Influence of COVID-19 on E-commerce sales

The omnichannel strategies case of the retail businesses in Sweden

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Abstract

Purpose - This thesis aims to describe the strategies employed by omnichannel experts in Swedish retail shops during the Covid19 pandemic. Furthermore, the integration of the physical and online channels is studied to describe the methods used to increase sales, especially in the online channels.

Methodology – The study applies a qualitative method where semi-structured interviews were conducted with omnichannel experts from retail businesses.

Findings – The aim of the retail shops during the Covid19 pandemic has been to perform in-store and online shopping despite the partial restrictions. Retail shops had to adapt to the changes in the Swedish market and the consumer behavior. The challenge of maintaining sales and remaining competitive has shown that Swedish retail shops have remained resilient and that adaptation has been key to their business strategies.

Practical Implications – Retail businesses worldwide were forced to close their business except for their online services. However, Sweden is a particular case where retailers had to find solutions to their physical and online retail operations. Partial restrictions allowed them to carry out business activities in the Swedish market. Therefore, the current pandemic has influenced Swedish retailers to help them identify business strategies to boost their sales, especially online sales. As well as the data collection and literature findings, both cases suggest that adapting to new technologies is the key to increasing sales in all channels. Therefore, retailers should introduce new ways of working with the help of technological tools to become more competitive and provide excellent service to an increasingly demanding and technologically savvy customer.

Contribution – This study contributes to the area of research that looks at how omnichannel retail structures can be improved to increase sales. And how they adapt to change market situations that influence consumer behavior.

Keywords: *omnichannel, in-store, online sales, Covid19, retailer.*

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This work has a special dedication to my lovely family, who always gave me their love and motivation to fulfill my dreams despite the distance. Last dedication, to my friends who gave me encouragement in the most challenging moments.

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Joel Dorian Aguilar Montano

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1. Introduction

In this chapter, the basis of the topic of study of the master thesis was developed entirely by distance learning. The chosen topic is how the omnichannel retail industry of retail companies in Sweden has progressed during the Covid19 health crisis. In addition, there is a particular focus on electronic sales channels. Firstly, the developments in the study area are presented to start this research. Secondly, the discussion of the problem will include information from the study to be investigated, and finally, the research aims, objectives, and delimitation will be stated.

1.1 Background

The authors Bell, Gallino, and Moreno, (2014) indicate that the omnichannel environment is a place where the customers can shop through a variety of online and offline channels. Omnichannel has seen tremendous growth and interest in recent years, and its evolution is partly due to the digitalization of business models (Verhoef, 2021). The integration of sales channels positively impacts consumers and offers a seamless experience that motivates them to buy (Chang & Li, 2021). Digital technology has provided many relevant successful features along with various opportunities and challenges to implementing with the strategic use of Omnichannel systems (Hole et al., 2019). Additionally, over the last few decades, the adoption of multichannel retail services that operate in online and offline channels has improved corporate performance (Cai et al., 2021). Especially in the recent Covid19 period where business strategies have changed due to the restrictions imposed by the governments of the countries in all around the world.

In the case of the retail industry, there has been a different behavior in terms of online sales growth. Customers have preferred to shop online to avoid going to the physical shop and thus prevent the risk of contracting the virus. Therefore, customers in recent years have visualized their purchases through technological devices, which means that businesses have focused on studying a more demanding, informed customer with multiple shopping choices. The authors Bhatti et. al., (2020) indicated that the Coronavirus influenced all the world's electronic commerce, and it has changed the nature of business. Therefore, it is observed that e-commerce is experiencing worldwide growth.

According to Sharma (2020), electronic commerce, commonly written as E-commerce, is the trading (buying and selling) of products and services using computer networks, such as the internet. Currently, both websites and social media are platforms that help companies expand their sales channels globally. According to Jílková & Králová (2021), indicated that consumers of all generations were more likely to buy goods and services digitally. Of the previous aircraft, this research focuses on a study and analysis of e-commerce expansion in Sweden during the Covid19 health crisis through omnichannel strategies development.

The particularity of the Swedish niche is partly because the Swedish territory has not been as highly restricted as other countries. According to Gustafsson & Kinnunen (2020), the Swedish economy was severely affected by Covid19, and Sweden seems to have fared better than other European countries. In their study, based on the European Commission's economic forecasts (2020), Sweden is predicted to be one of the countries that will lose the least in terms of GDP (-3.4% between 2020 and 2022). But although budgetary and financial support measures have softened the blow, the pandemic continues to affect GDP and employment in Sweden negatively.

Off-line and online sales of products and services have not been disrupted since the start of the pandemic and this was one of the main reasons that helped hold the economy better than other countries. In Sweden, the first case of Covid19 was confirmed on 31 January 2020 (Government.se). In the Swedish market, this health crisis changed the buying routine of consumers and the selling routine of businesses. From a Swedish perspective, the isolations, restrictions, closures of some physical shops, and distance rules have influenced consumer behavior during the pandemic years. According to Kroll, a division of Duff & Phelps (2020), Sweden notably resisted mandatory lockdown protocols allowing borders, schools, bars, and businesses to remain mostly open amid the pandemic, with some social distancing guidelines. Additionally, the more relaxed restrictions in Sweden do not appear to impact consumer confidence in terms of financial situation (Bayer, Halonen, and Hannover, 2020)

Concerning businesses, Swedish retailers have been forced to make decisions to change to meet a demand that has increased online sales from SEK 87 billion in 2019 to SEK 122 billion in 2020 (Statista.com). In graphic number 1, the Swedish market has seen an upward growth in sales through e-commerce channels for the last three years. As a result, for 2021, a growth forecast of up to 130 billion SEK was given, 49% more than in 2019.
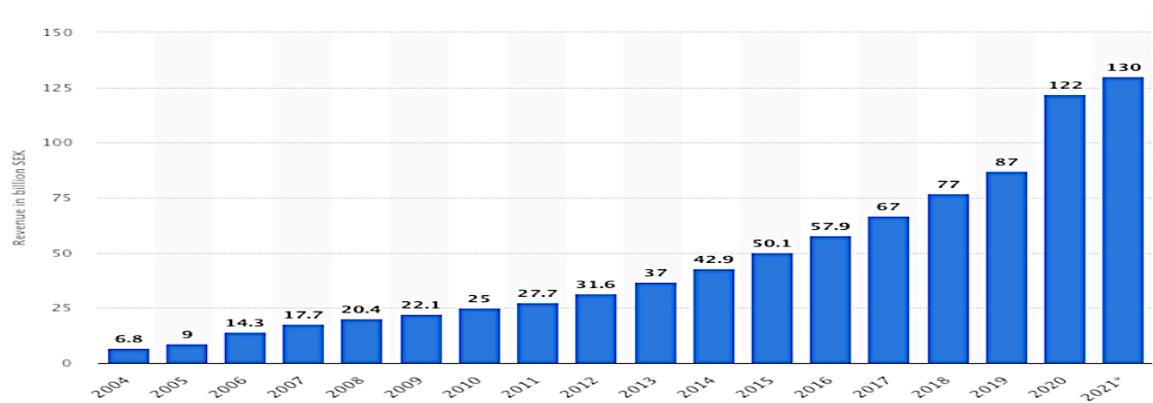
Graphic 1. E-commerce revenue in Sweden from 2004 to 2020 with a forecast of 2021*

Source retrieved from Statista.com

Considering the raising of digital purchasing into the Swedish operation business, the retail industry is prioritized in this study. As shown in Graphic 2, if we compare the pre-Covid19 period with the Covid19 period, we can see that retail trade sales in Sweden have experienced growth from May of 2020 (1.5%) to reach the top in June 2021 (7.2%).
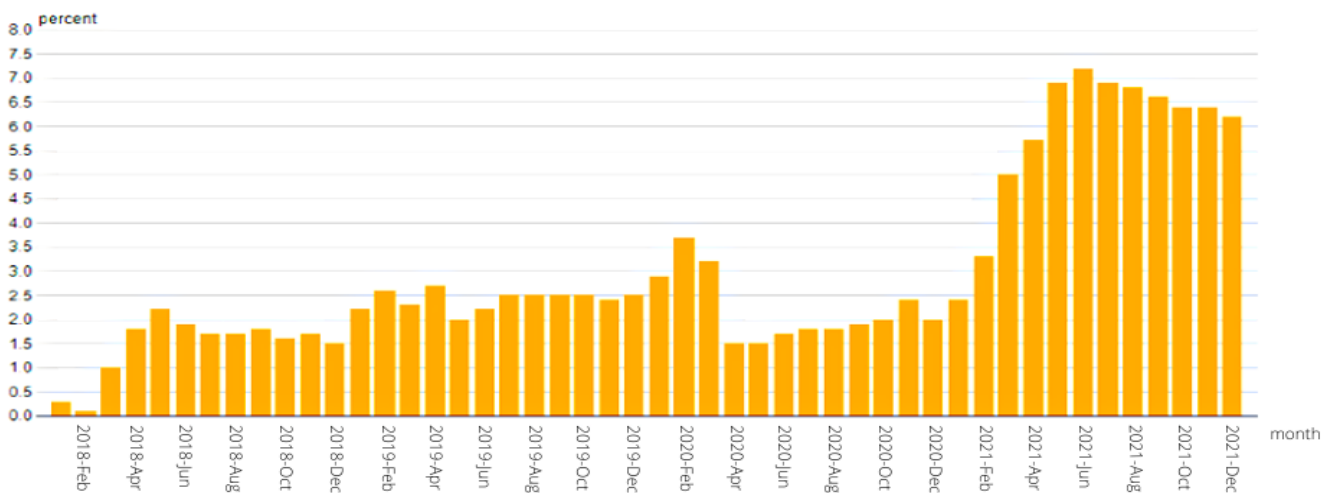
Graphic 2. Retail trade sales in Sweden. Accumulated. Development in percent, working day adjusted, constant prices by month. Total retail trade. Source retrieved from scb.se

Retail industry sales saw increased activity in 2020. The significant impact in retail is likely to be associated with a move towards the online distribution of these goods and services. This process was already ongoing but slower before the crisis (Hensvik & Skans, 2020). During the pandemic, entrepreneurs in the retail industry looked for the best solutions to continue innovating online. According to Bayer, Halonen, and Hannover (2020), in the short term,

retailers have responded with distancing actions such as contactless payment and the launch of online sales services. However, there is a greater tendency to have a more outstanding provision of digital services in the long term and increase digital elements in physical stores. For example, Hemköp launched its new Smartshopper app in March 2020, allowing customers to scan and pay for purchases with their phones, eliminating direct contact with employees and self-check-out machines.

Thus, retailers in Sweden have increased sales from their online channels even though it is possible to visit physical shops, regardless of the partial restrictions during the Covid19 circumstances in this country. Therefore, we confirm with the information above that one of the business strategies that helps in terms of sales growth during the Covid19 is the omnichannel strategies.

