien myyjien ja myyntijohtajien puolistrukturoituja haastatteluja (N = 47). Analyysimenetelminä kahdessa osatutkimuksessa käytetään teoriasidonnaista teema-analyysiä. Yhdessä osatutkimuksessa käytetään merkityksiin keskittyvää teema-analyysiä.

Väitöskirja tuottaa uutta teoreettista tietoa ja ymmärrystä yritysten välisen myynnin vuorovaikutuksesta ja myynnin vuorovaikutusosaamisesta modernin yritysten välisen suhdemyynnin kontekstissa. Ensimmäisen artikkelin keskeinen tulos on myynnin vuorovaikutusosaamisen käsitteellistäminen. Toisen artikkelin tulokset auttavat ymmärtämään sosiaalista läsnäoloa online chat keskusteluissa ja tulosten mukaan myyntivuorovaikutus on luonteeltaan erilaista riippuen asiakassuhteen vaiheesta. Tulokset laajentavat ymmärrystä myynnin vuorovaikutusosaamisen tarpeista verkkovälitteisessä vuorovaikutuksessa. Kolmannen artikkelin tulokset osoittavat, että pitkäaikaiset yritysten väliset asiakassuhteet kehittyvät henkilökohtaisella tasolla kolmen vaiheen kautta. Myyntivuorovaikutus tapahtuu monikanavaisesti ja se muuttuu itsestäkertomisen myötä henkilökohtaisemmaksi ja intiimimmäksi asiakassuhteen syventyessä henkilökohtaisella tasolla. Myös suhteeseen liittyvien hyöty- ja haitta-arvioiden luonne muuttuu. Artikkelin tulokset syventävät ymmärrystä myynnin vuorovaikutusosaamisen tarpeista erityisesti pitkäaikaisten asiakassuhteiden ylläpitämisen näkökulmasta.

Väitöskirjatutkimuksen teoreettisena johtopäätöksenä luodaan uusi kokonaisvaltainen ymmärrys myynnin vuorovaikutusosaamisesta modernissa yritysten välisessä suhdemyynnissä. Tulokset auttavat myös ymmärtämään paremmin yritysten välisten asiakasuhteiden kehittymistä ja ylläpitämistä interpersonaalisella tasolla: yritykset voivat luoda itselleen tarkoituksenmukaisen ja tehokkaan interpersonaalisen tason asiakassuhteiden johtamisstrategian. Tulokset auttavat kehittämään myynnin vuorovaikutuskoulutusta, ammatissa toimivien myyjien täydennyskoulutusta sekä myynti- ja markkinointijohtajien koulutusta. Tuloksia voidaan soveltaa myös kuluttajamyynnin kontekstiin.

Avainsanat*:* Moderni yritysten välinen suhdemyynti, myynnin vuorovaikutusosaaminen, sosiaalinen läsnäolo, sosiaalisen läpäisyn teoria

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation examines sales communication competence in a modern business-to-business (B2B) relationship selling context. I want to thank all sales professionals who participated in this research. The study has been conducted in the University of Eastern Finland, UEF Business School, in which I have been working since 2012. The UEF Business School has offered me enormous opportunities to learn, teach and investigate sales communication and business relationships. It has been a real pleasure to serve the UEF Business School in many roles: as a post-doctoral researcher, as a university lecturer in international business and sales communication, as an accreditation manager, and as an associate professor.

Professor Anu Puusa and professor Raija Komppula have supervised my dissertation. Your positive attitude and encouragement has been precious to me. Thank you so much Anu, for believing in me, and letting me grow as an independent business researcher. Thank you very much Raija, for believing in me, helping me and guiding my way. You both gave me encouraging, inspiring and critical feedback— which was exactly what I needed to finalize the dissertation.

The dissertation was pre-examined by professor Pauliina Ulkuniemi and professor Kaj Storbacka. Thank you both for your valuable feedback which helped me to finalize the study. I am grateful for Liikesivistysrahasto for the financial support.

My dissertation consists of three sub-studies which all have been co-authored. I am grateful to Professor Akiko Asai (J. F. Oberlin University, Japan), Associate Professor Saara Julkunen (UEF Business School, Finland) and Ms Saara Rytsy (UEF Business School, Finland) for their collaboration. To me, our collaboration has been inspiring, insightful, and fun.

Thanks to all my colleagues at the UEF Business School: you have supported and encouraged me during the past years. Thanks to all service management research group members: you have given me valuable feedback. Special thanks to Sari-Johanna Karhapää and Mirjami Ikonen. Thank you for supporting

me my dear communication colleagues and friends Sanna Herkama, Anne Laajalahti, Pipsa Purhonen, and Ira Virtanen.

My friends and family members have supported me enormously during this research journey. Thank you Minna Haapsaari, Hariklia Voutsa, Merja Almonkari, Mari Sihvo, Sanna Merimaa, Marjut Rantala, Mari Miettinen, Sanna Jormalainen, Sari Kekäläinen and Piia Miettinen for always being there for me. Thank you Anja and Aulis Koponen, as well as all my other family members and friends—near and far—you know you are in my heart. Thank you my mother Leila and my father Seppo for never stopping loving me and believing in me. Thank you so much for supporting me my brother Janne, Pia and Siiri. My husband Lasse, my daughter Amanda and my son Viljami: Thank you for loving me the way I am. I love you to the moon and back. You are my everything—I am nothing without you.

In Kuopio, 21st of October 2021
Jonna Koponen

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 MOTIVATION FOR THIS STUDY

Fundamental to the success of any company are profitable sales and enduring relationships with customers. In essence, as Dixon and Tanner (2012) explain, sales are the phenomenon of human-driven interaction between and within individuals and organizations to enhance an economic exchange within a value-creating context. Particularly in the competitive business-to-business (later B2B) sales field companies need to ensure that they have long-term relationships with profitable customers. In this dissertation, B2B relationship selling is understood as a process of focusing on building, securing and maintaining long-term profitable customer relationships (Arli, Bauer & Palmatier, 2018; Habel, Alavi & Linsenmayer, 2021). In this dissertation, a modern B2B relationship selling environment is characterized by rapid technological progress and digitalization, global competition, the active role of the customers, the need to build and maintain long-term customer relationships (Arli et al., 2018), the need to build solutions (Tuli, Kohli & Bharadwaj, 2007) and bring value to the customer (Haas, Snehota & Corsaro, 2015; Keränen & Liozu, 2020), and the need to communicate with customers via multiple communication channels (Bharadwaj & Shipley, 2020).

We are undergoing the fourth industrial revolution (Schwab, 2016). New technologies are affecting and changing the way we interact with people, the way we work and live (Bharadwaj & Shipley, 2020; Salesforce 2021; Syam & Sharma, 2018). In a review of the history of B2B relationship selling, Arli, Bauer and Palmatier (2018) argue that relationship selling is at a crossroads: current challenges such as growing expectations from customers and the fast progress of new technologies may hinder opportunities for building long-term customer relationships (Arli et al., 2018; Dixon, Frewer & Kent, 2011). Traditionally customer relationships have been built through in-person, face-to-face interaction (Dwyer et al., 1987), and customers had continuous contact with a familiar salesperson. However, as e-commerce has expanded, both B2B and business-to-consumer (later B2C) sales increasingly take place on digital platforms (Arli et al., 2018; Bharadwaj & Shipley, 2020). Moreover, the global COVID-19 pandemic, starting in the spring 2020, has rapidly forced companies and organizations to change their working habits and move their businesses and customer interactions online. The customers are increasingly well informed of their opportunities in the market and less reliant on traditional sales practices (Ancillai et al., 2019; Moore, Raymond & Hopkins 2015; Salesforce, 2019).

Today, B2B buyers search for information related to companies and products on the Internet and use social networks to communicate with other buyers (Rangajaran, Guenzi & Kaski, 2019). They do not rely on salespeople so much who they might consider to be biased related to the information they share (Rangajaran et al., 2019). B2B buyers have been found to favour purchasing through websites than relying on interaction with a salesperson (Hoar, 2015). A recent survey shows that the majority of B2B decision-makers desire digital self-service or remote human interaction (McKinsey & Company, 2021). Digital sales communication has become far more popular compared to traditional in-person, face-to-face interaction (see McKinsey & Company, 2021). Digital communication refers to technology-mediated communication between people (Sherblom, 2020). Digital sales communication tools enable synchronous and asynchronous communication between people (Bharadwaj & Shipley, 2020). Some researchers make a distinction between digital sales communication tools and digital sales interaction tools, meaning that digital sales interaction tools enable synchronous interaction via a face-to-face video connection (see Bharadwaj & Shipley, 2020). In this study, I use the term digital sales communication, and define it to include both text-based communication channels and tools (such as email, websites, search engine optimization, text messages, online text-based chatting); as well as video and audio based communication channels and tools (such as phone, videoconference equipment, online video calls, e.g., Microsoft Teams, Zoom, GoToMeeting, WhatsApp, and Messenger). All in all, B2B sales interactions (Karjaluoto & Ulkuniemi, 2015), and the customer relationship development process occur increasingly online. For instance, the use of online chat in B2B sales has increased recently (McKinsey & Company, 2021). B2B customer relationships may today be launched and maintained via social media tools, telephone, text messages, e-mail and online video meetings; and in-person face-to-face interactions occur much later in the sales process if there is even a need for the salesperson and customer to meet in person (Bharadwaj & Shipley, 2020; Rodriguez et al., 2016; Sleep et al., 2020).

At the same time, B2B customers usually need complex solution and service offerings, which makes in-person, face-to-face communication, trust and personal relationships critical (Jobber et al., 2019; Viio & Grönroos, 2014; Salesforce 2021). If there is a need for an in-person, face-to-face meeting between B2B buyers and sellers, the expectations and requirements for sales interaction are high (Julkunen, Koponen & Nickell, in process). During the COVID-19 pandemic, new restrictions and lockdowns have made it difficult to meet with the customer in-person. If in-person meetings take place, more effort needs to be paid to securing safety (e.g., wearing masks, maintaining a safe distance, using hand sanitizers, washing hands, not touching when greeting etc.).

This study is motivated by the trend in which B2B sales interaction occurs more commonly via multiple communication channels, moving away from traditional in-person, face-to-face communication towards a combination of digital and in-person, face-to-face communication. In the past decades, the profession of selling has gone through many changes (Moncrief, 1986; Moncrief et al., 2006; Marshall et al., 2012) and sales job characteristics have become more complex and demanding (Marcos Cuevas, 2018). Already Moncrief & Marshall (2005) described the emergence of new types of sales jobs, for instance consultative sellers and key account managers, which were characterized by new competence requirements such as relationship selling skills. Later on, Marshall et al. (2012) detected new skill requirements for social media and other advanced technologies. Additionally, Marcos Cuevas (2018) outlines four new competence categories for future sales professionals: functional, relational, managerial and cognitive competencies. Still, previous studies have not focused solely on understanding new sales communication competence, which is needed due to recent changes in the B2B sales environment, B2B buyer behaviour, and society in large. My dissertation is a response to this topical challenge. The dissertation contributes to the existing

B2B relationship selling literature by studying the sales communication competence in the modern B2B relationship selling environment.

Communication can be understood as a contextual and situated activity (Dannels, 2001; Laajalahti, 2014), and therefore interpersonal communication competence (later ICC) criteria can be defined for each profession/occupation based on disciplinary preferences, norms and values (Dannels, 2001; Koponen & Julkunen, 2015). This study is motivated by the need to create a comprehensive understanding of sales communication competence particularly in the field of modern B2B relationship selling.

In the communication research field, several studies have counted on the foundation established by Brian Spitzberg and William Cupach (1984). They defined ICC as a construction with affective, behavioural and cognitive dimensions (see reviews of the literature by Laajalahti, 2014; Wilson & Sabee, 2003). Since the 1950s, these core dimensions have dominated models of communication competence (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). Still, there are inconsistencies in the way the concept is defined. For instance, the behavioural dimension (skills, skilled behaviour, interpersonal communication skills) can be understood to be a part of ICC, as I define in this study. However, researchers have used the terms interpersonal communication skills, skilled interpersonal communication or skilled behaviour in parallel to ICC (Hargie, 2010). Furthermore, relational competence, communicative competence, and communication competence have been applied as alternative expressions for ICC (see Purhonen, 2012).

In this dissertation, I rely on the Spitzberg's and Cupach's (1984; 2002; 2011) foundation as a starting point of the investigation. To clarify, in this dissertation, I take a contextual approach to ICC and rely on the theoretical understanding of ICC as a construction with behavioural, cognitive, and affective communication dimensions (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984; 2002; 2011), as it provides a comprehensive understanding on the complex phenomena compared to focusing just on communication skills (see, e.g., Hargie, 2010). I approach ICC as the competence related to communication (verbal and nonverbal) that is needed in the context of modern B2B relationship selling. Therefore, ICC is considered an inseparable part of B2B salespeople's work. ICC refers to competence which is required when communicating via multiple channels—either in-person or via multiple digital sales communication tools—with customers, other B2B sales professionals, and other important actors in the context of modern B2B relationship selling. I define the *effectiveness* of interpersonal communication based on Spitzberg and Cupach (2002; 2011), and I see it as the achievement of desired or preferred outcomes for both the salesperson and customer of sales interaction in modern B2B relationship selling context. In addition, the *appropriateness* (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002; 2011) of interpersonal communication refers in this dissertation to the perceived legitimacy or fitness of a communicator's behaviour in a modern B2B relationship selling context and in the customer relationship. *Ethicality* refers to the willingness and ability of the salesperson to take moral responsibility (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002; Wilson & Sabee, 2003) and the willingness to behave in a way which does not create distrust or insult others (e.g., the customer or other parties involved in modern B2B relationship selling process). In this dissertation, ICC is explored at the individual level in the sense that I am interested in B2B salespeople's meanings that they give to their experiences and perceptions related to ICC in their work. In addition, I approach ICC at the relationship level, because in modern B2B relationship selling building and maintaining long-term customer relationships are core aims of the work. Therefore, I also explore two important communication contexts (digital sales communication in online chat conversations, and long-term customer relationship building process), and make interpretations of the sort of ICC which is needed in those communication contexts. Finally, I take the results together from an individual level exploration and relationship level investigation and provide a comprehensive understanding of sales communication competence in a modern B2B relationship selling context.

1.2 RESEARCH GAP

Several arguments are to be found in the current B2B sales literature justifying the need for this study. (1) There is a gap in the existing research to explain sales communication competence in today's modern B2B relationship selling environment. (2) Digital sales communication and the use of multiple communication channels have become more important in B2B relationship selling than before, but we are lacking an in-depth examination of these contexts at the interpersonal level. Therefore, this study is motivated by the need to investigate two important communication contexts that are connected to modern B2B relationship selling: digital sales communication with customers that are at different phases of the customer relationship, and long-term customer relationship building via multiple communication channels at the interpersonal level. (3) As modern B2B relationship selling is increasingly occurring online, there is a need to understand how different technological tools can convey social presence in digital sales communication. Despite the importance of social presence, there are a lack of studies of the functions of customer-salesperson interaction and social presence in online B2B sales (Leek et al. 2017; Ogonowski et al. 2014; Ou et al. 2014). (4) We lack understanding on how interpersonal communication mechanisms, such as a salesperson's self-disclosure and relational cost and reward evaluation, may enhance or hinder long-term customer relationship development. Therefore, in this dissertation, I investigate the interpersonal communication mechanism introduced in social penetration theory (SPT) (Altman & Taylor, 1973) to understand how and why B2B customer relationships evolve towards deeper phases. Next, these four key arguments are elaborated.

First, salespeople are very important people in the company as they are involved in customer interactions, in creating and maintaining long-term customer relationships and offering appropriate solutions for customers. Therefore, ICC is essentially needed to succeed in modern B2B relationship sales work. Even though the significance of effective interpersonal communication has long been recognized in the existing sales literature (see Griffith, 2002; Saxe & Weitz, 1982; Weitz, Sujan & Sujan, 1986), there is a gap in the existing research to show what sales communication competence is needed from salespeople in today's modern B2B relationship selling environment. A recent meta-analytical review of B2B sales success (Ohiomah, Benyoucef & Andreev, 2020) clearly demonstrates that a salesperson's cognitive competence (experience, technical skills), functional competence (customer orientation, effort, salesmanship skills), social competence (job satisfaction, motivation, commitment, adaptive selling, interpersonal skills) and meta-competence (goal orientation, age, self-efficacy, role ambiguity) are related to B2B sales success. Interpersonal communication competence was not, however, investigated, but the importance of interpersonal skills was acknowledged in the review. When defining interpersonal skills, Ohiomah et al. (2020, p. 436) referred to a definition provided by Castleberry and Shepherd (1993, p. 36) and see interpersonal skills as “the cognitive process of actively sensing, interpreting, evaluating, and responding to the verbal and nonverbal messages of present or potential customers”. Examples of interpersonal skills include listening, empathy and communication style (Ohiomah et al., 2020, p. 436).

Furthermore, the literature review in my first article (Koponen et al., 2019) shows in detail how previous research has investigated salesperson’s skills, such as adaptive selling behaviour (Chakrabarty et al., 2004; Spiro & Weitz, 1990), listening skills (Drollinger & Comer, 2013), customer oriented sales behaviour (Plouffe et al., 2009; Lussier & Hartman, 2017), and personal selling capability (Guenzi et al., 2016). Additionally, salespeople’s affective aspects of behaviour have been studied focusing on emotional intelligence (e.g., Schumacher, Wheeler & Carr, 2009), sales call anxiety (Verbeke & Bagozzi, 2000, communication apprehension (Boorom et al., 1998) and cultural sensitivity (Harich & LaBahn, 1998). Moreover, salespeople’s knowledge has been studied focusing on selling skills (Rentz et al., 2002; Singh et al., 2017). Studies have combined several dimensions of the salesperson’s abilities (see, e.g., Borg & Johnston, 2013; Lacoste, 2018) and intercultural communication competence (see, e.g., Bush et al., 2001). However, to the best of my knowledge, these studies do not provide an up-to-date, comprehensive understanding of the sales communication competence in a modern B2B relationship selling environment.

Second, we need more understanding on the communication contexts that are important in modern B2B relationship selling. With regard to these communication contexts (Graves, 2021; Dannels & Housley Gaffney, 2009), different contexts are important in different professions/occupations. In B2B relationship selling, the change from traditional in-person, face-to-face communication to digital sales and multiple communication channels was recently reinforced by the global COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, new digital communication contexts have become important, and we lack an understanding of sales interaction in these new digital sales communication environments. Therefore, this study is motivated by the need to investigate two important communication contexts that are connected to modern B2B relationship selling. These communication contexts are the digital sales communication context and long-term customer relationship building via multiple communication channels. By investigating important communication contexts in a specific profession/occupation, it is possible to gain an understanding of the interpersonal communication competence that is relevant in the particular profession/occupation (see Dannels, 2001; Graves, 2021).

Compared to B2C customer relationships, B2B relationships are usually regarded as more relational (for instance more continuous, involved and interactive) (Jobber et al., 2019). The customer relationships are formed through interaction between selling and buying firms, however, this interaction takes place fundamentally between customers and salespeople at the interpersonal (person-to-person or small group) level. That is, B2B customer relationships have a nested form: one level of the partnership is in the form of an interorganizational relationship and the other is based on an interpersonal relationship. In the field of sales and marketing, interpersonal interaction between customers and salespeople has been investigated for decades (Chapple & Donald, 1947; Evans, 1963; Webster, 1968; Hulbert & Capon, 1972). Still, interpersonal level exploration related in particular to B2B customer relationships is much scarcer in the field of B2B relationship selling compared to the interorganizational exploration (see Arli et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2016). As previous B2B relationship selling research has mainly focused on investigating the development of interorganizational relationships (see the latest review by Zhang et al., 2016), in this dissertation I explore the development of B2B customer relationships at the interpersonal level. This exploration is highly important as in today's fragmented global sales environments, it is far more difficult to create long-lasting interpersonal relationships between partners. Interpersonal sales communication occurs increasingly via online channels and in-person, face-to-face interactions occur much later in the sales process if there is even a need for the salesperson and customer to meet (Sleep et al., 2020; Mantrala & Albers, 2012). Therefore, we need more understanding on how to meet people on online channels, what to take into consideration, how to react and communicate with customers who are in diverse stages of the customer relationship and how we can build stronger interpersonal bonds between key customers via multiple communication channels.

Third, based on the systematic review of the B2B relationship selling research by Arli and colleagues (2018) and the summary of the key theories (see Table 4 in this summary), to best of my knowledge previous studies do not offer a theoretical approach to examine digital sales communication in B2B customer relationships. A theoretical approach is needed to better understand digital sales communication instead of in-person, face-to-face communication. In this study, I examine digital sales communication through the theoretical lens of social presence. As B2B relationship selling is increasingly occurring online, there is a need to understand how different technological tools can convey a social presence in digital sales communication (Arli et al., 2018). A social presence is important as it has an influence on the customers' perceived usefulness of a website (Ogonowski et al., 2014). Moreover, it increases the customers' initial trust in the website (Gefen & Straub, 2004). Researchers (Gefen & Straub, 2004; Ogonowski et al., 2014; Olson & Olson, 2000) have also found a social presence enhances customers' purchasing intentions. Despite the importance of a social presence, there are a lack of studies of the functions of customer-salesperson interaction and social presence in online B2B sales (Leek et al. 2017; Ogonowski et al. 2014; Ou et al. 2014). Therefore, in my second article (Koponen & Rytsy, 2020), I explore the social presence in online B2B chat conversations between salespeople and customers who are at different phases of their customer relationship.

Fourth, key previous research investigating B2B relationship development in phases has been either conceptual (see Dwyer et al., 1987; Rousseau et al., 1998) or empirical in nature with a quantitative approach (see Jap and Ganesan, 2000; Zhang et al., 2016). Little empirical research focuses on examining B2B customer relationship development process at the interpersonal level with a qualitative approach. Interpersonal level investigation is important since in many companies salespeople are most significantly in contact with the customers (Jobber et al., 2019), and they are crucial players in building long-term relationships with the customers (Panagopoulos et al., 2017). Being able to form close personal relationships is a valuable skill for a salesperson.

Nevertheless, the existing sales literature has not investigated how interpersonal communication mechanisms, such as a salesperson's self-disclosure and relational cost and reward evaluation, may enhance or hinder a customer relationship to become more personal in nature. Therefore, in this dissertation I investigate the interpersonal communication mechanism introduced in social penetration theory (SPT) (Altman 1993; Altman & Taylor, 1973; Altman, Vinsel & Brown, 1981; Baack, Fogliasso & Harris; Bylund, Peterson & Cameron, 2012) to understand how and why B2B customer relationships evolve towards deeper phases. SPT has not been fully applied to investigate interpersonal-level B2B customer relationship evolvement. Only few studies (Hansen & Riggle, 2009; Johnston et al., 2012; Liu & Gao, 2014; Arli et al., 2018) have applied SPT in B2B sales contexts, leaving a research gap to explore the development of interpersonal B2B customer relationships.

1.3 PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The research problem of this dissertation is to explore and define sales communication competence in a modern B2B relationship selling context. Due to rapid changes in the modern B2B relationship selling environment, we need a new comprehensive understanding of the issue. This doctoral dissertation consist of three articles following the introduction. The study is qualitative in nature. The context of the study is modern B2B relationship selling, particularly focusing on interpersonal-level exploration. The main research question of the dissertation is: *How can sales communication competence be understood and defined in a modern B2B relationship selling context?* To answer this question, the following five sub-questions are explored.

The first sub-question aims to gain an understanding of what kind of sales communication competence is relevant and socially negotiated in the field of modern B2B relationship selling. This investigation is connected with an individual-level exploration of sales communication competence. Research question number one is explored in the first article (Koponen et al., 2019).

RQ1. How is the interpersonal communication competence of salespeople constructed in international B2B relationship selling contexts in which salespeople create complex solutions for their customers?

With research questions number two and three, I concentrate on investigating digital sales communication which occurs in online chat conversations between salespeople and their customers, who are at different phases of the customer relationship. These investigations are connected with a relationship-level exploration of sales communication competence. With research question two I am able to contribute a more comprehensive understanding of the social presence embedded in online B2B chat conversations. With research question three I am able to yield more understanding on B2B customers' functions for using the online chat. Research questions two and three are investigated in the second article (Koponen & Rytsy, 2020).

RQ2. How is social presence embedded in online B2B chat conversations between salespeople and customers who are at different phases of the cus-tomer relationship?

RQ3. How do the functions of online B2B chats vary for customers who are at different phases of the customer relationship?

With research questions number four and five, I investigate long-term customer relationship development and the communication mechanisms (relational cost and reward evaluation; self-disclosure and business disclosure) that drive the relationship development process at the interpersonal level. These investigations are connected with the relationship-level exploration of sales communication competence. Research questions four and five are investigated in the third article (Koponen & Julkunen, forthcoming).

RQ4. How and why does/does not the salesperson’s evaluation of the rela-tional costs and rewards of a long-term B2B customer relationship shift to-wards deeper phases?

RQ5. How and why does/does not the salesperson’s self-disclosure and business disclosure shift the long-term B2B customer relationship towards deeper phases?

Finally, in the summary part of the dissertation, my aim is to provide a comprehensive understanding of sales communication competence in a modern B2B relationship selling context. I do this by combining the findings from the three articles. Table 1 below summarizes how the articles included in this dissertation help to fill the gaps in the literature. Table 1 summarizes the research objectives of Articles I, II and II, and further shows how the research questions relate to each article (RQs 1–5). Table 1 also illustrates the level of exploration related to sales communication competence, and how all the articles form the theoretical contribution of the entire dissertation, which I provide in the summary part of the dissertation. The main contribution of this dissertation is a comprehensive understanding of the sales communication competence in a modern B2B relationship selling context.

Table 1. Research objectives, research questions and key contribution

	Article I	Article II	Article III
Research objective	To understand what kind of interpersonal communication competence sales managers and salespeople need as they conduct modern B2B relationship selling. To contribute to the existing theoretical understanding of ICC and to conceptualize a new construct: sales communication competence (SCC).	To understand how social presence is embedded in online B2B chat conversations between salespeople and customers, who are at different phases of their customer relationship. To examine various functions of online chats with customers.	To understand how long-term B2B customer relationships evolve towards more personal and intimate relationships via the salesperson's self-disclosure and relational cost and reward evaluation. To contribute to existing social penetration theory (SPT).
Research question	RQ1	RQ2, RQ3	RQ4, RQ5
Level of exploration regarding sales communication competence	Individual-level exploration	Relationship-level exploration	Relationship-level exploration
	↓	↓	↓
Key theoretical contribution of the dissertation	Comprehensive understanding of sales communication com-pe-tence in a modern B2B relationship selling context *Summary of the dissertation*		

1.4 KEY CONCEPTS OF THE STUDY

Business-to-business sales	In this study, business-to-business sales is defined as the phenomenon of human-driven interaction between and within individuals and organizations in order to enhance economic exchange within a value-creating context (Dixon & Tanner, 2012).
B2B relationship selling	In this dissertation, I define B2B relationship selling as a process of concentrating on securing, building, and maintaining long-term relationships with profitable customers (Arli et al., 2018; Jobber et al., 2019; Johnston & Marshall, 2016). In B2B relationship selling, the requirements of building appropriate solutions in long-term customer relationships and achieving profitable sales via collaborative sales processes (Tuli et al., 2007) as well as focusing on customer value (Haas et al., 2015) are essential.
Customer relationship	A customer relationship is defined to consists of ongoing, intentional, non-accidental, interactions (such as communications and purchases) between the customer and the seller, moving beyond discrete transactional exchanges (Dwyer et al., 1987; Iacobucci & Ostrom, 1996).
Digital sales communication	In this study, I use the term digital sales communication (see Bharadwaj & Shipley, 2020) and define it to include both text-based communication channels and tools (such as email, websites, search engine optimization, text

	messages, online text-based chatting); as well as video and audio-based communication channels and tools (such as phone, videoconference equipment, and online video calls, e.g., via Microsoft Teams, Zoom, GoToMeeting, WhatsApp, and Messenger).
In-person, face-to-face communication	In this dissertation, in-person face-to-face communication is understood as communication in which the salesperson and buyer meet in the same location and both verbal and nonverbal messages can be fully transmitted and interpreted (see Julkunen, Koponen & Nickell, in process).
Interpersonal sales communication	Interpersonal communication is defined as “a process involving a dyad or small number of people in which actors create meanings through verbal and nonverbal message behaviours” (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008, 3). Interpersonal sales communication is defined as interpersonal communication that occurs in the sales setting.
Interpersonal communication competence	In this dissertation, I take a contextual approach to ICC and rely on the theoretical understanding of ICC as a construction with behavioural, cognitive, and affective communication dimensions (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984; 2002; 2011). I approach ICC as competence related to communication (verbal and nonverbal) that is needed in the context of modern B2B relationship selling. Therefore, ICC is considered as an inseparable part of B2B salespeople’s work. ICC refers to competence which is required when communicating via multiple

	channels—either in-person, face-to-face or via multiple digital sales communication tools—with customers, other B2B sales professionals, and other important actors in the context of modern B2B relationship selling. I define the *effectiveness* of interpersonal communication based on Spitzberg and Cupach (2002; 2011) and see it as the achievement of desired or preferred outcomes of sales interaction for both the salesperson and customer in a modern B2B relationship selling context. The *appropriateness* (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2011) of interpersonal communication refers to the perceived legitimacy or fitness of a communicator's behaviour in a modern B2B relationship selling context and in the customer relationship. *Ethicality* refers to the willingness and ability of the salesperson to take moral responsibility (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002; Wilson & Sabee, 2003) and the willingness to behave in a way which does not create distrust or insult others (e.g., the customer or other parties involved in modern B2B relationship selling process).
Interpersonal skills	In this dissertation, interpersonal skills are defined to be a part of a person's interpersonal communication competence. According to Hargie (2010) skills are processes that can be observed in behaviour, but skills are also connected to affective and cognitive processes. Interpersonal skills include such skills as listening skills, conflict management skills, persuasion, empathy and getting along with others (Rentz et al., 2002, p. 15).

Online chat	Online chat is defined as a computer-mediated service offered to online businesses (Chattaraman et al., 2012).
Modern B2B relationship selling environment	In this dissertation, the modern B2B relationship selling environment is characterized by rapid technological progress and digitalization, global competition, the active role of customers, the need to build and maintain long-term customer relationships (Arli et al., 2018), the need to build solutions (Tuli, Kohli & Bharadwaj, 2007) and bring value to the customer (Haas, Snehota & Corsaro, 2015; Keränen & Liozu, 2020), and the need to communicate with customers via multiple communication channels (Bharadwaj & Shipley, 2020).
Social presence	In this dissertation, I focus on social presence as interaction with sellers (Caspi & Blau, 2008; Lu et al., 2016). I define a social presence in interaction with customers and sellers as the ability of the participants to project themselves socially and affectively in digital sales communication (see also Garrison et al., 2000; Garrison & Anderson, 2003; Rourke et al., 1999).
Social penetration theory	Social penetration theory (SPT) is defined as a theory that explains interpersonal relationship development over time in phases via the process of relational cost and reward evaluation and self-disclosure (Altman, 1993; Altman & Taylor, 1973; Altman, Vinsel, & Brown, 1981). In SPT the term “social penetration” is used to denote a gradual increase in self-disclosure during the

	relationship development process (Altman & Taylor, 1973).
Self-disclosure	Self-disclosure is defined as the process of telling another person about oneself (Mongeau & Miller Henningsen, 2008, p. 366). According to Derlega and Grzelak (1979, p. 152), “self-disclosure includes any information that refers to the self, including personal states, dispositions, events in the past, and plans for the future. It can be objectively defined as any verbal message that formally begins with the word ‘I’ (for instance, ‘I think’, ‘I feel’) or any other verbal message about the self.” Therefore, self-disclosure always includes a decision whether to reveal one’s thoughts, feelings or experiences to another person, and at what level of intimacy to disclose personal, or even sensitive, information.
Relational cost and reward evaluation	Relational cost and reward evaluation are defined as the salesperson’s evaluations of the relational costs (such as spending too much time with the customer or personal dislike of interacting with the customer) and rewards (such as financial rewards or time savings) related to a specific customer relationship (Moon & Bonney, 2007).

1.5. POSITIONING THE STUDY

As a separate research field, relationship selling emerged in the 1970s (Arli et al., 2018) alongside the relational movement in the field of marketing (Gummesson & Grönroos, 2012). Before that, transactional marketing was the mainstream approach in the field of marketing. Transactional marketing focuses on single transactions (single purchases), and the focus was not on developing long-term customer relationships (Grönroos, 2007). Additionally in sales, the focus was on a series of unrelated transactions without a mutual connection between the buyer and the seller. The philosophy behind the well-known classical 4P model of marketing—the marketing mix—by E. Jerome McCarthy (1960) was connected to transactional marketing. For a long time it was thought that in order to have success in marketing, the firm need to apply the 4Ps model (product, price, place and promotion), and manipulate the marketing mix variables in order to produce an effect in the customer (Gummesson & Grönroos, 2012; Grönroos, 2007). The marketing mix became the dominant marketing paradigm for 30–40 years. Later the marketing mix was enlarged to become 5–15 Ps (see Judd, 1987; Kotler, 1984; Egan, 2008; Grönroos 2007).

In the 1980s relational approaches to marketing became conceptualized as relationship marketing, one-to-one markets and customer relationship management (Gummesson & Grönroos, 2012). The central idea in relationship marketing is that customer-seller relationships are more effective than single transactions between companies (Gummesson & Grönroos, 2012; Grönroos & Gummerus, 2015). In contrast to transactional marketing, relationship marketing means that a company's or organization's marketing efforts should be designed on the basis of multiple customer contacts over time (Jobber et al., 2019). Thereafter, new marketing ideas arose including services marketing (Vargo & Lusch, 2004; 2008), B2B marketing and networks (see Håkansson et al., 2009; Johanson & Mattsson, 1987), and the Nordic School (Gummerus & von Koskull, 2015; Heinonen & Strandvik, 2018). Today, relationship marketing researchers focus largely on online relationship marketing (Kozlenkova et al., 2017; Steinhoff et al., 2019), even though it has to be acknowledged that research on online relationship marketing started already in the 1990s. The above-mentioned changes in the field of marketing have also resonated in the field of sales.

As Figure 1 shows, I position my dissertation within the B2B sales research stream. There are multiple theoretical approaches to B2B sales, including for instance, transactional selling (Dupinsky 1980/1981), adaptive selling (Evans, 1963; Weitz et al., 1986), relationship selling (Arli et al., 2018; Habel et al., 2021), solution selling (Ulaga & Kohli, 2018; Tuli et al., 2007), value-based selling (Haas et al., 2015; Terho et al., 2015; Keränen & Liozu, 2020) and social selling (Ancillai et al., 2019; Rogriguez, Ajjan & Peterson, 2016). From these, I have selected to focus on B2B relationship selling, as this approach emphasizes interpersonal communication between sellers and customers and acknowledges the importance of securing, building and maintaining long-term customer relationships.

As pointed out in Figure 1, among the B2B relationship selling literature, my dissertation focuses on the interpersonal level as my interest is in the salesperson's interpersonal communication competence and customer–salesperson interaction. I do not focus on sales management, sales strategies, sales process, salesperson motivation etc., which are also important areas of today's B2B sales research. Furthermore, key theoretical constructs and theories in this dissertation include interpersonal communication competence, social presence, and social penetration theory, which are all elaborated further in the theoretical part of the dissertation.

Finally, Figure 1 shows that the aim of the dissertation is to explore how can sales communication competence be understood and defined in a modern B2B relationship selling context.

Figure 1. Positioning the dissertation in the field of B2B sales

2 B2B RELATIONSHIP SELLING

2.1 B2B RELATIONSHIP SELLING AS A RESEARCH FIELD

In this chapter, my aim is to elaborate B2B relationship selling as a research field by first looking at the evolution of relationship selling, then examining key theories in relationship selling, and finally summarizing key previous research concerning the customer relationship development process.

First, the origins of selling date back to the history of Ancient Greece which describes selling as an exchange activity, and already Plato wrote about "salesmen". The simplest way to consider the role and nature of selling, which has been traditionally called salesmanship, is to make a sale. However, salespeople who earned their living only by selling did not exist before the Industrial Revolution in England (1760–1840) (Jobber et al., 2019).

Human interaction lies at the heart of sales (Dixon & Tanner, 2012), and this aspect is particularly important in B2B relationship selling. According to Habel, Alavi and Linsenmayer (2021), relationship selling is the dominant view in B2B sales today both in academia and in practice. Besides building long-term customer relationships, the relationship selling approach focuses on providing appropriate solutions to customers' problems, and providing added value for the customer. Key activities in relationship selling include new customer acquisition, trust building, maintaining existing customers, developing customer relationships and being responsive to customers' needs (Johnston & Marshall, 2016). The salesperson's customer orientation (Homburg et al., 2011), adaptive selling behaviour and relational investments are thought to enhance long-term customer relationship building (Habel et al., 2021). Simultaneously, activities that may threaten customer relationships, such as applying a selling orientation (Saxe & Weitz, 1982) or manipulative tactics (Alavi et al., 2018), are avoided.

Today, companies' sales strategies outline the type of salespeople needed, appropriate sales management processes, sales activities and technologies used in the company (Ingram et al., 2002). The purpose of the sales strategy is to show how the company aims to accomplish its marketing objectives, and how the company is going to allocate resources to their sales units (Panagopoulos & Avlonitis, 2010). Furthermore, Terho et al. (2015) state that via a properly designed sales strategy, salespeople should be able to focus their efforts on accomplishing performance objectives, which are set by the upper management.

According to Jobber et al. (2019), sales tasks vary a great deal today: some salespeople have a large amount of interaction with international customers in export markets and need to customize their services/products according to the customer’s needs and problems; some are selling products from home to domestic markets without comprehensive customer interaction or requirements for product customization. Still, common responsibilities of a salesperson include prospecting, implementing marketing and sales strategies, providing services, handling complaints, self-management, knowledge management, database management, sales and profit success, customer relationship management, and conducting successful sales (Jobber et al., 2019). Typically, B2B salespeople are expected to conduct a broad range of personal selling activities. According to Ingram and colleagues (2009, p. 4), personal selling refers to “personal communication with an audience through paid personnel of an organization or its agents in such a way that the audience perceives the communicator’s organization as being the source of the message.” In the B2B context, personal selling often refers to a sales team or a salesperson interacting with one or more individuals (customers) from another organization.

Over the past years, changes to the B2B sales environment have been documented (Ancillai et al., 2019; Marcos Cuevas, 2018; Rangajaran, Guenzi, & Kaski, 2019). I have summarized the key characteristics of the modern B2B relationship selling environment in Table 2. Today’s business context is complex and systemic, this is due to underlying megatrends such as globalization, digitalization and environmental awareness (Marcos Cuevas, 2018; Möller, Nenonen & Storbacka, 2020). Competition has become a more global, technological progress and digitalization is rapid, solutions have become more complex (Yli-Pietilä & Tani, 2019), and e-commerce has become more popular than before (Habel et al., 2021). Due to recent changes in the business field caused by the global COVID-19 pandemic (McKinsey & Company, 2021), B2B sales organizations have been forced to modernize their sales strategies and daily practices, and better align with the demands of e-commerce (Bharadwaj & Shipley, 2020; Habel et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the customer's role has changed towards active information seeker. For instance, 82% of buyers mentioned the significance of content they saw on social media when making their purchasing decisions (Minsky & Quesenberry, 2016). B2B buyers increasingly search for information related to companies and products on the Internet and use social networks to communicate with other buyers (Rangajaran, et al., 2019). B2B buyers rely less on salespeople in their decision-making (Rangajaran et al., 2019). Almost 75% of B2B buyers favour purchasing via a website than relying on interaction with a salesperson (Hoar, 2015).