1.2 Problem discussion

Retail companies in the Swedish market did not have a burst of commercial activity despite the restrictions imposed by the Swedish government to maintain the safety distance or the limitation of the maximum number of customers inside the stores in March 2020 (folkhalsomyndigheten.se).

According to Bricco, Misch, and Solovyeva (2021), they argue that Sweden's containment strategy has brought much attention from other countries. In addition, the authors comment that retailers have operated without severe restrictions and mandatory social distance measures. In this situation, retail companies have been forced to maximize their operations to meet higher online demand than in previous periods (Graphic 1) without neglecting their physical shop operation strategies. At the same time, working in physical shops, they have opted to modernize their equipment to allow for less physical contact within the shops, thereby adapting to factors such as consumer habits and Covid19 contagion prevention restrictions. This way of working in an atypical phase of society modified the consumption habits, which involves different channels of retail companies. According to Mansour & Hoque (2021), during the pandemic, online and offline sales channels were integrated, and offline businesses were oriented to work to a specific operation. This operation is known as the omnichannel strategy.

A multi-channel approach, where a customer can access a particular offering across multiple channels, has allowed retailers to compete on a higher level (Ejnarsson, 2016). Customers that have reached a higher level of digital maturity are now using the various channels and touchpoints to choose the most convenient channel to search for offerings. To produce a consistent experience for sales and brand recognition, merchants must build a cohesive offering across all channels.

According to Deloitte "A road map for omnichannel fulfillment", the current environment is a challenge for retailers. While e-commerce sales are increasing, retailers must establish an online division and separate organizational structures for the new sales channel. In addition, the previous article stated that the expansion of online sales has led us to omnichannel in the current era, which is characterized by the necessity to offer relevant products anywhere, at any time.

Thus, the need arises to create a research questions that is of practical use to retail experts who are developing or implementing omnichannel strategies. Therefore, it is interesting to study how this working method has contributed to increasing sales, especially online sales.

1.3 Purpose, objectives and research question

This article describe the omnichannel retailing process in Sweden during the Covid19 pandemic. It is essential to mention that e-commerce sales have a remarkable scope due to their expansion. Other than this, the attitude of the retailers in Sweden towards omnichannel retailing is also analyzed. The development of the omnichannel retailing sector of the Swedish market has experienced crucial changes during this pandemic.

To achieve the objective of this research work, two research questions are created:

1. How do feel retailers in Sweden about omnichannel retailing when it comes to organizational transformation?
2. In Sweden's retail industries, how far has omnichannel e-commerce progressed?

1.4 Delimitations

This work will be carried out online with the supervisor and the developed interviewees for data collection. The region of the study is Sweden. It will study retailers who work in Sweden and whose online and offline operation is on Swedish territory. Since the study is about omnichannel research, customer research is wholly excluded. The retailers considered for this work are large retailers (+250 employees). The following retail activities are included: furniture, home decoration, electro domestics, groceries, fashion, sportswear, liquor store, and pharmacy.

2. Literature review

Since the researcher's study focuses on analyzing changes in omnichannel retailing during the Covid19 period, the literature review is introduced as follows: First, an analysis of how retailers behaved in the face of the first measures imposed by the Swedish government. Also, it discusses how they have adapted to these measures and the new consumer experience. Second, it introduces omnichannel strategies to improve the customer experience and create value from multichannels to demonstrate that the increase in sales resulted from these changes implemented by retailers in Sweden. Third, the author discusses four retail fundamentals that influence the transformation of omnichannel strategies. Fourth and last one, it studies the digital elements that have added value to improve sales through the online channel and the physical shop. In addition, a particular focus is placed on how these digital channels responded to the high demand for online shopping.

2.1 Retail behavior and adaptation during Covid19 in Sweden

The information in this section is an additional supplement to the information disclosed in the introduction of this study. Retailers in Sweden have undergone radical change over a short period due to the effects of the Covid19 pandemic. These businesses have had to modify their structures in response to measures imposed by the Swedish government and changing consumer behavior. These external factors prompted the change and rapid action by the

companies to avoid being seriously affected and resorting to the closure of establishments, as has happened in other countries around the world.

These measures were due to the decisions taken by the Swedish government. Which, on the one hand, severely affected specific industries, such as those requiring a physical presence for business or services (Gustafsson & Kinnunen, 2020), and not so severely affected industries such as food production, pharmacies and supplements, and services connected to home decoration as well as parts of the development of e-commerce (Gustafsson & Kinnunen, 2020). In contrast, Colliander and Rosengren's study (n.d.) found that grocery retailers increased sales by being an essential supply for consumers. On the other hand, other sectors have decreased their inflow of customers, as in the case of fashion and beauty. In addition, grocery retailers had a total growth of 6.7% in April 2020. However, it is worth mentioning that imposed government measures in other countries severely affected their retail physical businesses.

The particularity of Sweden is that it has never been isolated. According to Kavaliunas et al. (2020), one of the reasons why Swedish government preferred not to force its citizens to isolate themselves in their homes was to have a collective immunity progressively and rapidly. In addition, the former author reported that Sweden imposed mild measures to deal with the pandemic based on recommendations with few legislative controls.

The other factor that intervened in retailers' change was customer behavior due to the socio-sanitary crisis that forced them to make purchasing decisions without leaving home or avoid human contact to avoid being infected by the virus. Timoumi et al. (2022) indicated that the Covid19 health-crisis had led retailers to make an effort to create a safety-driven customer experience. In addition, the blockades and subsequent closure of offline vendors made retailers agile and pivot to online shopping channels (Timoumi et al., 2022). The authors Sandberg et al. (2021) state that consumer behavior is constantly evolving and that an extreme shift that occurred during the pandemic significantly altered the business world. These authors remarked that they found four crucial aspects in their study in Sweden. The author of this paper highlights two for this study. The first is that the pandemic has accelerated the shift from physical shops to online shops, particularly in the entry of new users to online shopping. And the second is that their survey of Swedish consumers indicated that 60% visited physical shops less frequently and that 19% of consumers believe they will permanently visit physical shops less regularly.

Colliander & Rosengren (n.d.), indicated that the pattern of online consumer behavior was prominent in Swedish consumption. Their study indicated that the consumption rate of grocery retailers increased by 101% in April 2020. In addition, despite the decline in total consumption in the fashion sector, the Swedish fashion industry's online sales increased by 13% in the first quarter of 2020.

2.2 Omnichannel strategies as a solution to create a better seamless experience.

Faced with the possibility of opening the doors of physical retail shops and the reluctance of some consumers to leave their homes, retailers in Sweden have adapted to changing strategies with an omnichannel approach. In recent years, one of the crucial aspects of omnichannel marketing for omnichannel retailers has become providing a superior, seamless experience for customers (Chang, 2022). Nanda et al. (2021) stated that customer interaction has recently received much attention in omnichannel retailing. It is expected to be a critical component in the retailer's future sales performance. Moreover, Lorezo-Romero et al. (2020) indicated that many firms are ditching multichannel in favour of a much more centralized strategy known as omnichannel to obtain a competitive edge by integrating and optimizing the many channels and providing a unique experience to the customer. Additionally, Inoue and Hashimoto (2022) found in the results of their study that omnichannel strategies could contribute to capturing more members at accidental business opportunities (e.g., like the growth of sales due to the Covid19 pandemic effect).

After several founds in research articles, the author confirms that omnichannel is the future for retailers to seek profitable results and provide a better customer experience. The definition of omnichannel will be presented in the section below, along with its importance and characteristics. In addition, the author discussed the concepts of transformation and digitalization that will assist in solving the research questions supported by the method chosen for this study.

2.2.1 Omnichannel definition, importance, and characteristics.

In recent years, significantly since 2019, the world has been influenced by technology and telecommunications, making it imperative for organizations to have an omnichannel strategy to penetrate and engage many more people and markets. But what is omnichannel? According

to Mika et al. (2018), omnichannel is defined as a seamless integration of channels or consumer touch points, each of which has a unique appeal or value in order to provide chances for diverse customers. Another authors like Ellie et al. (2019) defines it as a new way to improve customers' shopping experiences and address the drawbacks of a multichannel retailing strategy. Therefore, integrated channel management integrates sales channels' goals, design, and implementation to improve customers' shopping experiences. The degree of channel integration can be used as a proxy for a company's omnichannel operation (Zarei et al., 2020).

Based on this information, an omnichannel strategy is considered to create a better customer experience, which translates into greater brand loyalty and thus increases the likelihood of purchase. Furthermore, customers are experiencing new purchasing decisions due to increased digitalization, and retailers have expanded multiple sales options. According to Iglesias-Pradas et. al (2021) the Covid19 pandemic and population lockdown in several nations has resulted in an unanticipated increase in digital channels. As a result of the strong rise of digital, retailing businesses has transformed their operations (Verhoef, 2021).

Omnichannel strategies are seen at all levels and the needs of the organization. Whether serving customers to physical shops, guiding audiences through a particular purchase journey, or generating loyalty and engagement from their target audience. It all corresponds to a deep understanding of the company's customers, which requires additional efforts to engage and keep these people interested in the business.

Omnichannel strategies have become a necessity for companies that need permanent contact with their customers to contact new audiences to grow their business and maintain those with a long history within it. Omnichannel strategies of retailers aim to make the presence and accompaniment of customers an agile and dynamic process, where the customer feels represented and supported by the company with which they interact.

Table 1, according to the authors Mirsh et al. (2016), presents a full outline of the omnichannel's characteristics.

Characteristics of Omnichannel Management	
Channel integration	Seamless switching among all channels possible
Channel management	Across all channels
Goals and incentive systems	To optimize performance across all channels
Communication between consumer and firm	Unidirectional and bidirectional
Data	Data are shared across channels

Table 1. Characteristics of omnichannel business.

Source retrieved from Mirsh et al. (2021)

The author of this paper states the difference between multichannel and omnichannel in the following sub-section to comprehend the operation of these strategies. Defining this differentiation will assist in understanding better the research and the fundamental reasons why the omnichannel is more critical than the multichannel.

2.2.2 Omnichannel differentiation with multichannel

The distinction between multichannel and omnichannel marketing is based on how a company handles digital channels with the traditional channels. A multichannel approach is used by businesses that want to get the most out of each sales channel - store, phone, web, mobile, and so on. In last years, according to Leeflang et al. (2014), the scope of multichannel is moving to a new phase of digitalization in marketing and retailing with specific challenges. According to this evolution, customers can approach or be attracted to firms or brands in various ways. On the other hand, an omnichannel strategy puts the client at the center of the plan rather than maximizing the channels via which they arrive.

A multichannel strategy aims to reach customers through different media, both digital and physical: advertisements, websites, brochures, email newsletters, mobile apps, physical shops, and other media. However, the goal of the omnichannel is to improve the consumer experience, resulting in increased brand loyalty and purchase likelihood. It is all about employing strategies

that make greater use of the channels that have been established by giving a more consistent experience for the user.

Verhoef et al. (2015) indicated that retail multichannel is moving to retail omnichannel. Some external factors such as digitalization and the Covid19 pandemic have prompted most retail companies to operate omnichannel strategies. Based on these factors, Xu (2014) stated that mobile devices and the development of their apps have started to have a more significant impact as a new channel on the market. Therefore, this development of new channels creates new competencies in the market and thus breaking down old demographic and consumer barriers (Erik et al., 2013).

In Figure 3, Verhoef et al. (2015) present the differences between omnichannel and multichannel retailing.

Multi-channel versus omni-channel management.

	Multi-channel management	Omni-channel Management
Channel focus	Interactive channels only	Interactive and mass-communication channels
Channel scope	Retail channels: store, online website, and direct marketing (catalog)	Retail channels: store, online website, and direct marketing, mobile channels (i.e., smart phones, tablets, apps), social media Customer Touchpoints (incl. mass communication channels: TV, Radio, Print, C2C, etc.).
Separation of channels	Separate channels with no overlap	Integrated channels providing seamless retail experiences.
Brand versus channel customer relationship focus	Customer – Retail channel focus	Customer – Retail channel – Brand focus
Channel management	Per channel	Cross-channel objectives (i.e.,
Objectives	Channel objectives (i.e., sales per channel; experience per channel)	overall retail customer experience, total sales over channels)

Figure 3. Multi-channel versus omni-channel management.

Retrieved from Verhoef et al. (2015)

The following sub-section is needed in terms to start digging into the structure of the omnichannel. It will serve to mention the channels of operation used by retailers.

2.2.3 Omnichannel strategy in business retail

The omnichannel strategy used by retailers is based on using all available channels to create an innovative and seamless customer experience. In the modern era, retailers include Information Systems (IS), which drive the customer experience to a better shopping experience (Rafi, 2020).

Authors Belu & Marinoiu (2014) indicated that retailers had an essential distribution function such as buying, selling, transporting, storing, conditioning, presenting, communicating, and financing in the past. In contrast, the modern era includes retailer branding, barcodes, electronic data interchange, automated supply, and the development of new forms of marketing. In their study. The same authors confirmed that the form of distribution has evolved from a classic shop formula to omnichannel distribution. The relationship between consumers and retailers has evolved to maintain a consumer-retailer relationship. During the pandemic, customers have looked for a retailer that offers them added value to purchase the best conditions concerning the best experience.

In the 1990s, with the internet revolution, retailers started to create online sales channels to achieve electronic sales through distance selling techniques, teleshopping, and e-commerce (Belu & Marinoiu, 2014). The rapid evolution of the internet prompted one of the most critical changes for retailers to participate in e-commerce. As a result, a new online sales channel appears that complements the traditional method. According to Belu & Marinoiu (2014), the new distribution of retail strategies is represented in the following figure 4.

Figure 4. Omnichannel Retailing strategy. Source Retrieved from Belu & Marinoiu, 2014.

The choice of this retail omnichannel model is in sequence with the research intentions of the author of this thesis. According to the study of the authors Belu & Marinoiu (2014), this model of an omnichannel strategy is recommended for the future retail business strategies. Therefore, this figure consists of five sales channels: shops, online (web), mobile, social networks, and telephone. These interface channels are related to the primary services of the multichannel operation: store management, order management, finance management, payment service, customer relationship management (CRM), and enterprise resource planning (ERP).

Having analyzed the retailers' omnichannel strategies, we proceed to find the solutions to answer the research questions in the conclusions section at the end of this master thesis. For this purpose, the following two sections includes the theoretical part with the most notable attributes to be studied and evaluated according to the questions developed towards the interviewees.

2.3 Omnichannel and its influence on the transformation of the retail fundamentals during Covid19.

According to different studies (Gallino and Moreno, 2019., Mirsch et al., 2016., Allagiannis et al., 2021), an omnichannel transformation has always existed, and its change has been due to the adaptation of the omnichannel operation to the socio-economic context. For instance, like the actual Covid19 Health crisis.

The authors Gallino and Moreno (2019) indicated that two influence transformations in retails were found in their study developed to different omnichannel managers:

1. Think that everything has changed and that to be successful, you have to go back to the beginning of the plan, assuming that what is already in place is no longer relevant.

2. Believe that there is nothing new after a change.

The former authors asserts that managers should know how to balance these two positions by understanding the things that have not changed and then building what is needed to succeed in the new environment.

These arguments are relevant to this study and are linked to managers' ability to apply changes in their omnichannel strategies in times of change due to external factors. Such as changes in omnichannel due to the influence of Covid19 on retail businesses. Moreover, the author of this master thesis is committed to observing retailers' fundamentals in the new omnichannel context (Gallino and Moreno, 2019) and comparing the attributes with the responses of omnichannel managers in Sweden to solve the Research Question 1 (RQ1), which will be analyzed in the "analysis section" of this thesis. This route makes it possible to analyze the evolution of the transformation through these fundamentals and see which aspects have improved in Swedish retail omnichannel.

The fundamentals for a successful omnichannel transformation are depicted in the following table 2.

Fundamentals for achieving omnichannel transformation		
	Gallino & Moreno (2019) concept	*Other authors concepts*
1. Forecasting	It addresses the incorporation of data and tools for a forecasting operations function, which is considered a cornerstone for managing different operational channels.	Forecasting should be included in the planning process since it generates future scenarios (of a product, market, etc.) (Sajtos, 2011). Investors use sales forecasting to assist them decide whether or not to invest in new businesses (Armstrong, 1999).
2. Inventory Management	Due to the multiple returns faced by retailers due to the increase in online sales, retailers were forced to become experts in reverse logistics. To prevent cracks	Inventory management is the process of monitoring and controlling stock levels and ensuring adequate replenishment to meet customer demand.

	between channels, retailers allow their customers to return products purchased online to the physical shop. This operation concludes with exclusive customer service.	Determining the right inventory level is crucial, as inventory ties up money and affects performance. Having too much inventory reduces working capital and affects the liquidity of the company (Priniotakis & Argyropoulos, 2018). Inventory management is a critical function that determines the supply chain's health as well as the impact on the balance sheet's financial health (Samanta, 2015).
3. Assortment Planning	Some factors influence assortment decisions, which are related to inventory (multi-channel management, customer expectations, and high competition). Assortment decisions must have a systematic approach. Based on the data available to the company, managers must be more agile in making reliable and effective decisions. To create a competitive advantage, retailers must tailor the assortment	Several variables in the shop level operation such as shop management, sales assistants, merchandise promotion, to name a few, could affect the desired outcome of the assortment planning. (Bahng et al. 2018). The goal of assortment planning is to create an assortment that maximizes sales or gross margin based on a variety of constraints, such as a limited budget for product purchases, limited shelf space for product display,

	presented to customers across all retail channels.	and a variety of other constraints, such as the desire to have at least two suppliers for each type of product (Kök et al. 2006).
4. Managing Employees	Employees are a critical part of retail operations. Retailers seeking success in omnichannel operations must understand the employee as a crucial asset and not an expense.	Employee management is an important job in a business, both traditionally and strategically. A company's objectives and organizational strategy must be known before it can plan its demands. Managers must focus on how to deal skillfully with employees if they want to boost productivity, cut expenses, and improve their company's competitive advantage (Manna, 2008).

Table 2. Fundamentals for achieving omnichannel transformation.

Source retrieved from Gallino & Moreno, 2019.

2.4 E-commerce and the technology acceptance in the omnichannel infrastructure.

This section highlights the use of channels that influence the growth of e-commerce. These channels generate digital sales on websites, social media, and mobile apps. These three channels are currently driving sales growth for retailers and gaining a larger audience share due to various reasons such as having more stock available than in the physical shop, watching the stock availability on smart phones, health security against possible contagions, to name a few. Furthermore, the author Belu (2014), confirms that the current distribution channels of the web, mobile, and social media have caused a shift in the retail value chain. Figure 5

(Statista.com) below provides information on the impact of e-commerce sales in Sweden before and after the pandemic. The Statista.com study confirms that there was a 93% increase in e-commerce sales during the pandemic compared to pre-pandemic (7%).
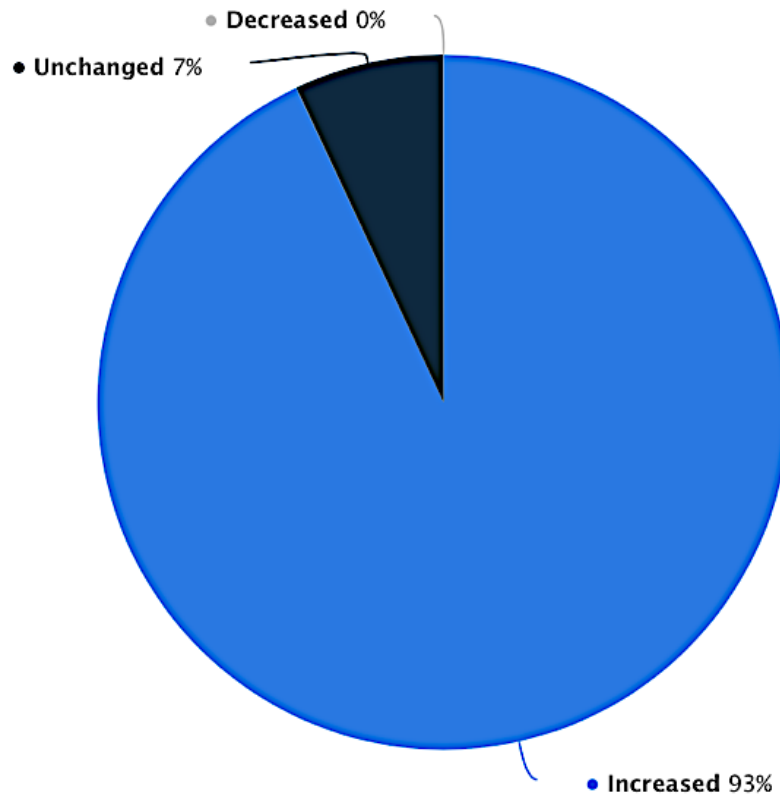
Figure 5. Covid19's impact on e-commerce in Sweden by 2021.
Source retrieved from Statista.com