As information is more easily available for customers, salespeople are expected to bring extra value to the customer. They need to be experts not only on their own business, products and/or services, but also on the customer's business to consult and help the customer (Kenner & Leino, 2020; Marcos Cuevas, 2018; Yli-Pietilä & Tani, 2019). Moreover, B2B and B2C sales are starting to have more similar elements, as also B2B customers prefer more personalized and tailored sales and appreciate customer experience (B2Me thinking, see Salesforce 2019). For example, applying social media tools can help in customer interaction, but it also requires professionalism to choose the appropriate channels and flexibility to move between the channels depending on the customer's preferences (Agnihotri et al., 2012).

The importance of digital sales communication is well established in the existing sales studies (Ancillai et al., 2019). B2B customers have lower expectation for face-to-face in-person meetings. Ancillai and colleagues (2019) argue that as much as three quarters of all customers have low amounts of interpersonal interaction with salespeople without the need for in-person communication. During the COVID-19 pandemic, new digital communication tools and innovations were introduced and taken into active use. For example, digital sales communication such as video calls and online chats have become far more popular than traditional in-person face-to-face interaction (see McKinsey & Company, 2021).

A recent survey (Salesforce, 2021) shows that the top five sales tools that became more valuable since 2019 are video conferencing, artificial intelligence, mobile sales app(s) for employees, CRM-system and sales prospecting tools. Using social media in business has already transformed the ways salespeople operate and how the sales process is conducted (Rapp et al., 2013; Agnihotri et al., 2016). B2B customer relationships may today be launched and maintained via social media tools, telephone, text messages, e-mail and online video meetings; and in-person, face-to-face interactions occur much later in the sales process if there is even a need for the salesperson and customer to meet in person (Bharadwaj & Shipley, 2020; Sleep et al., 2020). Therefore, salespeople are expected to be comfortable using information technology in their jobs and when communicating with customers.

Yet, despite the increase in digital communication in sales, the necessity for in-person, face-to-face communication still exists in B2B sales relationships. Especially in B2B relationship selling, when the development of long-term customer relationships is expected, a combination of digital sales communication and in-person, face-to-face communication are needed (Julkunen et al., in process).

Table 2. Key characteristics of the modern B2B relationship selling environment

Key characteristics of the modern B2B relationship selling environment
• Technological progress and digitalization are rapid; competition is more global than before (Bharadwaj & Shipley, 2020; Marcos Cuevas, 2018; Yli-Pietilä & Tani, 2019).
• Customers have an active role. Information is easily available, and customers are active information seekers (Rangajaran et al., 2019; Sales force, 2019).
• Salespeople are expected to provide added value for the customer (Haas et al., 2015; Keränen & Liozu, 2020).
• B2B sales communication occurs via multiple channels, being a combination of digital sales communication and in-person, face-to-face communication. B2B sales and customer interaction occur increasingly online (Ancillai et al., 2019; McKinsey & Company, 2021).

2.1.1 Evolution of relationship selling

In a similar manner to the research field of marketing, in the field of sales research, a movement from transactional selling to relationship selling is evidenced. From the 1970s to the present, the evolution of relational selling is 50 years old (Habel et al., 2021). In transactional selling, the focus was on finding new customers, getting orders (even by cutting the price), maximizing short-term sales and basically selling to anyone. Instead, in relationship selling the focus is on retaining existing customers, setting the price for profit, becoming the preferred supplier, managing each customer for long-term profit and concentrating on high-profit-potential accounts (Grönroos, 1994; Jobber et al., 2019). Table 3 summarizes the contrasting ideas of transactional selling and relationship selling according to Jobber at el. (2019).

Table 3. Key ideas in transactional vs. relationship selling (modified from Jobber et al., 2019)

Relationship selling	Transactional selling
• Preserve the current customers	• Find and get new customers
• Become the most preferred seller/supplier	• Get orders (purchases)
• Price set for profit	• Get a sale even by cutting the price
• Concentrate on high-profit-potential customers	• Sell to anyone
• Manage each customer for long-term profit	• Manage all customers to max-imize short-term sales

From the customer perspective, a long-term relationship with the buyer reduces risk of delivery failure and reduces the time required to explain all the requirements (Jobber et al., 2019). In addition, relationship selling is significantly more important in sectors that are process or people based, particularly when production processes need to be integrated with the customer's processes; when customization is needed, when the sold processes are complex and expensive (Guenzi & Georges, 2010). A recent survey of 6,000 B2B sellers shows that 86% of them believed that long-term customer relationships had become increasingly important during the COVID-19 pandemic (Salesforce, 2021), and therefore relationship selling is a highly relevant sales approach today.

In their article, Arli et al. (2018) provide three perspectives that describe the history of relationship selling. The first is the historical perspective that exposes how relational selling has changed over the years. The second perspective is related to key theories in relationship selling, as Arli et al. (2018) analysed and assessed current theoretical approaches. The third perspective focused on key empirical findings indicating effective relational selling strategies.

The historical perspective consists of the evolution of relationship selling with four key approaches: individual selling (pre-1970s–1970s), buying center (1980s), adaptive selling (1990s) and customer orientation and solution selling (2000s–2010s) approaches (Arli et al., 2018).

The individual selling approach featured a traditional, one-to-one sales process, with a strong emphasis on the salesperson's efforts during the sales process (Borg & Young, 2014). According to Arli et al. (2018), sales were connected to the availability and proximity of natural resources and products. During the production era (circa 1870–1930), salespeople acted mainly as product suppliers and they did not really focus on the customers' needs (Powers, Koehler, & Martin, 1988). In traditional sales processed it was assumed that customers would buy any products that were produced, and it was about the salesperson's efforts to find prospects (Bonoma, Bagozzi, & Zaltman, 1978; Evans, 1963). However, emphasizing only the salesperson did not produce fruitful outcomes and in the 1970s the focus moved towards the customer, including relationship perspectives and acknowledging the dyadic nature of the relationships (Bonoma et al., 1978; Möller & Halinen, 2000).

Around the 1980s, the buying center approach emerged. Industrial selling was growing, and sales research proposed that the exchanges between buyers and sellers could be understood as ongoing relationships (Hutt, Johnston & Ronchetto, 1985). Buyers demanded more personalized service which required efforts from a team of sellers, not just from an individual salesperson (Arli et al., 2018). A buying centred approach is connected with team selling theory, and it is thought that it is useful to have a team of sellers to build relations with large and complex customers. Dwyer et al. (1987) published their well-known model on the development of buyer-seller relationships in phases of awareness, exploration, expansion, commitment and dissolution. A growing service economy and fast development of information technology were also typical to the 1980s (Möller & Halinen, 2000) and there was growing awareness of the complexity of buyers' needs. Schurr (1987) suggested an evolution of sales approaches towards relational contracts and consultative selling (see Arli et al., 2018, p. 171).

In the 1990s, according to Arli et al. (2018), an adaptive selling approach emerged, even though the ideas of adaptive selling behaviour have been presented much earlier (see Evans, 1963). Adaptive selling means "altering of sales behaviour during a customer interaction or across customer interactions based on perceived information about the nature of the selling situation" (Weitz et al., 1986, p. 175). Adaptive selling was predominantly applied in personal selling, when the salesperson focused on identifying the customer's wishes and needs.

During the 2000–2010s the focus on customers increased. A customer orientation and solution selling approach emerged (Arli et al., 2018). Consistent with the increased focus on customers and move towards a service economy, the role of the salesperson evolved from being a partner towards being a value creator (Arli et al., 2018). The traditional approach to the sales process, the so called seven steps of selling, was updated by Moncrief and Marshall (2005). The famous seven steps of selling included prospecting, pre-approach, approach, sales presentation, overcoming objections, closing the sale and after-sale service (Dubinsky, 1980). Due to transformative factors such as technological advancements, Moncrienf and Marshall (2005) suggested that there should be changes in each step and this new sales process should be understood as an evolved process with the customer at the center. While the traditional seven steps of selling reflected a selling orientation as a part of the company, the evolved selling process by Moncrief and Marshall (2005) reflected a customer orientation and highlighted the need to focus on relationship selling.

More recently, studies have explored adaptive selling (see Franke & Park, 2006), and firms have focused on e-commerce channels due to the increased number of mobile devices, as well as the growth in social media use and omnichannel retailing (Arli et al., 2018). Arli et al. (2018) anticipate that future B2B relationship selling approaches will involve increased team efforts. They argue that solution selling and team-based selling approaches are likely to remain important.

2.1.2 Key theories in B2B relationship selling research field

Key theories and constructs in the relationship selling research field can be organized chronologically and in relation to the evolution of the relationship selling approach. Before the 1970s, exchange theory (see Evans, 1963) was popular and the popular sales mode was one-to-one. In the 1970s power and dependency theory became evident and the sales mode moved towards a dyadic one (see Bonoma et al., 1978). Moving on to the 1980s, social exchange theory dominated the relationship selling field (see Dwyer et al., 1987). In the 1990s, the organization-to-organization sales mode became dominant and a commitment-trust relationship theoretical approach was widespread (see Arli et al., 2018). Arli et al. (2018) have summarized the current key theories in the field of relationship selling. These theories with key references are shortly presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Key theories in the relationship selling research field (modified from Arli et al., 2018)

Key theory and key references	Key idea and focus in the theory
Adaptation theory (Evans, 1963; Weitz et al., 1986)	**Key idea:** Adaptive selling behaviour refers to "the altering of sales behaviours during a customer interaction or interactions based on perceived information about the nature of the selling situation" (Weitz et al., 1986, p. 175). In adaptive selling, the salesperson adjusts his/her communication according to the buyers needs and is able to choose an appropriate approach according to the particular customer. **Focus:** Salesperson's communication style.

Key theory and key references	Key idea and focus in the theory
Commitment-trust theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994)	**Key idea:** Morgan and Hunt (1994) launched the commitment-trust theory and proposed that strong customer relationships are built on the foundation of commitment and trust. Trust and commitment are crucial for cooperation between business partners. Commitment means "an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship" (Moorman, Zaltman & Deshpande, 1992, p. 316). Trust is defined as "confidence in an exchange partner's reliability and integrity" (Morgan & Hunt, 1994, p. 23). **Focus:** Firm-to-firm relationships.
Interaction/ network theory (Johanson & Mattson, 1987)	**Key idea:** Network theory underlines exchange, adaptation and uncertainty. It focuses on firm-to-firm level relationships acknowledging that effective relational selling acquires high levels of joint planning, collaboration and effective communication (e.g., successful conflict resolution) (see Arli et al., 2018; Anderson & Narus, 1990). **Focus:** Firm-to-firm relationships.
Power dependency theory (Zhao, Flynn & Roth, 2007)	**Key idea:** Customer relationships feature two types of power: non-mediated and mediated power. Non-mediated power includes expert, referent and traditional legitimate forms of power. Mediated power includes rewards, coercive and legal legitimate power and it is often controlled by the customer (Arli et al., 2018; Zhao et al., 2007). **Focus:** Firm-to-firm relationships.
Social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973)	**Key idea:** Social penetration theory (SPT) explains how interpersonal relationships develop towards more intimate phases. SPT highlights self-disclosure, relationship satisfaction and trust between partners (Altman & Taylor, 1973). **Focus:** Interpersonal (person-to-person) relationships.
Team selling theory (Jackson et al., 1999)	**Key idea:** A team selling (or buying centred) approach includes the following key constructs: core selling, selling centres and key account management. The team selling approach acknowledges the customers' changing expectations and sees that it is easier to fulfil the customer's personalized service demands with a team of salespeople instead of an individual seller (Jackson et al., 1999). **Focus:** Firm-to-firm relationships.

To summarise, based on the systematic review by Arli et al. (2018) and the summary of the key theories (Table 4 above), I conclude that from the existing theories in the field of B2B relationship selling, only adaptation theory and social penetration theory (SPT) focus on interpersonal level B2B customer relationships. Even though a salesperson's adaptiveness is important and valuable, it is only one aspect of interpersonal communication competence (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002), which I focus on in my first article (Koponen et al., 2019).

Moreover, it is my view that previous studies do not offer a coherent theoretical approach to explain digital sales communication in B2B customer relationships. For this reason I bring social presence theory to the field of B2B relationship selling in my second article (Koponen & Rytsy, 2020).

Furthermore, Arli et al. (2018) point out that SPT (Altman & Taylor, 1973) explains the evolution of interpersonal relationships and it has been applied in relationship selling studies. However, the reference pointed out by Arli et al. (2018) investigates only initial sales interaction in a B2C context (Jacobs et al., 2001a; 2001b), not the evolvement of B2B customer relationships from the perspective of SPT. I prove this claim with a literature review conducted for my third article (Koponen & Julkunen, forthcoming) and show that SPT has not actually been fully applied to investigate interpersonal-level B2B customer relationship evolvement. In the literature review, I found that only a few previous studies (Hansen & Riggle, 2009; Johnston et al., 2012; Liu & Gao, 2014; Arli et al., 2018) applied SPT in a B2B sales context, still leaving a research gap to explore the development of interpersonal B2B customer relationships. Therefore, I apply SPT in this dissertation and show how it can offer interesting insights and explanations regarding the interpersonal communication mechanism that moves the B2B customer relationships towards stronger states.

2.1.3 Development of B2B customer relationships

When defining a relationship in B2B contexts, researchers have acknowledged that both parties need to perceive that a relationship between them exists and in order for a relationship to exist, there has to be more than occasional contact between business partners (see Barnes & Howlett, 1998; Egan, 2008).

In this dissertation, I rely on a definition in which a customer relationship entails intentional, ongoing and interactions between customers and sellers (Dwyer et al., 1987; Iacobucci & Ostrom, 1996). Customer relationships evolve over time (Egan, 2008) and a relationship is an ongoing process (Grönroos, 2007, p. 36). Often time customer relationships are understood to evolve through stages or phases of development (Zhang et al., 2016).

In their ground-breaking conceptual article, Dwyer, Schurr and Oh (1987) explored the development of B2B customer relationship development in phases which are illustrated in Table 5. Their article has inspired sales and marketing researchers enormously: according to Google scholar 4.11.2021 it has already 14,991 citations.

Table 5. Phases of the buyer-seller relationship (modified from Dwyer, Schurr and Oh, 1987)

Phase	Function of the phase
1. Awareness	In the awareness phase, the main purpose is recognizing potential business partners. Situational proximity helps to advance awareness. There is no actual interaction between partners.
2. Exploration	Dyadic interaction occurs between customers and sellers. There is an increase in interdependence between partners.
3. Expansion	Deeper interdependence between customers and sellers exists. Furthermore, additional gratifications are sought from the partners. Mutual satisfaction is probable via customized role performance.
4. Commitment	Sustained interdependence between business partners exists due to shared values and/or contractual mechanisms. Partners have significant mutual inputs, and they are capable of adapting to each other as well as resolving conflicts.
5. Dissolution	Dissolution means that partners may withdraw from the relationship at any stage of the relationship development process.

Thereafter, key previous research investigating B2B relationship development in phases or investigating the B2B relationship life cycle have been either conceptual (see Table 6, e.g., Wilson, 1995; Johnson & Selnes, 2004) or empirical in nature with a quantitative approach (e.g., Palmatier et al., 2013; Zhang et al., 2016). In Table 6 I summarize the relationship variables that these studies have explored, the number of relationship phases found in each study and also the conceptualizations of customer relationship phases in each study. The Table 6 is adapted and modified from Zhang et al. (2016, p. 56).

In the latest empirical study on interorganizational B2B customer relationship development in phases, Zhang et al. (2016) show how B2B relationships have been found to develop through 3–6 states summarizing the states of the relationship (see also Table 6). They summarize the phases as (1) an initial neutral or transactional state, (2) a positive relational state (usually having many phases), and (3) a negative relational state concerning the relationship deterioration or decline. This type of summary gives a rather linear impression of the customer relationship development, moving from neutral to negative phases. This type of thinking has been criticized. For example, Palmatier et al. (2013) brought up an idea of commitment as a continuous dynamic state. Furthermore, in their empirical study, Zhang et al. (2016) found three positive and two negative migration mechanisms in B2B relationships: exploration, endowment and recovery being positive ones and neglect and betrayal being negative ones. They showed that the B2B customer relationship development may move back and forth while it matures, and the development is not necessarily a linear process.

Despite these interesting findings, the previous studies summarized in Table 6 focus mainly on the development of interorganizational level B2B relationships, and the relationship state variables focus on measuring the firm-to-firm level relationship strength. Additionally, the focus has been on the sales work and business tasks; not on interpersonal level items as, e.g., Zhang et al. (2016) have reviewed. They highlighted the role of communication to be most important when facilitating the relationship exploration and movement from the early stages towards more mature stages. Communication has been investigated as the amount, frequency and quality of information shared between partners (Zhang et al., 2016). To the best of my knowledge, Zhang et al. (2016) provide the latest review focusing on B2B customer relationship development in phases. As the previous studies have been quantitative in nature, there is a need to explore the development of B2B customer relationships with a qualitative approach in order to understand how and why interpersonal communication mechanism migrates the relationship development process.

Table 6. Key previous research on customer relationship phases (modified from Zhang et al., 2016)

	Reference	**Relationship state variables**	**Conceptualization of relationship phases**
Conceptual	Ford (1980)	Experience, uncertainty, distance, commitment, adaptation, investments	The pre-relationship stage, the early stage, the development stage, the long-term stage, the final stage
	Dwyer *et al*., (1987)	Trust, commitment, dependence and norms	Awareness, exploration, expansion, commitment, decline, dissolution
	Rousseau *et al*., (1998)	Trust	Building, stability, dissolution
	Ring and Van de Ven (1994)	Trust, dependence, norms	Negotiation, agreement, execution, assessment, dissolution
	Heide (1994)	Dependence, norms	Initiation, maintenance, termination
	Wilson (1995)	Trust, commitment, social bonds, satisfaction, cooperation	Partner selection, defining purpose, setting relationship boundaries, creating relationship value, relationship maintenance
	Johnson and Selnes (2004)	Trust, commitment, satisfaction	Acquaintances, friends, partners

	Reference	Relationship state variables	Conceptualization of relationship phases
Empirical, quantitative approach	Jap and Ganesan (2000)	Commitment, dependence, norms, satisfaction, bilateral investment, conflict	Exploration, build-up, maturity, decline
	Hibbard *et al*., (2001)	Trust, commitment, dependence, communication, shared values	Focusing on four quartiles based on the duration of the relationship.
	Netzer *et al*., (2008)	Satisfaction, emotional connection, pride	Dormant, occasional, active
	Jap and Anderson (2007)	Trust, dependence, norms, risk seeking	Exploration, build-up, maturity, decline
	Palmatier *et al.*, (2013)	Commitment, commitment velocity	Continuous dynamic state
	Luo and Kumar (2013)	None	State 1 (lowest), state 2, state 3 (highest)
	Zhang *et al.*, (2016)	Commitment, trust, dependence, relational norms	Damaged state (poor), transactional state, transitional state, communal state (strong)

2.2 INTERPERSONAL SALES COMMUNICATION

Dyadic human interaction is considered inevitable when forming and maintaining B2B customer relationships (Elo, Benjowsky & Nummela, 2015). As defined by Baxter and Braithwaite (2008, p. 3), interpersonal communication is "a process involving a dyad or small number of people in which actors create meanings through verbal and nonverbal message behaviours". Interpersonal communication is the way people establish relationships, negotiate meanings and form an understanding of their identity (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008, p. 2). The business literature addresses the importance of interpersonal communication in the development of business relationships (Dwyer et al., 1987; Hung & Lin, 2013), which is the central focus in relationship selling. Interpersonal sales communication means that interpersonal communication occurs in the sales context, which is considered highly important in B2B relationships.

2.2.1 The importance of interpersonal communication in B2B sales

Previous sales research has recognized the benefits of effective sales communication in B2B selling (Stanko, Bonner & Calantone, 2007; Weitz and Bradford, 1999). Studies have shown that key features of salespeople favoured by customers are the ability to understand and satisfy the customer's needs, expertise in their company's products and the market, thoroughness, problem-solving skills, ability to ensure (or help to ensure) reliable and fast delivery, and good communication skills (see Jobber et al., 2019; Garver & Mentzer 2000). Furthermore, successful selling is connected to the salesperson's ability to release tension, ask appropriate questions, provide proper product information, make comparisons (for example compare two best options), offer evidence and justifications to support claims, acknowledge the customer's viewpoint, agree with and support the customer, have detailed knowledge on the customers, increase efforts to serve the customer, and have confidence in their own ability (see Jobber et al., 2019). Through reciprocal communication it is probable to develop trust and common values, coordinate activities, and build a better understanding between business partners (Stanko et al., 2007; Hung & Lin, 2013). Effective communication is associated with the development of commitment and satisfaction, and with the customer's perceived relationship quality (Hung & Lin, 2013; Sanzo et al., 2003; Stanko et al., 2007).

Currently relationship selling is facing new challenges including growing expectations from customers and the rapid development of new technologies, which hinder opportunities for relationship building (Dixon, Frewer & Kent, 2011). As e-commerce has expanded, B2B sales increasingly takes place on digital platforms and via advanced technologies (Gartner, 2019; Alavi & Habel, 2021). Modern B2B relationship selling is characterised by the use of social media, database and product knowledge management, solution selling, adding value, selling the product and building customer relationships; focusing on the customer at the center of everything (Jobber et al., 2019; Moncrief & Marshall, 2015). Additionally, sales interactions and the customer relationship development process are conducted increasingly online. Indeed, B2B relationships may today be launched and maintained via social media, telephone, e-mail, and virtual meetings; while face-to-face interactions occur much later in the sales process if there is even a need for the salesperson and customer to meet in person (Sleep et al., 2020; Mantrala & Albers, 2012). Therefore, better understanding of the interpersonal communication between salespeople and customers at different stages of the customer relationship and interaction via digital communication channels are definitely needed.

At the same time, serving B2B customers usually requires building highly complex solutions and service offerings, which makes trust, in-person face-to-face communication, and personal relationships critical (Jobber et al., 2019; Viio & Grönroos, 2014). Close relationships between partners are even more important today, as changing technology, increased foreign competition and shorter product life cycles put sales and purchasing divisions in key strategic roles. Customers are increasingly relying on their trusted strategic partners to share information and develop new products/services (Jobber et al., 2019).

Even though this dissertation focuses on relationship selling, it is important to acknowledge that not all customers want to engage in relationships with their suppliers (Bettercourt et al., 2015; Grönroos, 2007). Indeed, not all customers want to have interpersonally meaningful relationships with sellers and having one can be perceived as a burden (Bettercourt et al., 2015). Therefore, relationship investments and interactions will not increase customer value per se or bring in competitive advantage. However, when the customer and the seller have a reciprocal need and reciprocal willingness to develop a long-term customer relationship, salespeople are key actors who are responsible for creating, developing and maintaining customer relationships at the interpersonal level. Successful selling is dependent on the skilful handling of customer relationships, and therefore I argue that B2B relationship selling requires a new understanding of the interpersonal communication mechanisms that migrate the long-term B2B customer relationships at the interpersonal level.

2.2.2 Interpersonal communication competence

In this study, interpersonal communication competence (ICC) is needed to behave in an appropriate, effective and ethical manner in interpersonal communication situations (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002). For a long time, sales researchers have investigated salespeople's skills, such as adaptive selling skills and listening skills (Ramsey & Sohi, 1997; Saxe & Weitz, 1982; Weitz et al., 1986). Furthermore, a salesperson's affective qualities, such as emotional intelligence (Kidwell et al., 2011), and selling skills (Rentz et al., 2002) have been studied. Moreover, sales researchers have applied concepts such as social competence (including job satisfaction, motivation, commitment, adaptive selling, interpersonal skills) (Ohiomah et al., 2020), and relational competency (Phan et al., 2005) in their studies. In my first article (Koponen et al., 2019), I conducted a literature review of the current sales literature focusing on ICC in the field of sales, and a summary of the key research themes in this area are provided in Table 7 below. As we can see, there are numerous concepts in use.

Table 7. Summary of the main themes in the previous literature focusing on different aspects of a salesperson's ICC

Main theme	Key concepts applied	Illustrative key references
The salesperson's skills	Adaptive selling behaviour, communication style, customer-oriented behaviour, listening skills, personal selling capability, skill of rapport building	Kaski, Niemi & Pullins (2018), Guenzi et al. (2016), Miles et al. (1990), Ramsey & Sohi (1997), Saxe & Weitz (1982), Spiro & Weitz (1990), Weitz et al. (1986)
The salesperson's affective aspects	Communication apprehension, emotional intelligence, cultural sensitivity, sales call anxiety	Boorom et al. (1998), Harich and LaBahn (1998), Kidwell et al. (2011), Schumacher et al. (2009), Verbeke & Bagozzi (2000)
The salesperson's knowledge	Salesmanship skills, selling skills	Rentz et al. (2002), Singh et al. (2017)

Main theme	Key concepts applied	Illustrative key references
Combining several dimensions	Knowledge, skills and abilities in partnering role, sales performance drivers, sales competencies	Weitz & Bradford (1999), Borg & Johnston (2013), Lacoste (2018)
Exploring “communication competence”	Intercultural communication competence, communication competencies, relational competency	Bush et al. (2001), Chaisrakeo & Speece (2004), Griffith (2002), Phan et al. (2005)

The B2B relationship selling environment has undergone major changes in the recent past years (see Table 2). Based on the literature review (see Table 7), I found that we are missing a comprehensive and up-to-date understanding on sales communication competence in today’s modern B2B relationship selling environment. To build a comprehensive understanding, I wanted to apply the interpersonal communication competence (ICC) construct in this study.

ICC has been investigated in several research fields, for instance in the field of communication, psychology, social psychology, social sciences, linguistics, and media studies (see Laajalahti, 2014). In the field of communication, competent communication has inspired communication researchers for a very long time. Already Aristotle (ca 350 BCE/2012) was interested in competent communication and focused on speaker’s rhetorical appeals: *ethos, pathos,* and *logos*. Since then, ICC has been studied from various perspectives (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009; Wilson & Sabee, 2003), focusing for instance on an individual’s communication behaviour, or seeing ICC as an impression of the individual’s communication behaviour (Laajalahti, 2014). Furthermore, ICC can be understood and explored on the relationship level, or linked to certain professions or occupations, and therefore understood as an inseparable part of certain work environment (Dannels, 2001; Laajalahti, 2014).

ICC needed in work contexts and in different professions/occupations has been studied to some extent. For instance, previous studies have shed light on the ICC of accountants (Lawson, 2019), communication professionals (Wiesenberg et al., 2017; Zerfass et al., 2020), engineers (Darling & Dannels, 2003), entrepreneurs and networking (Kokkonen & Koponen, 2020), health professionals (Britt & Hatten, 2016; Mönkkönen & Finstad, 2007; Spitzberg, 2013), lawyers (Boccaccini et al., 2002), leaders (Johansson et al., 2014; Rouhiainen-Neunhäuserer, 2009), political leaders (Almonkari & Isotalus, 2012), researchers (Laajalahti, 2014), and teachers (Daly & Vangelisti, 2003). The focus of these studies has been on understanding communication competence as part of or as one element within a broader conception of professional competence (Kostiainen, 2003). Furthermore, as business becomes ever more global and digital, researchers have also focused on investigating cultural intelligence (CQ) (Rüth & Netzer, 2020; Yari et al., 2020), global mindset, and cross-cultural competencies (see Rüth & Netzer, 2020; van Heugten et al., 2017; Yari et al., 2020).

Most of the recent models and theoretical explanations of interpersonal communication competence (and intercultural competence) rely on cognitive, behavioural, and affective dimensions (Deardorff, 2006; Elo et al., 2015; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). Cognitive and affective processes cannot be fully observed by others from the speaker's communication behaviour, but behavioural dimensions (communication skills) can be observed. At least since the 1950s, these core dimensions have been popular in models of human communication competence (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). Nevertheless, despite the large number of studies exploring ICC there remain inconsistencies in the ways researchers define the concept. For instance, *skilled interpersonal communication, skilled behaviour*, or *interpersonal communication skills*, have been used in parallel with interpersonal communication competence (Hargie, 2010). In addition, synonyms for interpersonal communication competence have included *communication, communicative*, and *relational competence* (Laajalahti, 2014; Purhonen, 2012), or *interactional competence* (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Graves, 2021).

Since interaction and ICC, always occur in a certain relationship, situation, function, culture, and time, in this dissertation ICC is understood as a contextual phenomenon (Graves, 2021; Laajalahti, 2014). For example, the behavioural dimension (interpersonal communication skills) is assessed differently in diverse contexts (Spitzberg, 2013). Moreover, the observers' and participants' perceptions of the context determine the diverse expectations for ICC (Spitzberg, 2000; 2013). Therefore, it is justified to adopt a context-specific approach to studying ICC. At the same time, I admit that other researchers may approach and investigate ICC from different perspectives and may define it as a fairly stable trait of a person (see also Laajalahti, 2014).

A foundational understanding of ICC as a construction with behavioural, cognitive and affective communication dimensions was provided by Brian Spitzberg and William Cupach (1984). These dimensions are elaborated further in the coming paragraphs. The interpersonal communication competence framework (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984; 2002; 2011) is interested in the essence of competent communication and how it is linked to the outcomes of competence. Therefore, this theoretical understanding of ICC also affects what is considered as good or competent communication in this dissertation (see Graves, 2021).

According to Spitzberg and Cupach (2011), common criteria for competence are *appropriateness* (the degree to which communication observes socially imposed norms), *effectiveness* (the degree to which communication achieves goals), *efficiency* (the degree to which communication conserves resources), *ethics* (the degree to which communication adheres to a moral code), *fidelity* (the degree to which communication generates shared meaning), and *satisfaction* (the degree to which communication produces positive feelings). Still, in the communication research field, the most often applied and commonly accepted criteria for ICC are effectiveness, appropriateness, and ethicality (Deardorff, 2006; 2011; Laajalahti, 2014; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009).

Diverse perspectives can be applied to investigate ICC in a work context. First, ICC can be investigated via self-reporting techniques, when the focus is on people's understanding and their interpretations regarding the type of ICC needed for their work/occupation. With this approach, it is possible to understand self-perceived interpersonal communication competence (Jablin & Sias, 2001; Laajalahti, 2014). Second, ICC can be studied through other-reporting techniques. For instance, if the focus of the study is to investigate leaders' ICC, researchers may ask about customers', employees', stakeholders' or other researchers' perceptions of the leader's ICC (Jablin & Sias, 2001). With this approach, it is possible to understand other-perceived communication competence. Third, self-reporting and other-reporting techniques can be combined to gain a more comprehensive understanding of ICC in a certain work context (see Laajalahti, 2014). Furthermore, qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches can be applied when investigating ICC.

To clarify, in this dissertation I adopt a contextual approach to ICC and rely on the theoretical understanding of ICC as a construction with behavioural, cognitive, and affective communication dimensions (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984; 2002; 2011), as it provides a comprehensive understanding of the complex phenomena compared to focusing just on communication skills (see, e.g., Hargie, 2010). I approach ICC as competence related to communication (verbal and nonverbal) and one which is needed in the context of modern B2B relationship selling. Therefore, ICC is considered an inseparable part of B2B salespeople's work. ICC refers to competence which is required when communicating via multiple channels—either in-person, face-to-face or via digital sales communication tools—with customers, other B2B sales professionals, and other important actors in the context of modern B2B relationship selling. I define the *effectiveness* of interpersonal communication according to Spitzberg and Cupach (2002; 2011) and see it as the achievement of desired or preferred outcomes of sales interaction for both the salesperson and the customer in a modern B2B relationship selling context. In addition, the *appropriateness* (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2011) of interpersonal communication refers to the perceived legitimacy or fitness of a communicator's behaviour in a modern B2B relationship selling context and in the customer relationship. *Ethicality* refers to the willingness and ability of the salesperson to take moral responsibility (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002; Wilson & Sabee, 2003) and the willingness to behave in a way which does not create distrust or insult others (e.g., the customer or other parties involved in B2B relationship selling process). In this dissertation, ICC is explored at the individual level in the sense that I am interested the meanings that B2B salespeople give to their experiences and perceptions related to ICC in their work. In addition, I approach ICC at the relationship level, because in modern B2B relationship selling, building and maintaining long-term customer relationships in one of the core aims. Therefore, I also explore two important communication contexts (digital sales communication in online chat conversations, and the long-term customer relationship building process), and make interpretations of ICC which is needed in those communication contexts.

The behavioural communication dimension. When it comes to three communication dimensions underlying the ICC concept, the behavioural communication dimension refers to interpersonal communication skills that support acting in a manner that the interactants perceive to be appropriate and effective (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984). Researchers have acknowledged that skills are also tied to affective and cognitive processes, however, only skills can be observed in human behaviour (Hargie, 2010). If a person has good communication skills, others may observe effective and appropriate verbal and nonverbal communication behaviour in a certain context and relationship (Rubin, 1990; Valkonen, 2003). For instance, in the previous sales literature, interpersonal skills "include such skills as knowing how to cope with and resolve conflict and understanding, persuading and getting along with others, the ability to listen, and empathy" (Rentz et al. 2002, p. 15). According to a comprehensive literature review conducted for my first article (Koponen et al., 2019), several sales researchers have focused on adaptive selling behaviour (e.g., Weitz et al., 1986). Successful adaptation requires that salespeople understand the type of selling situation, the customer's expectations and needs, as well as the performance requirements (Limbu et al. 2016; Porter, Wiener & Franckwick, 2003). In addition, sales researchers have found that a salesperson's customer-oriented behaviour predicts relationship development (Williams, 1998), customer satisfaction (Lussier & Hartmann, 2017), and performance (Plouffe, Hulland & Wachner, 2009; Singh & Venugopal, 2015). Furthermore, many studies have investigated salespeople's listening skills which have been found to enhance trust (e.g., Ramsey & Sohi, 1997) and the relationship quality (Drollinger & Comer, 2013). Additionally, Guenzi et al. (2016) revealed that a salesperson's personal selling skills enhance their performance.

The cognitive communication dimension (Rubin, 1990; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984) relates to knowledge of appropriate and effective communication. In the communication literature, interactants are often thought to require both content and procedural knowledge (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002). Here, content knowledge means knowledge and understanding of the nature, norms, and rules of relationships between people and different types of communication situations. Procedural knowledge, instead, is related to knowledge of different processes, for instance knowledge about problem solving procedures, understanding how to set goals and prioritize them, and knowledge on explaining and predicting other people's communication behaviour (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002). Moreover, researchers have differentiated between meta-cognitive communication skills from the cognitive dimension. Meta-cognitive communication skills refer to knowledge of one's own cognitive and emotional processes (Laajalahti, 2014; Valkonen, 2003). Previous studies in the B2B relationship selling research field have pointed out the importance of procedural knowledge for instance related to different cultures (Bush et al., 2001; Chaisrakeo & Speece, 2004), but have not emphasised meta-cognition.

The affective communication dimension refers to feelings and attitudes towards interaction and the motivation to engage in interaction (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002). According to Valkonen (2003), motivation is a crucial element of ICC. She explains that even highly skilful people are not automatically effective communicators, if they are not willing to fully apply their skills. Related to the affective aspect of communication, previous sales studies have focused on communication apprehension and anxiety of salespeople (e.g., Verbeke & Bagozzi, 2000), or on the emotional intelligence of salespeople (e.g. Kidwell et al. 2011). According to Mayer and Salovey (1997, p. 10), emotional intelligence is the "ability to perceive, appraise, and express emotion; to access and/or generate feelings when they facilitate thought; to understand emotion and emotional knowledge; and to regulate emotions to promote educational and intellectual growth". It is important to note that the core communication dimensions (behavioural, affective and cognitive) are interconnected, and all dimensions are needed to communicate in a competent manner.

This theoretical understanding forms the theoretical framework in my first article (Koponen et al., 2019), and it also describes my pre-conceptions of the research phenomena under study in this entire dissertation.

2.2.3 Social presence in digital sales communication

Digital sales communication, such as video calls and online chats, have become far more popular than traditional in-person face-to-face interaction in today's modern B2B relationship selling (McKinsey & Company, 2021). In digital sales communication it is important to convey social presence between interactants. For instance, firms can install interactive online chat features on their webstore to bring a greater level of social presence to it (Ogonowski et al., 2014). Social presence can be defined in many ways, and researchers have approached the phenomena from various perspectives. Several e-commerce studies have adopted a one-dimensional model of social presence (see, e.g., Gefen & Straub, 2004; Ogonowski et al., 2014) defining social presence based on Short et al. (1976) and focusing on investigating the capacity of the website to convey a sense of human sociability and warmth (Lu et al., 2016).

Sallnäs, Rassmus-Gröhn and Sjöström (2000, p. 462) state that "social presence refers to the feeling of being socially present with another person at a remote location". Conventionally, social presence theory states (Short et al., 1976) that the degree of social presence varies depending on the communication channel. Short and colleagues (1976) ague that communication channels have different capacities to transmit information through nonverbal and verbal communication messages. That is, communication is effective and appropriate if the communication channel has the social presence required to accomplish the task (Sallnäs et al., 2000).

Referring to Short et al. (1976), social presence has a continuum. Most social presence is transmitted via face-to-face interaction, which is the richest communication medium. On the opposite side of the continuum are communication channels with the least social presence, such as text-based, written communication. Tasks and responsibilities that are complex in nature and involve applying interpersonal communication skills, such as problem-solving, negotiating or conflict management and resolution, require higher social presence than tasks that require routine information exchange (Sallnäs et al., 2000). B2B relationship selling involves various tasks that require high amounts of social presence, such as identifying customers' needs and problems, offering solutions, negotiating, and handling complaints. Therefore, B2B salespeople need solid interpersonal communication skills (Koponen, Julkunen & Asai, 2019) and they need to understand that B2B sales interaction involves a great deal of social presence also in online communication context.

On the other hand, other researchers than Short et al. (1976), have defined social presence as a multi-dimensional construct which includes the perception of others, the social presence of the web, and the social presence of interaction with sellers (Lu et al., 2016). In my second article (Koponen & Rytsy, 2020) I focus on the social presence in interaction with sellers (Caspi & Blau, 2008; Lu et al., 2016). Referring to Garrison et al. (2000), Garrison and Anderson (2003) and Rourke et al. (1999), I define social presence in interaction with customers and salespeople as the ability of the participants to project themselves socially and affectively in sales interaction. I explore how a social presence is embedded in text-based sales interaction (in online B2B chat conversations).

Researchers who have also defined social presence as the participants' ability to project themselves socially and affectively in online discussions (Garrison et al., 2000; Garrison & Anderson, 2003; Rourke et al., 1999) have suggested three categories of how social presence is manifested in online discussions. These are presented in Table 8 below.

Table 8. Categories of social presence as explained by Rourke et al. (1999)

Type of response	Example
Affective response	- Expressing emotions and humour. - Self-disclosure.
Interactive response	- Replying to others. - Referring to others' messages. - Expressing agreement. - Asking questions.
Cohesive response	- Activities that build and sustain a sense of group commitment (such as greetings and addressing participants by name).

The categorizations shown in Table 8 were applied when investigating online group discussions (Rourke et al., 1999) and social presence has been investigated as a projection of the self in online learning environments (Garrison et al., 2000; Garrison and Anderson, 2003; Rourke et al., 1999). I follow the same theoretical idea (see Koponen & Rytsy, 2020) exploring the social presence in B2B online chat conversations. I have chosen this approach since this way I was able to focus on actual observed communication between salespeople and customers.

2.2.4 Social penetration theory and self-disclosure

Social penetration theory (SPT) (Altman, 1993; Altman & Taylor, 1973; Altman *et al*., 1981) has its origins in the communication research field. The theory explains the interpersonal relationship development process over time in phases and assumes that interpersonal relationships typically become more trusting as they gradually move from a superficial stage towards deeper stages as partners gradually reveal personal information about themselves (Altman & Taylor, 1973, p. 10). In SPT, relationships, their development, and their deterioration have been described as communicative processes in which "people construct, reconstruct, and deconstruct their relationships via changes in verbal and nonverbal communication" (Mongeau & Miller Henningsen, 2008, p. 365). Even though SPT describes the development of interpersonal relationships in phases, the theory acknowledges the dialectical and cyclical nature of relationship maturity (Mongeau & Miller Henningsen, 2008).

Self-disclosure described in SPT refers to the communication mechanism of telling another person about oneself (Mongeau & Miller Henningsen, 2008). According to Derlega and Grzelak (1979, p. 152), "self-disclosure includes any information that refers to the self, including personal states, dispositions, events in the past, and plans for the future. It can be objectively defined as any verbal message that formally begins with the word 'I' (for instance, 'I think', 'I feel') or any other verbal message about the self." Therefore, self-disclosure always includes a decision whether to reveal one's thoughts, feelings or experiences to another person, and at what level of intimacy to disclose personal, or even sensitive, information.

The movement of self-disclosure is described by Altman and Taylor (1973) with an onion metaphor suggesting layers of self-disclosure: when people disclose personal information about themselves, the layers of the onion are peeled away, which signifies the development of the relationship. Altman and Taylor suggested surface, peripheral, intermediate and core levels of self-disclosure, which are summarized in the following Table 9.

Table 9. Layers of self-disclosure in SPT as described by Altman and Taylor (1973)

Self-disclosure	Description of the layer
The surface layer	The surface layer is seen by others and includes only very general information concerning oneself (e.g., one's height, weight, and gender).
The peripheral layer	At the peripheral layer more information is revealed, albeit the information is still fairly general, and of the sort a person could reveal in almost any social circumstances (e.g., one's first name, educational background, and occupation).
The intermediate layer	The intermediate layer contains information, that while not hidden, is shared with other people infrequently.
The core layer	The core layer contains private information disclosed only with caution, such as deep feelings, values, and inner personal thoughts.

Altman and Taylor (1973) presented four stages of relationship development defined which are described by the depth and breadth of self-disclosure as well as evaluation of the relational costs and rewards of the relationship. The depth of self-disclosure is connected to the idea of how personal the shared information is, and the breadth of self-disclosure refers to the number of topics discussed. If the disclosure and the relationship are rewarding to the partners, and if there is trust between partners, the relationship may deepen. Furthermore, for relationship development to happen, the self-disclosure is expected to be reciprocal.

The relational cost and reward evaluation introduced in SPT (Altman & Taylor, 1973) is closely linked to the customer relationship development process. However, relational partners not only assess the rewards and costs of the relationship but also use the information to predict future costs and rewards. An exchange refers to a transfer of something and expecting to gain something in return. However, a social exchange includes the human element and therefore it is somewhat different to an economic exchange. Furthermore, an economic exchange typically involves legal obligation and demands an exact specification of the rewards and costs of both parties (including also bargaining or negotiation), but a social exchange relies on trust and goodwill and therefore a social exchange is voluntary. A social exchange also leaves the relational costs and rewards open (Stafford, 2008). When people receive social rewards from others, they feel a sense of obligation (Mongeau & Miller Henningsen, 2008) which refers to a feeling of a need to pay things back.

In SPT, it is acknowledged that relationships may involve reduced intimacy, disengagement, and dissolution. Furthermore, as the rewards decline and the costs increase at the more intimate levels of communication, the social penetration process will reverse, and the relationship will begin to fragment (Mongeau & Miller Henningsen, 2008).

Prior research has deployed SPT to explore close relationships (friendships and romances, see Littlejohn, 1999), relationships in the healthcare context (see Bylund *et al*., 2012), and ethical reasoning in the field of business (Baack *et al*., 2000). Based on the literature review conducted for my third article (Koponen & Julkunen, forthcoming) some studies in the sales and marketing literature have adapted SPT (Hansen & Riggle, 2009; Johnston et al., 2012; Liu & Gao, 2014; Arli et al., 2018), but these studies did not apply SPT to investigate B2B customer relationship development at the interpersonal level. Prior sales research has shown that open communication persuades customers to trust salespeople (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). It can be expected that self-disclosure is vital to establishing, developing, and maintaining relationships between people (Altman and Taylor, 1973) and more specifically between customers and salespeople (Haytko, 2004).

To summarise my theoretical choices, I have conducted the Table 10 which provides a summary to illustrate how the selected theoretical constructs and approaches are connected with my articles. Furthermore, I explain the benefits of choosing and applying each theoretical construct and approach.

Table 10. Key theoretical constructs and theories in each article

Sub-study	Theoretical constructs and approaches	Benefits of choosing the theoretical constructs/ approaches
Article I (Koponen et al., 2019)	Interpersonal communication competence (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). ICC consists of affective, cognitive and behavioural dimensions (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984; 2002).	Instead of a fragmented understanding, with the ICC concept I am able to provide a comprehensive theoretical understanding of sales communication competence in a modern B2B relationship selling context, taking into consideration behavioural, affective and cognitive dimensions.
Article II (Koponen & Rytsy, 2020)	Social presence is understood as interaction with sellers (Caspi & Blau, 2008; Lu et al., 2016). Social presence emerges in interaction with customers and sellers and is understood as the ability of the participants to project themselves socially and affectively in digital sales communication (see Garrison et al., 2000; Garrison & Anderson, 2003; Rourke et al., 1999).	Social presence provides a theoretical lens to investigate digital sales communication. During online chat conversations, salespeople and customers do not meet in-person and face-to-face, and therefore we need new constructs to understand digital sales communication. Social presence is one useful construct for that.

Sub-study	Theoretical constructs and approaches	Benefits of choosing the theoretical constructs/ approaches
Article III (Koponen & Julkunen, forthcoming)	SPT explains interpersonal relationship development over time in phases via the process of relational cost and reward evaluation and self-disclosure (Altman, 1993; Altman & Taylor, 1973; Altman, Vinsel, & Brown, 1981). In SPT the term “social penetration” is used to denote a gradual increase in self-disclosure during the relationship development process (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Self-disclosure is the process of telling another person about oneself (Mongeau & Miller Henningsen, 2008, p. 366). Relational cost and reward evaluation are a salesperson’s evaluations of the relational costs and rewards related to a specific customer relationship (Moon & Bonney, 2007).	SPT focuses on interpersonal relationship development and the theory provides theoretical constructs through which I am able to investigate how B2B customer relationships evolve. It shows the communication mechanism that drives the customer relationship development at the interpersonal level.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 QUALITATIVE RESEARCH APPROACH

This dissertation follows a qualitative research approach commonly used in social sciences and business studies (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Puusa & Juuti, 2020). I have chosen a qualitative research approach as it is suitable to produce contextual knowledge of the phenomena under study (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). Furthermore, a qualitative approach is suitable when the aim of the investigation is to increase understanding of a phenomena that is abstract and is scarcely studied empirically (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016; Savolainen, 2014). As there is no existing understanding of the phenomena under investigation—previous studies have not yet conceptualized sales communication competence in a modern B2B relationship selling context—I wanted to investigate how to understand and define the concept. Qualitative research approach is suitable to investigate phenomena that need deeper conceptualization (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016) and this was therefore an appropriate choice for this study.

My dissertation is connected with the **interpretive research paradigm** (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015, p. 50–58) in business research (Puusa & Juuti, 2020, p. 38–39). Interpretivism has developed as a response to the social scientific investigations in the 1800s and the 1900s (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015). According to Croucher & Cronn-Mills (2015, p. 52) scholars such as Georg Wilhelm Hegel (1770–1831), Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), Ferdinand Tönnies (1855–1936), Max Weber (1864–1920), and Georg Simmel (1858–1918) were pioneers in testing the idea of *Verstehen* (which refers to an interpretive approach to social science). They claimed that methods applied in natural sciences were inappropriate for investigating human behaviour because such methods did not consider individual social processes, or cultural norms, symbols and values. Today, the interpretivist paradigm is widely used in different disciplines including hermeneutics, symbolic interactionism and phenomenology (see Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015).

According to Puusa and Juuti (2020) interpretative research aims to interpret subjective meanings connected with certain situations or contexts. Croucher and Cronn-Mills (2015) explain that the interpretative research paradigm concentrates on the belief that reality is constructed through subjective perceptions and interpretations of reality. Therefore, researchers in an interpretive paradigm investigate the social construction of meaning through the analysis of individual intentions, goals and purposes (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015). The researcher's role is active in the research process and in interpreting meanings that are based on people's subjective understanding of their experiences (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015; Puusa & Juuti, 2020). With qualitative research methods it is possible to explore the meanings that the participants of the research give to their experiences and perceptions regarding interpersonal communication competence as well as sales communication in online B2B chat conversations and in the long-term customer relationships development process. The strength of a qualitative research design, such as this, is in its capacity to provide situated insights and rich details, however it can be criticized for not being able to produce results that can be generalized to a wider population (see Puusa & Juuti, 2020).

As a research phenomenon, sales communication competence is linked to the construct of interpersonal communication competence (ICC) (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984; 2002; 2011). This theoretical construct, ICC, consists of behavioural, cognitive and affective dimensions (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984; 2002; 2011) which I have elaborated in the theoretical part of this dissertation. ICC can be only partially observed. We can see the behavioural dimension—interpersonal communication skills—in observed communication behaviour, but affective and cognitive dimensions are not similarly observable (Laajalahti, 2014). Therefore, to fully capture the essence of sales communication competence and gain an understanding of the behavioural, affective and cognitive dimensions of ICC in the context of modern B2B relationship selling, I needed to explore the meanings that the salespeople give to their experiences and perceptions regarding ICC in their work. This is a self-reporting approach to studying ICC (self-perceived interpersonal communication competence) (Jablin & Sias, 2001), and represents an individual-level exploration of ICC.

Besides focusing on self-perceived interpersonal communication competence (see Jablin & Sias, 2001) at the individual level, I added an understanding of sales communication competence by investigating two communication contexts that I found important in modern B2B relationship selling: digital sales communication in online chat conversations between salespeople and their customers, who are at different phases of the customer relationship (Koponen & Rytsy, 2020), and long-term customer relationships development at the interpersonal level (Koponen & Julkunen, forthcoming). These two investigations focus on the relationship level. When investigating digital sales communication, I made interpretations based on sales conversations in natural settings between salespeople and their customers in online B2B chats. Furthermore, when investigating the long-term customer relationship development process, I focused on the meanings that the salespeople give to self-disclosure, business disclosure, as well as relational cost and reward evaluation during the long-term customer relationship process. Therefore, these two studies do not represent self-reporting techniques which can be applied when investigating ICC (see Jablin & Sias, 2001). Instead, based on the findings of these two relationship-level studies (Koponen & Rytsy, 2020; Koponen & Julkunen, forthcoming), I as a researcher have made interpretations of what should be added to the understanding of sales communication competence construct formed in the first article (Koponen et al., 2019). Therefore, I see this as an other-reporting technique (Jablin & Sias, 2001; Laajalahti, 2014) in a sense, that through my interpretations, I provide more understanding on other-perceived sales communication competence in the modern B2B relationship selling context.

Ontological assumptions. Connected with the interpretative research paradigm, I believe that reality is socially constructed by interconnected patterns of communication (see also Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). My ontological assumptions are related to relativism suggesting that multiple realities exist. According to Guba and Lincoln (1994, p. 110) relativism means that "realities are apprehendable in the form of multiple, intangible mental constructions, socially and experientially based, local and specific in nature (although elements are often shared among many individuals and even across cultures), and depend for their form and content on the individual persons or groups holding the constructions”. Therefore, people’s or groups’ constructions are not “true” in any absolute sense, but those constructions can be understood as more or less sophisticated (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Epistemological assumptions. In this dissertation, my epistemological assumptions are tied to subjectivism (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). That is, knowledge and understanding are created jointly in interaction between the investigator and respondents. As an investigator, I am not free from my pre-conceptions and therefore I have to admit that the results of my inquiry are formed through my and my co-authors’ interpretation of the qualitative research data. When evaluating my dissertation in chapter 5.4., I explain my previous experience of studying and teaching international business and sales management and having company collaboration and practical experience on B2C and B2B sales. I have also acknowledged my pre-conceptions in my research articles, and I admit I have a broad pre-understanding of interpersonal sales communication, customer relationships, and social penetration theory. My methodological choices are elaborated next.

3.2 RESEARCH METHOD AND DATA COLLECTION

The research methods, data collection and data analysis are explained in Table 11 and further elaborated in the following chapters.

Table 11. Research methods, data collection and data analysis

Article	Method	Data analysis
Article I	- 39 semi-structured interviews - participants: CEOs, international B2B sales managers, salespeople and sales communication educators. - expert interviews (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015; Morse et al., 2002) including participants with the best possible knowledge of the research topic.	- Theory-driven theme analysis. - Systematic process of combination (Dubois & Gabbe, 2002).
Article II	- 157 online B2B chat conversations collected in a case company. - The conversations occurred between customers (n=157) and chat-sellers (n=9). - The case company's CRM system was examined to specify buyer types.	- A theory-driven theme analysis focusing on social presence and functions of the chat.
Article III	- 47 semi-structured interviews - participants: CEOs, international B2B sales managers, salespeople - expert interviews (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015; Morse et al., 2002) with participants with the best possible knowledge of the research topic.	- Theme analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). - The analysis focused on the respondents' experiences and on the meanings (Polkinhorne, 1995) they give to self-disclosure and cost and reward evaluation.

3.2.1 Data collection: Article I

For the first article (Koponen et al., 2019), data were collected via expert interviews (N=39) (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015). I sought a sample containing participants who had the best possible knowledge of the research topic (Morse et al., 2002). Accordingly, I first conducted semi-structured interviews (n = 29) with sales managers, salespeople, and CEOs from four companies representing different industries. I chose to interview salespeople or sales managers who were involved in international B2B relationship selling including solution offering to produce valid conclusions (Morse et al., 2002).

These interviews were mainly conducted during in-person, face-to-face meetings.

In addition to the salespeople and sales managers, I interviewed sales communication educators (n=10), who had experience in teaching B2B sales in academia. The interviews were mainly conducted via Skype as the sales educators lived abroad. I applied the sales educators' group as a comparative sample to improve the reliability of the findings (Morse et al., 2002). New data were collected until effective saturation of categories was achieved (Morse et al., 2002). The interviewees were assigned pseudonyms.

I applied selection criteria to find participants for the study: they were to have had more than 10-years' experience in international B2B selling, they were to have conducted sales in at least three different countries, and they needed to have an understanding of long-term customer relationships. Based on Deeter-Schmelz and Kennedy's (2011) analysis, the educators were selected from universities which offered sales as a major or minor subject. The universities were located in the United States, France, the United Kingdom and Finland. The sales educators had to have at least three years of experience in teaching sales.

The interviews were conducted in 2013–2017 either in English or in Finnish by two researchers. The duration of the interviews was between 60 and 180 minutes. Appendix I covers the questions applied in the interviews to understand the perceptions of the interviewees (Miles & Huberman, 1994). A database was created to organize the data and ensure validity.

3.2.2 Data collection: Article II

Empirical data for the second article (Koponen & Rytsy, 2020) was collected from a case company in 2014–2017 using existing online B2B chat conversations (N=157) between salespeople and customers. The case company allowed the data collection in natural settings immediately after the B2B online chat service was established on their website. The company offers cloud-based services (Obal, 2013) online to international and domestic customers. Their typical customer is a small or medium-sized enterprise.

The online chat feature was added to the case company's website in 2014 and it was available during office hours. The online chat was text based providing an immediate opportunity to communicate with the case company's salesperson. The online chat conversations were recorded automatically, and the customers were aware of it as the case firm's privacy policy clarified that online chat data would be recorded and it could be used for research purposes. For research purposes, the chat conversations were downloaded as Excel documents showing who the producer of the data was. Here, a conversation refers to chat messages written by a customer or a salesperson into a chat box, and which are then followed by the other party's message(s). In total 2,251 communication units (referring to individual message lines) were identified for analysis. On average, one sales conversation consisted of 10 communication units. In addition, the case company's CRM data was applied to identify the stage of the customer relationship and to classify different customer types. A database was created to organize the data and ensure validity.

3.2.3 Data collection: Article III

For the third article (Koponen & Julkunen, forthcoming), 47 expert interviews were conducted by two researchers to gain a sample including participants with the best possible understanding of the research matter (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2014). Two researchers interviewed B2B salespeople in Scandinavia including sales managers, CEOs, and salespeople from companies representing different industries (hereafter, *salespeople*). From these participants, 29 were the same as were interviewed for the article I (Koponen et al., 2019), however, regarding this article, the interviews focused on long-term B2B customer relationship development. The reliability of the study was guaranteed by the longitudinal and detailed data collection conducted over 10 years (2007–2017). My co-author had started the longitudinal data collection already in 2007, and she invited me to join her in research collaboration in 2013. Therefore, we continued the data collection together starting in 2013.

The B2B salespeople had over 10-years' experience in B2B sales, and they had long-term customer relationships lasting over five years. To ensure the richness of information advocated by Guenzi and Storbacka (2015), the salespeople were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews with open questions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Again, new data were collected until effective saturation of the studied categories was achieved (Morse et al., 2002). The interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes each. The interviewees were assigned pseudonyms. The interviewees were encouraged to express their own views on long-term B2B customer relationships. They were asked to choose two important and long-term customer relationships with a high economic outcome in their customer portfolio. The interview questions are presented in Appendix II. Most of the interviews were done during in-person, face-to-face meetings, and they were all tape recorded and carefully transcribed. A database was created to organize the data and ensure validity.

3.3 DATA ANALYSIS

3.3.1 Analysis in Article I

The analysis in the first article (see Koponen et al., 2019) represents an abductive approach to sales research (Dubois & Gabbe, 2002). Therefore, a theoretical framework was established at the beginning of the study (Dubois & Gabbe, 2002). The tightness of the theoretical framework was based on my preconceptions as a researcher and on the previous understanding of the three dimensions of ICC (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984), which are already explained in the theoretical part of this dissertation. Still, the idea in an abductive research approach is that preconceptions and the theoretical framework may evolve during the study as the researchers are inspired by empirical observations (Dubois & Gabbe, 2002, p. 558). Therefore, in the analysis a systematic process of combination was applied (Dubois & Gabbe, 2002).

The transcribed interviews with the sales educators and B2B salespeople were organized into two datasets. Each dataset was analysed by applying a theme analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the first phase, the two researchers familiarized themselves with the datasets to gain a holistic picture of it. In the second phase, initial codes were formed based on the data collected from the salespeople. Simultaneously, the researcher's preconceptions and the theoretical framework were used to code theoretically interesting features across the entire dataset. Thereafter, appropriate data were connected to each code.

The analysis moved on to a third phase in which potential themes were sought. Relevant codes were connected to potential themes, and labelled as sub-categories of each theme. The themes were given a name. As a result three themes were found to be consistent with the theoretical framework (behavioural communication dimension, affective communication dimension and cognitive communication dimension), and one new theme was found to be connected with sales-specific knowledge and skills (which we named sales acumen). Appropriate and illustrative excerpts from the data were selected to exemplify each theme.

Moreover, the data gathered from the sales educators was analysed in a similar manner as described above. Lastly, a cross-case analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) was conducted by comparing the themes and sub-categories found in both datasets.

3.3.2 Analysis in Article II

For the analysis of the second article (see Koponen & Rytsy, 2020), 157 online chat conversations were selected. I left out chat conversations that did not include at least one question and one reply. I systematized the data based on customer types, which was identified through the company's CRM data. The customer types are summarized in Table 12 below.

Table 12. Customer types in the data

Definition and number of customers	Relationship phase based on Dwyer et al. (1987)	Information from the case company's CRM regarding the customer
New customer (n = 101)	Awareness	No proven prior interaction with the case company.
Existing prospect (n = 19)	Exploration	Potential customer with some prior interaction with the company.
Existing customer (n = 37)	Expansion	Current customer or a partner. Long-term relationship with much prior interaction with the case company.

A theory-driven theme analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Leek et al., 2017) was applied to code the online chat conversations for social presence and the customer's reason for using the chat. Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 79) state that a "thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data".

First, I familiarized myself with the data to gain a holistic picture of it. Then, based on the identified customer types, I separated the data into three datasets. The analysis was driven by research the questions, and I formed initial codes related to the social presence from each of the data-sets. As explained in the article (Koponen & Rytsy, 2020), I used the idea of categorizing social presence from Garrison et al. (2000), Garrison and Anderson (2003) and Rourke et al. (1999). I systematically coded the datasets and found interactive and affective responses. I was not able to find any cohesive responses (see Rourke et al., 1999). However, I found a relationship maintenance category that referred to responses aiming at maintaining the existing customer relationship.

After this, I moved on to analyse the customer's reasons for using the chat. I named the reasons (themes) and counted the number of utterances in each theme. Thereafter, I selected relevant quotes from the data to illustrate my findings (see Koponen & Rytsy, 2020).

3.3.3 Analysis in Article III

The data analysis aimed to explain the subjective meanings (Thompson et al.,1989) of the interviewees utilizing a theme analysis process (Braun and Clarke, 2006). We followed the principles of reliability and aimed at consistency in the analysis between the researchers (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2016). First, two researchers scrutinized the transcribed interviews to acquire as full a picture of the data as possible. Then, we as researchers separately organized the data under the two main themes of the study: relational cost and reward evaluation and self-disclosure. Simultaneously, both researchers used their preconceptions to systematically code theoretically interesting features of the data across the entire dataset.

Second, the researchers identified four meanings related to the main themes (relational cost evaluation, relational reward evaluation, business-related disclosure, and self-disclosure). Third, they generated data relevant to those meanings. Fourth, the researchers compared their individual analysis of thematic meanings with each other and discussed the differences, resolving instances of disagreement through discussion and further analysis of the interviews. When a common understanding was reached, the researchers built the final version of the findings together. We developed an analysis table to undertake a systematic comparison of the meanings in different customer relationship phases. The phases of the customer relationships were then identified based on diverse meanings linked to relational cost and reward evaluations, self-disclosure and business disclosure. Moreover, we identified meanings related to the deterioration of B2B relationships.

4 RESEARCH RESULTS

The results of this dissertation are originally presented in peer-reviewed articles, of which two are published (Koponen et al., 2019; Koponen & Rytsy, 2020) and one is under final review round (Koponen & Julkunen, forthcoming). In the summary part of my dissertation, I summarize the key results from each of the three articles, however, examples from the data are included only in the original peer-reviewed articles. Due to research ethics, I am not able to publish the same examples and illustrations twice. In Articles I and III, examples are provided from the transcribed interview data. In Article II, examples are taken from text-based online chat conversations. Particularly in qualitative studies, trustworthiness is supported with illustrations and examples from the original data (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016; Puusa & Juuti, 2020). Therefore, I hope the reader is able to read Articles I, II and III to see the original illustrations and examples from the data. The examples and illustrations provide a much richer and much more detailed description of my results compared to following summaries.

4.1 SALES COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

The objective of the first article was to understand what type of interpersonal communication competence sales managers and salespeople need as they are conducting B2B relationship selling that includes solution offering. The purpose was also to contribute to the existing theoretical understanding of interpersonal communication competence and conceptualize a new construct namely sales communication competence (SCC).

The findings let me form a new conceptualization of sales communication competence in international B2B relationship selling including four dimensions: (1) a behavioural communication dimension, (2) an affective communication dimension, (3) a cognitive communication dimension and (4) a sales acumen dimension. All these dimensions are important, and they include several sub-categories which are summarized in Table 13 below and already published in my first article (Koponen et al., 2019).

Table 13. Sales communication competence dimensions as presented in Koponen, Julkunen and Asai (2019)

Sales communication competence dimensions	
Behavioural communication dimension	
Relational communication skills	• Ability to establish contact and rapport • Ability to reduce tension and small talk skills • Ability to create trust • Ability to listen • Ability to ask questions and engage in a dialogue • Self-disclosure skills • Conflict management and resolution skills • Ability to accept personal invitations
Personal selling skills	• Networking skills in the prospecting phase • Impression management skills during first meetings • Listening skills and ability to ask questions to determine customers' needs and to gain more specific information • Adaptability during sales process • Presentation skills • Argumentation skills • Nonverbal communication skills • Improvisation skills • Negotiation skills related to the solution/product/service/delivery options • Ability to manage emotional reactions regarding counter arguments • Ability to make decisions and close the deal
Language skills	• Writing skills (mother tongue) • English language skills • Basics of the target country's language skills
Affective communication dimension	
Motivation	• Motivation to interact with different customers • Intrinsic motivation to learn more about people and sales
Positive and open attitude	• Positive attitude and curiosity toward interacting with people • Open attitude and empathy towards different people and their cultures

Sales communication competence dimensions	
Cultural sensitivity	• Respecting other cultures • Ability to show sensitivity towards different people and their cultures
Cognitive communication dimension	
Knowledge on communication	• Knowledge of different negotiation styles and tactics • Knowledge of different patterns regarding nonverbal communication behaviour • Theoretical understanding of communication
Cultural knowledge	• Knowing and understanding the national culture of the target country • Understanding cultural differences both at the national level and between generations • Understanding how to save face in interaction
Meta-cognition	• Thinking and reflecting on one's own and others communication behaviour
Sales acumen	
Strategic understanding of B2B sales	• Understanding of the buyer's behaviour • Understanding of the sales process • Understanding (global) business models • Knowing CRM systems, technological knowledge and capabilities related to sales area • Strategic understanding of the customer's business; adding value and creating common goals with the customer
Leadership skills	• Understanding how to lead sales teams and collaborate in teams • Understanding how to motivate salespeople and sales managers • Analytical skills and creativity in problem-solving • Time management skills

4.2 SOCIAL PRESENCE IN ONLINE B2B CHAT CONVERSATIONS

The aim of the second article (Koponen & Rytsy, 2020) was to understand how social presence is embedded in online B2B chat conversations between salespeople and customers who are at different phases of the customer relationship. Furthermore, the aim was to examine customers' reasons for using the online chat (expressed as functions). The findings showed how social presence varied in online chat conversations between salespeople and customers who were at different phases of the customer relationship.

First, the **social presence and functions of the online chat for new customers (n = 101)** showed that social presence included interactive and affective social presence, and the functions focused mainly on information searching. An *interactive social presence* emerged as new customers asked the salesperson several types of questions. Most often they asked questions to gain more precise information on SaaS services or pricing. They expressed their needs and business for to which they were searching for solutions. They asked detailed questions related to software integration and possible solutions. Some (n =2) wanted to make a purchase. Moreover, many new customers asked the salesperson to contact them via another communication channel (e.g., phone or email). An *affective social presence* emerged when new customers expressed positive or negative emotions. Emotional expressions were related to either having a good or bad customer service, or not finding enough in-depth information related to SaaS services. However, self-disclosure or the use of humour, which could be part of affective social presence, was not found. The *functions of the online chat* for new customers were: to search for information, problem-solving, to initiate interaction with the solution seller, purchasing, and giving feedback. They mainly used online chat tools to ask how to find information on the website or to ask for more information about the SaaS services, and how well the services met their needs and solved their problems.

Second, key findings related to social presence and the functions of online chat for existing prospects (n = 19) included an interactive and affective social presence and the functions were mainly connected with information seeking and asking for further interaction with sellers. *Interactive social presence* emerged when asking different types of questions, mainly related to case company's SaaS services and pricing. Furthermore, customers asked the seller to contact them via another communication channel or they expressed their willingness to make a purchase/start collaboration with the company. *Affective social presence* was shown through negative emotional expressions focusing on customer complaints. *Functions related to chatting online* related to searching for information, asking for further interaction, purchasing and customer feedback.

Third, key findings related to social presence and the functions of the online chat for existing customers (n = 37) were connected to interactive, affective and relationship maintenance social presence; and multiple functions. *Interactive social presence* emerged when existing customers asked questions related to the case company's SaaS services, pricing, or when they requested the more experienced solution seller to contact them via another communication channel. They also wanted to discuss in the chat room how the new service they had already bought had met their expectations and fulfilled their needs. Some customers requested a professional opinion regarding other service providers. *Affective social presence* was shown as existing customers' self-disclosure and in their expressions of negative emotions, which were related to customer complaints. Interestingly, self-disclosure existed only in the chat discussions with existing customers. Self-disclosure was social in nature, which means that the existing customers voluntarily revealed personal information about themselves which was not related to sales, exchange or transaction. *Functions of the online chat* included searching for information, requesting further interaction with a solution seller, problem-solving, giving feedback, becoming acquainted with salespersons, bringing in another potential client, and socializing.

4.3 THE ROLE OF SELF-DISCLOSURE AND RELATIONAL COST AND REWARD EVALUATION IN B2B CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP DEVELOPMENT

The objective of the third article (Koponen & Julkunen, forthcoming) was to understand how customer relationships evolve at the interpersonal level via the salesperson's self-disclosure and relational cost and reward evaluation. The purpose was to contribute to existing social penetration theory (SPT).

The findings indicate that the salespeople engaged in sales communication via multiple communication channels with their customers during the long-term customer relationship (e.g., email, phone, face-to-face meetings, video calls, videoconferences). The findings revealed that long-term B2B customer relationships evolve at the interpersonal level through a process of continuous relational cost and reward evaluation and self-disclosure. As a result, three relationship phases were found: becoming *business partners, collaborative partners,* and *collaborative and personal partners*. Mutual understanding and reciprocal self-disclosure was needed between partners at the interpersonal level in order to deepen the interpersonal relationship. However, not all customer relationships evolve through all three phases and relationship deterioration may occur at any time during the process. The evolvement of the relationship was restricted if the partners were not willing to reveal highly personal information about themselves and become collaborative and personal partners.

The findings showed that the salespeople evaluated the relational costs and rewards as the relationship matured. The reward evaluations progressed from being purely task-oriented, to becoming customer-related, to ultimately including relationship-related benefits. In the first phase (becoming business partners), task-related benefits were related to having opportunities to build projects and forge profitable transactions between partners. Customer-related benefits included confirming the customer firm as profitable, which was required for building trust and establishing an interpersonal relationship with the customer. Relational costs emerged if the salesperson did not find the customer interesting as a person, and therefore, they did not want to move forwards towards sharing anything personal.

In the second phase (becoming collaborative partners) task-related benefits focused on the opportunity to develop a long-term business relationship by resolving business problems. Customer-related benefits included mutual trust and commitment between the customer and salesperson. Relationship-related benefits included having a considerable amount of interaction outside of work, having shared interests with the customer and having appropriately managed conflicts. Relational costs were related to issues preventing the relationship deepening: for example, the salespeople had concerns over revealing too much private information and making friends with the customer. If they did not want to make friends, they did not want to deepen the customer relationship further.

In the third phase (becoming business and personal partners) task-related benefits were related to a customer's degree of profitability, time-savings on business issues and the cost effectiveness of doing business with the customer. Customer-related benefits included personal value and satisfaction, deep trust, and commitment between partners. Relationship-related benefits were linked to having deep trust between partners and the possibility to share life philosophy and private issues with the partner. Salespeople were also engaged in the customer's private life and the partners provided mutual social support to each other. No relational costs were found.

The findings indicated that three different phases in long-term profitable customer relationships were characterized by different types of self-disclosure. In the first phase (business partners), self-disclosure emerged as general business-related disclosure (topics that the customer is interested to hear more about, such as an overview of the business and products/services offered) and general self-disclosure (small talk, talking about current affairs, pets, and family relations).

In the second phase (becoming collaborative partners) self-disclosure was found to be strategic business-related disclosure (discussing deeper strategic issues) and personal life self-disclosure (sharing aspects such as personal interests and hobbies; however, the salespeople felt it was more appropriate to talk about their own private issues rather than ask about the customer's private issues).

Finally, in the third phase (being collaborative and personal partners) the partners engaged in synergistic business-related disclosure (discussing strategic business topics and synergistic goals with a particular customer) and in-depth self-disclosure (sharing highly intimate topics such as political views, values, health conditions, philosophy, and even discussing various stigmas).

Given that SPT has previously mainly been used to investigate how close interpersonal relationships evolve, the findings provide a contextual extension to SPT. I show that self-disclosure in B2B customer relationships is not only related to the persons themselves, as described in SPT, but is also significantly business-related. Additionally, relational reward evaluations throughout the shifting of the customer relationship process can be linked to task-, customer-, and relationship-related benefits. Costs prevent the customer relationship deepening. Moreover, the customer relationship may deteriorate at any time during the relationship development process. Therefore, I suggest that SPT could be expanded to create a business and social penetration theory (BSPT).

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 KEY THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION OF THE ARTICLES

The main research question of this dissertation was: *How can sales communication competence be understood and defined in a modern B2B relationship selling context?* To explore how to understand and define sales communication competence in the content of modern B2B relationship selling, I formed five sub-questions and conducted three studies reported in three articles.

The dissertation makes several theoretical contributions to the field of B2B relationship selling which are explained in detail in each article. The following Table 14 summarises the key contribution of each article. After Table 14, I present the theoretical contribution and managerial implications of the entire dissertation.

In Article I (Koponen et al., 2019), the aim was to understand what type of interpersonal communication competence sales managers and salespeople need as they are conducting modern B2B relationship selling. The main contribution to the existing theoretical understanding of ICC in the field of relationship selling was to conceptualize a new construct: sales communication competence (SCC). Because interpersonal communication competence criteria can be defined differently in each profession/occupation and because there are diverse important communication contexts in each profession/occupation, I decided to investigate two important sales communication contexts in the field of B2B relationship selling: digital sales communication and long-term customer relationship development.

In Article II (Koponen & Rytsy, 2020), I focused on digital sales communication and my aim was to understand how social presence is embedded in online B2B chat conversations between salespeople and customers who are at diverse phases of the customer relationship. In addition, the aim was to examine various functions of the online chat conversations for different customers. The main contribution was to introduce a new theoretical category: relationship maintenance social presence.

In Article III (Koponen & Julkunen, forthcoming), I focused on long-term customer relationships and my aim was to understand how long-term B2B customer relationships evolve towards more personal and intimate relationships via salesperson's self-disclosure and relational cost and reward evaluation. The main contribution was to consider the existing social penetration theory (SPT) and provide a new theoretical model on the development of interpersonal B2B customer relationships through communication mechanisms (self-disclosure and relational cost and reward evaluation).

Table 14. Theoretical contributions of Articles I-III

Theoretical contributions of Articles I-III		
Article I	**Article II**	**Article III**
Theoretical contribution - New theoretical construct: sales communication competence. - In-depth understanding on behavioural, affective and cognitive communication dimension as well as sales acumen.	Theoretical contribution - New theoretical category: relationship maintenance social presence	Theoretical contribution - New theoretical model on the development of interpersonal B2B customer relationships through sales communication mechanisms (self-disclosure and relational cost and reward evaluation)

5.2 SALES COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE IN MODERN B2B SELLING CONTEXT

Taken together the results from Articles I, II and III, I form a comprehensive understanding of sales communication competence in a modern B2B relationship selling context. The following Figure 2 illustrates this new theoretical understanding.

As found in Article I (Koponen et al., 2019), to conduct effective, appropriate and ethical interpersonal sales communication with B2B customers in relationship selling, salespeople and sales managers need competence in sales communication. Sales communication competence in modern B2B relationship selling consists of sales acumen as well as cognitive, behavioural, and affective dimensions of communication. Competent sales communication has three important criteria: effectiveness, appropriateness and ethicality. This means, that the communicators (salespeople and customers) must be able to achieve desired or preferred outcomes of sales interaction in modern B2B relationship selling context. It also means that sales communication must be appropriate regarding the social norms, the relationship, communication channel, situation and cultural surroundings in which it occurs. Ethicality refers to the willingness and ability of the salesperson to take moral responsibility and to have the willingness to behave in a way which does not create distrust or insult others (e.g., the customer or other parties involved in modern B2B relationship selling process). This understanding forms the core of sales communication competence and is therefore placed in the middle of Figure 2.

The second layer in Figure 2 refers to multiple customer relationship phases. Article II (Koponen & Rytsy, 2020) showed how social presence varied in online chat conversations with customers who were in different phases of the customer relationship. Furthermore, in Article III (Koponen & Julkunen, forthcoming) I found that customer relationships have different phases as they move towards deeper levels at the interpersonal level. Therefore, I claim it is an important aspect of sales communication competence in a modern B2B relationship selling to be aware of the different customer relationship phases and different communication needs, wishes and demands that the customers have in these phases.

Furthermore, I claim that interpersonal sales communication has to be personified and customized according to the customer relationship phase, because B2B buyers increasingly prefer personalized and customized sales communication (Rangajaran et al., 2019). In the early phase (new customers, prospects) the customers are more interested in information seeking, problem solving and business-related communication than in personal-level communication. With new customers and prospects, it is appropriate to keep the sales communication focussed on the task and business levels. However, when the customer relationship matures and partners have an existing long-term customer relationship, the customers are more interested in relationship maintenance. Existing customers want to socialize and engage in self-disclosure also via online communication channels. Therefore, reciprocal personal sharing and self-disclosure become important in interpersonal sales communication. However, salespeople need to be sensitive and respect the customers' privacy boundaries, that is, their personal boundaries for sharing personal information.

The third layer in Figure 2 refers to multiple communication channels and combining in-person, face-to-face and digital sales communication based on the customer's preferences. Based on my findings in Articles II (Koponen & Rytsy, 2020) and III (Koponen & Julkunen, forthcoming), I claim that the interpersonal sales communication must be optimized across different communication channels which the customer prefers to use throughout the customer's purchasing journey. When using communication technology and engaging in digital sales communication, a social presence must be considered to convey verbal and nonverbal cues and build trust between partners. Furthermore, in B2B relationship selling salespeople need cultural knowledge and cultural sensitivity (see also Koponen et al., 2021). This claim is supported by the findings from my first article, in which I found that language skills, cultural sensitivity, motivation to interact with different customers and having a positive and open attitude towards them, are an important part of sales communication competence. Being aware of and understanding different nationalities is important both in domestic and international B2B relationship selling.

Figure 2. Sales communication competence in a modern B2B relationship selling context

I have further added the important aspects found in Articles II (Koponen & Rytsy, 2020) and III (Koponen & Julkunen, forthcoming) to Table 15. I have marked the additional aspects (knowledge on customer relationship phases and strategic understanding of multiple sales communication channels) with italics.