According to the Apptus.com study, e-commerce grow by 40% in 2020 compared to 2019. Their survey study found that 88% of Swedes confirmed that they spent more time at home and that to have a cozy atmosphere at home, they preferred to shop online and have the product delivered to their home. Graphic 3, shows that the most popular industries for people in Sweden in 2021 were furniture and home decor (43%), followed by Do-It-Yourself items (41%), sports and leisure (38%), books (26%), and fashion (16%).
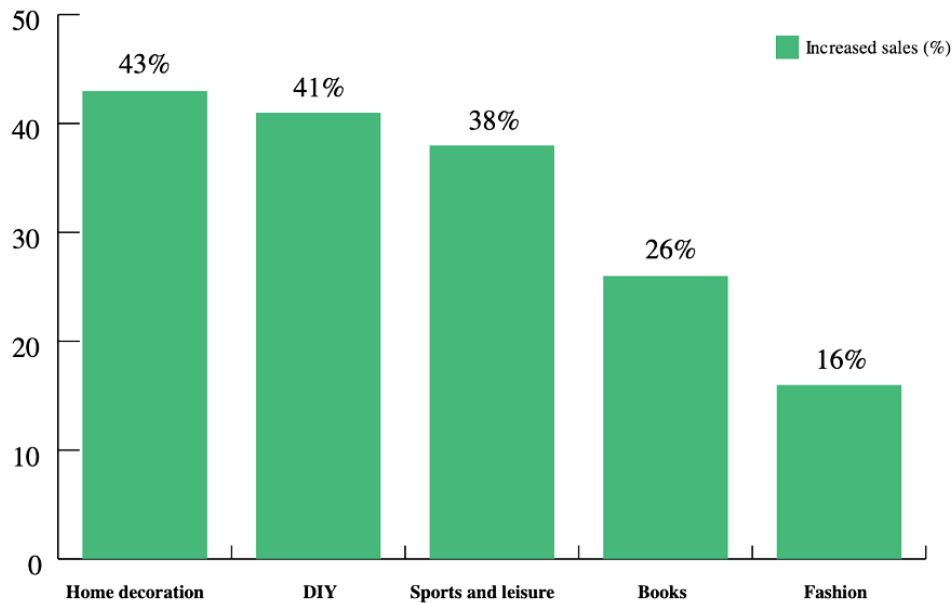
Graphic 3. Percentage of retailers' online sales in Sweden in 2021.
Source retrieved from apptus.com

In the article developed by Wheelson (Nordicstartupnews.com), there are five main reasons why Sweden is a leader in Europe in the E-commerce industry:

1. **The balance Between Online & Offline Shopping trends:** Despite technological advancements such as cellphones, simple internet access, online shopping, and social media, physical shopping continues to be popular and, in fact, complements the expanding online buying trend. Sweden has managed to strike a nice balance between the two.

2. **Convenience:** Because of its logistical convenience, Sweden has become a hotspot for the ecommerce software business due to its central location in Northern Europe.

3. **Globalization & Competition:** Because the ecommerce business has so much potential, the competitiveness level has been enhanced accordingly. Anyone who enters the market will be met with opposition by the market's current pioneers, such as Sweden. This country has long been technologically and digitally savvy, providing its eCommerce industry an advantage.

4. **Pandemic & Work From Home Culture**: Covid19 created a lot of instability in everyone's life and affected many people's lifestyles. This is not the case, however, for those who live in Sweden. Despite the fact that people in Sweden experienced difficult circumstances as well, the Swedish economy was stabilized thanks to the country's rising culture of online shopping.

5. **Launch of Amazon.se**: If we were to rate the various ecommerce tools available to the general public in Sweden, Amazon.se would surely be towards the top. According to Alex Ootes, Vice President of European Expansion for Europe, Amazon.se has enabled the company to offer Swedish consumers over 150 million products, including goods and services from local Swedish businesses.

The Swedish market and its particular situation of partial restrictions allowed its customers to decide to make a purchase both physically and online. At the beginning of the pandemic, many Swedes went into voluntary seclusion to avoid being infected and going to physical shops. Although according to Apptus.com, no previous situation has caused such a strong growth of e-commerce in Sweden, e-commerce retailers went through an interesting and learning period during the pandemic. The website's study found that retailers such as Clas Ohlson improved their online sales optimization with improvement tools such as e-sales to give the customer a quick and convenient visit and also to be able to manage around 15.000 products from their stock. In another case, according to Contactpigeon.com, Ikea furnished company during the pandemic adopted different strategies. One of the most prominent was the integration of the physical shop and e-commerce, indicating that the company was careful to expand into the digital world. In addition, the above study noted that IKEA was successful in implementing such a strategy, albeit slowly. The operation of the strategy saw it expanding its product range online and then proceeding with the creation of highly functional mobile apps and digital catalogs.

Retailers in times of Covid sought strategies to increase their "order value" and offer unique consumer experiences. Moreover, explaining the developments mentioned above makes it more objectively and graphically evident why the level of e-commerce sales has evolved during the pandemic. Omnichannel strategies were enhanced due to digital integration in retail operations. Therefore, in the following studies by Dragan (n.a.), Cakir et al. (2021), and Lee

(2014), the following themes are factors and also explain the evidence of e-commerce development in retailers' omnichannel. These themes influence web channels, social media, and smartphones on omnichannel operations. In addition, Lee (2014) emphasizes the importance of the new role that physical shops must play in terms of technological development in their operations.

Dragan (n.a.) argued that when considering implementing technology in omnichannel strategies, IT representatives of companies have to create a matrix of solutions that must be present, implemented, or updated in the company. Furthermore, in his study, he proposes the following matrix, Figure 6, to be considered to enable optimal technological development for omnichannel retail.
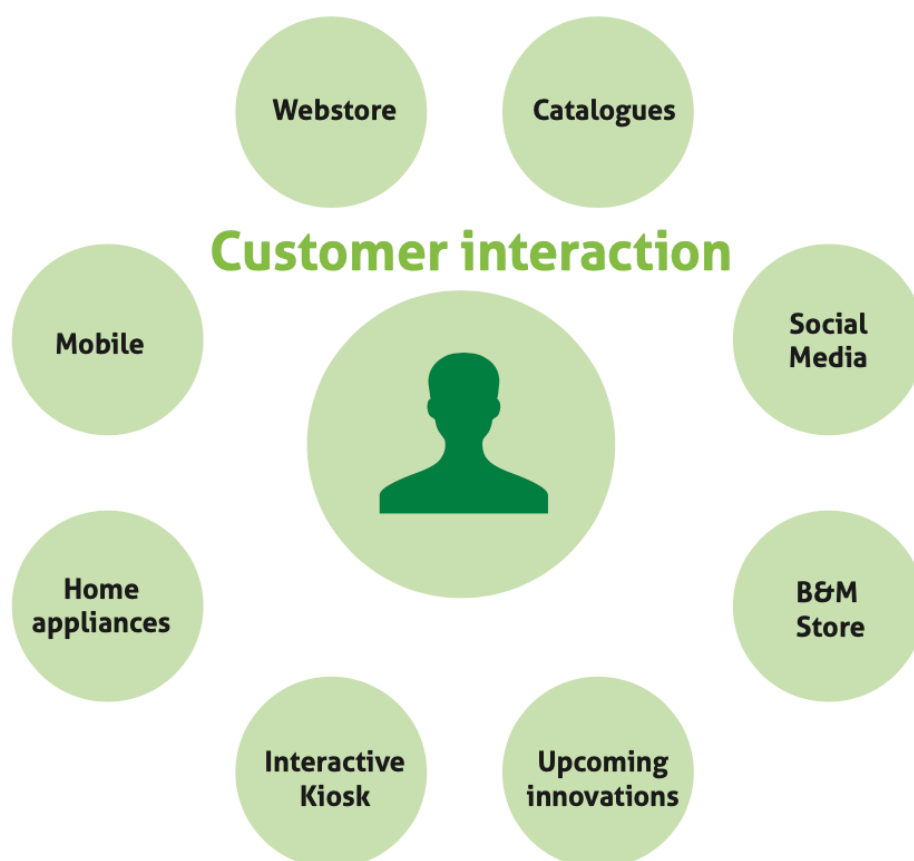

Figure 6: Matrix of solutions for optimal omnichannel retail development.
Source retrieved from Dragan (n.a.)

Cakir et al. (2021) indicated in their study that the rapid growth of technology such as artificial intelligence (AI), phone technology, augmented reality, virtual reality, and the internet of things (IoT) is changing the interaction between retailers and consumers. Otherwise, the adoption of technologies must meet the short-term needs during the Covid19 crisis and recognize and address the long-term implications in the course of a sustained digitization strategy (Cakir et al., 2021).

According to the pandemic situation in Sweden with partial restrictions, retailers in this territory struggled with selecting and implementing technologies to add more value through the integration of channels, thus achieving a higher level of sales. However, because the capabilities to drive the integration are continually growing, implementing technology for channel integration is a substantial task (Yan et al., 2010). Furthermore, implementing technologies in the different cases mentioned above discusses the evidence that retailers have focused on developing integration between channels and technology to increase their sales, and this enrich and boost the online sales more than ever.

As the author of this thesis is looking for evidence to increase online sales of retailers in Sweden, the study by Iftikhar et al. (2020) focuses on similar research. For customer growth and thus sales growth, they have seen the need to study "channel integration activities." Therefore, to answer the Second Research Question (RQ2). With respect to the time constraint, the four most crucial channel integration activities from the study by Iftikhar et al. (2020), which most closely match the influence of value creation on in-store, online, smartphones and website channels, have been collected.

Channel Integration Activity	Enabling Technology	Examples of implementation
1. Integrated Order Fulfilment.	IoT (RFID), AI.	Reserve and Pay, Click and Collect, Amazon Dash Button, Amazon Key Delivery, Amazon Anticipatory Shipping

2. Integrated Transactions.	Mobile technologies, Biometric Technologies.	Instagram Shopping, Amazon Go, Uniqul Payment, Alibaba 'Pay with Selfie.'
3. Integrated Product and Price Information.	Mobile Technologies, Augmented Reality.	H&M Scan and Buy, Bauble Bar Interactive Display, Loreal Makeup Genius, Nike's product customization.
4. Integrated Reverse Logistics	IoT (RFID).	Video based emotion Analytics.

Table 3: A look at the technology and services available for channel integration. Source retrieved from Iftikhar et. al. (2020).

To consider channel integration activities as crucial for this study, the authors Iftikhar et al. (2020) conducted interviews with omnichannel practitioners. As a result, they collected essential channel integration activities concerning enabling technology in omnichannel operations. In the author's paper, it would take place to make use of this channel integration activity and discover which technologies enabled retailers in Sweden to boost their sales growth, i.e., to find the value of increased sales. In this way, this section of this master thesis can help omnichannel experts to discover the relevant technology to consider when deciding which technology is most suitable for their business.