Table 15. Dimensions of the sales communication competence in a modern B2B relationship selling context

Sales communication competence dimensions in modern B2B relationship selling context	
Behavioural communication dimension	
Relational communication skills	• Ability to establish contact and rapport • Ability to reduce tension and small talk skills • Ability to create trust • Ability to listen • Ability to ask questions and engage in a dialogue • Self-disclosure skills • Conflict management and resolution skills • Ability to accept personal invitations
Personal selling skills	• Networking skills in the prospecting phase • Impression management skills during first meetings • Listening skills and the ability to ask questions to determine customer's needs and to gain more specific information • Adaptability during the sales process • Presentation skills • Argumentation skills • Nonverbal communication skills • Improvisation skills • Negotiation skills related to the solution/product/service/delivery options • Ability to manage emotional reactions regarding counter arguments • Ability to make decisions and close the deal
Language skills	• Writing skills (mother tongue) • English language skills • Basics of the target country's language skills
Affective communication dimension	
Motivation	• Motivation to interact with different customers • Intrinsic motivation to learn more about people and sales
Positive and open attitude	• Positive attitude and curiosity toward interacting with people • Open attitude and empathy towards different people and their cultures
Cultural sensitivity	• Respecting other cultures • Ability to show sensitivity towards different people and their cultures

Sales communication competence dimensions in modern B2B relationship selling context	
Cognitive communication dimension	
Knowledge on communication	• Knowledge of different negotiation styles and tactics • Knowledge of different patterns regarding nonverbal communication behaviour • Theoretical understanding of communication
Knowledge on customer relationship phases	• *Knowledge on customer relationship development process and the different phases* • *Knowledge on the customer's different communication needs and preferences in different phases of the relationship both in online and face-to-face communication settings* • *Understanding of how to develop the customer relationships towards deeper levels, if appropriate*
Cultural knowledge	• Knowing and understanding the national culture of the target country • Understanding cultural differences both at the national level and between generations • Understanding how to save face in interaction
Meta-cognition	• Thinking and reflecting on one's own and others communication behaviour
Sales acumen	
Strategic understanding of B2B sales	• Understanding of the buyer's behaviour • Understanding of the sales process • Understanding (global) business models • Knowing CRM systems, technological knowledge and capabilities related to sales area • Strategic understanding of the customer's business; adding value and creating common goals with the customer

Sales communication competence dimensions in modern B2B relationship selling context	
Strategic understand-ing of multiple sales communication channels	• *Strategic understanding of the adoption and usage of multiple sales communication channels during the sales process* • *Understanding the differences and similarities between online and in-person, face-to-face communication* • *Adapting to the customer's preferences regarding the communication technology and communication channel* • *Adapting to the customer's wishes related to personified communication* • *Understanding how social presence and the functions of the sales communication vary in different communication channels*
Leadership skills	• Understanding how to lead sales teams and collaborate in teams • Understanding how to motivate salespeople and sales managers • Analytical skills and creativity in problem-solving • Time management skills

5.3 MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The managerial implications are organised under the following themes: sales training for sales professionals, sales education, digital sales work and sales management.

Sales training for sales professionals. For managers it would be valuable to consider sales communication competence when recruiting and training new B2B salespeople. Companies spend large sums on training their salespeople in B2B sales, focusing on the sales process, sets of principles and techniques, personal selling skills, a wide range of selling tasks (Jobber et al., 2019), and new using technology (Habel et al., 2021). My findings help to select the necessary content for sales training by focusing on the key elements of sales communication competence in modern B2B relationship selling contexts.

Furthermore, sales training could focus on customer relationship management at the interpersonal level. Salespeople could be advised to recognize the appropriate B2B customer relationship level with particular customers. As the findings in Article III showed, not all salespeople (or their customers) want to have personal relationships with all of their partners. When focusing on customer relationships, salespeople in training could be asked to analyze the types of relationships they would like to build with their customers and the costs and rewards associated with different types of relationships. Furthermore, they could be directed to focus on which sub-type of business related disclosure and self-disclosure would benefit different types of relationships. In B2C sales settings, it has been found that a salesperson's intimate self-disclosure has a positive impact on the quality of sales interaction (Jacobs et al., 2001a; 2001b). Therefore, salespeople who are involved in online B2B customer service, could be taught how to elicit self-disclosure from customers and how to respond to them. In addition, they could be taught how to add self-disclosure to their own messages. Self-disclosure could be applied as a concrete tool in order to maintain long-term B2B customer relationships on online and hybrid communication channels.

Sales education. The findings of this dissertation could be applied when educating future business professionals and managers. In Article I (Koponen et al., 2019), it was recognized how significant it is for students to gain an understanding of real international B2B sales contexts. Therefore, when educating future managers, pedagogical principles could be based on the communication in the discipline's theoretical framework (Dannels, 2001), as well as situated learning theory, as I suggest in Article I. Situational learning theory emphasizes learning as increasing participation in communities of practice and calls for authentic learning activities and legitimate peripheral participation in. Based on the idea of learning by increasingly participating in communities of practice (Wenger, 2009), business students could first observe more experienced sales managers. Then, they could practice low-risk tasks themselves (Koponen & Julkunen, 2015) under the guidance of a facilitator, and handle more demanding tasks later on by participating in real communities of practice (for instance in a form of an internship).

Digital sales work. The findings from Article II (Koponen & Rytsy, 2020) are practically relevant from the perspective of digital sales work. First of all, customers expect to gain information fast and have immediate solutions to their problems even on online communication channels. Salespeople should therefore have an in-depth understanding of the firm's products and services, as well as sufficient sales communication competence. To successfully offer complex solutions for B2B customers, companies could consider offering richer communication channels for those purposes (see also Ogonowski et al., 2014).

The findings support the idea that online chat conversations as a sales communication channel added value for the case company. Online chat conversations are a communication channel which can bring in new customers. Online conversations may also strengthen the existing customer relationship. The findings can be applied when improving companies' online customer service and when improving the content of the website.

Sales management. Based on my findings, I argue that in B2B companies, managers could put more emphasis on interpersonal level strategic thinking alongside interorganizational level strategic considerations. Sales managers are responsible for managing and leading the sales process and the sales team (Jobber et al., 2019; Moncrief & Marshall, 2005), but interpersonal level relationships are dependent on the needs, wishes, objectives, privacy boundaries, and interpersonal communication competence of both parties. Therefore, I suggest sales managers consider an interpersonal sales communication strategy to best suit the diverse needs of B2B customers in the 2020s and enhance their customer experience management.

In the sales management cycle, the key steps are goal setting, designing the measures, organizing sales, actual sales work, assessing results, and controlling and re-evaluating the sales management practices (see Jobber et al., 2019). For instance, if the company wants to keep existing long-term B2B customer relationships and gain more long-term customer relationships in their customer portfolio during next five years (*goals*), this has to be considered in their yearly profit planning. There needs to be a vision regarding what kind of partnership types are wanted, how these partnership types can come true at the interpersonal level, and how these partnerships will be managed.

The findings of this study may inform managers in planning the partnership types in relation to customer relationship phases (do we want to become *business partners, collaborative partners,* or *collaborative and personal partners* with the customer and what will it take to be one?). When conducting the partnership agreement with the customer, a good and value-added customer experience should be ensured at the interorganizational and interpersonal levels. For instance, partners may negotiate and agree on appropriate digital sales communication channels and need for annual in-person, face-to-face meetings.

Furthermore, the company needs to decide the type of CRM-system it wants to use, and what crucial customer data needs to be written or uploaded to the selected CRM-system (*measures*). The findings of this study are useful when designing important questions related to customer relationships in the CRM-system. For instance, different layers of self-disclosure and business disclosure can be stored. When there is a turnover of salespeople, managers could then ensure that salespeople leaving the company do not walk away with all valuable interpersonal-level customer knowledge. Instead, they should transfer interpersonal information about the customer to their successors, however, at the same time keeping in mind how much personal information about the other person is ethical to disclose (also considering the General Data Protection Regulations, GDPR). To ensure successful information transition, managers could be required to systematically add the collection of interpersonal-level information to their CRM systems.

When *organizing the sales* and conducting the actual sales work, managers should ensure that salespeople are working according to a partnership agreement. They should allocate enough resources to the salespeople to nurture long-term customer relationships. At the sales team level, managers can share responsibility between team members for nurturing different types of customer relationships based on their salespeople's sales communication competence (see also Koponen *et al*., 2019). My findings have shown that not all salespeople (or their customers) want to reveal highly personal information about themselves and become collaborative and personal partners with customers. A salesperson's relational cost and reward evaluation as well as their self-disclosure may enhance or restrict the long-term B2B customer relationship maintenance and development process at the interpersonal level. Therefore, managers should train their salespeople to recognize the different relational needs of customers and respond to those needs.

Finally, when *assessing results* as well as when *controlling and re-evaluating the sales* management cycle, managers should follow the agreed interpersonal measures and make adjustments or needed changes to the company's sales management cycle.

5.4 EVALUATION, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As with all studies, this dissertation also has limitations. The research approach is qualitative and therefore limitations should be reflected through the key aspects of qualitative business research evaluation (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). The basic framework for evaluating research are reliability, validity and generalizability (see Patton, 2014). However, researchers argue that these evaluation criteria are better suitable for evaluating quantitative research with a positivistic approach. This is because qualitative research does not aim to generalize results, instead, the focus is on providing in-depth understanding on the phenomena under study. Therefore, I base the evaluation of my dissertation on reflecting on the trustworthiness of the study.

5.4.1 Evaluation and limitations

Quality criteria in a qualitative study are related to the trustworthiness of the study (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016; Puusa & Juuti, 2020). According to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2016), particularly when a piece of research relies on relativist ontology and subjectivist epistemology, trustworthiness is the criteria that defines how good the inquiry is. Trustworthiness can be evaluated by looking at dependability, transferability, credibility, and conformability (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016, p. 308).

Dependability means that as a researcher, I am responsible for offering enough information to the reader regarding the research process. The reader should be able to evaluate how logical, traceable and well-documented my research is (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). My research process is described in the three articles (Koponen et al., 2019; Koponen & Rytsy, 2020; Koponen & Julkunen, forthcoming) which have been peer-reviewed by anonymous international researchers. Therefore, I needed to write and describe my research process as clearly and logically as possible to help other researchers to understand the research process. I believe that the peer-review process has strengthened the dependability of my inquiry. Furthermore, I have described the research process in this summary part of my dissertation. I received valuable feedback and comments from two independent pre-examiners, and I have clarified the dissertation based on their feedback. Therefore, I hope my research is traceable and well-documented. I believe other researchers could repeat my research process in other contexts.

Transferability refers to my responsibility to establish a connection between my findings and interpretations and previous studies (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). I have reflected my findings in connection with previous results regarding salespeople's communication competence, social presence in online chat conversations as well as the development of B2B customer relationships. Similarities between my results and previous studies have been found, and this has been carefully reflected in the discussion and conclusion part of each article. In the summary part of the dissertation, I have clarified my interpretations based on valuable feedback received from two independent pre-examiners. I believe that, at least to some extent, my results could be transferred to business-to-consumer sales contexts.

Credibility can be evaluated by asking whether the researcher has sufficient understanding of the topic to support his/her claims and whether the data provides enough merit to support the claims (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). When conducting the three sub-studies, I conducted literature reviews very carefully. I have familiarized myself with hundreds of research articles because I made the literature reviews very systematically and searched for information, e.g., from the following leading journals in the field of B2B sales: the European Journal of Marketing, Industrial Marketing Management, the Journal of Marketing, the Journal of Business Research, the Journal of Marketing Research, the Journal of International Marketing, the Journal of Marketing Science, the Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management, the Journal of Academy of Marketing Science, and the Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice. In addition to this, I have read many textbooks on B2B sales, relationship selling and relationship marketing. I have also been teaching sales communication 2013-2021 at the University of Eastern Finland, and at LUT-University, in Finland. Besides my domestic teaching experience, I have been on research exchanges in Japan, France and the United States. In addition to the three articles connected to this dissertation, I have published other articles in the field of B2B sales. Furthermore, I have studied interpersonal communication competence since I started my master's studies at the University of Jyväskylä, in 1997. I have published other articles related to ICC in other work contexts than modern B2B relationship selling (see Mönkkönen & Finstad, 2007; Kokkonen & Koponen, 2020). Moreover, I have practical experience of working in both B2C and B2B sales. I have collaborated with domestic and international companies during my research project, research exchange and teaching. Therefore, I would estimate that I have familiarized myself with the research topic very well.

I have provided detailed information regarding the data collected for this dissertation. In my first article (Koponen et al., 2019), the data consists of 39 interviews with people who have expertise in international B2B sales or sales education. I admit that the participants represent mainly the United States and different European countries. When selecting sales educators and asking them to participate in this study, I first looked for universities that offered sales studies (as a minor or major subject). These universities existed in Europe and in the United States (Deeter-Schmelz & Kennedy, 2011). When choosing CEOs, B2B salespeople, and sales managers for the interviews, I applied selection criteria saying that they all had to have experience of B2B sales in at least in three different countries. Even though representing Western countries, the participants of the study had substantial experience of working also in non-Western cultures.

In my second article (Koponen & Rytsy, 2020), I was able to collect online chat conversations in a case company. Therefore, the data was collected in natural settings and as a researcher I was not able to manipulate the data in any ways. Furthermore, I was able to use the case company's CRM data to identify and specify which phase of the customer relationship each customer represented.

In my third article (Koponen & Julkunen, forthcoming), the data consists of semi-structured interviews with 47 B2B sales professionals (Miles & Huberman, 1994) who were considered as experts of the research topic (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015). Again, I used specific selection criteria to gain relevant and credible information. I interviewed sales managers, salespeople, and CEOs from companies representing different industries. The specific criteria for the interviewees were: the B2B salespeople had to have over 10-years of experience in B2B sales and had to have long-term customer relationships. The duration of a customer relationship was had to be over 5 years.

In the original articles, I provide many examples from the interview data and thereby the reader may evaluate the links between my observations and categories in more detail by examining the articles. Examples from the data help the reader to evaluate whether my interpretations are credible. Anonymous peer-reviewers have commented on all my articles, and I have revised my articles according to their feedback. In addition, I have used cross-checking during my research process. In the cross-checking process, other researchers came relatively close to my interpretations, which gives more credibility to my findings (see Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016, p. 308; Miles & Huberman, 1994). In Articles I and III two researchers analyzed the interviews separately and they also cross-checked the data (see Piekkari, Plakoyinnaki, & Welch, 2010). Instances of disagreement were resolved by reviewing the texts and by discussion. A few follow-up questions were asked via telephone from the salespeople when clarification was required to increase the credibility of the investigation.

Confirmability refers to connecting the findings and interpretations to the data in a way that can be easily understood by others. In each of the three articles, I provide tables to show how I produced meanings, categories and themes from the data. All articles have been co-authored with other researchers which ensures that many researchers have participated in the interviews and in building the interpretations from the data. Furthermore, successful peer-review rounds in an international high-quality journal confirms that other researchers have understood the logic in my research process and analysis. When it comes to the summary part of the dissertation, I have modified the text according to comments received from two independent pre-examiners.

Because I follow a qualitative approach, the aim of my dissertation was not to achieve generality or to aim for sales performance goals in the findings. I admit that the interviewees' descriptions can never be complete; they rely on the informant's recall of the phenomena under study (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). My findings confirm that by utilizing qualitative research methods in the B2B relationship selling field, it is possible to gain new and interesting results. In my first article (Koponen et al., 2019), I showed how it is essential to examine sales communication competence based on expectations and values that are particularly present in the field of modern B2B relationship selling (Dannels, 2001). For instance, examining medical doctors, politicians (Mönkkönen & Finstad, 2007) or entrepreneurs' (Kokkonen & Koponen, 2020) interpersonal communication competence provides different results. I would not have been able to produce this kind of in-depth understanding with quantitative research methods.

Furthermore, in my second article (Koponen & Rytsy, 2020), I investigated online B2B chat conversations in natural settings. Additionally, here it would not have been possible to gain new understanding on social presence and customer's functions regarding online B2B chat usage with quantitative measures, because already existing scales and measures on these aspects did not exist. Finally, in my third article (Koponen & Julkunen, forthcoming), I was able to gain an in-depth understanding on long-term B2B customer relationship development at the interpersonal level from the perspective of salesperson's self-disclosure and relational cost and reward evaluation. I would not have been able to measure the development process from this perspective, because ready-made scales particularly focusing on self-disclosure in B2B customer relationships do not exist. However, other researchers may use my results in order to form new measures and apply quantitative research methods in order to generalize the results.

In this dissertation, I decided to investigate sales communication competence in modern B2B relationship selling through a combination of self-reporting and other-reporting techniques. Self-reporting and other-reporting techniques can be combined to gain a more comprehensive understanding of ICC in certain work context (see Laajalahti, 2014). However, other-reporting technique applied in this dissertation focused on my interpretations related to two communication contexts that I had investigated in-depth. Therefore, I could have strengthened my interpretations for instance by asking customers', sales team members' or other stakeholders' perceptions of sales communication competence in the modern B2B relationship selling environment.

Research ethics. Throughout the research process, I paid attention to research ethics. I have applied meticulousness, integrity, and accuracy in conducting my research, in recording and presenting the findings, and also in evaluating and judging the findings. I have followed the Academy of Finland's guidelines on research ethics. Moreover, I have taken into account other researchers' work, respected previous findings, and given credit to other researchers' achievements. My research has been well planned. I have conducted and reported my research according to the standards set for scientific knowledge. I have discussed and determined all questions relating to the status, co-authorship, liabilities and obligations of the members of my co-authoring teams before we started working. The participants in this research have provided informed consent and their anonymity has been guaranteed. The participants have voluntarily participated in this research, and they have been able to withdraw at any time from the research project.

5.4.2 Future research

My findings may inspire other researchers to develop a quantitative measure for evaluating B2B salespeople's sales communication competence. The measure could be formulated and tested, and thereafter applied to measure whether salespeople's sales communication competence has an impact, e.g., on customer satisfaction and sales success (see Ohiomah, Benyoucef & Andreev, 2020).

Furthermore, technological development is currently changing the way we live, work and communicate with others. Researchers have already called for empirical studies to investigate the meanings assigned to technology-mediated communication competence (Laitinen & Valo, 2018; Spitzberg, 2006). Therefore, it would be useful to investigate sales managers' digital communication competence, and for instance their successful e-leadership practices.

Based on my findings, I would encourage other sales researchers to examine digital sales communication in real-life sales situations with different types of data (for instance analyzing videorecorded sales interaction on different digital channels) and explore successful and non-successful episodes of digital sales interaction. Such research would increase our knowledge of how salespeople and customers actually behave, as some scholars have shown (Niemi & Vuori, 2021). With real-life video recordings, it would be possible to detect competent or incompetent communication behaviour in digital B2B sales communication.

In the future, as B2B sales increasingly occur online, we will need additional knowledge on customer's perspective and preferences. As my findings have shown, not all customers want to have deep interpersonal relationships with the seller. Still, in order to maintain long-term customer relationships, some customers want to have personal interaction with the seller. Therefore, we could investigate what the customers' preferences and expectations are for sales communication (in-person, face-to-face and digital sales communication) in different customer segments. When, why and how do the customers want to interact with B2B sellers in the future, if they do? What type of privacy issues become crucial, as sales communication is increasingly online?

Modern B2B relationship selling is continuously and rapidly changing as the technological revolution evolves, and it will provide fascinating research opportunities for B2B sales researchers. For instance, it could be interesting to explore the best practices and dark sides in forming, developing and maintaining customer relationships via digital sales communication tools. What digital communication tools are the most effective and appropriate in certain phases of the customer relationship and in forming the parasocial relationship between partners (Yuan et al., 2021)? What are the best practices in conducting effective and appropriate sales negotiations online? How are new technological tools changing the seller's role, sales interaction and customer relationship development process, if we look at the use of artificial intelligence, virtual reality, avatars and augmented reality, for example (see, e.g., Boyd & Koles, 2019; Hunter, 2019)?

REFERENCES

Academy of Finland guidelines for research ethics. Retrieved 24.9.2020 from http://www.aka.fi/globalassets/awanhat/documents/tiedostot/julkaisut/suomen-akatemian-eettiset-ohjeet-2003.pdf

Agnihotri, R., Kothandaraman, P., Kashyap, R., & Singh, R. (2012). Bringing "social" into sales: The impact of salespeople's social media use on service behaviors and value creation. *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management,* 32(3), 333–348.

Agnihotri, R., Dingus, R., Hu, M., & Krush, M. Michael. y. Hu, M. Y., & Michael T. Krush. (2016). Social media: Influencing customer satisfaction in B2B sales. *Industrial Marketing Management* 53, 172–180.

Alavi, S. & Habel, J. (2021). The human side of digital transformation in sales: review & future paths. *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management,* 41(2), 83–86.

Alavi, S., Habel, J., Schmitz, C., Richter, B. & Wieseke, J. (2018). The risky side of inspirational appeals in personal selling: When do customers infer ulterior salesperson motives? *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, 38(3), 323–343.

Almonkari, M., & Isotalus, P. (2012). Two Perspectives on the Communication Skills of Political Leaders. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 6(3), 246–267.

Altman, I. (1993). Dialectics, physical environment, and personal relationships. Communication Monographs, 60, 26–34.

Altman, I., & Taylor, D. A. (1973). S*ocial penetration: The development of interpersonal relationships*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.

Altman, I., Vinsel, A., & Brown, B. B. (1981). Dialectic conceptions in social psychology: An application to social penetration and privacy regulation. *Advances in experimental social psychology.* 14, Academic Press, 107-160.

Ancillai, Chiara, Harri Terho, Silvio Cardinali, and Federica Pascucci. 2019. "Advancing social media driven sales research: Establishing conceptual foundations for B-to-B social selling." *Industrial Marketing Management* 82, 293–308.

Anderson, J. C. & Narus, J. A. (1990). A model of distributor firm and manufacturer firm working partnerships. *Journal of Marketing*, 54(1), 42–58. Aristotle. (2012). *Retoriikka* [Rhetorics]. Original work published ca. 350 BCE.

Arli, D., Bauer, C., & Palmatier, R. W. (2018). Relational selling: Past, present and future. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 69, 169–184.

Baack, D., Fogliasso, C., & Harris, J. (2000). The personal impact of ethical decisions: A social penetration theory. *Journal of Business Ethics,* 24(1), 39–49.

Barnes, J. G. & Howlett, D. M. (1998). Predictors of equity in relationships between service providers and retail customers. *International Journal of Bank Marketing*, 16 (1), 5–23.

Baxter, L. A. & Braithwaite, D. O. (eds.) (2008). *Engaging Theories in Interpersonal Communication.* Multiple perspectives. SAGE: Los Angeles.

Baxter, L. A. & Montgomery, B. M. (1996). *Relating: Dialogues & dialetics*. New York, NY: Guilford.

Bettercourt, L. A., Blocker, C. P., Houston, M. B., & Flint, D. J. (2015). Rethinking customer relationships, *Business Horizons*, Vol. 58(1), pp. 99–108.

Bharadwaj, N. & Shipley, G. M. (2020). Salesperson communication effectiveness in a digital sales interaction. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 90, 106–112.

Bonoma, T. V., Bagozzi, R. & Zaltman, G. (1978). The dyadic paradigm with specific application toward industrial marketing. *Organizational Buying Behavior,* 49–66.

Boorom, M. L., Gooslby, J. R. & Ramsey, R. P. (1998). Relational communication traits and their effect on adaptiveness and sales performance. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 26(1), 16–30.

Borg, S. W. & Johnston, W. J. (2013). The IPS-EQ model: Interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence in a sales process. *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management,* 33(1), 39–51.

Borg, S. W. & Young, L. (2014). Continuing the evolution of the selling process: A multilevel perspective. *Industrial Marketing Management,* 43(4), 543–552.

Boyd, E. D. & Koles, B. (2019). Virtual reality and its impact on B2B marketing: A value-in-use perspective. *Journal of Business Research*, 100, 590–598.

Braun, V., and Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, Vol. 3, No 2, pp. 77–101.

Britt, R. K., & Hatten, K. N. (2016). The development and validation of the eHealth Competency Scale: A measurement of self-efficacy, knowledge, usage, and motivation. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 25(2), 137–150. https://doi.org/10.1080/10572252.2016.1149621

Bush, V.D., Rose, G.M., Gilbert, F., & Ingram, T. N. (2001). Managing culturally diverse buyer-seller relationships: The role of intercultural disposition and adaptive selling in developing intercultural communication competence. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science,* 29(4), 391–404.

Bylund, C. L., Peterson, E. B., & Cameron, K. A. (2012). A practitioner's guide to interpersonal communication theory: An overview and exploration of selected theories. *Patient education and counselling,* 87(3), 261–267.

Caspi, A. & Blau, I. (2008). Social presence in online discussion groups: testing three conceptions and their relations to perceived learning. *Social Psychology of Education,* 11, 323–346.

Castleberry, S. & Shepherd, D. C. (1993). Effective interpersonal listening and personal selling. *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, 13(1), 35–49.

Chaisrakeo, S., & Speece, M. (2004). Culture, intercultural communication competence and sales negotiation: A qualitative research approach. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 19: 267–282.

Chakrabarty, S., Brown, G., Widing II, R. E., & Taylor, R. D. (2004). Analysis and recommendations for the alternative measures of adaptive selling. *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*, 24(2), 125–133.

Chattaraman, V., Kwon, W. S., & Gilbert, J. E. (2012). Virtual agents in retail web sites: Benefits off simulated social interaction for older users. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 28, 2055–2066.

Chapple, E. & Donald, G. Jr. (1947). An evaluation of department store salespeople by the interaction chronograph. *Journal of Marketing*, 12(2), 173–185.

Croucher, S. M., & Cronn-Mills, D. (2014). *Understanding communication research methods: A theoretical and practical approach.* Routledge.

Daly, J. A. & Vangelisti, A. L. 2003. Skilfully instructing learners: how communicators effectively convey messages. Teoksessa J. O. Greene & B. R. Burleson (toim.) *Handbook of communication and social interaction skills.* Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum, 871–908.

Dannels, D. (2001). Time to speak up: A theoretical framework of situated pedagogy and practice for communication across the curriculum. *Communication Education*, 50: 144–158.

Dannels, D. P., & Housley Gaffney, A. L. (2009). Communication across the curriculum and in the disciplines: A call for scholarly cross-curricular advocacy. *Communication Education*, 58: 124–153.

Darling, A. L. & Dannels, D. P. (2003). Practicing engineers talk about the importance of talk: a report on the role of oral communication in the workplace. *Communication Education* 52 (1), 1–16.

Deardorff, D. K. (2011). Assessing intercultural competence. New Directions for Institutional Research, Spring no. 149, Wiley Periodicals, Inc. DOI: 10.1002/ir.381Deeter-Schmelz, D. R., & Kennedy, K. N. (2011). A global perspective on the current state of sales education in the college curriculum. *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*, vol. XXXI (1): 55–75.

Denzin, N. K. & Lincoln, Y. S. (2005). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research*. London: SAGE.

Derlega, V. J. & Grzelak, J. (1979). Appropriateness of self-disclosure. In G. J. Chelune (Ed.), Self-disclosure: Origins, patterns, and implications of openness in interpersonal relationships. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Dixon, A.L. & Tanner, J. F (Jr.) (2012). Transforming selling: Why it is time to think differently about sales research. *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, vol. XXXII, no. 1 (winter 2012), pp. 9–13.

Dixon, M., Frewer, S., & Kent, A. (2011). Are your sales reps spending too much time in front of customers? *Harvard Business Review*, 2, 1.

Drollinger, T. & Comer, L. (2013). Salesperson's listening ability as an antecedent to relationship selling. J*ournal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 28(1), 50–59.

Dubinsky, A.J. (1980/1981). A factor analytic study of the personal selling process. *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management* 1, 23−33.

Dubois, A., & Gadde, L-E. (2002). Systematic combining: an abductive approach to case research. *Journal of Business Research*, 55(7), 553–560.

Dwyer, F. R., Schurr, P. H., & Oh, S. (1987). Developing buyer-seller relationships. *Journal of Marketing*, 51(2), 11–27.

Egan, J. (2008). *Relationship marketing*. Exploring relational strategies in marketing. 3rd ed. Pearson Education: Harlow, England.

Elo, M., Benjowsky, C., & Nummela, N. (2015). Intercultural competences and interaction schemes – Four forces regulating dyadic encounters in international business. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 48, 38–49.

Eriksson, P., & Kovalainen, A. (2016). *Qualitative research methods in business research*. 2nd ed. Sage: Los Angeles.

Evans, F. B. (1963). Selling as a dyadic relationship - a new approach. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 6(9), 76–79.

Franke, G. R. & Park, J. E. (2006). Salesperson adaptive selling behaviour and customer orientation: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 43(4), 693–702.

Garrison, D. R. & Anderson, T. (2003). *E-learning in the 21st century: A framework for research and practice*. London: Routledge Falmer.

Garrison, D. R., Anderson, T. & Archer, W. (2000), "Critical inquiry in text-based environment: Computer conferencing in higher education", The Internet and Higher Education, Vol. 2 No. 2–3, pp. 87–105

Gartner (2019). Gartner says global IT spending to reach $3.8 trillion in 2019. Accessed 4th of June, 2021. https://www.gartner.com/en/newsroom/press-releases/2019-01-28-gartner-says-global-it-spending-to-reach--3-8-trillio

Garver, M. S. & Mentzer, J. T. (2000). Salesperson logistics expertise: A proposed contingency framework. *Journal of Business Logistics*, 21(2), 113–132.

Gefen, D. & Straub, D. W. (2004), "Consumer trust in B2C e-commerce and the importance of social presence: experiments in e-products and e-services", *Omega*, Vol. 32 No. 6, pp. 407–424.

Guenzi, P. & Georges, L. (2010). Interpersonal trust in commercial relationships: Antecedents and consequences of customer trust in the salesperson. *European Journal of Marketing,* 44 (1/2), 114–138.

Guenzi, P., Sajtos, L. & Troilo, G. (2016). The dual mechanism of sales capabilities influencing organizational performance. J*ournal of Business Research*, 69, 3707–3713.

Gummesson, E. & Grönroos, C. (2012). The emergence of the new service marketing: Nordic school perspectives. *Journal of Service Management*, Vol. 23 No. 4, 479–497.

Gupa, E. G. & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (eds.), Handbook on qualitative research. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, pp. 105–117.

Graves, C. G. (2021). Good communication revisited: Evaluative rhetorics and a disciplinary commonplace. *Western Journal of Communication*, 85 (4), 527– 548.

Griffith, D. A. (2002). The role of communication competencies in international business relationship development. *Journal of World Business*, 37, 256–265.

Grönroos, C. (1994). From marketing mix to relationship marketing: Towards a paradigm shift in marketing. *Management Decision*, 32 (2), 5–20.

Grönroos, C. (2007). *Service management and marketing. Customer management in service competition*. 3rd ed. John Wiley & Sond Ltd: Chichester.

Grönroos, C., & Gummerus, J. (2015). The service revolution and its marketing implications: Service Logic versus Service-Dominant Logic. In Gummerus, J. & von Koskull, C. (eds.), *The Nordic School. Service Marketing and Management for the Future,* pp. 83–110.

Grönroos, C., Nenonen, S. & Storbacka, K. (2020). Networks, ecosystems, fields, market systems? Making sense of the business environment. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 90, 380–399.

Gummerus, J. & von Koskull, C. (2015). *The Nordic School – Service marketing and management for the future.* CERS, Hanken School of Economics: Helsinki.

Haas, A., Snehota, I. & Corsaro, D. (2012). Creating value in business relationships: The role of sales. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 41, 94–105.

Habel, J., Alavi, S. & Linsenmayer, K. (2021). From personal to online selling: How relational selling shapes salespeople's promotion of e-commerce channels. *Journal of Business Research*, 132, 373–382.

Hansen, J. D., and Riggle, R. J. (2009). Ethical salesperson behavior in sales relationships, *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, 29 (2), pp. 151–166.

Hargie, O. (2010). *Skilled interpersonal communication: research, theory, and practice.* London: Routledge.

Harich, K. R. & LaBahn, D. W. (1998). Enhancing international business relationships: a focus on customer perceptions of salesperson role performance including cultural sensitivity. *Journal of Business Research*, 42, 87–101.

Haytko, D. L. (2004). Firm-to-firm and interpersonal relationships: Perspectives from advertising agency account managers. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 32(3), 312–328.

Heide, J. (1994). Interorganizational governance in marketing channels. *Journal of Marketing*, 58, 71–85.

Heinonen, K. & Strandvik, T. (2018). Reflections on customers' primary role in markets. *European Management Journal,* 36, pp. 1–11.

Hibbard, J. D., Kumar, N. & Stern, L. W. (2001). Examining the impact of destructive acts in marketing channel relationships. *Journal of Marketing*, 38 (February), 45–61.

Hoar, A. (2015). Death of a (B2B) salesman. Available at http://blogs.forrester.com/andy_hoar/15-04-14-death_of_a_b2b_salesman Accessed August 5th, 2020.

Hohenschwert, L. & Geiger, S. (2015). Interpersonal influence strategies in complex B2B sales and the socio-cognitive construction of relationship value. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 49, 139–150.

Homburg, C., Müller, M., & Klarmann, M. (2011). When should the customer really be king? On the optimum level of salesperson customer orientation in sales encounters. *Journal of Marketing*, 75(2): 55–74.

Hulbert, J. & Capon, N. (1972). Interpersonal communication in Marketing: An overview. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 9(1), 27–34.

Hung, K.-P. & Lin, C.-K. (2013). More communication is not always better? The interplay between effective communication and interpersonal conflict in influencing satisfaction. *Industrial Marketing Management,* 42(8), pp. 1223–1232.

Hunter, G. K. (2019). On conceptualizing, measuring, and managing augmented technology use in business-to-business sales contexts. *Journal of Business Research*, 105, 201–213.

Hutt, M. D., Johnston, W. J. & Ronchetto, J. R. Jr. (1985). Selling centers and buying centers. *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management,* 5(1), 32–40.

Håkansson, H., Ford, D., Gabbe, L.-E., Snehota, I. & Walusewski, A. (2009). *Business in Networks.* John Wiley & Sons Ltd: Glasgow.

Iacobucci, D., & Ostrom, A. (1996). Commercial and interpersonal relationships; Using the structure of interpersonal relationships to understand individual-to-individual, individual-to-firm, and firm-to-firm relationships in commerce. *International Journal of Research in Marketing,* 13(1), 53–72.

Ingram, T. N., LaForge, R. W. & Leigh, T. W. (2002). Selling in the new millennium: a joint agenda. *Industrial Marketing Management,* 31(7), 1–9.

Ingram, T. N., LaForge, R. W., Avila, R. A., Schwepker Jr., C. H. & Williams, M. R. (2009). *Sales management. Analysis and decision making.* 7th ed. M.E. Sharpe: New York.

Jablin, F. M. & Sias, P. M. 2001. Communication competence. In F. M. Jablin & L. L. Putnam (Eds.) *The new handbook of organizational communication.* Thousand Oaks: Sage, 819–864.

Jackson, D. W., Widmier, S. M., Giacobbe, R. & Keith, J. E. (1999). Examining the use of team selling by manufacturers' representatives. *Industrial Marketing Management,* 28(2), 155–164.

Jacobs, R. S., Evans, K. R., Kleine III, R. E., & Landry, T. D. (2001a). Disclosure and its reciprocity as predictors of key outcomes of an initial sales encounter. *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management* 21(1), 51–61.

Jacobs, R. S., Hyman, M. R. & McQuitty, S. (2001b). Exchange-specific self-disclosure, social self-disclosure, and personal selling. *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice,* 9 (1), 48–62.

Jap, S. D., & Ganesan, S. (2000). Control mechanisms and the relationship life cycle: Implications for safeguarding specific investments and developing commitment. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 37(2), 227–245.

Jap, S. D. &d Anderson, E. (2007), "Testing a life-cycle theory of cooperative interorganizational relationships: Movement across stages and performance", *Management science*, Vol. 53 No 2, pp. 260–275.

Jobber, D., Lancaster, G. & Le Meunier-FitzHugh, K. (2019). *Selling and sales management*. 11th ed. London: Pearson.

Johansson, C., Miller, V. D., & Hamrin, S. (2014). Conceptualizing communicative leadership: A framework for analysing and developing leaders' communication competence. *Corporate Communications*, 19(2), 147–165.

Johansson, J. & Mattsson, L. G. (1987). Interorganizational relations in industrial systems. *International Studies of Management & Organizations,* 17 (1), 34–48.

Johnson, P. & Duberley, J. (2000). *Understanding management research. An introduction to epistemology*. London: SAGE.

Johnson, M. D., & Selnes, F. (2004). Customer portfolio management: toward a dynamic theory of exchange relationships. *Journal of Marketing*, 68(2), 1–17.
Johnston, M. W. & Marshall, G. W. (2016). Contemporary selling: Building relationships, creating value (5th ed.). New York: Routledge.
Johnston, W. J., Khalil, S., Jain, M., and Cheng, J. M-S. (2012). Determinants of joint action in international channels of distribution: The moderating role of psychic distance. *Journal of International Marketing*, 20 (3), pp. 34–49.
Judd V. C. (1987). Differentiate With the 5th P: People. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 16(4), 241–247.
Julkunen, S., Koponen, J. and Nickell, D. (in process). Understanding value creation through digital and in-person communication in solution selling process.
Karjaluoto, H. & Ulkuniemi, P. (2015). Digital communications in industrial marketing. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 30(6), https://doi.org/10.1108/JBIM-06-2014-0136
Kaski, T., Niemi, J. & Pullins, E. (2018). Rapport building in authentic B2B sales interaction. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 69, pp. 235–252.
Kidwell, B., Hardesty, D. M., Murtha, B. R. & Sheng, S. (2011). Emotional intelligence in marketing exchanges. *Journal of Marketing*, 75, 78–95.
Kenner, K. & Leino, S. (2020). #*Myyntikirja. Menesty uuden ajan B2B myynnissä*. Helsinki: Alma Talent.
Keränen, J. & Liozu, S. (2020). Value champions in business markets: Four role configurations. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 85, 84–96.
Kokkonen, L. & Koponen, J. (2020). Entrepreneurs' interpersonal communication competence in networking. Prologi – puheviestinnän vuosikirja, 16(1), 8–26.
Koponen, J. & Julkunen, S. (2015). Situated learning theory and the principles of drama education. *Simulation & Gaming*, April 19, 1–11.
Koponen, J. & Julkunen, S. (forthcoming). Do we click? Interpersonal-level exploration of long-term B2B customer relationships. Under review in *European Journal of Marketing.*

Koponen, J., Julkunen, S. & Asai, A. (2019). Sales communication competence in international B2B solution selling. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 82, 238–252.
Koponen, J. & Rytsy, S. (2020). Social presence and e-commerce B2B chat functions. *European Journal of Marketing,* 54(6), 1205–1224.
Koponen, J., Julkunen, S., Pullins, E. and Gabrielsson, M. (2021). An intercultural, interpersonal relationship development framework. *International Marketing Review*, DOI: 10.1108/IMR-11-2019-0267.
Kostiainen, E. (2003). *Viestintä ammattiosaamisen ulottuvuutena* [Communication as a dimension of vocational competence]. Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä.
Kotler, P. (1984). *Marketing Management: Analysis, Planning and Control* (5th ed.). New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.
Kozlenkova, I. V., Palmatier, R. W., Fang, E., Xiao, B., & Huang, M. (2017). Online relationship formation. *Journal of Marketing*, 81(3), 21–40.
Laajalahti, A. (2014). Vuorovaikutusosaaminen ja sen kehittyminen tutkijoiden työssä. [Interpersonal communication competence and its development in the work of researchers]. Jyväskylä Studies in Humanities 225. Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä.
Lacoste, S. (2018). From selling to managing strategic customers – a competency analysis. *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management,* 38(1), 92–122.
Laitinen, K. & Valo, M. (2018). Meanings of communication technology in virtual team meetings: Framing technology-related interaction. *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies*, 111, 12–22.
Lawson, R. (2019). New competencies for management accountants. *CPA Journal*, 89(9), 18–21.
Leek, S., Houghton, D. & Canning, L. (2017). Twitter and behavioural engagement in the healthcare sector: An examination of product and service companies. *Industrial Marketing Management*, DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2017.10.009
Liu, A. H., and Gao, H. (2014). Examining relational risk typologies for guanxi boundary spanners: Applying social penetration theory to

guanxi brokering. *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, 22 (3), pp. 271–283.