The meanings of the attributes of channel integration activities along with technology enablement, according to Iftikhar et al. (2020), are described below:

1. **Integrated Order Fulfilment:** Traceability and the ability to change inventory, orders, and delivery points during all stages of order fulfillment across all channels are necessary for a fully integrated omnichannel system. In an integrated environment, the retailer must be able to see inventory across all channels know where products are available and how quickly they can get them to customers. In addition, with integrated order fulfillment, customers should be able to reserve products in-store using the

mobile, web, or social media (Reserve and Collect) and pick up products purchased via mobile, web, or social media in the physical shop (Click and Collect).

- **IoT (RFID):** The internet of things (IoT) is a complex network of devices and things that are connected to the internet. Radio Frequency Identification (RFID), beacons, camera networks, and other wireless sensor networks are all part of the IoT concept in retail.

- **AI:** AI is a term that refers to machine learning, natural language processing, drones, and other AI-based technologies that augment human intelligence.

2. **Integrated Transactions:** Integrated transactions are defined as providing secure access to complete a transaction through all accessible channels. Regardless of how, where, and on which channel the transaction takes place, the relevant data must be able to be securely retrieved by other parts of the integrated transaction system. With integrated transactions, customers should be able to buy products directly from all available channels, e.g., the retailer's social media, and buy products directly from an advertisement on any channel, e.g., a TV or news ad, digital signage, or a catalog. In addition, customers should be able to pay without going via a physical counter by using other in-store payment channels, such as Amazon Go or mobile and tablet payment, enhancing the retailer's marketing efforts.

- **Mobile technologies:** Mobile technologies include mobile apps, scan and go, QR codes, location-based apps, and other smartphone-related technologies.

- **Biometric Technologies:** Biometric technologies are computer-assisted techniques of confirming or recognizing a person's identity based on physiological or behavioral characteristics.

3. **Integrated Product and Price Information:** The integration of price and product information involves synchronizing product descriptions, stock status, and prices. It makes changes to them (e.g., discounts or availability) instantly visible to consumers and other members of the omnichannel system. This integration should also detect any

errors, mismatches, or missing product data anywhere in the omnichannel strategy and initiate corrective actions as necessary. E.g., the direct integration of Shopify and Google makes it easier for shoppers to discover the products available in the shop with Google Smart Shopping campaigns. Another example of the relationship between online and offline is Sephora's mobile app. Digitized shops, such as Nike Town, offer i-Kiosks to search for information digitally. Retailers should also provide social media-based details to customers through different digital channels.

- **Mobile technologies:** Mobile technologies include mobile apps, scan and go, QR codes, location-based apps, and other smartphone-related technologies.

- **Augmented Reality:** Augmented reality blends computer-generated items into the actual world, allowing for real-time interactions.

4. **Integrated Reverse Logistics:** Integrated Reverse Logistics: Integrated reverse logistics involves providing all channels for returns to customers and visibility of returns across all channels. Integrated reverse logistics links the different stages of reverse logistics and the various channels involved. Furthermore, information about the point(s) of return, the point(s) of stock holding and the reverse flow of products must be retrievable, traceable and modifiable via RFID, as in the case of M&S. Retailers can easily offer services such as in-store online return using RFID tagged products. Therefore, retailers can allow customers to buy in-store and return via other channels, such as using the website and collecting the return from their homes.

- **IoT (RFID):** The internet of things (IoT) is a complex network of devices and things that are connected to the internet. Radio Frequency Identification (RFID), beacons, camera networks, and other wireless sensor networks are all part of the IoT concept in retail.

2.5 Conceptual framework.

Figure 7 represents the conceptual framework of this research. In this way, it is possible to understand the work's structure, connection, and interaction to solve the research questions.

Influence of COVID-19 on E-commerce sales. The omnichannel strategies case of the retail businesses in Sweden.

Omnichannel Retailing strategy (Belu & Marinoiu, 2014)

STORES
* Retail management
* EPOS

ONLINE
* Ecommerce
* Analytics Optimisation

Warhouse Management
Order management
Finance management
Payment service
CRM
ERP

MOBILE
* Mobile Web
* Apps
* Geo

TELEPHONE
* Call center
* Telemarketing

SOCIAL
* Facebook, Twitter
Communities

Channels interfaces   Core services

Omnichannel and its influence on the transformation of the retail fundamentals during Covid19 (Gallino & Moreno, 2019)

- Forecasting
- Inventory Management
- Assortment Planning
- Managing Employees

E-commerce and the technology acceptance in the omnichannel infrastructure (Iftikhar et al., 2020)

- Integrated Order Fulfilment
- Integrated Transactions
- Integrated Product and Price Information
- Integrate Reverse Logistics

RQ1

(Developing 4 questions)

RQ2

(Developing 4 questions)

8 questions

Interview to participants through Video-Calls

Data Collection

Method solving through
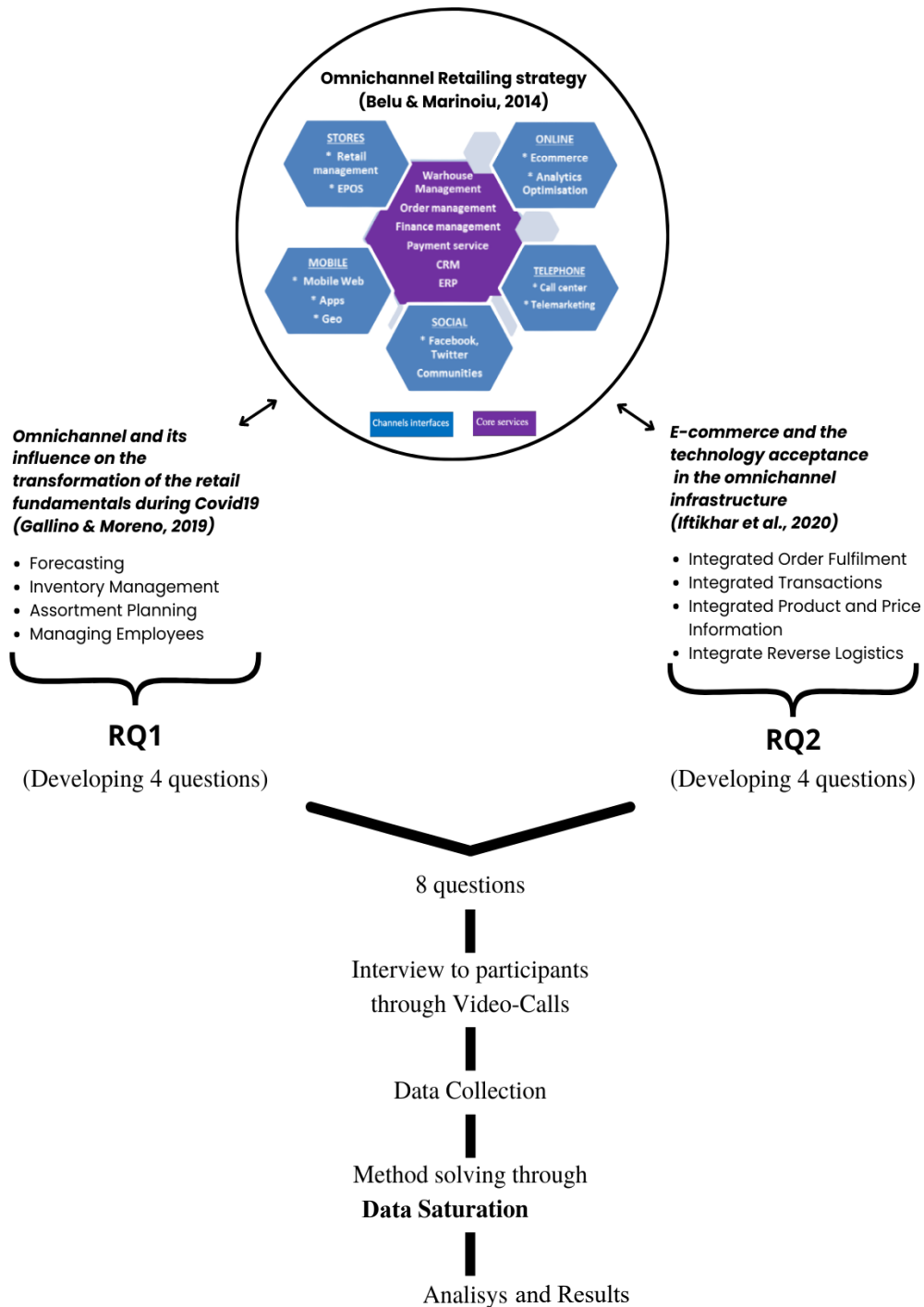**Data Saturation**

Analisys and Results

Figure 7. Conceptual framework of the master thesis.

3. Methodology

This chapter explains the thesis methodology, why the method was chosen, and how it relates to the thesis. In addition, it will explain how data will be collected to answer the research questions set out in the first chapter of this article.

3.1 Purpose of the research

According to Strydom (2013) a research study usually begins with an original concept or topic that is more or less defined. This step was developed in the first chapter of this article and the first stage of this section is described below to identify the type of study to be conducted. Thus, there are three types of research: exploratory, explanatory, and descriptive (Strydom, 2013).

Regarding the topic of the study, the Swedish society is currently undergoing an accelerated transformation in consumer habits during the Covid19 pandemic, which is having an influence on retailers' operations. Therefore, concerning the change in retailers' operations, this study attempts to seek and analyze the consequences of these changes where retailers experienced an accelerated increase in purchases in their sales channels, especially online.

To investigate the consequences of this economic phenomenon, the best way to analyze and interpret data is to conduct an exploratory study. According to Jupp (2006), exploratory research is a methodological technique that focuses on discovery and theory generation or construction. All study, in its purest form, is *exploratory*. Additionally, the social sciences are bound up with the idea of exploration and the researcher as an explorer. In this sense, exploration might be understood as approaching and carrying out the social inquiry: a state of mind, a unique personal orientation (Stebbins, 2001).

3.2 Research design

According to Huizenga et al. (2021), there are two types of research approaches: quantitative and qualitative. The author Stake (2010) defined two studies as, on the one hand, the quantitative study refers to the fact that the thinking of the study depends mainly on attributes, measurements, and linear statistical analysis. But each of the divisions of science also has a qualitative side, in which personal experience, intuition, and skepticism work in alliance with each other to help refine theories and experiments. On the other hand, the qualitative study

relies primarily on human perception and understanding. Furthermore, the same author pointed out that when examining the practices of teaching, nursing, and social work, the characteristics of qualitative research fit well.

This study analyzes how the professionals specializing in omnichannel retail in Sweden have experienced change during Covid19. According to the study by Stake (2010), our research work falls into social work, where a group of people develops and executes an expected outcome to achieve their goals. Based on this definition and the research questions of this thesis, *qualitative research* is the appropriate approach for this study. If researchers choose to collect experiential data rather than measurements, they call their research "qualitative," but they can still emphasize particular or general (Stake., 2010).

Stake (2010) indicated that observation, interview, and item examination are the most common qualitative research methods. In this thesis, *in-depth interviews* are the most appropriate to carry out the study. As the Covid19 phenomenon is still present in our everyday lives (2022), this master is conducted via online. The development of the interviews are carried out via *video conference* since the ease of connection and communication will allow the interviewee to accept the meeting invitation and proceed with the interview. As video conferencing has multifunctional and adjustable meeting settings, the right not to use a video camera will be respected if the interviewee does not consider it pertinent. To give a comfortable setting for the participant may increase willingness to talk openly and honestly (Nehls et al., 2015). For the interviews of this thesis, oral communication for data collection is most important.

According to Stake (2010), interviews have the following main purposes: First, elicit unique insights or interpretations held by the individual being interviewed. Second, to obtain a numerical aggregation of data from a large number of people. Third, to learn about "something" that the researchers could not see for themselves.

Moreover, based on the degree of structure, interviews are divided into structured, semi-structured, and unstructured interviews (Fontana, A., & Frey, J., 2005). How interviews are intended to collect information in this thesis is in a more open-ended manner and without a fixed range of responses to each question. These characteristics fit better with *semi-structured interviews*.

One of the interview objectives is interview a person alone rather than in a group. According to Adams (2018), conducting the study conversationally with one respondent at a time, a combination of closed-ended and open-ended questions is best employed, often accompanied by follow-up questions about why or how. In addition, the same author states that the dialogue can digress from the agenda item - i.e., not strictly adhere to fixed questions like a standardized survey - and can delve into entirely unforeseen issues. One hour is considered a reasonable maximum length for semi-structured interviews to minimize interviewer and respondent fatigue.

3.3 Research Methodology

According to the exploratory research design of this thesis, data collection is essential to answer study questions and objectives. Hox & Boeije (2005), within a qualitative research design the data collection strategically typically involves:

- Collecting a large amount of data on a relatively small, purposive sample
- Using techniques such as in-depth interviews
- Participant observation
- Focus group

Primary data is gathered for the specific study subject at hand, using procedures most suited to the problem. Thus, the _primary data sample_ is collected by interviewing retail company professionals with omnichannel knowledge, such as omnichannel manager, chief operating officer (COO), chief information officer (CIO), e-commerce manager, to name a few. It is essential to mention that the sample collected is within the region of Sweden and that the retailers are of Swedish and international nationality. Additionally, this study is mapped in Stockholm, the largest city in Sweden and where most retailers are located.

In addition, the retailers interviewed have both physical and online points of sale (web, email, social media, to name a few). Therefore, those who only have a physical or online shop are excluded from this study. However, retailers that are in the process of implementing omnichannel are also valid for this study.

Since the in-depth interviews in the qualitative study of this thesis do not have an exact number of interviewees, Table 4 lists the retailers that will be attempted to be interviewed. It is essential to mention that after achieving saturation in the study, the number and the companies that were interviewed will be indicated.

Retailers located in Sweden		
Name of Company	Size	Number of Employees worldwide in 2021
Sportswear		
Stadium	Large	82,000
Decathlon	Large	55,000
Nike	Large	73,000
Adidas	Large	61,401
JD	Large	(+) 310,000
Fashion		
H&M	Large	107,375
Inditex	Large	165,042
Mango	Large	(+) 15,000
Grocery		
ICA Gruppen AB	Large	23,196
Axfood AB	Large	12,128
Coop Sverige AB	Large	91,000
Furniture, home accesories, and electrodomestics		
Ikea	Large	225,000
Clash Ohlson	Large	3,013
Mediamarkt	Large	52,000
Liquor store		
Systembolaget	Liquor store	3,844
Pharmacy		
Apoteket AB	Pharmacy	3,047

Table 4: Large size retailers located in Sweden. Size of company is by 2021 in a worldwide scope.

Note* In case some of these participants do not want to participate in the interview the next retailers are in queue: Bilma, El Giganten, Överskottsbolaget, Ellos, Siba, Brothers, Footlocker, Dressman, Naturkompaniet, Victoria´s Secret, Lindex, Life, Lego, Lekia, and Siba.

Based on secondary data, Hox & Boeije (2005) state that researchers are presented with three characteristic problems: First, researchers must identify data sources that may be relevant to their research subject. Second, they must be able to access the necessary information. Third, it's critical to assess how well the data match the current research's quality needs and the methodological criteria of good scientific practice.

The *secondary data* for this thesis are those found on the internet. These are scientific articles, books, and websites with relevant information collected and compiled beforehand.

3.4 Sampling

Shaheen (2019) indicates that one question that qualitative researchers must answer is this: How do you choose the samples for the study? The sample doesn't need to be random, great, or structured. It depends on the researcher's perception of what is significant to their research. Qualitative research is effective for researchers who can operate well in ambiguous situations. There are no hard and fast rules in qualitative research when it comes to sample size. It relies on the research's goal, what is at stake, what is beneficial, what is credible, and what research line can be completed within the period and with the resources available. A given set of resources and time can be used in various ways. For example, a high sample size can be utilized to investigate behavioral differences, whereas a smaller sample size can be used for in-depth analysis (Shaheen et al., 2019).

Shaheen et al. (2019) argues that the inductive-deductive process, which is a feature of the grounded theory technique, can be used to explain the data gathering procedure for theoretical sampling. The inductive process relies on the theory emerging from the data, and the deductive process involves the purposeful selection of samples to test, verify, and develop the theory. (Becker, 1993). This thesis makes use of the *deductive research method* as it starts from theories based on general studies on omnichannel. In this way, it will be possible to analyze how the channels of retailers in Sweden are integrated.

According to the two existing probabilistic methods, which are probability sampling and non-probabilistic sampling, the method that fits best in this thesis is the *non-probabilistic sampling* method, in which, according to Gabor (2007), non-probabilistic sampling is less strict and easier to implement because it does not consider representativeness as a desirable goal for the sample description. These sampling procedures usually leave it up to the researcher to choose

which of the population components to explore. As things stand, schemes in this category are most commonly utilized in exploratory research, examination, observational research, and qualitative research. This study is based on the researcher's qualitative criteria and will decide on the basis of which criteria the sample is chosen.

Within non-probability sampling, there are different methods, and according to the existing methods in the work of Shaheen et al. (2019) the ones chosen for this study are those that integrate "purposive selection", since the author states that such selection is an inclusive part of the deductive process of grounded theory. Purposeful sampling is based on the idea that data-rich samples should be chosen in order to provide an in-depth view of the phenomenon (Shaheen et al., 2016). Furthermore, the two chosen methods are:

- **Purposeful Random Sampling:** The credibility of random and systematic samples is high. This is because researchers use a small random sample for credibility, not representativeness. A small purposive random sample clears up any doubts about the reasons for selecting a case but does not allow statistical generalizations to be made. (Shaheen et al., 2016)
- **Convenience Sampling:** Convenience sampling refers to collecting data for convenience: to do it quickly and conveniently. Evaluators use this sampling technique because collecting the sample in this way is easy and inexpensive. Although comfort and cost are of great importance, they should not be the first factor to consider. Instead, the sample's usefulness should be viewed as a primary factor. (Shaheen et al., 2016)

3.5 Data saturation

Two assumptions, data saturation, and data sufficiency (Shaheen, 2019) are defined to define the validity of the sample results through the semi-structured in-depth interviews in this qualitative study.

In this study, to measure the validity, we used the method of data saturation since, for Shaheen (2019), open-ended, leading, and probing questions are used in qualitative research to generate rich information and data. Moreover, Benjamin et al. (2018) indicates that the saturation level should be operationalized to be consistent with the research questions and the theoretical

perspective and analytic methodology used. Furthermore, its reach should be limited to avoid saturation losing its coherence and effectiveness if its conceptualization and applications are too broad. In addition, sampling techniques in qualitative research are purposive in nature, so data saturation is very high, as the researcher selects information-rich cases (Patton, 2002).

Fusch et. al. (2015), indicates that interviews are one method by which one's study results reach data saturation. In our study, semi-structured interviews collect data from interviewees through a set of open questions. To saturate the data, i.e., to collect sufficient information to understand the area of omnichannel transformation and digital acceptance, this type of interview will attempt to have a sufficiently acceptable sample of participants. Furthermore, the number of participants may not always correspond to the amount of data collected. When conducting semi-structured interviews, we gain a more limited and restricted account of each participant's experience than when using open-ended interviews. To obtain saturation, a larger number of interviews is required. (Morse, 2015)

3.6 Ethical considerations

To conduct interviews and collect as accurate information as possible, the interviewees retain the right not to reveal their name and the name of the company they work for. In this case, in the final paper, the company would be referred to by its business activity—for instance, Respondent X, Company A (Fashion industry). In addition, since the interviews is conducted in video call-in meeting programs, the interviewees will keep the right to use the camera to be recorded.

4. Data Analysis

This section will present the data collected to solve research questions 1 and 2. The data consists of interview material from three interviews. The first research question contains four questions to deal with how retailers have experienced organizational transformation in their omnichannel. The second research question contains the last four questions of this study to deal with how retailers have progressed in adding technology to their business to increase their physical store and specially their online sales.

4.1 Sample Characteristics

A total of 43 retail companies were identified by the author of this thesis, making use of internet search and sending invitations through Email, LinkedIn, and phone calls. Unfortunately, of the 43 retailer companies, 40 could not participate in the interview (32 declined, 8 did not respond). Time constraints (1 month of data collection), the sales period, and the summer vacations were the critical barriers to not reaching the expected number of interviews. Thus, this section interprets the results in the context of a small sample. However, three large retail stores with a high reputation in the Swedish market responded to the participation invitation to be interviewed. The responses in some of the questions show data saturation, although, in other answers, data saturation is not reached due to the drawbacks mentioned above. It is worth noting that if at least 7 more participants had participated in the interview, there would have been a better approximation of reaching data saturation. Two of the participants were male, and only one female participated in the interview. The age range of the participants was between 35 and 49 years old. The responsibilities of the participants were Commercial Director, Quality and Sustainability Manager, and Head E-commerce for the Nordic Countries. One of the participants refused to permit to disclose his name, and for the company he works for, due to high competition in the market, the other two participants agreed to disclose all interview information. Table 5 below details the participants' data.

Name	Position	Company	Industry
Participant X (R1)	Commercial Director	Company Y	Sports
Sham Khalaf (R2)	Head E-commerce for the Nordic Countries	Inditex – Zara Store AB	Fashion
Jesper Bondesson (R3)	Quality & Sustainability Manager	Rusta AB	Furniture & Home Decoration

Table 5: Participants of the semi-structured interviews through video call.