Limbu, Y. A., Jayachandran, C., Babin B. J. & Peterson, R. T. (2016). Empathy, nonverbal immediacy, and salesperson performance: the mediating role of adaptive selling behavior. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 31(5), 654–667.

Littlejohn, S. W. (1999), *Theories of Human Communication* (6th ed.), Wadsworth Publishing Company, Belmont, CA.

Lu, B., Fan, W. & Ahou, M. (2016). Social presence, trust, and social commerce purchase intention: An empirical research. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 56, 225–237.

Luo, A. and Kumar, V. (2013). Recovering hidden buyer–seller relationship states to measure the return on marketing investment in business-to-business markets. *Journal of Marketing Research*, Vol. 50 No 1, pp. 143–160.

Lussier, B. & Hartmann, N. N. (2017). How psychological resourcefulness increases salesperson's sales performance and satisfaction of their customers: Exploring the mediating role of customer-oriented behaviors. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 62, 160–170.

Mainela, T. Ulkuniemi, P. (2013). Personal interaction and customer relationship management in project business. J*ournal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 28(2), 103–110.

Mantrala, M. K. & Albers, S. (2012). Impact of the Internet on b2b sales force size and structure. In Lilien, G. L. and Grewal, R. (Eds), *Handbook of B2B Marketing*. Edward Elgar Publishing: Northampton, MA, pp. 539–562.

Marcos Cuevas, J. (2018). The transformation of professional selling: Implications for leading the modern sales organization. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 69, 198–208.

Marshall, G., Moncrief, W., Rudd, J., & Lee, N. (2012). Revolution in sales: The impact of social media and related technology on the selling environment. *The Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*, 32(3), 349–363.

McCarthy, E. J. (1960). Basic marketing: A managerial approach. Homewood, IL: Irwin.

McKinsey & Company (2021). Available at https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/marketing-and-sales/our-insights/these-eight-charts-show-how-covid-19-has-changed-b2b-sales-forever . Accessed 4th of April 2021.

Miles, M. P., Arnold, D. R. & Nash, H. W. (1990). Adaptive communication: The adaptation of the seller's interpersonal style to the stage of the dyad's relationship and the buyer's communication style. *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, Vol. X (February), 21–27.

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis. An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Moncrief, W. C. (1986). Ten key activities of industrial salespeople. Industrial Marketing Management, 15(4), 309–317.

Moncrief, W. C. & Marshall, G. W. (2005). The evolution of seven steps of selling. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 34(1), 12–22.

Moncrief, W., Marshall, G., & Lassk, F. (2006). A contemporary taxonomy of sales positions. *The Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*, 26(1), 55–65.

Mongeau, P. A., & Miller Henningsen, M. L. (2008). Stage theories of relationship development. In L. A. Baxter & D. O. Braithwaite (Eds.), *Engaging theories in interpersonal communication. Multiple perspectives* (pp. 363–375). Los Angeles: Sage Publications.

Moon, M. A., and Bonney, L. (2007). An application of the investment model to buyer-seller relationships: A dyadic perspective. *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, 15(4), pp. 335–347.

Moore, J. N., Raymond, M. A., & Hopkins, C. D. (2015). Social selling: A comparison of social media usage across process stage, markets, and sales job functions. *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, 23(1), 1–20.

Moorman, C., Zaltman, G. & Deshpande, R. (1992). Relationships between providers and users of market research. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 29(3), 314–328.

Morgan, R. & Hunt, S. (1994). The commitment-trust theory of relationship marketing. *Journal of Marketing*, 58(3), 20–38.

Morse, J. M., Barrett, M., Mayan, M., Olson, K., & Spiers, J. (2002). Verification strategies for establishing reliability and validity in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 1(2), 13–22.

Möller, K. & Halinen, A. (2000) Relationship Marketing Theory: Its Roots and Direction. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 16(1–3), 29–54.

Möller, K., Nenonen, S. & Storbacka, K. (2020). Networks, ecosystems, fields, market systems? Making sense of the business environment. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 90, 380–399.

Mönkkönen, J. & Finstad, M. (2007). Lääkärin ja poliitikon viestintäosaamisen jäljillä. [Tracing the essence of physician's and politicians' communication competence]. In P. Isotalus, M. Gerlander, M. Jäkälä & T. Kokko (Eds.) *Prologi. Puheviestinnän vuosikirja 2007*, 33–66.

Netzer, O., Lattin, J. M., and Srinivasan, V. (2008). A hidden Markov model of customer relationship dynamics. *Marketing science*, 27(2), 185–204.

Niemi, J. & Vuori, J. (2021) (Eds.) Myyntityö vuorovaikutuksena. Vastapaino: Tampere.

Ogonowski, A., Montandon, A., Botha, E., & Reyneke, M. (2014), "Should new online stores invest in social presence elements? The effect of social presence on initial trust formation", *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, Vol. 21, pp. 482–491.

Ohiomah, A., Benyoucef, M. & Andreev, P. (2020). A multidimensional perspective of business-to-business sales success: A meta-analytic review. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 90, 435–452.

Olson, J. S. & Olson, G. M. (2000), "I2i trust in e-commerce", *Communications of the ACM*, Vol. 43 No. 12, pp. 41–44.

Palmatier, R.W., Houston, M. B., Dant, R. P., & Grewal, D. (2013). Relationship velocity: toward a theory of relationship dynamics. *Journal of Marketing*, 77(1), 13–30.

Panagopoulos, N. G. & Avlonitis, G. J. (2010). Performance implications of sales strategy: the moderating effects of leadership and environment. *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 27(1), 46–57.

Panagopoulos, N. G., Rapp, A. A., & Ogilvie, J. L. (2017). Salesperson solution involvement and sales performance: The contingent role of supplier firm and customer–supplier relationship characteristics. *Journal of Marketing*, 81(4), 144–164.

Patton, M. (2014). Qualitative Research and evaluation methods. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE.

Piekkari, R., Plakoyinnaki, E., & Welch, C. (2010). 'Good' case research in industrial marketing: Insights from research practice. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 39, 109–117.

Plouffe, C. R., Hulland, J. & Wachner, T. (2009). Customer-directed selling behaviors and performance: a comparison of existing perspectives. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 37, 422–439.

Porter, S. S., Wiener, J. L. & Frankwick, G. L. (2003). The moderating effect of selling situation on the adaptive selling strategy–selling effectiveness relationship. *Journal of Business Research*, 56, 275–281.

Powers, T. L., Koehler, W. F. & Martin, W. S. (1988). Selling from 1900 to 1949: A historical perspective. *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, 8 (3), 11–21.

Purhonen, P. (2012). *Interpersonal communication competence and collaborative interaction in SME internationalization.* University of Jyväskylä. Jyväskylä Studies in Humanities 178.

Puusa, A. & Juuti, P. (2014). Voimmeko rakentaa siltoja organisaatiotutkimuksen paradigmojen ylitse. *Hallinnon Tutkimus*, 33(4), pp. 366–374.

Puusa, A. & Juuti, P. (2020). Laadullisen tutkimuksen näkökulmat ja menetelmät. Tallinna: Gaudeamus.

Ramsey, R. P., Sohi, S. (1997). Listening to your customers: The impact of perceived salesperson listening behavior on relationship outcomes. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 25(2), 127–137.

Rangajaran, D., Guenzi, P. & Kaski, T. (2019). Mastering digital transformation in sales: A research agenda going forward. *Proceedings of the Annual Global Sales Science Institute Conference 2019 Panama*, pp. 44–55. Global Sales Science Institute: Aalen.

Rapp, A., Beitelspacher, L. S., Grewal, D., & Hughes, D. E. (2013). Understanding social media effects across seller, retailer, and consumer interactions. Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 41(5), 547–566.

Rentz, J.O., Shepherd, C. D., Tashchian, A., Dabholkar, P. A. & Ladd, R. T. (2002). A measure of selling skill. Scale development and validation. *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*, 22(1) (Winter), 13–21.

Ring, P. S. & Van de Ven, A. H. (1994). Developmental processes of cooperative interorganizational relationships. *Academy of Management Review*, 19(1), pp. 90–118.

Rodriguez, M., Ajjan, H. & Peterson, R. M. (2016). Social media in large sales forces: An empirical study of the impact of sales process capability and relationship performance. *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, 24(3), 365–379.

Rouhiainen-Neunhäuserer, M. (2009). *Johtajan vuorovaikutusosaaminen ja sen kehittyminen: johtamisen viestintähaasteet tietoperustaisessa organisaatiossa* [The interpersonal communication competence of leaders and its development: leadership communication challenges in a knowledge-based organization]. University of Jyväskylä, Finland. Jyväskylä Studies in Humanities 128.

Rourke, L., Anderson, T., Garrison, D. R. & Archer, W. (1999). Assessing social presence in asynchronous, text-based computer conferencing. *Journal of Distance Education*, 14 (3), pp. 51–70.

Rousseau, D. M., Sitkin, S. B., Burt, R. S., & Camerer, C. (1998). Not so different after all: A cross-discipline view of trust. *Academy of Management Review*, 23(3), 393–404.

Rubin, R. B. (1990). Communication competence. In G. M. Phillips & J. T. Wood (Eds.), Speech communication: Essays to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Speech Communication Association (pp. 94–129). Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale.

Rüth, R. & Netzer, T. (2020). The key elements of cultural intelligence as a driver for digital leadership success. *Leadership, Education, Personality: An interdisciplinary Journal*, 2, 3–8.

Salesforce (2019). State of the connected customer report. Accessed 24th of April, 2021. Available at https://www.salesforce.com/content/dam/web/en_us/www/assets/pdf/salesforce-state-of-the-connected-customer-report-2019.pdf

Salesforce (2021). State of sales. Accessed 24th of April, 2021. Available at https://www.salesforce.com/content/dam/web/en_us/www/documents/research/Salesforce-State-of-Sales-4th-Ed.pdf

Sallnäs, E. L., Rassmus-Gröhn, K., & Sjöström, C. (2000). Supporting presence in collaborative environments by haptic force feedback. *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction*, 7(4), pp. 461–476.

Sanzo, M. J., Santos, M. L., Vázquez, R., Álvarez, L. I. (2003). The effect of market orientation on buyer–seller relationship satisfaction. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 32(4), 327–345.

Savolainen, T. (2014). Trust-building in e-leadership: A case study of leaders' challenges and skills in technology-mediated interaction. *The Journal of Global Business Issues*, 8 (2), 45–56.

Saxe, R., & Weitz, B. A. (1982). The SOCO scale: A measure of the customer orientation of salespeople. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 343–351.

Schumacher, L., Wheeler, J. V. & Carr, A. S. (2009). The relationship between emotional intelligence and buyer's performance. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 24(3/4), 269–277.

Schurr, P. H. (1987). Evolutionary approaches to effective selling. *Advances in Business Marketing*, 2, 55–80.

Schwab, K. (2016). The fourth industrial revolution. New York, NY: Crown Business.

Sherblom, J. C. (2020), *Computer-mediated communication. Approaches and perspectives*, Cognella Inc., San Diego, California.

Short, J. A., Williams, E., & Christie, B. (1976). *The social psychology of telecommunications*. Wiley: London.

Singh, R., Kumar, N. & Puri, S. (2017). Thought self-leadership strategies and sales performance: integrating selling skills and adaptive selling behavior as missing links. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 32(5), 652–663.

Singh, R. & Venugopal, P. (2015). The impact of salesperson customer orientation on sales performance via mediating mechanism. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 30(5), 594–607.

Sleep, S., Dixon, A. L., DeCarlo, T. & Lam, S. K. (2020). The business-to-business inside sales force: roles, configurations and research agenda. *European Journal of Marketing*, 54(5), pp. 1025–1060.

Spitzberg, B. H. (2006). Preliminary development of a model and measure of computer-mediated communication (CMC) competence. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 11, 629– 666.

Spitzberg, B. H. (2013). (Re)Introducing communication competence to the health professions. *Journal of Public Health Research*, 2(23), 126–135.

Spitzberg, B. H. (2015). The composition of competence: Communication skills. In A. F. Hannawa & B. H. Spitzberg (Eds.), *Communication competence* (pp. 237–269). De Gruyter Mouton.

Spitzberg, B. H. & Cupach, W. R. (1984). Interpersonal Communication Competence. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications.

Spitzberg, B. H., & Cupach, W. R. (2002). Interpersonal skills. In M. L. Knapp & J.A. Daly (Eds.) *Handbook of Interpersonal Communication*, 3rd ed. (pp. 564–611). London: Sage Publications.

Spitzberg, B. H., & Changnon, G. (2009). Conceptualizing intercultural competence. In Deardorff, D. K. (Ed.), *The SAGE Handbook of Intercultural Competence* (pp. 2–52). Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.

Spitzberg, B. H. & Cupach, W. R. (2011). Interpersonal Skills. In M. L. Knapp & J. A. Daly (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Interpersonal Communication* (4th ed., pp. 481–526). Sage, 481–526.

Stafford, L. (2008). *Social exchange theories*. In L. A. Baxter and D. O. Braithwaite (Eds.), Engaging theories in interpersonal communication. SAGE: Los Angeles.

Stanko, M. A., Bonner, J. M. & Calantone, R. J. (2007). Building commitment in buyer-seller relationships: A tie strength perspective. *Industrial marketing Management*, 36(8), 1094–1103.

Steinhoff, L., Arli, D., Weaven, S & Kozlenkova, I. (2019). Online relationship marketing. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 47, 369–393.

Syam, N. & Sharma, A. (2018). Waiting for sales renaissance in the fourth industrial revolution: machine learning and artificial intelligence in sales research and practice. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 69, 135–146.

Terho, H., Eggert, A., Haas, A. & Ulaga, W. (2015). How sales strategy translates into performance: the role of salesperson customer orientation and value-based selling. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 45 (1), 12–21.

Thompson C. J, Locander, W.B., & Pollio, H.R. (1989). Putting Consumer Experience Back into Consumer Research: The Philosophy and Method of Existential – Phenomenology. *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 16, pp. 133–147.

Tuli, K. R., Kohli, A. K., & Bharadwaj, S. G. (2007). Rethinking customer solutions: From product bundles to relational processes. *Journal of Marketing*, 71(3), 1–17.

Ulaga, W., & Loveland, J. M. (2014). Transitioning from product to service-led growth in manufacturing firms: emergent challenges in selecting and managing the industrial sales force. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 43(1), 113–125.

Ulaga, W., & Kohli, A. K. (2018). The role of a solution salesperson: Reducing uncertainty and fostering adaptiveness. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 69, 161–168.

Van Heugten, P., Heijne-Penninga, M., Robbe, P., Jaarsma, D., & Wolfensberger, M. (2017). International perspectives on the profile of highly talented international business professionals. *Journal of Education for Business*, 92(7), 323–331.

Vargo, S. L. & Lusch, R. F. (2004). Evolving to a new dominant logic for marketing. *Journal of Marketing*, 68(1), 1–17.

Vargo, S. L. & Lusch, R. F. (2008). The service-dominant logic: Continuing the evolution. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 36(1), 1–10.

Verbeke, W. & Bagozzi, R. P. (2000). Sales call anxiety: Exploring what it means when fear rules a sales encounter. *Journal of Marketing*, 64(July), 88–101.

Viio, P. & Grönroos, C. (2014). Value-based sales process adaptation in business relationships. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 43(6), 1085–1095.

Webster, F. Jr. (1968). Interpersonal communication and salesman effectiveness. *Journal of Marketing*, 32(3), 7–13.

Weitz, B. A. (1981). Effectiveness in sales interactions: a contingency framework. *Journal of Marketing*, 45(1) (Winter), 85–103.

Weitz, B. A., Sujan, H., & Sujan, M. (1986). Knowledge, motivation and adaptive behavior: A framework for improving selling effectiveness. *Journal of Marketing*, 56, October, 1–17.

Weitz, B. A. & Bradford, K. D. (1999). Personal selling and sales management: a relationship marketing perspective. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 27(2), 241–254.

Wenger, E. (2009). A social learning theory. In K. Illeris (Ed.), *Contemporary theories of learning* (pp. 209–218). New York, NY: Routledge.

Wiesenberg, M., Zerfass, A., & Moreno, A. (2017). Big data and automation in strategic communication. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 11(2), 95–114.

Wilson, D. T. (1995). An integrated model of buyer-seller relationships. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 23(4), pp. 335–345.

Williams, M. R. (1998). The influence of salespersons' customer orientation on buyer-seller relationship development. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 13(3), 271–287.

Wilson, S. R., & Sabee, C. M. (2003). Explicating communicative competence as a theoretical term. In S. R. Greene & B. R. Burleson (Eds.) *Handbook of Communication and Social Interaction Skills* (pp. 3–50). Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Yari, N., Lankut, E., Alon, I. & Richter, N. F. (2020). Cultural intelligence, global mindset, and cross-cultural competencies: A systematic review using bibliometric methods. *European Journal of International Management*, 14(2), pp. 210–250.

Yli-Pietilä, M. & Tani, M. (2019). *Vuorovaikutusmyynti. Digiajan ketterä myyntimenetelmä*. Helsinki: Books on Demand.

Yuan, C., Moon, H., Wang, S., Yu, X., & Kim, K. H. (2021). Study on the influencing of B2B parasocial relationship on repeat purchase intention in the online purchasing environment: An empirical study of B2B E-commerce platform. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 92, 101–110.

Zerfass, A., Hagelstein, J., & Tench, R. (2020). Artificial intelligence in communication management: A cross-national study on adoption and knowledge, impact, challenges and risks. *Journal of Communication Management*, 24(4), 377–389.

Zhao, X., Flynn, B. B., & Roth, A. V. (2007). Decision sciences research in China: Current status, opportunities, and propositions for research in supply chain management, logistics, and quality management. *Decision Sciences*, 38(1), 39–80.

Zhang, J. Z., Watson Iv, G. F., Palmatier, R. W. & Dant, R. P., (2016). Dynamic relationship marketing. *Journal of Marketing*, 80 (5), pp. 53–75.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1.
Interview questions related to Article I.

Background questions

Please describe your educational background, job history, job title, age, experience in B2B sales (also in years).

Could you please describe the company you work for (CEO, sales manager, salesperson)/Could you please describe sales education at the University you work in (sales educators)?

Could you please describe your own experience in B2B sales/in sales communication training and education?

Seller's interpersonal communication competence

How could you describe the characteristics of interpersonal communication competence needed in international B2B sales?

Could you please describe what kind of communication competence is needed in interaction with customers?

What kinds of communication skills do you consider important if you think about people/yourself working in international B2B sales?

What kind of knowledge do B2B salespeople need in their work?

What about knowledge related to different cultures?

What kinds of attitudes or motivations are needed in international B2B sales?

What else do you think is crucial to achieve ones' goals and build solutions in interaction with international customers?

What else would you like to say?

APPENDIX 2.
Interview questions related to Article III.

Background questions

Please describe your educational background, job history, job title, age, experience in B2B sales (also in years).

Could you please describe the company you work for (CEO, sales manager, salesperson)?

How would you describe the firm's strategic philosophy?

How would you describe the firm's sales strategy and sales approach?

Long-term B2B customer relationship development

The interviewees were encouraged to consider the development of two particular long-term B2B customer relationships from their inception to the present.

When did you meet the customer for the first time?

How did you communicate with the customer? What channels did you use?

What did you tell the customer about your company as the relationship evolved?

Why did you tell the customer such things?

How would you describe the relationship development process?

How was the relationship created, developed and maintained?

How do the relationships deteriorate?

What advantages or disadvantages did you experience as the relationship evolved?

What did you tell the customer about yourself as the relationship evolved and why?

What else would you like to say?

ARTICLES

ARTICLE I

Koponen, J., Julkunen, S. & Asai, A. (2019). Sales communication competence in international B2B solution selling. Industrial Marketing Management, Vol. 82, pp. 238–252.

ARTICLE II

Koponen, J. & Rytsy, S. (2020). Social presence and e-commerce B2B chat functions. European Journal of Marketing, Vol. 54, No. 6, pp. 1205-1224.

ARTICLE III

Koponen, J. & Julkunen, S. Do we click? Interpersonal-level exploration on B2B customer relationship development. (forthcoming) European Journal of Marketing

In the first article, I was the first author. I was responsible for the research idea, research design and building the theoretical contribution of the study. I collected the interview data from sales educators worldwide. I collected the data from sales managers and salespeople in collaboration with Saara Julkunen. I was responsible for data analysis in collaboration with Saara Julkunen. I was responsible for writing the research article and drawing the conclusions. Saara Julkunen and Akiko Asai provided valuable comments on the manuscript.

In the second article, I was the first author. I was responsible for the research idea and study design. Saara Rytsy collected the data from the case company. I conducted the data analysis and brough in new theoretical ideas regarding social presence. I was responsible for writing the research article, drawing the conclusions and revising the manuscript during peer-review rounds.

In the third article, I was the first author. I was responsible for the research idea and theoretical choices. I was responsible for the research design in collaboration with Saara Julkunen. I collected the data from sales managers and salespeople in collaboration with Saara Julkunen. I was responsible for data analysis in collaboration with Saara Julkunen. I had the main responsibility for writing the research article, drawing conclusions and revising the manuscript during the peer-review rounds. Saara Julkunen provided valuable comments regarding the manuscript.

ARTICLE I

Koponen, J., Julkunen, S. & Asai, A. (2019). Sales communication competence in international B2B solution selling. Industrial Marketing Management, Vol. 82, pp. 238–252.

Industrial Marketing Management 82 (2019) 238–252

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Industrial Marketing Management

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/indmarman

Sales communication competence in international B2B solution selling

Jonna Koponen[a,*], Saara Julkunen[a], Akiko Asai[b]

[a] Business School, University of Eastern Finland, Finland
[b] Intercultural Communication, J.F. Oberlin University, Japan

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Relationship selling
B2B solution selling
Personal selling skills
Communication competence
Sales communication competence

ABSTRACT

Increasing demands for international solution selling call for a better understanding of the interpersonal communication competence required of sales professionals. Accordingly, this study investigates discipline-specific needs regarding the interpersonal communication competence required by business-to-business (B2B) salespeople. Empirical data was collected via 39 in-depth interviews from international B2B salespeople, sales managers, CEOs and sales communication educators. As a result, we have formed a new conceptualization of sales communication competence in international B2B solution selling comprising four components: (1) a behavioral communication component, (2) an affective communication component, (3) a cognitive communication component and (4) sales acumen. Managerial implications are presented with recommendations for future research.

1. Introduction

The international business-to-business (B2B) solution selling environment has become an increasingly complex and global communication environment. In international B2B solution selling, salespeople aim to build appropriate solutions in long-term customer relationships with key customers and achieve profitable sales via successful collaborative sales processes (Homburg, Müller, & Klarmann, 2011; Tuli, Kohli, & Bharadwaj, 2007). Indeed, B2B solution selling has now moved towards relationship selling, which perceives sales as a process of concentrating on securing, building, and maintaining long-term relationships with profitable customers (Homburg, Droll, & Totzek, 2008; Palmatier, 2008). Despite extensive current research on solution selling (Evanschitzky, Wangenheim, & Woisetschläger, 2011; Panagopoulos, Rapp, & Ogilvie, 2017; Tuli et al., 2007; Ulaga & Kohli, 2018; Ulaga & Loveland, 2014) little attention has been given to investigating the dimensions of the communication competence required by salespeople in international B2B solution selling. Since salespeople are the most important people in building long-term customer relationships and in providing solutions, they crucially need communication competence to succeed in their work. Accordingly, our research contributes to the B2B sales and marketing literature in four ways.

First, we contribute to the existing B2B sales and marketing literature in terms of originality (Corley & Gioia, 2011). This study provides new and original theoretical knowledge on the sales communication competence required by salespeople who are conducting international B2B solution selling. By focusing on individual salespeople, we respond to the call for solution-specific research at the individual salesperson level (Evanschitzky et al., 2011; Ulaga & Loveland, 2014). In addition, B2B sales researchers have been calling to investigate the specific competencies which salespeople need to master as they provide solutions in solution-centric sales (Blocker, Cannon, Panagopoulos, & Sager, 2012; Evans, McFarland, Dietz, & Jaramillo, 2012; Ulaga & Kohli, 2018; Williams & Plouffe, 2007). Particularly Ulaga and Kohli (2018, p. 167) have argued that future research should more specifically investigate which “excellent interpersonal skillsets and adequate technical competencies” B2B solution sellers need in order to be successful in their work. Although existing sales research has considered many important aspects of solution selling at the firm level (Tuli et al., 2007; Ulaga & Kohli, 2018), only Panagopoulos et al. (2017) have focused on individual salespeople and investigated salespeople's key solution-related activities. However, we are the first to examine what type of sales communication competence salespeople need as they accomplish international B2B solution sales activities.

Second, we form a new conceptualization of sales communication competence in international B2B solution selling comprising four components: a behavioral communication component, an affective communication component, a cognitive communication component and sales acumen. Introducing a new concept - sales communication competence - is a clear incremental advance (Corley & Gioia, 2011) on the previous sales and marketing research. We show that salespeople need sales acumen as a central part of sales communication

* Corresponding author at: Department of Business, University of Eastern Finland, P.O. Box 1627, FI-70211 Kuopio, Finland.
E-mail address: jonnapauliina.koponen@uef.fi (J. Koponen).

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2019.01.009
Received 30 May 2018; Received in revised form 18 December 2018; Accepted 8 January 2019
Available online 17 January 2019
0019-8501/

competence, which previous studies have not emphasized. Sales acumen refers to a strategic understanding of B2B sales and leadership skills. Specifically, this is new understanding compared to that presented in previous sales studies, which have focused on selling skills (Rentz, Shepherd, Tashchian, Dabholkar, & Ladd, 2002; Singh, Kumar, & Puri, 2017; Singh, Singh, & Banerji, 2018).

Third, we bring scientific utility (Corley & Gioia, 2011) to sales research. We build a theoretical bridge between the communication literature that has long provided a conceptualization for interpersonal communication competence (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002) and the sales literature that has long recognized the significance of effective interpersonal communication (Chaisrakeo & Speece, 2004; Griffith, 2002; Rentz et al., 2002; Saxe & Weitz, 1982; Weitz, 1981; Weitz, Sujan, & Sujan, 1986) but lacks a comprehensive theoretical conceptualization. By combining communication literature, sales literature and empirical data we bring about a new understanding of which skills, knowledge, affective aspects and sales acumen are crucial for salespeople as they aim to accomplish successful international B2B solution sales. Even though Griffith (2002) referred to "communication competence" in his study, he defined the concept differently from the way we do. Our results are scientifically useful because we provide the first conceptualization of a salesperson's communication competence in a B2B solution selling context, and other researchers may use this conceptualization to build quantitative measures and to explore the phenomena further in order to generalize the findings.

Fourth, our results are practically useful (Corley & Gioia, 2011), since we determine the core areas of communication competence in sales that we should teach to the next generation of international solution sellers and sales managers (see Szkudlarek, 2009). Managers need to know what to train their sales force to do so that they are effective in providing solutions. This information is crucial because the role of solution sellers has changed from being partners during the sales process towards becoming creators of value (Arli, Bauer, & Palmatier, 2018). Solution sellers need to be able to provide complex solutions, implement strategic decisions to achieve growth for the company through customer solutions, reduce uncertainty in the solution process and encourage adaptive behavior of all parties involved (Ulaga & Kohli, 2018). In this study, we bring new knowledge concerning sales communication competence that is highly important since sellers are in constant and strategically important interaction with buyers throughout the B2B solution selling process.

2. Positioning our study

Salespeople are the key players in the actual interaction with buyers and they engage in relationship building processes during B2B solution selling (Panagopoulos et al., 2017). In this study, we define interpersonal communication as skilled behavior and therefore we see that in order to be effective and appropriate in interpersonal communication, a person needs communication competence (Hargie, 2010; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002). Bush and Ingram (1996) stated that in marketing and sales contexts, intercultural communication occurs when a message from a buyer (or seller) from one culture must be processed by a seller (or buyer) from another culture. Focusing on the previous sales and marketing literature on B2B businesses, we claim that sales professionals need to be highly competent in communication (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002) to succeed in intercultural interaction with customers and colleagues. International B2B salespeople need the ability to function, effectively manage, and behave appropriately in culturally diverse sales settings (Earley & Ang, 2003; Hansen, Singh, Weilbaker, & Guesalaga, 2011).

Following Arli et al. (2018), and some additional important sales research journals, we reviewed the most relevant sales and marketing journals (*Industrial Marketing Management, Journal of Marketing, Journal of Marketing Research, Marketing Science; Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management; Journal of Academy of Marketing Science, Journal of Marketing Research, Journal of Business Research, Journal of World Business*) published up to 2018. We searched Reuter's Web of Science database, EBSCOhost (multiple databases), and carried out an advanced search within each journal. We searched for key words ("*communication competence*", "*cross-cultural communication competence*", "*intercultural communication competence*", "*interpersonal communication competence*", "*business communication competence*", "*global communicative competence*", "*relational competence*", *and* "*interpersonal skills*") anywhere in the text (including the title, abstract, key words, text). We found 202 articles that founded our key concepts. Based on our research questions and relevance to our study, we selected 46 most important articles for further analysis. From these, 19 articles did not focus on sales contexts. From the 27 articles left, 11 studies dealt with the salesperson's interpersonal skills; 5 focused on affective aspects, 3 investigated selling related knowledge. In addition, 4 articles aggregated many dimensions such as skills, knowledge and abilities, but did not refer to communication competence. Finally, 4 articles included an exploration or use of communication competence, intercultural communication competence, or relational competency in their study. All in all, we found that in the sales and marketing literature the sellers' communication competence had been a rather unexplored concept. In the next section, we analyze and draw conclusions based on previous studies and present how our study is positioned in relation to these key articles in Table 1.

2.1. Previous research on salespersons' communication competence

First, as Table 1 shows, we found 11 prior studies examining *salespersons' interpersonal skills*. In the sales literature, interpersonal skills are defined as follows: "Interpersonal skills includes such skills as knowing how to cope with and resolve conflict and understanding, persuading and getting along with others, ability to listen, and empathy," (Rentz et al., 2002, p. 15). Several sales researchers have focused on adaptive selling behavior (see Weitz, 1981; Weitz et al., 1986). It has been found to be important for the sellers to understand a selling situation, in addition to the customer's needs and the requirements for performance (Chakrabarty, Brown, Widing II, & Taylor, 2004; Limbu, Jayachandran, Babin, & Peterson, 2016; Porter, Wiener, & Frankwick, 2003) and to be able to adapt their communication behavior accordingly. Through an appropriate communication style, the seller should be able to adapt to the customer (Miles, Arnold, & Nash, 1990). Moreover, researchers have examined sellers' customer-oriented behavior and found that it predicts relationship development (Williams, 1998), performance (Lussier & Hartmann, 2017; Plouffe, Hulland, & Wachner, 2009; Singh & Venugopal, 2015), and customer satisfaction (Lussier & Hartmann, 2017). Good listening skills on behalf of the seller have been found to enhance trust (Ramsey & Sohi, 1997; Drollinger & Lucette, 2013), relationship quality and the overall communication skills of salespeople (Drollinger & Lucette, 2013). In addition, Guenzi, Sajtos, and Troilo (2016) showed that a seller's personal selling capability enhances their performance. These studies provide a good understanding of important interpersonal skills needed in B2B sales situations, however, they miss an overall conceptualization of the sellers' communication competence.

Second, *salespersons' affective aspects* have been studied in terms of communication apprehension, emotional intelligence, cultural sensitivity and sales call anxiety (see Table 1). Boorom, Gooslby, and Ramsey (1998) investigated sellers' relational communication traits and showed that salespeople with lower levels of communication apprehension were more involved in interaction. Emotional intelligence has been investigated in terms of buyers' or sellers' behavior and its connection to performance (Kidwell, Hardesty, Murtha, & Sheng, 2011; Schumacher, Wheeler, & Carr, 2009). The sellers' cultural sensitivity has been conceptually defined and anticipated to have a connection with the salesperson's role performance (Harich & LaBahn, 1998). In

Table 1
Positioning our study within key previous studies.

Theme or focus	Concept	Conceptualization or definition	Sales context	Main results	References
The salesperson's skills	Adaptive selling behavior	Adaptive selling is conceptualized as the process a salesperson goes through to gather information about the selling situation and use this information to develop unique sales presentations designed to meet the customer's needs (Spiro & Weitz, 1990).	Salespeople from two firms. Rebuy or new buy versus straight rebuy.	The salesperson's adaptive selling strategy will generally enhance performance outcomes. This relationship is stronger in a modified rebuy and new buy situation.	Porter et al. (2003)
	Adaptive selling behavior	Definition: "the ability to adapt sales behaviors during a customer interaction or across customer interactions based on perceived information about the nature of selling situation" (Weitz et al., 1986, p. 175).	Salespeople representing several different firms.	Researchers recommend using ADAPTS-SV (RMML) for a multifaceted measure of adaptive selling; for behavior-only scale they recommend Spiro and Weitz (1990)	Chakrabarty et al. (2004)
	Adaptive selling behavior	Adaptive selling behavior is defined to refer to "the altering of sales behaviors during a customer interaction or across customer interactions based on perceived information about the nature of the selling situation" (Weitz et al., 1986, p. 175).	Pharmaceutical sales reps.	Adaptive selling behavior mediates the effect of perspective taking empathy and empathic concern on relationship performance.	Limbu et al. (2016)
	Communication style	Communication style is conceptualized as: - *task orientation* referring to high level of goal directed behavior by the communicator; - *self orientation* referring to person whose primary interest in communication is on what any activity will "mean to me"; and - *interaction orientation* referring to style that emphasizes social relationships.	Conceptual paper, no empirical data.	A model to describe how a seller might adapt her or his communication style to the buyer's communication style in different stages of the buyer-seller relationship.	Miles et al. (1990)
	Customer-oriented behavior	A salesperson's customer-orientation consists of: - non-opportunistic behavior corresponding to coordinative negotiation style, and - interpersonal behaviors concerning information sharing, needs discovery, and response adaptation.	Salesperson-buyer dyads; organizational buyers.	With SOCO scale (Saxe & Weitz, 1982) the results showed that customer-oriented behavior of salespeople predicts relationship development.	Williams (1998)
	Customer-directed selling behaviors	Based on the SOCO scale (Saxe & Weitz, 1982) a salesperson's behavior can be distinguished between a "sales orientation" and "customer-orientation". A customer-orientation favors the customer's best interests and needs.	Salespeople from three different firms.	The ADAPTS scale and Selling Skills scale are the best scales explaining salesperson performance.	Plouffe et al. (2009)
	Customer-oriented sales behavior	Definition: "Customer-oriented selling can be viewed as the practice of the marketing concept at the level of individual salesperson and customer" (Saxe & Weitz, 1982, p. 343). Using SOCO scale.	Salespeople in a large media organization in India.	A salesperson's customer orientation relates positively to sales performance through emotion regulation and salesmanship skills.	Singh and Venugopal (2015)
	Customer-oriented behavior	Definition: "Customer-oriented behaviors refer to the degree to which salespeople practice the marketing concept by trying to help their customers make purchase decisions that will satisfy customer needs" (Saxe & Weitz, 1982, p. 344).	Salesperson-customer dyads in various industries in B2B settings.	Customer-oriented behaviors mediate the influence of psychological resourcefulness on sales performance and customer satisfaction.	Lussier and Hartmann (2017)
	Listening skills	A salesperson's listening behaviors consist of: - *sensing,* - *evaluating,* and - *responding.*	Automobile industry; B2C sales context.	When customers perceive a high level of listening behavior, it enhances the customer's trust in the seller and leads to greater anticipation of future interaction.	Ramsey and Sohi (1997)
	Listening skills	Active empathic listening (AEL) is defined as "listening practiced by salespeople in whom active listening behaviors are combined with empathy to achieve a higher form of listening" (Comer & Drollinger, 1999).	B2B sellers who were randomly selected from a commercial mailing list.	AEL is positively related to trust, relationship quality and the overall communication skills of salespeople.	Drollinger & Lucette (2013)
	Personal selling capability	Personal selling capacity consists of: - *account management* (building customer relationships and maintaining customer relationships), and - *salesmanship* (cross/up-selling customers; delivering the right sales message; closing sales).	Salespeople in Italy in a variety of market settings (consumer/ industrial goods and service providers).	Sales capabilities enhance performance directly through a well-structured sales force and indirectly by leveraging personal selling capability by nurturing sales talent and targeting customers.	Guenzi et al. (2016)

(*continued on next page*)

Table 1 (*continued*)

Theme or focus	Concept	Conceptualization or definition	Sales context	Main results	References
The salesperson's affective aspects	Communication apprehension	Relational communication traits consist of *communication apprehension* (CA) and *interaction involvement*. These are investigated within an adaptive selling framework.	Insurance salespeople.	Salespeople who exhibit lower levels of CA are more highly involved in communication interactions, and higher involvement facilitates increased adaptiveness and sales performance.	Boorom et al. (1998)
	Emotional intelligence	Definition: Emotional intelligence is defined as the "abilities to perceive, appraise, and express emotion; to access and/or generate feelings when they facilitate thought; to understand emotion and emotional knowledge; and to regulate emotions to promote educational and intellectual growth" (Mayer & Salovey, 1997, p. 10).	Buyers and suppliers; US manufacturing and service companies.	Buyers' emotional intelligence is positively related to relationship performance.	Schumacher et al. (2009)
	Emotional intelligence	Definition: Emotional intelligence (EI) is the ability to acquire and apply knowledge from one's emotions and those of others to produce beneficial outcomes.	Agents from real estate company; insurance agents from U.S.	The results indicate a complementary relationship between EI and cognitive ability in that EI positively influences performance at higher levels of cognitive ability.	Kidwell et al. (2011)
	Cultural sensitivity	Definition: Cultural sensitivity is the customer's perception of the degree to which the salesperson accommodates cultural differences.	U.S.-Mexican business relationships.	The study presents a conceptual framework and identifies antecedents and consequences of salesperson role performance.	Harich and LaBahn (1998)
	Sales call anxiety	Sales call anxiety (SCA) is defined "as the fear of being negatively evaluated and rejected by customers, which is accompanied by urges to avoid contact with customers or, when contact is made, to refrain from interacting effectively and asking for a commitment."	Salespeople in Dutch bank, selling mortgages to consumers.	SCA consists of four components: negative self-evaluations, negative evaluations from customers, awareness of psychological symptoms, and protective actions. SCA negatively influences performance.	Verbeke and Bagozzi (2000)
The salesperson's knowledge	Selling skills	Selling skills are described as individual's learned proficiency at performing the necessary tasks for the sales job including three components: - *interpersonal skills*, such as knowing how to cope with and resolve conflicts, - *salesmanship skills*, such as knowing how to make a presentation and close the sale, and - *technical skills*, such as knowledge of product features and benefits and engineering skills.	Food broker salespeople from four companies in the U.S.	The authors present a selling skills scale as a reliable and valid instrument.	Rentz et al. (2002)
	Selling skills	Exploring thought self-leadership strategies (TSL), which involve making the best use of mental strategies to develop and maintain constructive thoughts. Selling skills are defined referring to e.g. Rentz et al. (2002).	Salespeople in pharmaceutical companies in Asian countries.	A salesperson's TSL relates positively to sales performance through self-efficacy, selling skills and adaptive selling behavior.	Singh et al. (2017)
	Salesmanship skills	Salesmanship skills are defined by referring to Rentz et al. (2002). The authors explore the mediating impact of salesmanship skills on the natural reward strategies (NRS)–sales performance linkage.	B2B salespeople in a single media firm in India.	Results show that NRS are influenced by a salesperson's emotion regulation abilities, while salesmanship skills partially mediate the NRS-sales performance relationship.	Singh et al. (2018)

(*continued on next page*)

Table 1 (*continued*)

Theme or focus	Concept	Conceptualization or definition	Sales context	Main results	References
Aggregating many dimensions of the salesperson's abilities	Knowledge, skills and abilities in partnering role	In partnering role, sellers need: - *knowledge* (e.g. on the buying firm, benefits of company's products/services), and - *skills and abilities* (e.g. creative problem solving, interacting with people, building trust).	Conceptual paper, no empirical data.	For salespeople, the partnering role means that they need to be able to build relationships rather than make short-term sales. The use of sales teams is increasing.	Weitz and Bradford (1999)
	Sales performance drivers	Exploring the factors that drive sales performance based on previous literature. Defining 24 different concepts.	Meta-analysis, no empirical data.	5 sub-categories demonstrate a significant relationship with sales performance: selling-related knowledge, the degree of adaptiveness, role ambiguity, cognitive aptitude and work engagement.	Verbeke et al. (2011)
	Interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence	Definition: "Interpersonal skill includes such skills as knowing how to cope with and resolve conflict and understanding, persuading and getting along with others, the ability to listen, and empathy," (Rentz et al., 2002, p. 15). Referring to many sources, the authors say that emotional intelligence refers to intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligence.	Conceptual paper, no empirical data.	The paper presents the IPS-EQ model which aims to conceptualize interpersonal skills in B2B sales processes.	Borg and Johnston (2013)
	Sales competencies	Sales competencies for strategic account management include: - *cognitive aptitude*, - *skills* (e.g. conflict resolution, cross-cultural communication, negotiation skills) - *motivation* (customer-orientation, relationship commitment and trust), and - *personal aspect* (ethical behavior).	Conceptual paper, no empirical data.	The article highlights a competency path that can lead salespeople to transition successfully into strategic account managers.	Lacoste (2018)
Exploring "communication competence"	Intercultural communication competence	Intercultural communication competence refers to: - *the ability to deal with stress,* - *interpersonal relationships,* and - *communication styles*.	Marketing executives across various industries and MBA students.	In addition to being adaptive, the intercultural disposition of marketers is of key importance in developing intercultural communication competence.	Bush et al. (2001)
	Intercultural communication competence	Intercultural communication refers to: - *cultural awareness*, - *cultural sensitivity*, and - *cultural adroitness*.	Salespeople from high- and low-context cultures. Focusing on negotiation.	The study proposes a conceptual model of how cultural issues at three different levels (individual, organizational, national) influence salespeople's negotiation styles.	Chaisrakeo and Speece (2004)
	Communication competencies	Communication competencies consists of: - *cognitive communication competence* (e.g., adaptation to one's own linguistic patterns), - *affective communication competence* (e.g., motivation and attitude), and - *behavioral communication competence* (e.g., abilities which enable meaningful interaction).	Industry examples and international managers from 4 countries and various industries.	The author presents a model of communication effectiveness for international relationship development and a six-step process to guide managerial actions towards stronger international business relationships.	Griffith (2002)
	Relational competency	Relational competency consists of: - *relationship initiation competence* (e.g. assertiveness, dominance, shyness, social anxiety), and - *relationship maintenance competence* (e.g. intimacy, trusting ability, interpersonal sensitivity)	Southeast Asia business partnerships.	The authors present a theoretical framework for examining the impact of the manager's relational competency.	Phan et al. (2005)

addition, Verbeke and Bagozzi (2000) investigated whether sales call anxiety has an impact on performance. These studies prove that sellers need emotional intelligence and cultural sensitivity in B2B sales. In addition, sellers need to overcome anxiety and communication apprehension in their interaction with buyers. However, these studies do not describe an overall conceptualization of the sellers' communication competence.