4.2 Transformation of the retailers to omnichannel strategies.

4.2.1 Forecasting

The crisis of the pandemic affected retailer businesses' operations in different ways. Depending on the industry to which it belongs, R1 stated that the sports industry was hit hard since the pandemic began.

> "It was impossible to respond at 100%. We didn't expect the demand of our customers. Another problem we had was the stock. Usually, Company X turnover is done by internal brands, and the problem was not the production we have with the brands; the main factor was the factors were closed during the Covid19. Therefore, Company X stopped production; thus, we have a lack of products that was terrible".

However, R2 and R3 belong to the Fashion, and Furniture&Home Decor sectors, respectively, were able to cope with the forecasting strategies. The Fashion sector for Zara stores faced the situation with the continuity of its sales operations both in physical stores and online. In the first few months of the pandemic, its sales dropped from physical stores, and its online sales grew exponentially. R2 illustrated the following:

> "Yes, as we follow up and synchronize closely both online and in-store, we are aware that we are offering the best assortment based on the customer's needs. For example, during the pandemic, we noticed a rise in online sales in our business and a decrease in off-stores".

R3 proposed a different strategy according to the circumstances of the moment where it focused on selling products that customers seek to avoid being affected by the virus and home decoration and repair products for those who accepted voluntary confinement. In this way, R3 stated that:

> "I would say yes because we had such a wide assortment, and if we look at the start of the pandemic, we had in our assortment the kind of products the customers wanted at that time. So thus, our assortment was helping us through the pandemic and gave us a brief overlook. We had the consumables range, with products like

toilet paper, shampoo, alcohol gel, hand sanitizer, and more, which was very interesting for the customers at the beginning of the pandemic. Furthermore, we know that people stay at home, so we provide products like paints, wallpaper, and decorating that renew the house, and we also have the "home deco," where people can buy renewed things in a new way."

Recommended strategies

All three participants agree on using a data adjustment operation after forecasting. It is recognized that updating information across channels is crucial to keep consumers correctly informed on all sales channels. R2 commented that it is usually very complicated to maintain updates since items in the fashion industry appear very quickly, and responsiveness concerning updates usually takes time. In the case of R3, he noted that the data adjustment focused more on shipping and supply chain areas. The object of importance to these areas was ensuring they could guarantee consumer demand.

4.2.2 Inventory Management

One of the respondents found meeting the demands of customer orders across the business channels difficult. The R1 stated that its stock was insufficient. Therefore, it was challenging to meet the demand across the sales channels. However, the search for strategies to solve the stock problem was to turn to small market players. Thus, R1 stated that:

> "I explain this by bringing you an example about our padel sell operation. A padel website contacted me to try to sell the stock from 2021 as I said we didn't have enough stock to respond to the high demand in padel, so at the same time, we had in the Swedish market a bomb in padel, many new actors in the market bought a lot many shoes, rackets, etc. So, the bomb stops in 2022, and we understand that the market is shared with many new small actors that came to the market apart from the traditional established long ago. So, the need for small actors to sell their overstock from 2021 was an opportunity for us to buy the insufficient stock that we needed."

R2 and R3 stated that they did meet the demand due to the efficiency of response of product replenishment strategies. In the case of R2 noted that

"Yes, we do. We know what we need to have to be able to sell based on our historical data. We ensure that we are following all our strategies about what we sell every season and being on top of fashionable items sold, which is tricky to reach. The main center is caring in the company to provide the best according to the customers' needs. We do not want to overstock at the end of the day and try to be as accurate as possible while forecasting our operations."

In the case of R3, the strategy was different. Its primary approach was to maintain permanent contact with its suppliers to create loyalty value and thus ensure its expected demand. R3 then explained its strategy using an example:

"For example, if we look at last Christmas, a lot of retailers had problems with empty shelves because they did not have Christmas decorations and communication with suppliers to meet the need of consumers demands. Thus, part of our success was that we rented our own meet of suppliers from Asia and also where other retailers globally cancel a lot of orders, so we kept our promises with suppliers and the purchases we had as orders."

Recommended strategies

All respondents have implemented the strategies of returning online items to the physical shop to bring them the advantage of covering stocks in the physical shops. At the same time, they think it is an excellent service to differentiate from their competitors. Regarding the automated inventory receipt, the three respondents confirmed that the retailers use them. The value that adds to the operation of retailers is that it provides successful control and organization. Therefore, R3 concludes that the functions of this system are beneficial.

4.2.3 Assortment planning

This attribute generated three different strategies from the interviewees. Each retail business has different ways of executing the assortment planning strategy. For R1, the focus is on benchmarking the assortment planning with the previous year's. In addition, they strive to stay in contact with the customer through contact strategies such as online surveys. This symbiosis of work generates favorable results that enable sales growth in all its channels.

On the other hand, adapting products to the Swedish culture stands out so that its sales connection is closer and more appealing to its customers. Moreover, as the adaptation to purchasing their products with their sales operators, R1 expressed the following:

> "We know our collection comes from the biggest countries and make some adjustments for the Swedish market because it is not the same culture as other countries. For example, our share of turnover in other cities is enormous compared with other countries in our retail store. So, of the reasons that our retail assortment planning is efficient is due to adaptation to the country's regulation. So we need to adapt our assortment planning comparing different countries."

For the fashion company Inditex-Zara, R2 ensures that their assortment planning is based on the online and physical shop Product Managers' decisions from the merchandise sales results. In this way, they ensure that they can cover all those products that provide consumer value to their customers and what they need. However, it also points out that assortment planning operations require a manual procedure. Still, they are confident that they will have a more automated function that will allow them to do a better job in the future.

R3 stated that their number one strategy is to demonstrate to consumers that they are the best value for money and that what they buy has a sustainability value. Therefore, R3 expressed the following:

> "The company's strategy is to be a leading and trusted low-price retailer in Europe, which means we have to offer a low price. Hence, we know that regardless of Covid19 as an example. Regardless of the situation in the world, the low price and luxury always work together. Thus, people with money can buy luxury things, and those with less money still need to buy their suppliers. So we are number one in our strategy. Then, of course, we want to make it easy for our customers to buy sustainably, so low price and sustainability are our main objectives."

Recommended strategies

All three interviewees share the response that the data retailers' control is essential to cope with situations like Covid19 to respond correctly to the new costumer behavior. The modernization of their facilities allowed them to boost their sales. In addition, better technology riding on their operations leads to more data management. Thus, the previous factors are the key to being more

agile, accurate, and efficient. It helps them better understand customer behavior, helps them know what they need, and guides them to make better decisions about their suppliers.

4.2.4 Managing employees

R1, R2, and R3 had to adapt to all the rules imposed by the Swedish government to continue operating. In the case of R1, at the beginning of the pandemic, it had to reduce its staff to adapt to the rule of a maximum number of workers within the shops. Company X worked in each shop with a shop manager and in each sector with a department manager and a sales assistant. As their profits grew and the regulations fell away, they could hire more staff to correctly service the number of sales. A similar case for R2 and R3 was when the shop managers took the lead role in establishing order and discipline for employees and customers to respect the rules.

Recommended strategies

The attribute of transparency in the case of R1 allowed them to maintain a high level of trust from their employees and ex-employees affected by the health crisis. The ex-employees were hired again after the increase of sales. R2 highlighted that they had excellent timing to provide good customer service. Finally, all interviewees found it crucial to pay attention to security measures and their implementation in the shops.

4.3 Solving digital application to retail strategies.

4.3.1 Integrated order fulfillment

Respondents' answers reflect that integrated order fulfilment has been a strategy put in place to improve the sales operation of the businesses. In this way, they experience an improvement in the stock management of the different channels and a better customer service with exclusive services. In this way, the value gained by each business increases as various operations are installed and complemented with advanced technology. In the case of R1, they implemented a service innovation that allowed them to differentiate themselves from their competitors during the pandemic. In this case R1 stated:

> "We implanted Click and Collect Drive-In Service, which people can buy and return items without needing to visit the store, our assistants fix everything by picking up the stuff from the customer's car, and we do the rest."

However, he claimed that there is still a lot of work to be done to implement more of the technologies they have, such as Click&Collect in the physical shop, stand-alone Tills, and home delivery, to name a few.

R2 highlights two services that helped the business during the pandemic. Firstly, Click&Collect solves long queues at cash tills in-store, and in addition, customers can view products on the web and social media and after they can picked up at the nearest shop. In this way, integrated order fulfillment is based on taking into account the stock in the physical and online shops, thus controlling the availability of products available nationwide. Secondly, Self-Check-Out offers a more autonomous shopping experience and allows the customer to have no physical contact with any shop employee. The finished purchase information is fully integrated with the shop's sales where this new shopping mode is available. This way, it is possible to control the available stock in our channels correctly.

This question was tricky for R3 because he did not have enough knowledge to give a complete answer. Still, he stated that he knows that Rusta implemented the new system called Product Lifecycle Management (PLM). With a more sustainable idea, Rusta opted for this service to control the use of packaging material for their shipments.

Recommended strategies

The implemented technologies such as Click&Collect in-store, Click&Collect DriveIn, self-checkout, and PLM system provided good evidence of having an efficient integrated order that controls stock effectively and brings productivity to the shops' work operation. Furthermore, in terms of profit, they generate a significant positive impact on net margin (R1), logistics costs (R2), and material cost reduction (R3).

4.3.2 Integrated transaction

All participants shared thoughts about having a solid integrated transaction system in their purchase operation. None of the stores had problems with any channel source. They ensure that customers can feel comfortable and safe shopping online in any retail channel. Online channels are built to promote trust with the consumer and thus offer an excellent payment service (R2).

Recommended strategies

Respondents' answers leave no evidence of a specific strategy. However, they express that shopping security is an essential service that helps consumers to buy products online without fear of being scammed by cyber attackers. In other words, transaction security is indispensable in any retail business.

4.3.3 Integrated product and price information

R1 said that integrating price and product information favors the ease of communication with the consumer and that it is an indispensable strategy to have a positive turnover at a business level. On the other hand, R1 expressed that having a technological tool for such integration allows the business to understand what type of products and volume it needs to sell in the channels to be profitable and what price you need to have in each channel. Businesses work hard to have the same prices in all available channels. Furthermore, he adds that integrating price and product information also has to do with how the Swedish market works. Therefore, R1 expressed:

> "We have many other impacts, most of the retailers buy the products in Euros and Dollars, and then they sell in SEK, so the rates are a key to our margin. Some years ago, the SEK exchange rate was 11%, and last year was 9.9% this volatility of the exchange rate, which can variate 10 % every year, is affecting your margin. We need to understand that we are suffering from inflation now that 6.6% in Sweden affects the price of our products, so we know that people have less money to buy sports than last year. Other expenses like fuel reduce the costs like sports. If we learn that inflation reduces sales, raising the price in inflation is not a good idea. And the problem is all we are thinking the same, all companies are pushing the price down, illogically we are going to have the reflects on raising the price, but the problem is that the customer will not buy to you. So, we are entering a case of a fight of pricing until the economy return to the normal situation"

R2 does not know much about the systems in place for integrating price and product information. However, she commented as follows:

> "Initially, we manually uploaded all the products' content to be able to do the most accurate descriptions of the products. Still, things change in the period line, and

we are aware of updates manually. Thus, we have automated systems that fix the price of the products in all channels. About the system details, I am not aware of that specific part of the company´s operation, but of course, we work with one that makes us facilitate the load of work."