Third, *salespersons' selling related knowledge* has been investigated in terms of selling and salesmanship skills (see Table 1). Rentz et al. (2002) presented a selling skill scale including interpersonal skills, salesmanship skills and technical skills. Singh et al. (2017) focused on self-leadership strategies that have a positive impact on sales performance through self-efficacy, selling skills and adaptive selling behavior. Singh et al. (2018) also studied salesmanship skills related to natural reward strategies and sales performance. Referring to a salesperson's knowledge, the scale developed by Rentz et al. (2002) seems to be the most commonly used when investigating selling skills. Although these studies display highly important results, an overall conceptualization of sellers' communication competence is not provided in these studies.

Fourth, we found four studies that *aggregated many dimensions of the salespersons' abilities* (see Table 1). At quite an early stage Weitz and Bradford (1999) connected relationship marketing with personal selling and sales force management practice and research. They emphasized attention on long-term buyer-seller relationships and identified the salesperson's partnering role (Weitz & Bradford, 1999). They highlighted the seller's knowledge, skills and emphasized abilities that salespeople need to perform the partnering role. More recently, Verbeke, Dietz, and Verwaal (2011) examined factors that drive sales performance. Based on existing literature they claim that these factors consist of selling-related knowledge, the degree of adaptiveness, role ambiguity, cognitive aptitude, and work engagement. Based on connecting interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence Borg and Johnston (2013) conceptualized an IPS-EQ model, that highlights interpersonal skills in the B2B sales process. Finally, Lacoste (2018) investigated sales competencies and showed competency paths that lead salespeople's growth towards becoming successful strategic account managers. Despite showing many highly important constructs and models, all these studies are conceptual in nature. Therefore, new empirical research is needed to conceptualize an up-dated understanding of sellers' communication competence in international B2B solution selling.

Finally, only four articles included an exploration or discussion of communication competence, intercultural communication competence, or relational competency in their study. Intercultural communication competence was explored by Bush, Rose, Gilbert, and Ingram (2001) and Chaisrakeo and Speece (2004). Bush et al. (2001) concluded that adaptive selling behavior is a mediator between an intercultural disposition and intercultural communication competence. Regarding sales negotiations, Chaisrakeo and Speece (2004) defined sellers' intercultural communication competence to consist of cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity and cultural adroitness. They propose a conceptual model of how cultural issues at the individual, organization and national level influence salespeople's negotiation styles. Communication competence was also explored as a model of communication effectiveness in different cultural environments (Griffith, 2002) consisting of cognitive communication competence, affective communication competence, and behavioral communication competence. However, Griffith (2002) applied definitions for cognitive, affective and behavioral communication competencies from the intercultural communication literature, particularly citing Kim (1991). These definitions are different from the the ones we use in our study citing Spitzberg and Cupach (1984, 2002) for cognitive, affective and behavioral dimensions. Kim (1991) defines cognitive competence as an individual's ability to ascertain meaning from verbal and nonverbal language (seeApplegate & Sypher, 1988; Kim, 1991). Furthermore, Kim (1991) sees affective competence as a person's emotional tendencies related to communication (Applegate & Sypher, 1988; Kim, 1991). According to Kim (1991), behavioral competence involves a person's flexibility and resourcefulness in reacting during interaction. Griffith (2002) did not focus on a solution selling context, instead he focused on international business relationships. His main focus was to create an action plan to describe the phases needed in effective communication, which is very useful from a managerial perspective. Still, he did not focus on a conceptualization of sales communication competence. Finally, Phan, Styles, and Patterson (2005) focused on relational competency, which included relationship initiation competence and relationship maintenance competence. As a result, the authors presented a theoretical framework for examining the impact of a manager's relational competence. All the mentioned studies highlight the importance of intercultural communication competence and the ability of the sellers to form and maintain relationships. However, these studies did not include sales knowledge or salesmanship skills in their frameworks or models. In summary, the previous sales studies have not provided a comprehensive and up-to-date understanding of the communication competence required by solution sellers in international B2B sales. For this reason we will next examine the communication literature and build a bridge between sales and communication research.

3. Theoretical foundation

3.1. Communication in the disciplines – a theoretical framework

As the aim of this research is to create a comprehensive theoretical understanding and conceptualization of a salesperson's communication competence in an international B2B solution selling context, our theoretical foundation is linked to the principles of the theoretical framework of *Communication in the Disciplines* (CID). CID is based on the principles of disciplinary knowledge construction, the social construction of knowledge, and situated learning (Dannels, 2001; Dannels & Housley Gaffney, 2009). It suggests that communication is a situated and contextual activity (Dannels, 2001). Therefore, communication competence criteria are defined in each discipline based on disciplinary values and preferences. Additionally, discipline-specific communication competence is gradually learned as an individual participates in professional work and engages with the professional community (Dannels, 2001; Hyvärinen, Tanskanen, Katajavuori, & Isotalus, 2010). With regard to the context, disciplinary oral genres or styles of communication can be distinguished in different disciplines (Dannels, 2001; Dannels & Housley Gaffney, 2009). As we follow the CID framework in this study, we need to investigate how communication competence criteria are understood in the international B2B sales field. Therefore, we need to examine how experts in international B2B sales (salespeople and leading educators in sales communication) construct communication competence requirements in B2B solution selling.

3.2. Interpersonal communication competence

Diverse communication research on interpersonal and communication competence has approached the phenomenon from various theoretical perspectives (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009;Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002; Wilson & Sabee, 2003). In the field of communication, numerous studies have relied on the foundation provided by Spitzberg and Cupach (1984), which emphasizes interpersonal communication competence as a construction with cognitive, behavioral and affective dimensions. Moreover, effectiveness, appropriateness, and ethicality are commonly accepted criteria of interpersonal communication competence (Deardorff, 2006, 2011; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). We define effectiveness according to Spitzberg and Cupach (2002) and see it as the achievement of preferred or desired outcomes of social interaction. Moreover, appropriateness refers to the perceived fitness or legitimacy of a communicator's behavior in a given context and relationship. Ethicality refers to the willingness and ability to take moral responsibility and the willingness to behave in a way which does not insult others or create distrust (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002; Wilson & Sabee, 2003). Most theories and models of intercultural competence and communication competence rely on cognitive, behavioral, and affective dimensions as conceptual metaphors to guide their explanations (see Deardorff, 2006; Elo, Benjowsky, & Nummela, 2015; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009).

The behavioral dimension refers to interpersonal communication skills that support acting in a manner that the interactants perceive to be effective and appropriate (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984). Having good communication skills means that a person is able to show appropriate and effective verbal and nonverbal communication behavior in a certain context (Rubin, 1990; Valkonen, 2003). Accordingly, skills are processes that can be seen in behavior, however, skills are also related to cognitive and affective processes (Hargie, 2010).

The affective dimension refers to the motivation to engage in interpersonal interaction, as well as feelings on and attitudes to communication and interacting with other people (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002; Valkonen, 2003). Motivation is a crucial part of interpersonal communication competence, because even highly skillful people are not necessarily effective communicators, for instance, if they are not willing to participate in interaction and use their skills fully during any interaction (Valkonen, 2003).

Furthermore, the cognitive dimension refers to knowledge and understanding of effective and appropriate interpersonal communication (Rubin, 1990; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984). Spitzberg and Cupach (2002) further explain that interactants need to have both content knowledge and procedural knowledge. Content knowledge refers to knowledge and understanding of the nature, rules, and norms of different communication situations and relationships between people. Procedural knowledge refers, for example, to knowledge of different processes, such as how to set goals and prioritize them, knowledge about problem solving procedures, and knowledge explaining and predicting other people's communication behavior (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002). Some researchers also differentiate meta-cognitive communication skills from the cognitive component (Valkonen, 2003), referring to an individual's knowledge of their own cognitive and emotional processes, such as the ability to evaluate their own communication behavior (Valkonen, 2003).

The above-mentioned core components (behavioral, affective, and cognitive forms) have dominated models of human communication competence at least since the 1950s (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). Despite the large numbers of studies exploring interpersonal and intercultural communication competence (see reviews from Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009; Wilson & Sabee, 2003) there remain inconsistencies in the ways researchers define the concept. For instance, the behavioral dimension can be seen as one part of interpersonal communication competence as explained above. However, *skilled behavior*, *skilled interpersonal communication* or *interpersonal communication skills* have also been used in parallel with interpersonal communication competence (Hargie, 2010; Purhonen, 2012). Moreover, *communication*, *communicative,* and *relational competence* have been used as synonyms for interpersonal communication competence (Purhonen, 2012). Therefore, it is important to note that these core components are interrelated, and all these parts are needed to communicate in a competent manner.

3.3. Intercultural communication competence

In the marketing and sales literature, intercultural communication competence is viewed as crucial in building trust between partners (Elo et al., 2015). Additionally, due to the high-performance expectations in global sales environments (Barnes, Leonidou, Siu, & Leonidou, 2015; Hoppner, Griffith, & White, 2015), salespeople need the ability to communicate effectively with people who come from different cultures (Bush et al., 2001; Chaisrakeo & Speece, 2004). In the communication literature, intercultural communication competence is defined in much the same way as the above-mentioned competence in interpersonal communication (see Deardorff, 2006; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). According to Chen and Starosta (2005) the critical difference is that scholars of intercultural communication place more emphasis on contextual factors and the environment people come from. Among the variety of terms used in the communication and marketing literature are: multiculturalism, cross-cultural adaptation, intercultural sensitivity, cultural intelligence, international communication, global competence, cross-cultural awareness, and global citizenship (Deardorff, 2011; Elo et al., 2015; Malek & Budhwar, 2013). Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) offer an extensive review of the existing foundational models of intercultural competence in the communication research field. Most of these models include cognitive, behavioral, and affective dimensions (see Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006; Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998), however other concepts can also be found such as facework competence (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998), adaptation (Kim, 1988), and intercultural sensitivity (Bennett, 1986). Still, a comprehensive conceptualization for communication competence for international B2B solution sellers does not exist.

4. Method

4.1. Data collection

A qualitative approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) was chosen for this study because we particularly wanted to focus on using methods appropriate for exploring the interplay between theoretical constructs and an empirically complex phenomenon (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2009). Since our research goal is to investigate seller's communication competence needed in international B2B solution selling, we used expert interviews (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015) and sought a sample comprising participants who have the best possible knowledge of the research topic (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002). Accordingly, we first interviewed international B2B solution salespeople including sales managers, salespeople, and CEOs from four different companies in different industries. Conducting interviews with salespeople or managers who are not involved in international B2B solution selling would not generate valid conclusions (Morse et al., 2002). We collected new data until we saw effective saturation of categories (Morse et al., 2002). Second, we interviewed sales communication educators, who have an academic understanding of international B2B solution selling and who teach communication skills to sales students. We used this group as a comparative sample to improve the reliability of our results (Morse et al., 2002). Again, we collected new data until we saw effective saturation of categories (Morse et al., 2002). To conclude, we conducted in-depth interviews (n = 39) with sales communication educators worldwide (n = 10) and international B2B solution sellers (n = 29). The interviewees were assigned pseudonyms and are represented in Table 2. The interviews were conducted either in English or in Finnish.

Given the known difficulty of acquiring in-depth and holistic knowledge of the phenomenon influencing a study (Graebner, 2009), we established specific criteria for the data. To qualify for the study, international B2B solution sellers had to have more than 10-years' experience in international B2B solution selling, to have conducted sales in at least three different countries, and needed to have an understanding of long-term relationships between sales professionals and customers. The sales communication educators worldwide were selected based on information on whether sales was a major or minor subject for business students at their universities. The universities selected for this study were located in the United States, the United Kingdom, Finland, and France (see Deeter-Schmelz & Kennedy, 2011). The educators were required to have at least three years of experience in offering courses on sales communication related subjects at a bachelor's or master's degree level.

The interviews were conducted over four years (2013–2017) and

Table 2
The interviewees.

Interviews (n = 29) with CEOs, salespeople, or sales managers		Interviews (n = 10) with sales communication educators	
Construction business	CEO (Matt)	USA, Baylor University	Professor (Lisa)
	Sales manager (Nick)		
	Seller (Roger)		
	Seller (Anton)		Senior lecturer (Vera)
IT-business	Sales Manager (Kirstin)	USA, University of Toledo	Professor (Victoria)
	Sales Manager (John)		Lecturer (Anna)
	Sales Manager (Tom)		
Paper and packaging industry	Sales Manager (Susan)	UK, Cranfield School of Management	Senior lecturer (Paul)
	Sales Manager (Jack)		
	Seller (Peter)		
Pharmaceutical industry	CEO (Katherine)	UK, University of Portsmouth	Sales Department Manager (Emma)
	Sales Manager (Maria)		
	Sales Manager (Alice)		
		France, IAE Montpellier School of Management	Professor (Edwin)
		Finland, Aalto University	Professor (Carl)
			Professor (Caroline)

the duration of the interviews was between 60 and 180 min. Semi-structured and open-ended questions were used, to offer a flexible method for understanding the perspectives of the interviewees (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2009). In the interviews, we focused on the characteristics of a seller's communication competence in international B2B solution selling. We asked the B2B salespeople and sales educators some background questions including questions about their professional backgrounds and job history, and also posed questions to elicit general information about their company or university, and their own experience in B2B sales or in sales communication training and education. Next, the B2B salespeople and sales educators were asked to comment on a seller's interpersonal communication competence in international B2B sales following an open-ended chronology. For example, we asked the following questions: *How could you describe the characteristics of interpersonal communication competence needed in international B2B sales? What kinds of communication skills do you consider important if you think about people/yourself working in international B2B sales? What kind of knowledge do B2B salespeople need in their work? What about knowledge related to different cultures? What kinds of attitude or motivation are needed in international B2B sales? What else do you think is crucial to achieve ones' goals and build solutions in interaction with international customers?*

4.2. Analysis

Our study represents an abductive approach to sales research (Dubois & Gabbe, 2002). As Dubois and Gabbe (2002) argue, in an abductive approach, researchers suggest a tight and evolving theoretical framework at the beginning of the study. The tightness of the framework is based on the researchers' preconceptions; however, these preconceptions and the theoretical framework may evolve during the study as the researchers are inspired by empirical observations (Dubois & Gabbe, 2002, p. 558). In this study, our preconceptions and the tightness of our theoretical framework was based on the previous understanding of the three dimensions of interpersonal communication competence (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002). These dimensions are behavioral, cognitive and affective components that are connected with communication. However, since our aim was to build new theoretical understanding of the communication competence needed particularly in international B2B solution selling, we wanted to be inspired by observations from our interview data and see if the tightness of the theoretical framework could be expanded. We used a systematic process of combination in the analysis (Dubois & Gabbe, 2002). That is, we used the theoretical framework and relied on theoretical dimensions of interpersonal communication competence and we reviewed the interview data to see whether the theoretical framework could be expanded or developed. First, we organized the data into two datasets (sales educators and B2B salespeople) and conducted a within-case analysis. In the theme analysis process, we followed the principles described by Braun and Clarke (2006). In the first phase, we familiarized ourselves with our data. We carefully read the transcribed interview texts to gain a holistic picture of the data. In the second phase, we generated initial codes from the data collected from solution sellers, CEOs, and sales managers. At the same time, we systematically used our theoretical framework and preconceptions to code theoretically interesting features of the data across the entire dataset. We then connected relevant data to each code. In the third phase, we searched for potential themes and gathered all the relevant codes into each potential theme. We labeled the codes as *sub-categories* of each theme. Then we reviewed the themes and checked which themes worked in relation to the codes. Then we defined and named the themes. We found three main themes (behavioral, affective and a cognitive dimension related to communication) which were consistent with our theoretical framework, and a new theme (sales acumen) related to sales specific knowledge and skills. Finally, we selected relevant excerpts from our data to illustrate each theme. In addition, we analyzed the data collected from the sales educators in a similar manner as described above. Finally, a cross-case analysis was conducted by comparing the themes and sub-categories found in both datasets (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Two researchers analyzed the data. Reliability was achieved through careful data collection, the creation of a case database, in addition to having the interviewees review the transcribed interview data, and by cross-checking the data (Piekkari, Plakoyinnaki, & Welch, 2010). A few follow-up questions were asked via phone when clarification was needed (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to increase the reliability and validity of the investigation.

5. Results

The results of our analysis are divided into four main themes, their sub-categories, and their meanings in both datasets as shown in Table 3. The main themes found were behavioral, affective, and cognitive dimensions related to communication, and sales acumen related to sales specific knowledge and understanding. During the analysis, the perceptions of the sales educators and B2B salespeople were merged into one table to acquire a holistic understanding of the phenomena. The results show that overall the perceptions of the sales educators and B2B salespeople were rather similar. Next, we introduce the results appertaining to all themes.

Table 3
Results consisting of main themes, sub-categories, and meanings in both data-sets.

Sales communication competence		
Theme	Sub-category	Meaning in both data-sets (S = salespeople and sales managers; E = sales educators)
Behavioral communication dimension	• Relational communication skills	• Ability to establish contact and rapport (S, E) • Ability to reduce tension and small talk skills (S) • Ability to create trust (S, E) • Ability to listen (S, E) • Ability to ask questions and engage in a dialogue (S, E) • Self-disclosure (S) • Conflict management and resolution skills (S) • Ability to accept personal invitations (S)
	• Personal selling skills	• Networking skills in prospecting phase (S, E) • Impression management skills during first meetings (S) • Listening skills and ability to ask questions to determine customer's needs and to gain more specific information (S, E) • Adaptability during sales process (S, E) • Presentation skills (S, E) • Argumentation skills (S, E) • Nonverbal communication skills (S, E) • Improvisation skills (E) • Negotiation skills related to the solution/product/service/delivery options (S, E) • Ability to manage emotional reactions regarding counter arguments (S) • Ability to make decisions and close the deal (S, E)
	• Language skills	• Writing skills (mother tongue) (S, E) • English language skills (S, E) • Basics of the target country's language skills (S, E)
Affective communication dimension	• Motivation	• Motivation to interact with different customers (S, E) • Intrinsic motivation to learn more about people and sales (S, E)
	• Positive and open attitude	• Positive attitude and curiosity towards interacting with people (S, E) • Open attitude and empathy towards different people and their cultures (S, E)
	• Cultural sensitivity	• Respecting other cultures (S, E) • Ability to show sensitivity towards different people and their cultures (S, E)
Cognitive communication dimension	• Knowledge on communication	• Knowledge of different negotiation styles and tactics (S, E) • Knowledge of different patterns regarding nonverbal communication behavior (E) • Theoretical understanding of communication (E)
	• Cultural knowledge	• Knowing and understanding the national culture of the target country (S, E) • Understanding cultural differences both at the national level and between generations (S, E) • Understanding how to save face in interaction (S)
	• Meta-cognition	• Thinking and reflecting on one's own and others communication behavior (E)
Sales acumen	• Strategic understanding of B2B sales	• Understanding of the buyer's behavior (S, E) • Understanding of the sales process (S, E) • Understanding (global) business models (S, E) • Knowing CRM systems (E), technological knowledge and capabilities related to sales area (S, E) • Strategic understanding of customer's business (S); adding value (S, E) and creating common goals with the customer (S, E)
	• Leadership skills	• Understanding how to lead sales teams and collaborate in teams (S) • Understanding how to motivate salespeople and sales managers (S) • Analytical skills and creativity in problem-solving (S, E) • Time management skills (S, E)

5.1. The behavioral communication dimension of sales communication competence

The behavioral communication dimension of sales communication competence included the following sub-categories: relational communication skills, personal selling skills, and foreign language skills (see Table 3). Both datasets revealed almost the same skills to be important. However, salespeople emphasized relational communication skills more than the sales educators did. Salespeople highlighted small talk, self-disclosure, ability to accept personal invitations and ability to manage and resolve conflicts, which the sales educators did not emphasize.

Relational communication skills refer to a manager's ability to communicate effectively with the managers of the partner firm (Phan et al., 2005, p. 173). Relational communication skills are needed to create, maintain, and develop interpersonal relationships (Purhonen, 2012) with customers. Sales educators, salespeople, and sales managers thought that it was primarily important to establish contact and build rapport. The salespeople further pointed out that at the beginning of the business relationship it is also important to reduce tension with appropriate small talk. They also reported it was important to create trust to support the customer's willingness to continue the relationship. Both respondent groups emphasized the importance of having listening skills, the ability to ask questions, and of engaging in dialogue with the customer. Moreover, when creating and developing customer relationships, the salespeople and sales managers mentioned voluntarily offering personal information about themselves to the customers; a concept known as self-disclosure (Jacobs, Evans, Kleine III, & Landry, 2001). In our data, the salespeople explained that during long-term customer relationships they may even disclose quite personal aspects, as shown in the following quotation:

> When you develop an interpersonal [customer] relationship, it is a professional personal relationship. It is not just about talking about families, illnesses, children, and hobbies. But really getting to know each other, what he has done earlier professionally, what schools he attended, what mentors he had or what his ambitions are for the future. [Also] what his professional fears might be. (John, Sales

Manager).

Particularly when asked how they maintain long-term customer relationships, the salespeople emphasized the ability to accept invitations and participate in important customer events even outside normal working hours, as one of the sales managers explained:

> When your customer relationships become deeper, the customers start inviting you to their homes. I mean, in Singapore and Israel people take care of their grandparents and others and in those countries, salespeople may also be invited to a funeral of a customer's father. Then you must go. If you don't go, it's really embarrassing [not a correct thing to do]. (Tom, Sales Manager).

Conflicts were seen as a natural part of business interaction and having a deep relationship with the customer made it easier to resolve conflicts as the following quotation shows:

> Yes of course there are those sorts of situations where we make mistakes and the customer does not like it. And then when solving it… some sort of conflict might arise…It is possible to solve very difficult issues if there is a long-term relationship and it is a trusted and good relationship. It's a bit like a marriage too, that you can get over the worst hardships more easily that if it was quite a fresh relationship. (Maria, Sales Manager).

The second sub-category of the behavioral dimension of sales communication competence was related to personal selling skills (see Table 3). The results showed that these skills closely matched the seven steps of the modern sales process (Homburg et al., 2011; Moncrief & Marshall, 2005) in both datasets. These skills consisted of: networking skills, impression management, listening, asking questions, adaptability, presentation skills, argumentation skills, nonverbal communication skills, improvisation skills, negotiation skills, the ability to manage emotional reactions and the ability to make decisions and close the deal. As part of the prospecting phase at the beginning of the sales process, networking skills were emphasized in finding new customers and creating initial trust and commitment between business partners. During the first meeting with a potential customer, the salespeople highlighted the importance of making a positive first impression (impression management skills) as shown in the following quotation: "If you take care of your appearance, it's easier to get to talk to people than if [you don't]. That's how it is. In other words, appearances do matter." (Kirstin, Sales manager). Both salespeople and sales educators highlighted listening skills and the ability to ask questions to determine the customer's needs and to acquire more specific information about the customer's needs and problems. When asked about listening skills, one of the sales managers said:

> You must ask questions and listen. You have two ears and one mouth. I mean, when you are listening for two thirds of the time that's quite good. And you must [listen very carefully] and you should not ask the same questions again. (Tom, Sales Manager).

Adaptability was shown in the salespeople's ability to adapt to the sales situation and, for example, the ability to modify a sales presentation according to information collected from the customer. This refers to adaptive selling (Spiro & Weitz, 1990, p. 61), which comprises behaviors such as collecting information about a prospective customer and making adjustments in a sales presentation based on that information. Argumentation and presentation skills were also mentioned in the interviews and they typically referred to telling the customer about a product or service offer and convincing them to purchase: "I think argumentation is important, how you propose the argument and how you handle objections." (Edwin, Professor).

Nonverbal communication skills were also mentioned, and these were related to both observing the customer's nonverbal communication and being aware of one's own gestures, position, movements, and clothing. Interestingly improvisation skills were also mentioned by sales educators because salespeople need not only to adapt to the customer's needs but also to live in the moment, as one lecturer explained:

> If you think like a comedian, speak on that feeling and just go with the flow. A salesperson has to adapt to the customer's needs and be able to live in the moment, so improvisation skills are critical. (Anna, Lecturer).

Moreover, when negotiation skills related to the solution, product, or service, both salespeople and sales educators highlighted price and delivery options. One of the sales managers explained:

> If there are difficult things, like disagreements over the price, the negotiations are kind of a game. I remember once when I was young, and I didn't budge, and the customer called my boss and asked him if he could get me to change my mind. I said no, I'm not going to budge. (Susan, Sales Manager).

The salespeople suggested that in difficult negotiations it is crucial to manage emotional reactions, particularly if a customer has difficult counterarguments, as the following quotation shows:

> Sometimes you may hear some nasty things from the opposite side, very arrogant talk…You can easily get hurt if you are too sensitive. [You must be able to master your feelings.]… Under no circumstances should you argue about the point. (Maria, Sales Manager).

Finally, salespeople and sales educators both highlighted the importance of decision-making skills and the ability to close the deal at the correct moment (when it is effective and profitable).

The third sub-category in the behavioral dimension of the sales communication competence was related to language skills that were defined as a necessary part of communication between people who come from different countries. As Table 3 illustrates, in both datasets the respondents highlighted the importance of good writing skills (in their own language) and also possessing good English language skills. Furthermore, understanding at least the basics of the target country's language was seen as a worthwhile additional skill.

5.2. The affective communication dimension of sales communication competence

The affective communication dimension included motivation, attitude, and cultural sensitivity (see Table 3). The motivational aspects were described in the following way in our data:

> It shows if you don't have any motivation. Then you just wish that the meeting would be over as soon as possible. The other party will also notice that. Motivation also means that you have clear goals when you go to meet a customer. (Susan, Sales Manager).

Moreover, some international salespeople emphasized that they were not motivated only by money, but because they wanted to learn more (see Pullins, Haughtvedt, Dickson, Fine, & Lewicki, 2000 on intrinsic motivation), as one seller says: "I'm motivated by learning, not money… As a human being, I'm interested in learning more [about other people] by listening to them and by talking with them." (Tom, Sales Manager). The following quotations are further evidence of the presence of intrinsic motivation:

> International sales is a very mobile job, very time-consuming work, very challenging, uncomfortable work, that you need a solid foundation for. Therefore, you need some intrinsic motivation. (Carl, Professor).

> It's about passion. I'm out there because I want to do a really good job for you as a customer. I'm out there because I know I can do creative different things. Or I'm out there working for you, because this is what I truly love. Whether it is the product aspect that I love, or the customer aspect that I love. (Victoria, Professor).

Attitude here refers to having an open and positive attitude, which was expressed as a salesperson's willingness to communicate with new people and to understand a customer from a foreign culture. The third sub-category of the affective dimension of sales communication competence relates to cultural sensitivity. Respecting other cultures and being sensitive towards other people with different cultures was mentioned as key to building trust, as a sales manager explains: “It's respect and sensitivity for other people and their culture that helps to build trust between business partners.” (John, Sales Manager).

5.3. The cognitive communication dimension of sales communication competence

The cognitive communication dimension included three sub-categories: knowledge of communication, cultural knowledge, and meta-cognition (see Table 3). First, both respondent groups acknowledged the importance of knowing different negotiation styles and tactics. Sales educators, however, also emphasized theoretical knowledge and having an understanding of communication, as explained by the next respondent:

> They also need to know, without stereotyping, the patterns of nonverbal communication, So, when we communicate in a particular way, certain gestures and certain symbols mean something in a particular context and something completely different in another context. So, international sales managers require that understanding… Communication theories may shed light on some key elements such as conflict management. (Paul, Senior lecturer).

On a topic related to cultural knowledge, both salespeople and sales educators thought it was important to understand the characteristics of national cultures and differences between cultures at a national cultural level, as the next quotation shows:

> It's really important to know about different cultures, for example that in Asia, the most important thing is to know about the environment and hierarchies. Because [if you don't know] you may embarrass other people even if you don't mean to, or make stupid mistakes if you haven't found out who is who. (Tom, Sales Manager).

Interestingly, the topic of understanding differences between generations was also mentioned. Moreover, the concept of face emerged from the interviews. Face refers to the desired social image that a person creates during interaction with others (Fombelle, Bone, & Lemon, 2016; Goffman, 1967). The salespeople pointed out the importance of saving face:

> And let's say that, however, keeping the face of both people involved in the discussion. You should not underestimate the customer's knowledge if he or she asks a question which is stupid in your opinion. So, I'm not going to say why would you ask that sort of thing. [laughs] (Maria, Sales Manager).

Focusing on meta-cognition, sales educators pointed out the importance of reflecting on one's own and on the customer's feelings and behavior when managing sales processes and collaborating with customers as shown in the following quotation: “International sales management requires professionals to engage in internal communication with themselves, when traveling, when reflecting on issues, when thinking of terms…That internal communication [the meta-cognitive aspect] is very important.” (Paul, Senior lecturer).

5.4. Sales acumen as a dimension of sales communication competence

Sales acumen was the fourth dimension of sales communication competence including two sub-categories: a strategic understanding of B2B sales and leadership skills (see Table 3). Both salespeople and sales educators emphasized the importance of sales acumen as a crucial and inseparable component of communication competence. One of the sales educators explained:

> I think there are all these other related skill sets outside of the actual interaction. …[In order to succeed], salespeople have to have a broader knowledge base because they need to be able to see it from the customer's side, see it from the company's side. Do the communication, customer interaction part, but then do all other things around that. (Victoria, Professor).

Sales acumen appeared to be different from other components since it was related to substance-knowledge of B2B sales, not communication. A strategic understanding of B2B sales included a decent understanding of the buyer's behavior, sales process and global business models, as well as knowing CRM systems, technology and capabilities related to sales area well. It was also related to a strategic understanding of the customer's business, adding value and creating common goals with the customer. Leadership skills consisted of understanding how to lead sales teams and collaborate in teams; understanding how to motivate salespeople; analytical skills and creativity in problem-solving and time management skills.

Strategic understanding of B2B sales involved understanding the buyer's behavior and the customer's business, as one professor emphasized: “You have to understand how buyers behave, no matter whether they are international or domestic.” (Edwin, Professor). Notably, understanding the sales process from start to finish was also highlighted: “I think the core sales process is really important. Whether that process will look somewhat different, maybe as it becomes more strategic, maybe adding more value and consulting with the customer. Still it is important.” (Victoria, Professor). Having a strategic understanding of the customer's business and matching this with the value creation process of the customer's firm were seen as necessary parts of goal congruence between partners. One of the sales managers said: “If the customer has cost saving, effectiveness, operational excellence [or something else] in their strategy, and if I am not able to add any value for them, then I am just a ‘nice’ person to know.” (Kirstin, Sales Manager). Understanding global business models, as well as possessing technological knowledge and capabilities related to the sales area were highlighted too. In addition, sales educators thought it was important to understand customer relationship management systems.

Second, related to sales acumen, leadership skills were raised by both groups of respondents. These skills comprised analytical skills and creativity in terms of problem solving were considered important, as one of the professors explained:

> You also need problem-solving skills… Once they understand a customer's problems and issues, they clearly need to be able to come up with solutions to that and [analytically] go through a process with a customer…Creativity becomes increasingly more important because, the more global we get, the more dimensions there are, so you've got to be able to put all the pieces together and say how we can come up with a unique solution for you. (Victoria, Professor).

International B2B salespeople and sales managers particularly underlined the importance of understanding how to lead sales teams and collaborate in teams, which today might mean teams with members from many different countries. One of the sales managers said:

> I have teamed up with people from Britain, Sweden, and Germany on the same project, and when you think about, say communications, on a timeline, or when I [as the head of the project] communicate with all three, then the matters must be on a general level and quite formal. When you go to an informal level, then you can talk about more personal matters. I mean, in a multicultural project, you have to take into account the hotchpotch of cultures, and communications are really time-consuming and problematic. (John, Sales Manager).

Additionally, it was considered important to understand how to motivate others and how to manage time.

6. Discussion

First, our results contribute to the previous sales literature (Evanschitzky et al., 2011; Ulaga & Kohli, 2018; Ulaga & Loveland, 2014) as we focused on individual level exploration by investigating what skills, knowledge, and affective aspects are important as solution sellers navigate in international B2B sales environments. Focusing on sellers is highly important since they are the crucial players in actual interaction with the buyers going through relational processes in solution selling (Panagopoulos et al., 2017). Panagopoulos and co-authors (2017) presented valuable results on how salespeople are involved in solution building and what their key activities are. Our results expand this understanding and show what type of sales communication competence is required from sellers to perform solution-selling activities.

Second, we increase the existing understanding in the sales field, and bring new and original theoretical knowledge forth by presenting a conceptualization of sales communication competence required in international B2B solution selling contexts. We found that sales communication competence in an international B2B solution-selling context consists of (1) a behavioral communication dimension (relational communication skills, personal selling skills, and language skills), (2) an affective communication dimension (motivation, a positive and open attitude, and cultural sensitivity), (3) a cognitive communication dimension (knowledge of communication, cultural knowledge, and meta-cognition), and (4) sales acumen (strategic understanding of B2B sales and leadership skills). Together these dimensions form the basis for professional, appropriate and effective communication behavior in international B2B solution-sales contexts. We are the first to provide an overall conceptualization of sales communication competence in international B2B solution-sales contexts.

Third, our findings are scientifically useful (Corley & Gioia, 2011) as we respond to the call from B2B sales researchers to investigate salespeople's specific competencies that they need to master as they provide solutions in solution-centric sales (Blocker et al., 2012; Evans et al., 2012; Ulaga & Kohli, 2018; Williams & Plouffe, 2007). Solution sellers need to be able to provide complex solution, as well as implement strategic decisions to achieve growth for the company through customer solutions, in addition to reducing uncertainty in the solution process and encouraging adaptive behavior of all parties involved (Ulaga & Kohli, 2018). In order to succeed, we show that they need adequate communication skills. Our results differ from previous findings, since previously sales researchers have mainly emphasized adaptive selling skills (see Chakrabarty et al., 2004; Limbu et al., 2016; Porter et al., 2003; Spiro & Weitz, 1990; Weitz, 1981; Weitz et al., 1986), customer-oriented behavior (Lussier & Hartmann, 2017; Plouffe et al., 2009; Singh & Venugopal, 2015; Williams, 1998) and listening skills (Drollinger & Lucette, 2013; Ramsey & Sohi, 1997). Instead, in international B2B solution-selling context, we found that the most important communication skills are related to building and maintaining relationships, personal selling skills during the sales process and foreign language skills. Personal selling skills have been previously investigated as a part of the sales process (Chakrabarty, Brown, & Widing II, 2013; Homburg et al., 2011; Malshe, 2004; Moncrief & Marshall, 2005; Saxe & Weitz, 1982), but these skills have not been incorporated as a part of sales communication competence. In addition, since previous sales research is mostly conducted in the U.S., foreign language skills have not been emphasized by other researchers.

Moreover, we show that salespeople need specific affective communication abilities in international B2B solution selling-contexts. Based on our results, these aspects include motivation, having a positive and open attitude as well as cultural sensitivity. Again, we bring new knowledge in this regard, since previous studies have focused on emotional intelligence (Kidwell et al., 2011; Schumacher et al., 2009) and communication apprehension or anxiety (Boorom et al., 1998; Verbeke & Bagozzi, 2000). Emotional intelligence is defined as the "ability to perceive, appraise, and express emotion; to access and/or generate feelings when they facilitate thought; to understand emotion and emotional knowledge; and to regulate emotions to promote educational and intellectual growth" (Mayer & Salovey, 1997, p. 10). In our data, sellers referred to managing their emotional reactions regarding the customer's counter arguments during the sales process (see Table 3). Related to the affective communication dimension, our results show that international B2B solution sellers need to have a positive and open attitude as well as empathy and curiosity towards other people coming from culturally diverse backgrounds. B2B solution sellers need motivation to interact with international customers and learn more about people and sales. Therefore, they need to be life-long learners in this matter.

Regarding the cognitive communication dimension, our results highlighted the importance of having knowledge of communication, other cultures and meta-cognition skills. Previous studies have pointed out the importance of cultural knowledge (Bush et al., 2001; Chaisrakeo & Speece, 2004) and knowledge of communication (Rentz et al., 2002), but they have not highlighted meta-cognitive aspects. It seems that in today's competitive B2B solution selling environments, it is important for sellers to be able to think and reflect on their own and others' communication behavior.

Additionally, our results highlight the importance of sales acumen as a crucial and inseparable part of sales communication competence in the international B2B solution-selling context. The addition of sales acumen as a key dimension of sales communication competence is a novel finding in this study. Previous conceptualizations of interpersonal communication competence (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002) or intercultural communication competence (Deardorff, 2006; Elo et al., 2015; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009) have not emphasized discipline-specific knowledge (Dannels, 2001) as a part of communication competence. Moreover, previous sales research has not been able to provide a comprehensive framework which would include both communication related competencies and important substance-specific knowledge and skills. According to our results, sales acumen consists of two important sub-categories: a strategic understanding of B2B sales, and leadership skills (see Table 3). Salespeople with sales acumen demonstrate a strategic understanding of their customer's businesses, which enables them to add mutual value and create common goals to encourage business partner collaboration. They show an understanding of the buyer's behavior, sales process and global business models. They understand CRM systems and they have technological knowledge and capabilities related to the sales area. Moreover, in order to achieve the goals of international B2B solution selling, salespeople need leadership skills. They need to be able to lead teams and motivate salespeople. Analytical skills and creativity in terms of problem solving, as well as time management skills are required. All in all, sales acumen is related to substance-specific knowledge and skills in the sales area which enable B2B international solution sellers to build and develop collaboration with their customers.

Finally, our results confirm that it is crucial to investigate discipline-specific communication competence based on values and expectations in different disciplines (Dannels, 2001). This new type of knowledge is not possible to produce with quantitative research methods applying existing scales and measures. Instead, a qualitative approach is needed to provide an in-depth understanding of discipline-specific communication competencies, as we do in this study.

7. Conclusions and future research

This study presents a new conceptualization of sales communication competence that captures the most significant dimensions in the context of international B2B solution selling. As the results emphasized sales acumen as a basis of successful communication in the international B2B solution-selling context, it is placed at the center of Fig. 1.

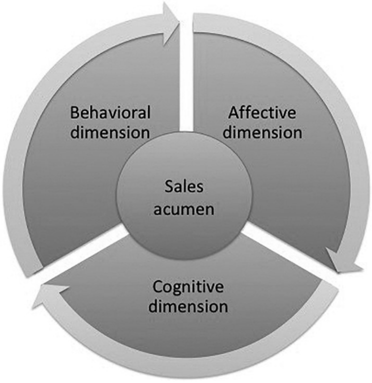

Fig. 1. Conceptualization of sales communication competence in international B2B solution selling.

That is, sales acumen forms the core of communication competence in sales. Without such a strategic understanding of sales and leadership skills, international B2B sellers are not able to carry out successful solution sales. Moreover, behavioral, affective, and cognitive communication dimensions are placed around it in a circle. Salespeople need all these communication dimensions to succeed in international B2B solution selling. This new information will aid researchers to continue developing quantitative measures for the assessment of salespeople. That is, based on our results, a new measure for the sales communication competence of salespeople could be formulated and tested.

In this study, we interviewed sales educators, salespeople, sales managers, and CEOs to obtain an in-depth understanding of the sales communication competence needed in the field of international B2B solution selling. This approach was valuable since we were able to combine two different approaches and obtain a more holistic view of the phenomenon. In the future, researchers could continue to investigate real life international B2B sales situations with different types of data (e.g., video recordings) and explore successful and non-successful episodes of sales interaction. Such research would increase our knowledge of how salespeople and customers actually behave in a competent or incompetent manner.

Furthermore, future studies could investigate what kind of sales communication competence is needed in other specific sales contexts, for example in digital marketing and sales channels where computer-mediated communication is crucial. Also, future studies could take a culture-specific approach and investigate sales situations, for example, in Japan, as non-Japanese salespeople would find it valuable to know specific Japanese cultural rules which may influence the partner's decision-making processes (Asai & Minoura, 2018).

7.1. Limitations

As with all studies, this study also has its limitations. Even though our data consist of 39 interviews of participants with expertise in international B2B sales or education in sales communication, we have to note that these people represent mainly European countries and the U.S. When selecting informants in the field of sales communication education, we searched for universities that offered sales as a major or minor subject in their business programs. These universities existed in Europe and in the USA (see Deeter-Schmelz & Kennedy, 2011). Moreover, when selecting international B2B salespeople, sales managers, and CEOs we had stipulated the criterion that the subjects all must have experience of international B2B solution selling in more than three countries. This information was confirmed at the beginning of the interviews and the results revealed that the interviewees had conducted international B2B sales in Italy, France, Germany, Spain, Portugal, Sweden, Norway, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Russia, Turkey, Cyprus, Israel, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, the United States, India, South-Korea, China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Singapore, Argentina, Chile, Columbia, and Uruguay. Therefore, we can say with some certainty that the interviewees had considerable experience of working in non-Western cultures. Nevertheless, their own national culture is a Western one.

7.2. Managerial relevance

Our results are practically useful (Corley & Gioia, 2011) and as a managerial implication, we emphasize the importance of the seller's competence in sales communication regarding international B2B solution-selling practices. First, the ability to communicate effectively across cultural boundaries has become an essential skill in today's world (Szkudlarek, 2009). Our results show what might be included in training programs for international B2B salespeople. Our results not only help to determine the necessary content for sales training, but also show how important it is for sales students to gain an understanding of real international B2B sales contexts. Therefore, when educating future sales managers at the undergraduate and master's degree levels, pedagogical principles could be based on the CID theoretical framework (Dannels, 2001), and situated learning theory, which emphasizes learning as increasing participation in communities of practice (Wenger, 2009). Situational learning theory calls for authentic learning activities and legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice (Wenger, 2009). Research has shown that knowledge influences the performance of salespeople and it has been shown that it takes about ten years to acquire a sufficient level of sales knowledge to catalyze high performance (Matsuo & Kusumi, 2002). However, experience alone does not guarantee high-level performance, and instruction, feedback, and practice are also needed. Therefore, young sales students could first observe more experienced solution sellers and then practice low-risk tasks themselves under the guidance of a facilitator (see Koponen & Julkunen, 2015). Later, sales students should be able to handle more demanding tasks and participate in real communities of practice for example in the form of an internship (Wenger, 2009). This type of training program could offer students opportunities to develop their sales communication competence and thereby enable them to offer a competitive advantage to their future employers.

References

Applegate, J., & Sypher, H. (1988). A constructivist theory of communication and culture. In Y. Kim, & W. Gudykunst (Eds.). *Theories in Intercultural Communication* (pp. 41–65). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Arli, D., Bauer, C., & Palmatier, R. W. (2018). Relational selling: Past, present and future. *Industrial Marketing Management, 69*, 169–184.

Asai, A., & Minoura, Y. (2018). On subjective well-being of Indonesian nurse family in Japan: Analysis of emotional experiences of work, school, and community. *The Journal of J.F. Oberlin University, Studies in Language and Culture, 9*, 77–98.

Barnes, B. R., Leonidou, L. C., Siu, N. Y., & Leonidou, C. N. (2015). Interpersonal factors as drivers of quality and performance in Western–Hong Kong interorganizational business relationships. *Journal of International Marketing, 23*(1), 23–49.

Bennett, M. J. (1986). A developmental approach to training for intercultural sensitivity. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 10*, 179–196.

Blocker, C. P., Cannon, J. P., Panagopoulos, N. G., & Sager, J. K. (2012). The role of the sales force in value creation and appropriation: New directions for research. *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management, 32*(1), 15–28.

Boorom, M. L., Gooslby, J. R., & Ramsey, R. P. (1998). Relational communication traits and their effect on adaptiveness and sales performance. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 26*(1), 16–30.

Borg, S. W., & Johnston, W. J. (2013). The IPS-EQ model: Interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence in a sales process. *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management, 33*(1), 39–51.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101.

Bush, V. D., & Ingram, T. (1996). Adapting to diverse customers: A training matrix for international marketers. *Industrial Marketing Management, 25*(5), 373–383.

Bush, V. D., Rose, G. M., Gilbert, F., & Ingram, T. N. (2001). Managing culturally diverse buyer-seller relationships: The role of intercultural disposition and adaptive selling in developing intercultural communication competence. *Journal of the Academy of*

Marketing Science, 29(4), 391–404.
Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communication Competence.* New York: Multilingual Matters.
Chaisrakeo, S., & Speece, M. (2004). Culture, intercultural communication competence and sales negotiation: A qualitative research approach. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing, 19*, 267–282.
Chakrabarty, S., Brown, G., & Widing, R. E., II (2013). Distinguishing between the roles of customer-oriented selling and adaptive selling in managing dysfunctional conflict in buyer–seller relationships. *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management, 33*(3), 245–260.
Chakrabarty, S., Brown, G., Widing, R. E., II, & Taylor, R. D. (2004). Analysis and recommendations for the alternative measures of adaptive selling. *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management, 24*(2), 125–133.
Chen, G.-M., & Starosta, W. J. (2005). *Foundations of Intercultural Communication.* Lanhan: University Press of America239–257.
Corley, K. G., & Gioia, D. A. (2011). Building theory about theory building: What constitutes a theoretical contribution? *Academy of Management Review, 36*(1), 12–32.
Croucher, S. M., & Cronn-Mills, D. (2015). *Understanding Communication Research Methods. A Theoretical and Practical Approach.* New York: Routledge.
Dannels, D. (2001). Time to speak up: A theoretical framework of situated pedagogy and practice for communication across the curriculum. *Communication Education, 50*, 144–158.
Dannels, D. P., & Housley Gaffney, A. L. (2009). Communication across the curriculum and in the disciplines: A call for scholarly cross-curricular advocacy. *Communication Education, 58*, 124–153.
Deardorff, D. K. (2006). Identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization. *Journal of Studies in Intercultural Education, 10*, 241–266.
Deardorff, D. K. (2011). Assessing intercultural competence. *New Directions for Institutional Research*Wiley Periodicals, Inc.https://doi.org/10.1002/ir.381 Spring no. 149.
Deeter-Schmelz, D. R., & Kennedy, K. N. (2011). A global perspective on the current state of sales education in the college curriculum. *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management, XXXI*(1), 55–75.
Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2005). *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (3rd ed). Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
Drollinger, B. Tanya, & Lucette, Comer (2013). Salesperson's listening ability as an antecedent to relationship selling. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing, 28*(1), 50–59. https://doi.org/10.1108/08858621311285714.
Dubois, A., & Gabbe, L.-E. (2002). Systematic combining: An abductive approach to case research. *Journal of Business Research, 55*, 553–560.
Earley, P. C., & Ang, S. (2003). *Cultural Intelligence: Individual Interactions Across Cultures.* Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.
Eisenhardt, K. M., & Graebner, M. E. (2007). Theory building from cases: Opportunities and challenges. *Academy of Management Journal, 50*(1), 25–32.
Elo, M., Benjowsky, C., & Nummela, N. (2015). Intercultural competences and interaction schemes – Four forces regulating dyadic encounters in international business. *Industrial Marketing Management, 48*, 38–49.
Evans, K. R., McFarland, R. G., Dietz, B., & Jaramillo, F. (2012). Advancing sales performance research: A focus on five under researched topic areas. *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management, 32*(1), 89–105.
Evanschitzky, H., Wangenheim, F. W., & Woisetschläger, D. M. (2011). Service & solution innovation: Overview and research agenda. *Industrial Marketing Management, 40*(5), 657–660.
Fombelle, P. W., Bone, S. A., & Lemon, K. N. (2016). Responding to the 98%: Face-enhancing strategies for dealing with rejected customer ideas. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 44*(6), 685–706.
Goffman, E. (1967). *Interaction Rituals.* Garden City, NY: Anchor.
Graebner, M. E. (2009). Caveat venditor: Trust asymmetries in acquisitions of entrepreneurial firms. *Academy of Management Journal, 52*(3), 435–472.
Griffith, D. A. (2002). The role of communication competencies in international business relationship development. *Journal of World Business, 37*, 256–265.
Guenzi, P., Sajtos, L., & Troilo, G. (2016). The dual mechanism of sales capabilities influencing organizational performance. *Journal of Business Research, 69*, 3707–3713.
Hansen, J. D., Singh, T., Weilbaker, D. C., & Guesalaga, R. (2011). Cultural intelligence in cross-cultural selling: Propositions and directions for future research. *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management, 31*(3), 243–254.
Hargie, O. (2010). *Skilled Interpersonal Communication: Research, Theory, and Practice.* London: Routledge.
Harich, K. R., & LaBahn, D. W. (1998). Enhancing international business relationships: A focus on customer perceptions of salesperson role performance including cultural sensitivity. *Journal of Business Research, 42*, 87–101.
Homburg, C., Droll, M., & Totzek, D. (2008). Customer prioritization: Does it pay off, and how should it be implemented? *Journal of Marketing, 72*(5), 110–130.
Homburg, C., Müller, M., & Klarmann, M. (2011). When should the customer really be king? On the optimum level of salesperson customer orientation in sales encounters. *Journal of Marketing, 75*(2), 55–74.
Hoppner, J. J., Griffith, D. A., & White, R. C. (2015). Reciprocity in relationship marketing: A cross-cultural examination of the effects of equivalence and immediacy on relationship quality and satisfaction with performance. *Journal of International Marketing, 23*(4), 64–83.
Hyvärinen, M.-L., Tanskanen, P., Katajavuori, N., & Isotalus, P. (2010). A method for teaching communication in pharmacy in authentic work situations. *Communication Education, 59*(2), 124–145.
Jacobs, R. S., Evans, K. R., Kleine, R. E., III, & Landry, T. D. (2001). Disclosure and its reciprocity as predictors of key outcomes of an initial sales encounter. *Journal of Personal selling and Sales Management, XXI*(1), 51–61.
Kidwell, B., Hardesty, D. M., Murtha, B. R., & Sheng, S. (2011). Emotional intelligence in marketing exchanges. *Journal of Marketing, 75*, 78–95.
Kim, Y. Y. (1988). *Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation: An Integrative Theory.* Philadelphia: Multilingual Matters.
Kim, Y. Y. (1991). Intercultural communication competence: A systems-theoretical view. In S. Ting-Toomey, & F. Korzenny (Eds.). *Intercultural Communication Competence* (pp. 259–275). Newbury Park, CA: Sage International and intercultural communications annual.
Koponen, J., & Julkunen, S. (2015). Situated learning theory and the principles of drama education. *Simulation & Gaming, April 19*, 1–11.
Lacoste, S. (2018). From selling to managing strategic customers – A competency analysis. *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management, 38*(1), 92–122.
Limbu, Y. A., Jayachandran, C., Babin, B. J., & Peterson, R. T. (2016). Empathy, nonverbal immediacy, and salesperson performance: The mediating role of adaptive selling behavior. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing, 31*(5), 654–667.
Lussier, B., & Hartmann, N. N. (2017). How psychological resourcefulness increases salesperson's sales performance and satisfaction of their customers: Exploring the mediating role of customer-oriented behaviors. *Industrial Marketing Management, 62*, 160–170.
Malek, M. A., & Budhwar, P. (2013). Cultural intelligence as a predictor of expatriate adjustment and performance in Malaysia. *Journal of World Business, 48*, 222–231.
Malshe, A. (2004). Relational listening and impression management in salesperson-customer relationships. *Advances in Consumer Research, 31*, 477–478.
Matsuo, M., & Kusumi, T. (2002). Salesperson's procedural knowledge, experience and performance: An empirical study in Japan. *European Journal of Marketing, 36*(7/8), 840–854.
Mayer, J. D., & Salovey, P. (1997). What is emotional intelligence? In P. Salovey, & D. J. Sluyter (Eds.). *Emotional development and emotional intelligence: Educational implications* (pp. 3–34). New York: Harper Collins.
Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative Data Analysis. An Expanded Sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
Miles, M. P., Arnold, D. R., & Nash, H. W. (1990). Adaptive communication: The adaptation of the seller's interpersonal style to the stage of the dyad's relationship and the buyer's communication style. *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management, X* (February), 21–27.
Moncrief, W. C., & Marshall, G. W. (2005). The evolution of the seven steps of selling. *Industrial Marketing Management, 34*, 13–22.
Morse, J. M., Barrett, M., Mayan, M., Olson, K., & Spiers, J. (2002). Verification strategies for establishing reliability and validity in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 1*(2), 13–22.
Palmatier, R. W. (2008). Interfirm relational drivers of customer value. *Journal of Marketing, 72*(4), 76–89.
Panagopoulos, N. G., Rapp, A. A., & Ogilvie, J. L. (2017). Salesperson solution involvement and sales performance: The contingent role of supplier firm and customer –supplier relationship characteristics. *Journal of Marketing, 81*, 144–164.
Phan, M. C. T., Styles, C. W., & Patterson, P. G. (2005). Relational competency's role in Southern Asia business partnerships. *Journal of Business Research, 58*, 173–184.
Piekkari, R., Plakoyinnaki, E., & Welch, C. (2010). 'Good' case research in industrial marketing: Insights from research practice. *Industrial Marketing Management, 39*, 109–117.
Plouffe, C. R., Hulland, J., & Wachner, T. (2009). Customer-directed selling behaviors and performance: A comparison of existing perspectives. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 37*, 422–439.
Porter, S. S., Wiener, J. L., & Frankwick, G. L. (2003). The moderating effect of selling situation on the adaptive selling strategy–selling effectiveness relationship. *Journal of Business Research, 56*, 275–281.
Pullins, E. B., Haughtvedt, C. P., Dickson, P. R., Fine, L. M., & Lewicki, R. J. (2000). Individual differences in intrinsic motivation and the use of cooperative negotiation tactics. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing, 15*(7), 466–478.
Purhonen, P. (2012). *Interpersonal Communication Competence and Collaborative Interaction in SME Internationalization.* University of Jyväskylä (Jyväskylä Studies in Humanities 178).
Ramsey, R. P., & Sohi, R. S. (1997). Listening to your customers: The impact of perceived salesperson listening behavior on relationship outcomes. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 25*(2), 127–137.
Rentz, J. O., Shepherd, C. D., Tashchian, A., Dabholkar, P. A., & Ladd, R. T. (2002). A measure of selling skill. Scale development and validation. *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management, 22*(1), 13–21 (Winter).
Rubin, R. B. (1990). Communication competence. In G. M. Phillips, & J. T. Wood (Eds.). *Speech Communication: Essays to Commemorate the 75th Anniversary of the Speech Communication Association* (pp. 94–129). Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
Saxe, R., & Weitz, B. A. (1982). The SOCO scale: A measure of the customer orientation of salespeople. *Journal of Marketing Research,* 343–351.
Schumacher, L., Wheeler, J. V., & Carr, A. S. (2009). The relationship between emotional intelligence and buyer's performance. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing, 24*(3/4), 269–277.
Singh, R., Kumar, N., & Puri, S. (2017). Thought self-leadership strategies and sales performance: Integrating selling skills and adaptive selling behavior as missing links. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing, 32*(5), 652–663.
Singh, R., Singh, R. K., & Banerji, D. (2018). Emotion regulation – Natural reward strategy linkage and its impact on sales performance: The mediating impact of salesmanship skills. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing, 33*(3), 353–364.
Singh, R., & Venugopal, P. (2015). The impact of salesperson customer orientation on sales performance via mediating mechanism. *Journal of Business & Industrial*

Marketing, 30(5), 594–607.
Spiro, R. L., & Weitz, B. A. (1990). Adaptive selling: Conceptualization, measurement, and nomological validity. *Journal of Marketing Research, 27*(1), 61–69.
Spitzberg, B. H., & Changnon, G. (2009). Conceptualizing intercultural competence. In D. K. Deardorff (Ed.). *The SAGE Handbook of Intercultural Competence* (pp. 2–52). Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
Spitzberg, B. H., & Cupach, W. R. (1984). *Interpersonal Communication Competence.* Beverly Hills: SAGE Publications.
Spitzberg, B. H., & Cupach, W. R. (2002). Interpersonal skills. In M. L. Knapp, & J. A. Daly (Eds.). *Handbook of Interpersonal Communication* (pp. 564–611). (3rd ed.). London: Sage Publications.
Szkudlarek, B. (2009). Through Western eyes: Insights into the intercultural training field. *Organization Studies, 30*(9), 975–986.
Ting-Toomey, S., & Kurogi, A. (1998). Facework competence in intercultural conflict: An updated face-negotiation theory. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 22*, 187–225.
Tuli, K. R., Kohli, A. K., & Bharadwaj, S. G. (2007). Rethinking customer solutions: From product bundles to relational processes. *Journal of Marketing, 71*(3), 1–17.
Ulaga, W., & Kohli, A. K. (2018). The role of a solution salesperson: Reducing uncertainty and fostering adaptiveness. *Industrial Marketing Management, 69*, 161–168.
Ulaga, W., & Loveland, J. M. (2014). Transitioning from product to service-led growth in manufacturing firms: Emergent challenges in selecting and managing the industrial sales force. *Industrial Marketing Management, 43*(1), 113–125.
Valkonen, T. (2003). *Puheviestintätaitojen arviointi. Näkökulmia lukiolaisten esiintymis- ja ryhmätaitoihin [Assessing speech communication skills. Perspectives on presentation and group communication skills among upper secondary school students].* University of Jyväskylä. Jyväskylä Studies in Humanities 7.
Verbeke, W., & Bagozzi, R. P. (2000). Sales call anxiety: Exploring what it means when fear rules a sales encounter. *Journal of Marketing, 64*(July), 88–101.
Verbeke, W., Dietz, B., & Verwaal, E. (2011). Drivers of sales performance: A contemporary meta-analysis. Have salespeople become knowledge brokers? *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 39*, 407–428.
Weitz, B. A. (1981). Effectiveness in sales interactions: A contingency framework. *Journal of Marketing, 45*(1), 85–103 (Winter).
Weitz, B. A., & Bradford, K. D. (1999). Personal selling and sales management: A relationship marketing perspective. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 27*(2), 241–254.
Weitz, B. A., Sujan, H., & Sujan, M. (1986). Knowledge, motivation and adaptive behavior: A framework for improving selling effectiveness. *Journal of Marketing, 56*(October), 1–17.
Wenger, E. (2009). A social learning theory. In K. Illeris (Ed.). *Contemporary Theories of Learning* (pp. 209–218). New York, NY: Routledge.
Williams, B. C., & Plouffe, C. R. (2007). Assessing the evolution of sales knowledge: A 20-content analysis. *Industrial Marketing Management, 36*, 308–319.
Williams, M. R. (1998). The influence of salespersons' customer orientation on buyer-seller relationship development. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing, 13*(3), 271–287.
Wilson, S. R., & Sabee, C. M. (2003). Explicating communicative competence as a theoretical term. In S. R. Greene, & B. R. Burleson (Eds.). *Handbook of Communication and Social Interaction Skills* (pp. 3–50). Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum.
Yin, R. K. (2009). *Case Study Research. Design and Methods* (3rd ed). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

ARTICLE II

Koponen, J. & Rytsy, S. (2020). Social presence and e-commerce B2B chat functions. European Journal of Marketing, Vol. 54, No. 6, pp. 1205-1224.

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available on Emerald Insight at:
https://www.emerald.com/insight/0309-0566.htm

Social presence and e-commerce B2B chat functions

Jonna Pauliina Koponen
Department of Business, University of Eastern Finland, Joensuu, Finland, and
Saara Rytsy
University of Eastern Finland, Joensuu, Finland

Received 26 January 2019
Revised 20 June 2019
Accepted 9 December 2019

Abstract

Purpose – Currently, online chat is in common use in e-commerce. By adding social interaction to the online context, companies hope to increase customers' purchasing intentions. However, previous studies have not investigated how social presence is embedded in online business-to-business (B2B) chat conversations between buyers and sellers. Moreover, the functions of online chat in B2B sales have not been investigated.

Design/methodology/approach – The data was collected at a case company over the course of four years, from which the authors analyzed 157 online chat conversations between buyers (n = 157) and sellers (n = 9) with a theory-driven thematic analysis. In addition, data from the company's customer relationship management system was collected to specify buyer types.

Findings – The results reveal that social presence was embedded in online B2B chat via buyers' interactive, affective and relationship maintenance responses. Social presence differed depending on the type of buyer, with only existing customers having relationship maintenance responses. E-commerce B2B chat functions can be described as multiple and changing depending on the buyer–seller relationship stage.

Research limitations/implications – Having data only from one case company limits the results to one type of industry.

Practical implications – The results can be used in sales training and when developing online chat services.

Originality/value – Results bring scientific utility to B2B sales and marketing research, as the authors build a bridge between social presence, the existing theoretical model on B2B buyer–seller relationship development and online chat as a communication medium. Other researchers may use this understanding when exploring B2B buyer–seller interaction in different digitalized communication media.

Keywords Relationship marketing, Online chat, Business-to-business, Buyer–seller interaction, Sales interaction

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Online shopping continues to grow in popularity, and new online stores are constantly being established. E-commerce and new forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC) have increased the use of CMC between buyers and sellers (Murphy and Sashi, 2018) and essentially changed buyer–seller interactions in business-to-consumer (B2C) and business-to-business (B2B)

This paper forms part of a special section "Digital marketing and business-to-business relationships", guest edited by Charles Hofacker, Kishore Gopalakrishna Pillai, Ismail Golgeci and David Gligor.

European Journal of Marketing
Vol. 54 No. 6, 2020
pp. 1205-1224
Emerald Publishing Limited
0309-0566
DOI 10.1108/EJM-01-2019-0061

sales (Arli *et al.*, 2018). Buyers increasingly prefer online interfaces, and almost 75 per cent of B2B buyers prefer purchasing via a website than relying on salespeople, while 93 per cent of them prefer purchasing online once they have decided what to buy (Arli *et al.*, 2018; Hoar, 2015). Moreover, within the past decade, there has been a developing interest in investigating how person-to-person interaction and social presence could be embedded into an online shopping environment (Gefen and Straub, 2004). Social presence and possibilities to interact with sellers are important in e-commerce, as shopping has always been a social activity (Lu *et al.*, 2016) and because social presence has been shown to increase customers' initial trust in the website and customer's trust in the seller, as well as enhance customers' purchasing intentions and thereby boost firms' sales (Gefen and Straub, 2004; Ogonowski *et al.*, 2014; Olson and Olson, 2000). Furthermore, it has been shown that social presence influences participants' enjoyment and perceived usefulness of the website (Ogonowski *et al.*, 2014). Social presence is important in online shopping, as anonymous, asynchronous and text-based CMC can hinder the development of interpersonal trust (Sherblom, 2020) between business partners. Moreover, lacking the presence of social elements has been claimed to be one of the major weaknesses that hinders e-commerce growth (Lu *et al.*, 2016). For all these reasons, it is highly important to investigate how social presence is embedded in CMC between buyers and sellers in different online communication channels.

We contribute to existing sales and marketing research by bringing new and original knowledge (Corley and Gioia, 2011) on how social presence is embedded in online B2B chat conversations between buyers and sellers. Furthermore, our results show why buyers join online B2B chats and thereby what functions does the online chat serve for B2B buyers. Presently, companies provide online chat facilities to enhance the social aspect of their websites (McLean and Osei-Frimpong, 2017). Online chat allows customers to easily contact a salesperson if they need support or assistance. In addition, online chat enables interaction between previously anonymous customers and salespeople, giving companies the possibility to gain new sales prospects. By focusing on B2B sales context and buyer–seller online chat conversations, we bring new knowledge (Corley and Gioia, 2011) to the field, as most of the previous studies on digital marketing have focused on consumers and B2C sales context (Nicolla and Teresa, 2016; Obal and Lancioni, 2013). There is a severe lack of studies of the social presence and the functions of buyer–seller interaction in online chat in B2B sales context (Leek *et al.*, 2017; Ogonowski *et al.*, 2014; Ou *et al.*, 2014). Our approach is important, as B2B business relationships are typically viewed as more relational (i.e. more involved, continuous and interactive) compared to B2C relationships (Brown *et al.*, 2016), and therefore, it can be assumed that there is a high need for social presence and interaction in digital B2B sales.

As well as this, we bring incremental advance (Corley and Gioia, 2011) to the existing B2B sales and marketing research by focusing on social presence in online B2B sales interaction as the ability of participants to project themselves socially and affectively in sales interaction. Currently, there is no single definition for social presence and researchers have approached the phenomena from different perspectives. Many of the previous e-commerce studies (Gefen and Straub, 2004; Ogonowski *et al.*, 2014) have defined social presence based on Short *et al.* (1976) and focused on the capacity of the website to convey a sense of human sociability and warmth (Lu *et al.*, 2016). Instead, other researchers have chosen to define social presence as a multi-dimensional construct including, for example, social presence of the web, perception of others and social presence of interaction with sellers (Lu *et al.*, 2016). In this study, we focus on social presence as interaction with sellers (Caspi and Blau, 2008; Lu *et al.*, 2016). We do not investigate social presence of the website or perceived perception of others in computer-mediated communication. Our focus is on investigating how social presence is embedded in text-based interaction between buyers and sellers in online B2B chat. Following Garrison *et al.* (2001), Garrison and Anderson (2003) and Rourke *et al.* (1999), we show how social presence is manifested in online discussions in buyers' affective and interactive responses. Furthermore, we are the first to introduce a new category of social presence in the context of online B2B sales, namely relationship maintenance.

Furthermore, we contribute to the existing B2B sales and marketing research by showing how functions of online B2B chat vary for buyers who are at different phases (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987) of the buyer–seller relationship. The extensive exploration of the evolution of B2B relationship selling by Arli *et al.* (2018, p. 12) suggests that future research should explore whether "technology can be a bridge or a barrier in today's relational selling." Moreover, marketing and sales scholars have been called to investigate different technological tools and how they enable buyer–seller interaction in different phases of the relationship development process because of reduced social and face-to-face time with buyers (Leek *et al.*, 2017). Our study responds to this call and brings scientific utility to the sales and marketing field as we build a bridge between social presence (Garrison *et al.*, 2001; Garrison and Anderson, 2003; Rourke *et al.*, 1999), the existing theoretical model on B2B buyer–seller relationship development (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987) and online chat as a communication medium (Ogonowski *et al.*, 2014). As a communication medium, online chat has a high level of social presence (Ogonowski *et al.*, 2014, p. 483), and it should thereby enhance buyer–seller interaction. However, it is not known how buyer–seller interaction varies in B2B online chat conversations when buyers are at different phases of the relationship. In addition, in our study, we bring about a new understanding of what kinds of functions the online chat has at different phases of the buyer–seller relationship development process and how social presence is embedded in online chat conversations with different types of buyers. Our results are scientifically useful, as we are the first to build these connections, and other researchers may use this understanding when exploring B2B buyer–seller interaction in different digitalized communication media.

Fourth, the results of this study are practically useful (Corley and Gioia, 2011), as companies offering a chat service on their websites can use our results in their sales training. Companies should train their B2B chat salespersons well enough to be able to answer complex questions professionally. B2B chat salespersons should be able to recognize existing buyers and react to their need for social disclosure online. Moreover, the results can be used to enhance the content of the company's website (e.g. add frequently asked questions and answers) and when testing the use of chatbots in B2B sales. Next, we present our theoretical background. Following that, we introduce our method and analysis, followed by our results and discussion. Finally, we present theoretical and practical implications.

2. Theoretical foundation

2.1 Online chat in e-commerce

During the past decade, people have become interested in how aspects of social interaction, such as social presence, could be embedded in online environments to enhance customers' trust and thereby sales performance (Gefen and Straub, 2004; Olson and Olson, 2000). Experts in online business have recognised that customers should not be ignored when they visit a website, leading to the development of personalized websites. Currently, several online stores provide online chat functionality (McLean and Osei-Frimpong, 2017) to enhance the social aspects of their websites. Online chat, which is often entitled *live chat* or *instant messaging*, is a computer-mediated service offered to online businesses who want to enhance their online customer service (Chattaraman *et al.*, 2012). Indeed, online chat is viewed as a cost-effective way to assist customers, as it allows customers to search for service-related information and contact a human representative from an organization, who can answer their questions (McLean and Osei-Frimpong, 2017). This definition clearly emphasizes that the role of online chat is to enhance the buying process by focusing on business-related discussion.

Previous studies have revealed that customer satisfaction can be increased by providing access to service personnel via websites (Yoon, 2010), to increase customers' trust in a website by providing a social presence via online chat (Ogonowski *et al.*, 2014) and to encourage repeat visits by customers via virtual agents (Etemad-Sajadi, 2014). However, research focusing on online chat in the B2B sales context is scarce (Arli *et al.*, 2018). As B2B sales and B2C sales processes differ, an in-depth understanding of the functions of online chat in B2B sales is needed. The B2B sales process is longer and more complex than in B2C sales, there are relatively fewer actors and interdependence is more common (Akrout and Diallo, 2017; Dubinsky, 1981; Homburg *et al.*, 2011). Trust is usually critical in B2B sales, as is developing a relationship between buyer and seller (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987; Crosby *et al.*, 1990; Palmatier *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, the functions of online chat may be somewhat different to what has already been identified in the B2C context.

Live online chat provides opportunities for two-way synchronous communication, and many organizations and companies provide online chat on their websites to offer support to their customers (Truel and Connelly, 2013; McLean and Osei-Frimpong, 2017). Some prior studies have investigated the functions of online chat in the B2C context. Online chat is usually provided to give customers the chance to ask questions, answer their queries and help them overcome problems and to give them help in navigating the website (McLean and Osei-Frimpong, 2017; Truel and Connelly, 2013). According to Chattaraman *et al.* (2012), online chat has three key functions: search support, navigational support and basic decision support. Previous studies have found that customers use online chat to collect information from an expert service provider, as well as to shorten the amount of time they spend on a task (Chattaraman *et al.*, 2012; Truel and Connelly, 2013). However, the functions of buyer–seller interaction in online B2B chat have not been explored.

2.2 Social presence

Companies usually provide live and interactive online chat in e-commerce to bring a greater level of social presence (Ogonowski *et al.*, 2014). Currently, there is no single definition for social presence, and researchers have approached the phenomena from different perspectives. Many of the previous e-commerce studies (Gefen and Straub, 2004; Ogonowski *et al.*, 2014) have adopted a one-dimensional model of social presence, basically defining social presence based on Short *et al.* (1976) and focusing on the capacity of the website to convey a sense of human sociability and warmth (Lu *et al.*, 2016). Sallnäs *et al.* (2000, p. 462) state that "social presence refers to the feeling of being socially present with another person at a remote location." Traditionally, social presence theory states (Short *et al.*, 1976) that the degree of social presence varies depending on the communication medium. For example, different communication media have different capacities to transmit information through verbal and non-verbal communication (Short *et al.*, 1976). According to Knapp (1972), *verbal communication* means the spoken or written word, whereas *non-verbal communication* refers to kinesics (e.g. movements of the head, hand, arm and foot, posture, gestures and facial expressions), paralanguage (e.g. voice pitch, volume, frequency, speech rate and pauses), physical contact (touching), proxemics (interpersonal spacing), physical characteristics (e.g. skin colour, body shape, attractiveness), artefacts (e.g. jewellery, clothes) and environmental factors (referring to the influences of the physical setting). In other words, different communication media have different degrees of capacity to transmit nonverbal and verbal communication, and communication is appropriate and effective if the communication channel has the social presence required for the task (Sallnäs *et al.*, 2000). Social presence has a continuum (Short *et al.*, 1976) from face-to-face interaction (with the most social presence), all the way to text-based, written communication (with the least social presence). Tasks that involve interpersonal communication skills, such as negotiation or resolving conflicts, require higher social presence, and tasks that require routine exchange of information require less social presence (Sallnäs *et al.*, 2000; Short *et al.*, 1976). As B2B sales involve various areas of competence, for example, identifying buyers' needs and problems, offering solutions, negotiating and handling complaints, B2B sellers need strong interpersonal communication skills (Koponen, Julkunen and Asai, 2019). Therefore, it is assumed that B2B sales interaction requires a vast amount of social presence also in online context.

Alternatively, other researchers have chosen to define social presence a multi-dimensional construct including, for example, social presence of the web, perception of others and social presence of interaction with sellers (Lu *et al.*, 2016). In this study, we focus on social presence as interaction with sellers (Caspi and Blau, 2008; Lu *et al.*, 2016). We do not investigate social presence of the website or perceived perception of others. Our focus is on investigating how social presence is embedded in text-based interaction between buyers and sellers in online B2B chat. More precisely, based on Garrison *et al.* (2001), Garrison and Anderson (2003) and Rourke *et al.* (1999), we define social presence in interaction with buyers and sellers as the ability of participants to project themselves socially and affectively in sales interaction. Researchers who have also defined social presence as participants' ability to project themselves socially and affectively in online discussions (Garrison *et al.*, 2001; Garrison and Anderson, 2003; Rourke *et al.*, 1999) have suggested three categories of how social presence is manifested in online discussions. These are: affective responses (e.g. expressing humour, emotions and self-disclosure), interactive responses (e.g. replying to others, referring to other's messages, expressing agreement, asking questions) and cohesive responses representing activities that build and sustain a sense of group commitment (e.g. addressing participants by name, greetings) (Rourke *et al.*, 1999). These categorizations have been applied when investigating online group discussions (Rourke *et al.*, 1999). Even though previous studies have investigated social presence as a projection of the self in online learning environment (Garrison *et al.*, 2001; Garrison and Anderson, 2003; Rourke *et al.*, 1999), we apply the same theoretical idea in a professional B2B online sales setting. This is because this definition focuses on actual observed communication (in our case text-based online chat conversations) instead of the potential of the medium to transfer social cues, which was the original idea by Short *et al.* (1976).

2.3 Interpersonal communication and buyer–seller relationship

Dyadic human interaction is often thought of as a necessity when creating and maintaining long-term customer relationships (Elo *et al.*, 2015). The marketing literature has addressed the importance of interpersonal communication in developing long-term business relationships (Celuch *et al.*, 2006; Dwyer *et al.*, 1987; Mason and Leek, 2012; Vadi and Suuroja, 2006). Interpersonal communication is a "process involving a dyad or small number of people in which actors create meanings through verbal and nonverbal message behaviours" (Baxter and Braithwaite, 2008, p. 3). Via interpersonal communication, people negotiate meanings and identity and establish relationships (Baxter and Braithwaite, 2008). Through reciprocal communication, it is possible to coordinate activities and for actors to develop trust, shared values and understanding (Hung and Lin, 2013; Stanko *et al.*, 2007). Several studies have shown that effective communication is also connected with the perceived quality of the buyer–seller relationship and with the development of commitment as well as satisfaction between B2B sales partners (Hung and Lin, 2013; Stanko *et al.*, 2007; Weitz and Bradford, 1999).

Traditional buyer–seller relationships in B2B sales enable buyers to have continuous contact with a salesperson who they are familiar with (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987), whereas online commerce often lacks this type of continuous buyer–seller interaction (Gefen and Straub, 2004). As customers rarely have direct contact with the seller in online commerce, Reichheld and Schefter (2000) argue that customers have to rely on technology and the organization rather than a particular seller. To enhance their social presence, companies sometimes use several social presence tools, such as socially rich photographs, instant messaging with live customer support, online chat boxes with text or video chat boxes with an online customer service person (Gefen and Straub, 2004; Ogonowski *et al.*, 2014). In online live chat boxes, an expert or technician is available when a customer enters the chat to answer questions about services or products (Ogonowski *et al.*, 2014). Online chat has a high level of social presence (Ogonowski *et al.*, 2014, p. 483) and it should thereby enhance buyer–seller interaction. However, it is the users of the medium (in this case buyers and sellers) who actually consider the amount of social presence required for the task and whether their task can be handled through online chat.