A similar situation occurs with R3 where he commented:

"We have a product information management system with all product and price information. So the software guarantees efficiency in the display of the information in all channels. Another operation in-store system is about the store picking the signs for the walls and shelves. Thus, several methods and parts of the organization are synchronized to fulfill the campaigns."

Recommended strategies

The strategy of implementing price and product information integration is essential in the retail business. The high volumes of stock handled by the interview participants' businesses provide evidence that retail operations must be managed by a technology system that streamlines the decisions of those responsible for maintaining correct presentation standards across all sales channels regarding price and information.

4.3.4 Integrated reverse logistics

Technological support in the retailers to improve return tracking and sales has enabled them to improve sales in all their channels. As argued by R1, improved efficiency and productivity is a reality due to the strong influence of systems such as RFID. At Company X, the operation of their work is linked to the use of the RFID system 90%. In the pandemic, they had a peculiar case thus R1 expressed the following:

"Unfortunately, during the pandemic period, we had a lack of stock of our products. But as I mentioned before, we found stock in the small actors, but the issue is that these products came with no RFID label. However, we have been able to print RFID labels in our stores. So in this way, to provide more excellent customer service, the customers can put in the basket of our self-check-out

machines without the need to scan the barcode. The self-check-out reads the product automatically."

In addition, he said that another strategy to increase sales was the robotization of warehouses. The operators use a Racket RFID to pass the racket in front of the merchandise, and the racket automatically reads the references. In this case, the inventories in our stockroom are less, and it helps of be productive with the time.

In the case of R2, it left evidence that implementing RFID in its shops was a strategy a few years ago. During the pandemic, it was advantageous to have better synchronization with the new sales strategies through online channels. This system boosts returns productivity as customers can return the products they buy online in Zara's physical shops. The result is that returns information is synchronized with the online department's inventory.

Finally, R3 was not sure to answer the last question of the research but assured that Rusta also works with the RFID system. This helps them to be more accurate in their supply chain. In addition, another system that increases the effectiveness of their operations is an autonomous picking system that allows them with stock identification.

Recommended strategies
All of the answers offer strategies that improve channel sales and offer users better flexibility when returning products purchased online to the physical shop. Integrating smart tags on products is one of the best implementations by retail businesses because it reduces inventory tasks, recognizes products quickly, and enables the efficient and fast purchase and return tracking. RFID is, therefore, a tool that retailers should consider in their operations.

5. Findings & Conclusion

To conclude this research work, the research questions developed in the introduction section will be answered in this section. Moreover, the findings and conclusions of the study will also be presented in this chapter. Finally, the implications for theory, the implications for practitioners, and future research will also be covered in this chapter.

5.1 Solving the research questions

The purpose of this thesis is to describe and identify the reasons why retail companies have increased sales in physical shops and especially in online channels. To achieve this purpose, this research is elaborated with all industries involved as retailers to describe with the best evidence and understand how they have reached the expected success during the Covid19 pandemic. However, to understand this evolution of retailers, this research focuses only on the retailer's point of view, excluding the involvement of customers.

When trying to define the role of the omnichannel strategies in the shops retailing during covid19 in Sweden, I had to establish two research questions:

RQ1: How do feel retailers in Sweden about omnichannel retailing when it comes to organizational transformation?

RQ2: In Sweden's retail industries, how far has omnichannel e-commerce progressed?

According to the results of this study, the adaptation to the circumstances caused by the effects of the health crisis on the change of organizational transformation and online channels has impacted the sales results, especially the online sales have had better progress. The strategies imposed in the physical shops allowed for moderately satisfactory customer service, i.e., making customers feel safe and confident when visiting the shops. In addition, this implementation of new strategies created online sales opportunities that allowed the customer to have a better relationship with the business, thus facilitating a more convenient, secure, and quicker purchase. The results of the interviews showed that retail businesses had accelerated their sales strategies to a digital era faster than expected. The data shows that adapting to change is a compliance obligation that businesses must accept if they want to keep the retail operation running. Otherwise, without updates in the working structure and poor organization to carry out sanitary measures, businesses could lead to financial losses leading to their closure. Otherwise, all businesses found themselves vulnerable situation due to the fast-acting pandemic in society. However, correctly applied strategies that increase retail sales, such as the attributes studied in the research questions, allow an opportunity for integration into a new market with customers undergoing behavioral change.

The answer to RQ1 is that retailers in Sweden had a complicated situation that was difficult to deal with because adapting to the change had many human and economic implications. On the one hand, workers were exposed to the virus with defense resources (masks and vaccines) to provide customer service. On the other hand, sales at the beginning of the pandemic affected businesses' revenues. At the same time, they had to invest money to strengthen their structures and implement their sales strategies.

The answer to RQ2 is that implementing technological resources due to R&D, as mentioned above, has led to improved sales in the sales channels of the website, social media, and smartphones. Therefore, e-commerce sales have progressed better than physical shops because of this talent of the business to facilitate shopping. In addition, consumer behavior has responded effectively to the strategies imposed by enterprises.

5.2 Theoretical contribution

This study has shown that the research questions posed together with the methodology employed and the data collection allowed for a solution to the gap on how retailers have sought solutions to adapt to the changes brought about by the Covid19 pandemic and thus contribute to a better retail operation.

The theoretical evidence found in the works of Gallino & Moreno (2019) and Iftikhar et al. (2020) proposed attributes previously included in their research work. On the one hand, the authors Gallino & Moreno (2019) indicated that when the industry undergoes significant transformations, the changes and uncertainties that retail businesses experience can make them lose focus of the objective and confuse them with what is essential and what is circumstantial. Therefore, their study helps to understand how the challenges and opportunities of retail businesses through changes in the omnichannel structure influence the omnichannel transformation of the company.

The work of Iftikhar et al. (2020) highlights the technology-related challenges retailers face in executing channel integration in the case of an Irish retailer. These authors argue that integrating technology and channels is necessary to provide a seamless consumer experience. Furthermore, the solutions deliver value creation through digital technology used in channel integration and thus achieve effectiveness and efficiency in the retail operation. Moreover, only

four attributes out of eleven available from the Iftikhar et al. (2020) study were used for this study which can be implemented for future studies.

5.3. Implication for practicioners

- The negative effect of the pandemic on the retail industry has created opportunities to create sales strategies. Due to the positive impact of the method employed by retailers on sales, more practitioners should consider implementing omnichannel strategies.

- Practitioners should adapt to new technologies. No matter the size of the business, if they strive to provide products and services in all available channels, they will secure an important niche in the market.

- For future pandemic-like events, retail businesses have evidence with this research on how to act in the face of an eventuality that changes customer and market behavior.

5.4 Limitations

The time factor, the holiday period, and the sales have strongly influenced the data collection. But the efforts made in the search for participants made it possible to interview three retail businesses with a bright future in the Swedish market. The validation of the answers was executed based on a small sample that showed saturation of data in some of the questions.

5.5 Suggestions for further research

According to the interest in increasing sales through the use of omnichannel strategies, there are still many areas that need further research. During the development of this master thesis, the following suggestions were found:

- This work could have a different focus by using a qualitative research method and shifting the focus of the study from the retailers to the clients. In this sense, for example, it could be studied whether customers have experienced a change in their purchasing behavior during the pandemic.

- The remaining attributes of the iftikhar et al. (2020) study could be used for another approach to technological transformation.

- The same study but with a larger sample to allow the validation of data saturation.

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Appendix:

Interview participation script:

Hello! My name is Joel, and I am student at Luleå Tekniska Universitet, nice to meet you.

Regarding my thesis work, I am conducting interviews through <u>online video-call</u> as part of a research study to increase the understanding of how sales have been boosted by using <u>omnichannel strategies</u> from the perception of retailers in Sweden during the Covid19 pandemic. The interview takes around 30 minutes and is very informal. I am simply trying to capture the omnichannel expert thoughts and perspectives regarding the experience with the changes in the retail strategies to face Covid19 by using omnichannel strategies.

Furthermore, the omnichannel expert's participation will be a valuable addition to my research, and their findings could lead to a greater public understanding of finding solutions for their retail operation.

On the other side, <u>the responses to the questions will be kept confidential if they please</u>. In that case, personal identifiers and company names are not revealed during the analysis and write-up of findings. I have time to conduct the interviews until July latest. The questionnaire has 8 questions and is a semi-structured interview, which means I can ask additional short questions in every main question.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask.

Thanks!

Joel

Studying MSc in International Business at Luleå Tekniska Universitet

Questionnaire developed for the experts in omnichannel retailers:

Influence of COVID-19 on E-commerce sales. The omnichannel strategies case of the retail businesses in Sweden.

Name and Age:

Position:

Company:

Permission for video and audio recording: Audio | Yes/No | Video | Yes/No |

Questionnaire for solving the Research Questions of the master thesis:

Solving retail transformation

Question 1 regarding Forecasting

Have you been quick enough to respond to changing customer demands? (Sub Question: Have you forecasted demand and fulfillment using data sets from all channels?)

Question 2 regarding Inventory Management

Has your inventory been sufficient to meet the demands of orders placed across your business lines? (Sub question: Do you have automated inventory receipt, reordering, and rotation processes in place?)

Question 3 regarding Assortment Planning

What have been your objectives for assortment planning? (Sub Question: How may retail assortment planning be improved?)

Question 4 regarding Managing Employees

What responsibilities do Retail Store Managers have in a period of crisis like the Covid19? (Sub: question: What characteristics do you need to be a successful retail store manager?)

Solving digital application to retail strategies

Question 5 regarding Integrated Order Fulfilment

What technological activities or tools have been involved in order fulfillment? (Example: Reserve and Pay, Click and Collect, etc)

Question 6 regarding Integration Transaction

How well has the integrated transaction between channels supported your sales growth? (Sub question: Does the technology benefit a wide variety of customers?)

Question 7 regarding Integrated Product and Price Information

What is the integrated product and price information in the business channels in the last three years? (Sub questions: What retail Information System is essential for the operation of product and price information?)

Question 8 regarding Integrated Reverse Logistics

Do you have an RFID in your integrated reverse logistics system? If not, what other technology do you implement in this case?