Relationship marketing literature conceptualizes the development of buyer–seller relationships as an on-going process that evolves through stages (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987). In their ground-breaking article, Dwyer *et al.* (1987) propose a sequence of stages that the buyer–seller relationship passes through which include: awareness, exploration, expansion and commitment. They also acknowledged the dissolution of the relationship, which may occur at any stage of the relationship. According to Dwyer *et al.* (1987) in the first phase (awareness), the main function is in recognizing potential exchange partners. The situational proximity of the partners advances awareness. In the second phase (exploration), dyadic interaction occurs, and a gradual increase in interdependence reflects bilateral probing and testing. In the third phase (expansion), mutual satisfaction between partners is possible via customized role performance. There is deeper interdependence between the buyer and seller and additional gratifications are also sought from the partners. In the fourth phase (commitment), shared values and/or contractual mechanisms ensure sustained interdependence between business partners. There are significant mutual inputs in the process. The partners resolve conflicts and adapt to each other. Finally, dissolution refers to a partner's possibility of withdrawal at any stage of the relationship. Basically, withdrawal is implicitly present throughout the relationship development process. Later findings have also shown that, for example, service provider–client relationships (Price and Arnould, 1999) and sales agent–business partner relationships (Grayson, 2007) can develop into friendships. This shows that even though buyer–seller relationships are highly task-oriented, as they become long-term relationships, they may share some similarities with other personal relationships. Moreover, as buyer–seller relationships evolve from transactional relationships toward long-term relationships, there are needs for a social presence and deeper interaction between the parties.

Furthermore, buyers who are in different phases of the B2B customer-relationship development process might have different requirements from online chats. They might also use online chats for different purposes, as in the beginning of the relationship the need for mutual information sharing is high (Andersen, 2001) and thereby also the demand for social presence could be assumed to be high. According to Andersen (2001), as the customer relationship evolves, continuing communication leads to the development of communication rules and norms between parties. Understanding, interpreting and responding becomes easier, and also the feelings, interests and intentions of both parties are acknowledged (Andersen, 2001). Therefore, buyers who are in deeper phases of the relationship might also have a need for personal sharing. Still, previous studies have not explored how social presence is embedded in online B2B chat conversations between sellers and buyers who are in different phases of the relationship, as we do in this research.

3. Method

The aim of this study is to understand how social presence is embedded in online B2B chat conversations between sellers and buyers who are at different phases of the customer relationship. Moreover, we explore what type of functions the online chat serves in the B2B sales context for buyers who are at different phases of the customer relationship. Therefore, we chose a single case study approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomena (Yin, 2009). The aim of a case study is to acknowledge the uniqueness of the case and to afford an in-depth, contextualized understanding of it (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008; Yin, 2009). We propose the following research questions:

RQ1. How is social presence embedded in online B2B chat conversations between salespeople and buyers who are at different phases of the customer relationship?

RQ2. How do the functions of online B2B chat vary for buyers who are at different phases of the customer relationship?

3.1 Data collection

The empirical research data was collected at the case company in 2014-2017 using existing online B2B chat conversations between buyers and sellers. The case company was selected by searching for a company which would offer us possibilities to collect data in natural settings right after the B2B online chat service was established. Therefore, the online B2B chat conversations in this research have not been produced for the purposes of any research; rather, our data was collected in a natural setting. The case company is a high-technology firm which offers software as a service (SaaS) (Obal, 2013) online via its own website. It offers these cloud-based services to domestic and international B2B buyers, who can purchase the service online. The case company has a technology team, a marketing and sales team and a management and finance team. The typical buyer is a small- or medium-sized enterprise (SME) that has online sales.

To find new prospects and thereby improve their sales, the case firm decided to add online chat features to their website in 2014. The online chat feature was available during office hours (from 8 a.m. until 4 p.m.), it provided immediate communication and it was purely text based (no video available). Sellers (hereafter called *chat salesperson*) were asked to respond to all chat visitors and pass possible prospects on to the sales team, which consisted of more experienced solution sellers. The chat salespersons had received sales training from the case company. The online chat conversations were recorded using chat software applications that automatically saved the data as conversations. A total of 157 chat conversations were downloaded as Excel documents that showed the producer of the data (buyer or seller). A conversation means chat messages (sentences) are written by one of the parties into a chat box and are then followed by the other party until the end of that conversation. Each individual chat message line was identified as a communication unit for analysis and thereby altogether 2,251 communication units were identified. One conversation between the buyer and the seller consisted of around ten communication units. The buyers were aware that the data are recorded, as the case firm's privacy policy clarifies that online chat data are recorded and it can be used for research purposes (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). The company's customer relationship management data was used to verify necessary information related to buyer types. This was done by chat salespeople after every chat conversation because the company's online chat system was not able to recognize customer types at the beginning of the conversation.

3.2 Data analysis

First, we selected only chat conversations including at least one question and one reply for the analysis, and we eliminated all other data (e.g. where the buyer just says *"Hello"* and then leaves the chat). This left us with 157 online chat conversations for the analysis, thus omitting 23 chat conversations (or single messages). Second, we organized the data based on buyer types. Even though the case company had established the online chat service for developing sales prospects, we found that as well as new buyers (n = 101), existing prospects (n = 19) and existing buyers (n = 37) used the online chat service. Information regarding buyer types was found from the company's customer relationship management data. The company used the term *new buyer* referring to buyers who they had not had any prior communication with. Referring to Dwyer *et al.* (1987), we identified that these buyers are at the awareness phase of the buyer–seller relationship. The company named *existing prospect* to describe buyers with whom they had already interacted but without concrete sales. Related to Dwyer *et al.* (1987), we identified that these buyers were at the exploration phase of the buyer–seller relationship. *Existing buyers* (as defined by the company) were those who had bought the company's service and had long-term customer relationships with the case company. Referring to Dwyer *et al.* (1987), we labelled these buyers to be at the expansion phase of the buyer–seller relationship. The buyer types are summarized in Table I.

All the online chat conversations were then coded for social presence and their function using a thematic analysis by classifying the message content (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Leek *et al.*, 2017). According to Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 79), "thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data." In the analysis, we followed the principles laid out by Braun and Clarke (2006). We applied theoretical thematic analysis, which was driven by our research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 84). In the first phase, we familiarized ourselves with our data. We carefully read the online chat conversations (in written text format) to gain a holistic picture of the data.

In the second phase, we divided the data into three data sets based on buyer type (Table I: new buyers; existing prospects; and existing buyers). We then generated initial codes from each of the data sets related to social presence. As Garrison *et al.* (2001), Garrison and Anderson (2003) and Rourke *et al.* (1999) suggest, we applied their idea of categorization in the analysis by using three categories of how social presence can be manifested in online discussions. Their categories were *affective responses* (e.g. expressing emotions and self-disclosure), *interactive responses* (e.g. replying to others, referring to other's messages,

Definition	Information from the case company regarding the buyer	Relationship phase based on Dwyer *et al.* (1987)
New buyer	No proven prior interaction with the case company	Awareness phase in B2B buyer–seller relationship
Existing prospect	Potential end-client with some prior interaction with the company	Exploration phase in B2B buyer–seller relationship
Existing buyer	Current paying end-client or a partner. Long-term business relationship with much prior interaction with the company	Expansion phase in B2B buyer–seller relationship

Table I.
Buyer types in the data

expressing agreement, asking questions) and cohesive responses (e.g. addressing participants by name, greetings). We systematically coded the data sets, and then we separated the codes under the themes of affective responses, interactive responses or cohesive responses in each of the three data sets. We were able to find interactive and affective responses from the data, though cohesive responses were not particularly present. In previous studies, cohesiveness referred to activities that build or sustain a sense of group commitment (Rourke *et al.*, 1999), and this was found to be applicable when investigating online group discussions. However, in our study, we investigated a dyadic interaction rather than group communication and our interest was in buyer–seller relationship rather than in group cohesiveness. Therefore, we added a new category in the analysis, "relationship maintenance," which referred to responses that aimed to maintain the existing customer relationships (e.g. small talk, greetings and bringing in another client). Bringing in another client was thought to represent willingness to maintain the relationship, as the buyers wanted to let their clients know about the case company's SaaS services.

In the third phase, we analyzed the codes applied in the social presence analysis to discover if we could find potential themes related to functions of the online chat for the buyers. This was indeed possible, as, for example, their vast amount of questions served different functions. Furthermore, we named these functions. Finally, we counted the number of utterances in each theme, and we selected relevant excerpts from our data to illustrate social presence as well as the functions of the online B2B chat for buyers.

4. Results

Here, we present the results from our study which are organized in Figure 1 according to the main themes that correspond to the research questions. First, the number of buyers using the online B2B chat features came to 157. These were categorized as new buyers (n = 101), existing prospects (n = 19) and existing buyers (n = 37), based on their customer relationship phase (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987). With all the above-mentioned buyers, online chat conversations included social presence referring to interactive and affective responses. However, the results show that only with existing buyers did some of the online chat conversations include relationship maintenance responses. Furthermore, our results reveal how the functions of online B2B chat varied depending on the types of buyers. The results are shown in Figure 1 and elaborated thereafter.

4.1 Social presence and functions of the online business-to-business chat for new buyers

For new buyers (n = 101), social presence was embedded in online B2B chat conversations through interactive and affective responses. *Interactive social presence* emerged when buyers were asking the seller several different kinds of questions in online chat (Figure 1). Most of these questions were related to gaining more precise information on SaaS services (such as service packages or how the service works) or pricing. A typical example of interactive social presence focusing on an information search is shown in the next quotation from the data:

> New buyer: Hi! Can I have some assistance here?
>
> Chat salesperson: Yes of course, how can I help you?
>
> New buyer: I am searching for information on your services. Do I select one service package or should I combine them?

Buyer type & number of buyers	Social presence	Code of social presence (number of units)	Function of the online chat for the buyer
New buyer (n = 101)	Interactive	- Asking for more information about SaaS services (75) - Asking about pricing (20)	Searching for information
		- Asking questions and figuring out if the service meets the customer's specific needs (50) - Asking for customized solutions (4)	Problem-solving
		- Asking the salesperson to contact the customer via phone or email (39) - Asking for registration for a seminar (3)	Further interaction
		- Customer asking to buy SaaS services (2)	Purchasing
	Affective	- Expressing positive emotions (3) - Expressing negative emotions (13)	Customers' feedback
Existing prospect (n = 19)	Interactive	- Asking for more information on SaaS services (6) - Asking about pricing (3)	Searching for information
		- Asking for the salesperson to contact the customer via phone or email (6) - Asking for registration for a seminar (2)	Further interaction
		- Customer asking to buy SaaS services or start collaboration with the case company (2)	Purchasing
	Affective	- Expressing negative emotions (4)	Customers feedback
Existing buyer (n = 37)	Interactive	- Asking for more information about SaaS services (27) - Asking about pricing (8)	Searching for information
		- Asking for the salesperson to contact them via phone or email (28)	Further interaction
		- Asking questions and figuring out if a new service meets the customer's needs (11) - Asking for a professional opinion on other service providers (2)	Problem-solving
	Affective	- Self-disclosure (9)	Become acquainted
		- Expressing negative emotions (13)	Customers' feedback
	Relationship maintenance	- Asking for a solution for the customer's customers (13)	Bringing in another potential client
		- Sending greetings to certain people in the company by his/her name (7) - Small talk (5)	Socializing

Figure 1.
Results of social presence and different functions of online business-to-business chat conversations for buyers

Chat salesperson: This decision is up to you.

New buyer: What is the cost of each package?

Chat salesperson explains the price and conversation continues.

Interestingly, buyers also expressed rather detailed business problems to which they were searching for solutions. For example, they expressed having a problem to integrate different software and they were asking the chat seller if the case company could do the integration. When the chat salesperson was successfully able to help the buyers, they found a positive solution for their problems. Typical examples related to problem-solving are shown in next two examples.

Example 1

New buyer: "Hi, I am trying to figure out how I could connect my ERP [System Z] with [Webstore 1] or [Webstore 2]. I need to get my webstore and my inventory synced. Is it possible to get this kind of synchronization done in real-time?"

Chat salesperson: "Yes, I checked the service technical information. It looks like we can do the synchronization."

The online chat conversation continues.

Example 2

New buyer*:* "Hello, do you happen to have any experience of Software A and Software B? I mean, how do you connect these programs? Currently we do it all manually, however, it is getting too hard."

Chat salesperson: "Hello! Yes, it is possible to connect these programs, so this should be doable! Please tell me what company you represent?"

The online chat conversation continues.

Furthermore, many buyers asked the salesperson to contact them via another communication channel (e.g. phone or email). This way the chat sellers were able to start building the business relationship by giving solution sellers an email address and/or phone number to the new buyers and by proposing setting a meeting for further interaction with another salesperson from the company who was a more experienced solution seller. Usually, the chat salesperson asked for the buyer's contact information (name, name of the company, phone number and email address) to set a meeting. In most cases, the chat salesperson was able to help the new buyers or pass them on to a solution seller (in 93 of the 101 chat conversations between new buyers and chat salespersons). In eight chat conversations, the chat seller was not able to help the new buyer. This was shown with expressions, such as, "I don't fully know whether that particular function is included in [Program X]" or "I could not find any information about that, so I don't know." Thereafter, they asked the buyer if they could put them in touch with a more experienced salesperson. Additionally, two new buyers wanted to make a purchase by having a conversation with a chat seller.

Affective social presence emerged when new buyers expressed positive and negative emotions in online B2B chat conversations. Basically, these emotional expressions were related to either having a good or bad customer service. New buyers gave positive feedback about the informative website and good service. On the other hand, they complained if they had a problem with the website or if it did not provide enough in-depth information related to SaaS services. However, self-disclosure or the use of humour (Rourke *et al.*, 1999) did not exist in online B2B chat conversations between new buyers and sellers.

Functions of the online B2B chat for new buyers (Figure 1) were found when we analyzed interactive and affective social presence further. As a result, we found six functions which were searching for information, problem-solving, starting interaction with the solution seller, purchasing and giving feedback. New buyers mainly used online chat to ask how to find information on the website or to ask for more information about the SaaS services and how well the services met their needs and solved their problems.

4.2 Social presence and functions of the online business-to-business chat for existing prospects

For existing prospects (n = 19), social presence was embedded in online B2B chat conversations through interactive and affective responses. *Interactive social presence* emerged as requesting different kinds of questions from the seller in online B2B chat. As Figure 1 shows, existing prospects' questions were mainly related to case company's services and pricing. Furthermore, existing prospects asked the seller to contact them via another communication channel or they expressed their willingness to make a purchase/start collaboration with the company. In most cases, the chat salesperson was able to help the prospects or forward them to company's solution seller (17 of the 19 chat conversations between new prospects and chat salespersons). In two chat conversations, the focus was on negative feedback, and the prospect's situation remained unresolved.

Affective social presence was shown only through negative emotional expressions focusing on customer complaints. The existing prospects mainly complained if the seller had not called or contacted the prospect as promised, as the next example from the data illustrates.

> Existing prospect: "You have not bothered to call me, so we have decided to take another provider's service."
>
> Chat salesperson: "I have sent an urgent request to our solution seller to contact you. I will call the seller again and ask him to speed up. Can I help you in any other ways?"
>
> Existing prospect: "I think it is too late because you don't seem to want to sell me anything!"
>
> Chat salesperson: "Of course we want to sell! Our sales expert will call you in a minute, I was able to catch him now."
>
> Existing prospect: "It would be best if you had an expert in the chat so you would not need to act as a useless intermediary:)"
>
> Chat salesperson: "Thank you for your feedback. We will try to develop our services."

Functions of the online B2B chat for existing prospects were further analyzed and the results showed that the functions were related to searching for information, having further interaction with a solution seller, purchasing and giving feedback. Figure 1 shows that, as with new buyers, existing prospects had pretty similar reasons to use the online chat. However, they did not express specific business problems into which they would have been searching for a solution.

4.3 Social presence and functions of the online business-to-business chat for existing buyers

For existing buyers (n = 37), social presence was embedded in online B2B chat conversations through interactive, affective and relationship maintenance responses.

Existing buyers included currently paying clients or partners who had prior interaction with the case company. In most of the chat conversations (in 29 of the 37 online chat conversations between chat salespersons and existing buyers), the chat salespersons were able to help the existing buyers or forward them to a solution seller. *Interactive social presence* emerged when existing buyers were asking questions related to the case company's SaaS services and pricing. They also asked if the seller could contact them via another communication channel. Furthermore, they wanted to discuss how the new service they had already bought had met their expectations and fulfilled their needs. In addition, some buyers requested a professional opinion regarding other service providers which shows respect toward the case company's expertise.

Affective social presence was shown as buyers' self-disclosure and in expressing negative emotions. As with the two other buyer types, negative emotions were related to customer complaints, particularly if they could not reach the solution seller, when the solution seller had not called or if they had problems with a SaaS service. Notably, self-disclosure existed only in online B2B chat discussions with existing buyers and chat salespeople. Self-disclosure was social in nature, not exchange-specific (Jacobs *et al.*, 2001); that is, the buyers voluntarily revealed personal information about themselves which was not related to sales, exchange or transaction, as the next example illustrates.

> [At the end of earlier discussion]
>
> Existing buyer: "I will try to be available all day. You know, I am in Spain right now and mobile connections are not always good here, so if you can't get through straight away you can try to call again."
>
> Chat salesperson: "Yes! I forwarded this information already to Matt. He will contact you today. ☺ Have a wonderful holiday in Spain!"
>
> Existing buyer: "It is so great to have this kind of job. I can move around, so it does not really matter where I am. ☺ Thanks!"
>
> Chat salesperson: "Yes, that's the best part of remote working. I wish the sun was shining here! You know, in Helsinki it's snowing today."

Relationship maintenance social presence was shown in existing buyers' small talk, sending greetings to certain people in the company by his/her name and in asking for a solution for the customer's customers. Compared to other buyer types, relationship maintenance was only shown in B2B online chat discussions between sellers and existing buyers; small talk existed when buyers entered the only chat room and came to talk without any specific task-related purpose, as the next example shows:

> Existing buyer: "Hello, it is me [John] from [Company A]:) "
>
> Chat salesperson: "Hello. How are you doing? It's [Amanda]."
>
> Existing buyer: "Hi!: D/I'm ok, thanks:)/How about you?"
>
> Chat salesperson: "I'm fine too! I am chatting and so many things are going on at the same time. . . By the way, did you get our email?"

Existing buyer: "This chat just popped up and I wanted to try it:)/Oh, what email do you mean?/I have received "insider news" if you mean those emails:) "

Chat salesperson: "I am not sure if I can tell you about our news yet [. . .]: D Just kidding. Well, we have some exciting news related to new compatibilities with your software!/Ok, nice talking to you."

Existing customer: "Okay:)/I'll stay tuned ☺ So we will keep in touch! Give my greetings to everyone!:) "

In addition, social presence as relationship maintenance emerged when buyers asked someone to contact them because they wanted to find a solution for their own customers, as illustrated below:

Existing buyer: "Hello, I tried to call you. One of my clients is in need of a solution. I think my client is interested in your services, so could you please call me? [Adds a phone number.]"

Chat salesperson: "Of course! Could you just please type your name, the name of your company, and your email address?"

Existing buyer: "Yes, of course." [Requested information provided.]

Functions of the online B2B chat for existing buyers were further analyzed. The results showed that the main functions included: searching for information, requesting further interaction with a solution seller, problem-solving, giving feedback, becoming acquainted with salespersons, bringing in another potential client and socializing (Figure 1).

5. Discussion

5.1 Theoretical contribution

Knowledge is brought to the sales and marketing field by focusing on the B2B sales context and actual observed buyer–seller online chat conversations, as most of the previous studies on digital marketing have focused on consumers and a B2C sales context (Nicolla and Teresa, 2016; Obal and Lancioni, 2013). Our results contribute to existing sales and marketing literature (Corley and Gioia, 2011), as we are the first to show how social presence is embedded in B2B online chat conversations through buyers' interactive, affective and relationship maintenance responses. Furthermore, our results show how online B2B chat had different functions for buyers in different stages in their customer relationship.

Additionally, we bring an incremental advance (Corley and Gioia, 2011) to existing B2B sales and marketing research by focusing on social presence in online B2B sales interaction in the ability of participants to project themselves socially and affectively in sales interaction. Many of the previous e-commerce studies (Gefen and Straub, 2004; Ogonowski *et al.*, 2014) have defined social presence based on Short *et al.* (1976) and focused on the capacity of the website to convey a sense of human sociability and warmth (Lu *et al.*, 2016). Our approach is different, as we focused on social presence as interaction with sellers (Caspi and Blau, 2008; Lu *et al.*, 2016) and investigated how social presence is embedded in text-based interaction between buyers and sellers in online B2B chat. In our data, there were three buyer types: new buyers, existing prospects and existing buyers. With new buyers who were in awareness phase of the relationship (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987), and with existing prospects who were in the exploration phase of the relationship (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987), social presence emerged in buyers' interactive and affective responses. With existing buyers who were in the expansion phase of the relationship (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987), social presence was embedded as buyers' interactive, affective and relationship maintenance responses.

Interactive social presence (Garrison *et al.*, 2001; Garrison and Anderson, 2003; Rourke *et al.*, 1999) was shown in most of the online chat conversations in buyers' different types of questions through which they wanted to start interaction with the seller. With all buyer types, these questions were related to sales (e.g. requesting more information on the case company's service, pricing, solutions for specific problems, asking how to make the purchase and how to contact the salesperson for further interaction). This shows that online B2B chat conversations were largely sales and exchange oriented, as has been found in studies focusing on face-to-face sales interactions (Jacobs *et al.*, 2001).

Affective responses (Garrison *et al.*, 2001; Garrison and Anderson, 2003; Rourke *et al.*, 1999) emerged when buyers expressed positive or negative emotions in online chat conversations. Only new buyers gave some positive feedback to the case company; however, all buyer types focused mainly on customer complaints in their negative affective responses. Therefore, online chat is a channel via which B2B buyers can complain. Furthermore, in online chat discussions between existing buyers and sellers, the buyers also expressed self-disclosure and voluntarily revealed personal information about themselves, which was not exchange-specific disclosure (Jacobs *et al.*, 2001). This is an important finding, as self-disclosure enhances social bonding between business partners (Geiger and Turley, 2005; Murphy and Sashi, 2018) and reciprocal self-disclosure improves the communication satisfaction in a relationship (Sherblom, 2020).

Furthermore, we are the first to introduce a new category of social presence in the context of online B2B sales, namely relationship maintenance. This emerged in the data as sending greetings, having small talk with the seller and in buyers' questions when they wanted to find a solution for their own customers. Previous studies have shown that when B2B relationships mature, partners have more trust and commitment in their relationship (Morgan and Hunt, 1994), and then buyers can even start to bring in new customers. Furthermore, by coming to the online chat for just small talk or sending greetings, it reveals that the social component of communication is needed in digital B2B sales, as it plays a significant role in building relationships. Social interaction can help partners to get to know each other better, build trust (Morgan and Hunt, 1994), build commitment (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987) and also align perceptions, set expectations and improve coordination (Sheng *et al.*, 2005).

The results further showed that functions of the online chat were related to searching for information, problem-solving, having further interaction with a seller, purchasing and giving feedback. Additionally, for existing buyers, the online chat served the function of becoming acquainted with salespersons, bringing in another potential client and socializing. The results of our study partly support previous findings related to functions of the online chat in B2C context. Previously, studies have found that online B2C chat has three key functions: search support, navigational support and basic decision-making related to purchasing (Chattaraman *et al.*, 2012). Previous studies (Chattaraman *et al.*, 2012; Truel and Connelly, 2013) have found that people use online chat to gather information from an expert as well as to reduce the time spent on a task. Searching for information was the main purpose our study identified, as well. However, B2B buyers did not use online chat for support in navigation or in basic decision-making. Instead, the functions of the online B2B chat can be described as multiple and changing depending on the buyer–seller relationship stage. This is an incremental advance to previous sales and marketing research, as we show that online chat can actually help sellers to build and even develop business relationships with buyers at different stages of the relationship. Moreover, as B2B sales are increasingly occurring online, a more in-depth understanding is needed of how and why B2B customer relationships evolve via computer-mediated communication in online context. The existing theoretical understanding of the phases of B2B buyer–seller relationships (Crosby *et al.*, 1990; Dwyer *et al.*, 1987; Palmatier *et al.*, 2013) is based on the underlying assumption that buyers and sellers are able to communicate and negotiate frequently in face-to-face settings. This study has shown that computer-mediated communication via online B2B chat is slightly different with different types of buyers. Even though social presence emerged through interactive and affective responses with all buyers, only existing buyers expressed relationship maintenance responses. Therefore, we should further investigate different technological tools, how buyers and sellers are using them and what their influence is across the different phases of buyer–seller relationships, as Arli *et al.* (2018) have also pointed out. Eventually, we should build a new theoretical understanding of the development process of the buyer–seller relationship in B2B sales via computer-mediated communication in online contexts.

As services are increasingly offered via the internet, the results of this study are scientifically useful (Corley and Gioia, 2011) as they could be applied when testing if chatbots could be used for B2B sales. According to Shawar and Atwell (2005, p. 489), a chatbot is a "machine conversation system which interacts with human users via natural conversational language." Chatbots are used, for example, in place of humans in online customer service chats (Hill *et al.*, 2015) in B2C sales. Usually customer service chatbots are based on human dialogue, and therefore, the results of this study could be used when developing chatbots for B2B sales. Yet the extent to which chatbots can be used in B2B sales needs investigation, as the B2B sales process has been known to be more complex than B2C sales process (Akrout and Diallo, 2017; Dubinsky, 1981; Homburg *et al.*, 2011). Moreover, as the results of this study showed, B2B buyers can have specific questions and problems in mind when they enter a chat room, and they might even ask for customized solutions to their problems.

5.2 Practical contribution

The study has several managerial implications. As our results reveal, chat salespersons were not able to help the buyers in all cases, and therefore, a more experienced salesperson should be in charge of B2B online chats or they should be at least very easily available to offer better customer service. Therefore, even though buyers entering the chat room expected to gain instant solutions to their complex problems, online chat does not seem to be the best possible communication medium for solving very complex problems and offering solutions for those problems. For successful complex B2B solution, selling a richer communication medium (such as face-to-face meetings or face-to-face video chats with an expert salesperson) would be a more suitable choice (Ogonowski *et al.*, 2014). Even though all the chat salespersons had received sales training, it seemed not to be sufficient for the needs of B2B buyers, who demanded more professional answers and fast solutions to their problems. Therefore, the chat salespersons would need an even more in-depth understanding of the company's SaaS services and their technological aspects or they should be able to consult an expert solution seller to answer complex questions from the buyers. Furthermore, in sales training the B2B sellers could learn how to add some self-disclosure into online sales interaction, for example, a salesperson's intimate social disclosure has been found to positively impact the quality of sales interaction (Jacobs *et al.*, 2001). Therefore, salespersons who will be involved in online B2B chats with potential customers should be taught how to elicit social disclosure from buyers, how to respond to them and how to add some social disclosure elements to their own chat messages. Based on our results, the case company could also improve their customer service by considering why their customers are not getting call backs and how their internal communication is working.

All in all, the results indicate that online chat could be seen as adding value for the case company. Online chat reached both new buyers and existing ones, making it a communication channel that can bring in new customers, as well as strengthen the existing customer relationship. Chat conversations can be used to improve online stores and to enhance sales communication via an increased social presence on a company's website. Furthermore, CMC tools such as Aliwangwang (an instant message tool developed by Alibaba) have been found to be an effective way to communicating with a vast amount of customers (Lu *et al.*, 2016), and an online chat box brings added value to sellers, as they can easily serve a larger amount of B2B customers, as they able to interact face-to-face. In the future, we need a better theoretical understanding of the impact of different technological tools on relational development across different phases of the buyer–seller relationship.

6. Limitations

Although our study has strengths, it has some limitations. Although the data consist of online chat conversations between 157 buyers and sellers, they were still collected from a single case company. Having data only from one case company limits the results to one type of industry. In the future, multiple case study could be conducted to investigate and compare several industries to see if there are differences in the findings. The data were collected in natural settings, which makes them more reliable than interview data (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). Still, we could have combined buyer survey data or buyer interviews with our online chat data to link our results to, for example, customer satisfaction or customers' trust toward the seller. However, that can be conducted in future studies.

References

Akrout, H. and Diallo, M.F. (2017), "Fundamental transformations of trust and its drivers: a multi-stage approach of business-to-business relationships", *Industrial Marketing Management*, Vol. 66, pp. 159-171.

Andersen, P.H. (2001), "Relationship development and marketing communication: an integrative model", *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing*, Vol. 16 No. 3, pp. 167-182.

Arli, D., Bauer, C. and Palmatier, R.W. (2018), "Relational selling: past, present and future", *Industrial Marketing Management*, Vol. 69, pp. 169-184.

Baxter, LA. and Braithwaite, DO. (2008), *Engaging Theories in Interpersonal Communication. Multiple Perspectives*, SAGE, Los Angeles.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006), "Using thematic analysis in psychology", *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, Vol. 3 No. 2, pp. 77-101.

Brown, JR., Weaven, SK., Dant, RP. and Crosno, JL. (2016), "Boosting the effectiveness of channel governance options: the moderationing role of relational norms", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 50 Nos 1/2, pp. 29-57.

Caspi, A. and Blau, I. (2008), "Social presence in online discussion groups: testing three conceptions and their relations to perceived learning", *Social Psychology of Education*, Vol. 11 No. 3, pp. 323-346.

Chattaraman, V., Kwon, W.S. and Gilbert, J.E. (2012), "Virtual agents in retail web sites: benefits off simulated social interaction for older users", *Computers in Human Behavior*, Vol. 28 No. 6, pp. 2055-2066.

Corley, K.G. and Gioia, D.A. (2011), "Building theory about theory building: what constitutes a theoretical contribution?", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 36 No. 1, pp. 12-32.

Crosby, L.A., Evans, K.R. and Cowles, D. (1990), “Relationship quality in services selling: an interpersonal influence perspective”, *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 54 No. 3, pp. 68-81.

Dubinsky, A.J. (1981), “A factor analytic study of the personal selling process”, *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, Vol. 1 No. 1, pp. 26-33.

Dwyer, F.R., Schurr, P.H. and Oh, S. (1987), “Developing buyer-seller relationships”, *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 51 No. 2, pp. 11-27.

Elo, M., Benjowsky, C. and Nummela, N. (2015), ” “Intercultural competences and interaction schemes – four forces regulating dyadic encounters in international business”, *Industrial Marketing Management*, Vol. 48, pp. 38-49.

Eriksson, P. and Kovalainen, A. (2008), *Qualitative Research in Business Studies*, Sage, London.

Etemad-Sajadi, R. (2014), “The influence of a virtual agent on web-users desire to visit the company: the case of restaurant’s website”, *International Journal of Quality and Reliability Management*, Vol. 31 No. 4, pp. 419-434.

Garrison, D., R. and Anderson, T. (2003), *E-Learning in the 21st Century: A Framework for Research and Practice*, Routledge Falmer, London.

Gefen, D. and Straub, D.W. (2004), “Consumer trust in B2C e-commerce and the importance of social presence: experiments in e-products and e-services”, *Omega*, Vol. 32 No. 6, pp. 407-424.

Geiger, S. and Turley, D. (2005), “Socializing behaviors in business-to-business selling: an exploratory study from the republic of Ireland”, *Industrial Marketing Management*, Vol. 34 No. 3, pp. 263-273.

Grayson, K. (2007), “Friendship versus business in marketing relationships”, *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 71 No. 4, pp. 121-139.

Haytko, D.L. (2004), “Firm-to-firm and interpersonal relationships: perspectives from advertising agency account managers”, *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, Vol. 32 No. 3, pp. 312-328.

Hill, J., Ford, W.R. and Farreras, I.G. (2015), “Real conversations with artificial intelligence: a comparison between human-human online conversations and human-chatbot conversations”, *Computers in Human Behavior*, Vol. 49, pp. 245-250.

Hoar, A. (2015), “Death of a (B2B) salesman”, available at: http://blogs.forrester.com/andy_hoar/15-04-14-death_of_a_b2b_salesman (accessed 5 August 2018).

Homburg, C., Müller, M. and Klarmann, M. (2011), “When does salesperson’s customer orientation lead to customer loyalty? The differential elements of relational and functional customer orientation”, *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, Vol. 39 No. 6, pp. 795-812.

Hung, K.-P. and Lin, C.-K. (2013), “More communication is not always better? The interplay between effective communication and interpersonal conflict in influencing satisfaction”, *Industrial Marketing Management*, Vol. 42 No. 8, pp. 1223-1232.

Jacobs, R.S., Hyman, M.R. and McQuitty, S. (2001), “Exchange-specific self-disclosure, social self-disclosure, and personal selling”, *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, Vol. 9 No. 1, pp. 48-62.

Knapp, M., L. (1972), *Nonverbal Communication in Human Interaction*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, NY.

Koponen, J., Julkunen, S. and Asai, A. (2019), “Sales communication competence in international B2B solution selling”, *Industrial Marketing Management*, Vol. 82, available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2019.01.009

Leek, S., Houghton, D. and Canning, L. (2017), “Twitter and behavioural engagement in the healthcare sector: an examination of product and service companies”, *Industrial Marketing Management*, available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2017.10.009

Lu, B., Fan, W. and Ahou, M. (2016), “Social presence, trust, and social commerce purchase intention: an empirical research”, *Computers in Human Behavior*, Vol. 56, pp. 225-237.

McLean, G. and Osei-Frimpong, K. (2017), “Examining satisfaction with the experience during a live chat service encounter – implications for website providers”, *Computers in Human Behavior*, Vol. 76, pp. 494-508.

Mason, K. and Leek, S. (2012), “Communication practices in a business relationship: creating, relating and adapting communication artifacts through time”, *Industrial Marketing Management*, Vol. 41 No. 2, pp. 319-332.

Morgan, R. and Hunt, S. (1994), “The commitment-trust theory of relationship marketing”, *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 58 No. 3, pp. 20-38.

Murphy, M. and Sashi, C.M. (2018), “Communication, interactivity and satisfaction in B2B relationships”, *Industrial Marketing Management*, Vol. 68, pp. 1-12.

Nicolla, C. and Teresa, D. (2016), ” “Young consumer-brand relationship building potential using digital marketing”, *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 50 No. 11, pp. 1993-2017.

Obal, M. (2013), “Why do incumbents sometimes succeed? Investigating the role of interorganizational trust in the adoption of disruptive technology”, *Industrial Marketing Management*, Vol. 42 No. 6, pp. 900-908.

Obal, M. and Lancioni, R.A. (2013), ” “Maximizing buyer–supplier relationships in the digital era: Concept and research agenda”, *Industrial Marketing Management*, Vol. 42 No. 6, pp. 851-854.

Ogonowski, A., Montandon, A., Botha, E. and Reyneke, M. (2014), “Should new online stores invest in social presence elements? The effect of social presence on initial trust formation”, *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, Vol. 21 No. 4, pp. 482-491.

Olson, J.S. and Olson, G.M. (2000), “I2i trust in e-commerce”, *Communications of the Acm*, Vol. 43 No. 12, pp. 41-44.

Ou, C.X., Pavlou, P.A. and Davison, R.M. (2014), “Swift Guanxi in online marketplaces: the role of computer-mediated communication technologies”, *MIS Quarterly*, Vol. 38 No. 1, pp. 209-230.

Palmatier, R.W., Houston, M.B., Dant, R.P. and Grewal, D. (2013), “Relationship velocity: toward a theory of relationship dynamics”, *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 77 No. 1, pp. 13-30.

Price, L.L. and Arnould, E.J. (1999), “Commercial friendships: service provider – client relationships in context”, *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 63, pp. 38-56.

Reichheld, F., F. and Schefter, P. (2000), “E-loyalty: your secret weapon on the web”, *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 78, pp. 105-113.

Rourke, L., Anderson, T., Garrison, D.R. and Archer, W. (1999), “Assessing social presence in asynchronous, text-based computer conferencing”, *Journal of Distance Education*, Vol. 14 No. 3, pp. 51-70.

Sallnäs, E.L., Rassmus-Gröhn, K. and Sjöström, C. (2000), “Supporting presence in collaborative environments by haptic force feedback”, *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction (Tochi)*, Vol. 7 No. 4, pp. 461-476.

Shawar, B.A. and Atwell, E. (2005), “Using corpora in machine-learning chatbot systems”, *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics*, Vol. 10 No. 4, pp. 489-516.

Sheng, S., Brown, J.R. and Nicholson, C.Y. (2005), “The mediating role of communication in interorganizational channels”, *Journal of Marketing Channels*, Vol. 13 No. 2, pp. 51-80.

Sherblom, JC. (2020), *Computer-Mediated Communication. Approaches and Perspectives*, Cognella, San Diego, CA.

Short, J.A., Williams, E. and Christie, B. (1976), *The Social Psychology of Telecommunications*, Wiley, London.

Stanko, M.A., Bonner, J.M. and Calantone, R.J. (2007), “Building commitment in buyer–seller relationships: a tie strength perspective”, *Industrial Marketing Management*, Vol. 36 No. 8, pp. 1094-1103.

Truel, O. and Connelly, C.E. (2013), "Too busy to help: antecedents and outcomes of interactional justice inn based service encounters", *International Journal of Information Management*, Vol. 33, pp. 674-683.

Weitz, B.A. and Bradford, K.D. (1999), "Personal selling and sales management: a relationship marketing perspective", *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, Vol. 27 No. 2, pp. 241-254.

Yin, R., K. (2009), *Case Study Research. Design and Methods*, 3rd ed., Sage, Thousand Oaks.

Yoon, C. (2010), "Antecedents of customer satisfaction with online banking in China: the effects of experience", *Computers in Human Behavior*, Vol. 26 No. 6, pp. 1296-1304.

Further reading

Altman, I. and Taylor, D., A. (1973), *Social Penetration: The Development of Interpersonal Relationships*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, NY.

Garrison, D.R., Anderson, T. and Archer, W. (1999), "Critical inquiry in text-based environment: computer conferencing in higher education", *The Internet and Higher Education*, Vol. 2 Nos 2/3, pp. 87-105.

Hong, I.B. and Cha, H.S. (2013), "The mediating role of consumer trust in an online merchant in predicting purchase intention", *International Journal of Information Management*, Vol. 33 No. 6, pp. 927-939.

Syam, N. and Sharma, A. (2018), "Waiting for sales renaissance in the fourth industrial revolution: machine learning and artificial intelligence in sales research and practice", *Industrial Marketing Management*, Vol. 69, pp. 135-146.

Walther, J.B. (1996), "Computer-mediated communication: impersonal, interpersonal, and hyperpersonal interaction", *Communication Research*, Vol. 23 No. 1, pp. 3-43.

Wilson, J.M., Straus, S.G. and McEvily, B. (2006), "All in due time: the development of trust in computer-mediated and face-to-face teams", *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, Vol. 99 No. 1, pp. 16-33.

Corresponding author
Jonna Pauliina Koponen can be contacted at: jonnapauliina.koponen@uef.fi

JONNA KOPONEN

This dissertation is motivated by the trend in which B2B sales interaction is moving away from traditional in-person, face-to-face communication towards a combination of digital and in-person communication. The dissertation investigates what sales communication competence salespeople need to communicate in a competent manner in a modern B2B relationship selling environment. As a result, a new theoretical construct, *sales communication competence in modern B2B relationship selling contexts*, is produced.

UNIVERSITY OF EASTERN FINLAND

uef.fi

PUBLICATIONS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF EASTERN FINLAND
Dissertations in Social Sciences and Business Studies

ISBN 978-952-61-4382-8
ISSN 1798-5749