



Exploring the customer relationships experience of webstore users

Case: Simucube

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Abstract

In the rapidly transforming landscape of B2B commerce, the digital shift has markedly influenced how companies manage customer relationships and transactional processes through online platforms. This study specifically investigates the effects of webstore functionalities on customer relationships within B2B settings, using Simucube—a Finnish manufacturer specializing in sim racing equipment—as the focal case company. A qualitative research approach was utilized, involving interviews with B2B customers who regularly interact with the company's webstore. These interviews were aimed at understanding how digital interfaces affect customer experiences and relationship management.

The research findings indicate that while webstores significantly enhance transactional efficiency, their ability to foster relational interactions remains limited. Customers reported high satisfaction with the ease of use and the efficiency of the webstore, appreciating the autonomy it provides in the purchasing process and its role in reducing communication errors. Notably, the webstore facilitates quick, efficient transactions that are error-free, significantly impacting customer satisfaction positively. However, the lack of personal interaction through the webstore was noted as a limitation in building deeper, long-term relationships, which are often vital in B2B contexts.

Conclusively, the study underscores that webstores, despite their proficiency in managing transactions, do not adequately support the relational dynamics crucial for sustained business engagements. The findings advocate for the integration of features that promote interpersonal communication and deeper relational ties without sacrificing operational efficiency. Looking forward, it recommends that future research expand the scope of investigation to include diverse industries and larger sample sizes, to better understand the broader implications of webstore functionalities on customer relationships in B2B commerce.

Keywords/tags (subjects)

B2B E-Commerce, webstore design and usability, customer experience, interpersonal communication in B2B

Miscellaneous (Confidential information)

None

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Tutkimus verkkokaupan käyttäjien asiakassuhteiden kokemuksista. Case: Simucube

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Tiivistelmä

B2B-kaupan nopeasti muuttuvassa kentässä digitaalinen muutos on merkittävästi vaikuttanut siihen, miten yritykset hallitsevat asiakassuhteita ja transaktioprocesseja verkkoalustoilla. Tämä tutkimus tarkastelee erityisesti verkkokauppojen toiminnallisuuksien vaikutuksia asiakassuhteisiin B2B-ympäristössä, käyttäen esimerkkitapauksena Simucubea, suomalaista sim racing -varusteiden valmistajaa. Tutkimuksessa hyödynnettiin laadullista tutkimusmenetelmää, johon sisältyi haastatteluja B2B-asiakkaiden kanssa, jotka säännöllisesti käyttävät yrityksen verkkokauppaa. Haastattelut keskittyivät digitaalisten rajapintojen vaikutuksiin asiakaskokemuksiin ja suhdhallintaan.

Tutkimustulokset osoittavat, että vaikka verkkokaupat merkittävästi parantavat transaktiotehokkuutta, niiden kyky edistää relationaalisia vuorovaikutuksia on rajallinen. Asiakkaat raportoivat korkeasta tyytyväisyydestä verkkokaupan käytön helppouteen ja tehokkuuteen, arvostaen autonomiaa, jota se tarjoaa ostoprosessissa ja sen roolia viestintävirheiden vähentämisessä. Verkkokauppa mahdollistaa huomattavasti nopeammat, tehokkaat ja virheettömät transaktiot, joilla on positiivinen vaikutus asiakastyytyväisyyteen. Kuitenkin, henkilökohtaisen vuorovaikutuksen puute verkkokaupan kautta on huomattu rajoitteena syvempien, pitkäaikaisten suhteiden rakentamisessa, jotka ovat usein elintärkeitä B2B-konteksteissa.

Yhteenvedon tutkimus korostaa, että vaikka verkkokaupat ovat tehokkaita hallitsemaan transaktioita, ne eivät tue riittävästi suhteellista dynamiikkaa, joka on välttämätöntä kestävien liikesuhteiden ylläpitämisessä. Tulokset suosittelivat ominaisuuksien integroimista, jotka edistävät henkilökohtaista viestintää ja syvempiä suhteellisia siteitä ilman toiminnallisen tehokkuuden uhraamista. Tulevaisuudessa suositellaan, että tutkimuksen laajuutta laajennettaisiin kattamaan erilaisia toimialoja ja suurempia otoskokoja, jotta voidaan paremmin ymmärtää verkkokaupan toiminnallisuuksien laajemmat vaikutukset asiakassuhteisiin B2B-kaupassa.

Avainsanat

B2B verkkokauppa, verkkokaupan suunnittelu ja käytettävyys, asiakaskokemus, henkilökohtainen viestintä B2B liiketoiminnassa

Muut tiedot (salassa pidettävät liitteet)

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1 Introduction

In the evolving landscape of business-to-business (later B2B) commerce, the digital transformation has radically altered how companies interact with each other. The advent of webstores and other online platforms has not only streamlined transaction processes but also reshaped the dynamics of customer relationships and satisfaction. As businesses increasingly migrate to digital interfaces, understanding the impacts of these platforms on customer behavior and relationship management has become dominant.

The effectiveness of customer relationship management in B2B webstores is critical to sustaining and growing business relationships. This thesis dives into how webstores influence the customer experience and the management of ongoing relationships in a B2B context. It focuses on the user experience of webstore platforms and how these digital interactions shape perceptions, influence satisfaction, and affect the longevity of business relationships. Understanding these dynamics is vital for businesses to optimize their digital strategies, ensuring that webstore functionalities align with customer needs and preferences. This research helps in identifying key areas where webstores can be enhanced to better support customer engagement, streamline communication, and foster trust and loyalty in a competitive digital marketplace.

While broad research exists on general webstore and customer relationship management, specific studies focusing on how webstores affect B2B customer relationships are notably limited. Most existing literature targets consumer (B2C) interactions, with limited focus on the unique dynamics and challenges of B2B digital commerce. Additionally, the integration of webstores with essential backend processes like inventory management and invoicing, which are crucial in B2B contexts, is often overlooked. This thesis aims to fill these gaps by examining the direct effects of webstore usage on the customer experience and relationship management within a B2B framework.

1.1 Case company: Simucube

Simucube is a Finnish company that makes specialized equipment for sim racing, which is essentially a high-tech and realistic form of video game racing. Imagine playing a racing game where instead of using a simple game controller, you have a setup that mimics a real car's steering wheel and gives you feedback that feels like you're actually driving. Their equipment includes advanced

steering systems that provide very realistic feedback through the steering wheel, from direct drive motor and pedals with active motor generating effects feeling like a real car.

Company is recognized for producing these systems with high quality, aiming to make the racing experience very immersive for users, whether they're playing for fun or training for professional racing. The technology behind their products comes from their parent company, Granite Devices, which has expertise in creating sophisticated motor controls for industrial applications.

1.2 Research focus and scope

This thesis examines the impact of webstore functionalities on customer relationships in B2B environments. It aims to understand how digital platforms influence customer experiences, relationship management, and overall satisfaction from a business customer's perspective. The study investigates how webstore features and their integration with backend processes affect transaction efficiency, explores how interfaces and functionalities manage customer relationships, and identifies potential areas for improvement to enhance B2B customer loyalty.

However, the research acknowledges limitations such as a limited number of interviews with customers, potentially affecting the generalizability of the findings. The industry specific nature of the case company might also limit the applicability of the results to other sectors. Additionally, the study focuses mostly on digital interactions, which may overlook the value of integrated hybrid sales approaches that combine digital and traditional methods.

2 Literature Review

The transformative impact of digital technology on B2B markets has forced a thorough understanding of its effects on customer relationships. This literature review explores the dynamics of customer relationship management (CRM), customer experience, and interpersonal communication within the context of B2B webstores. The synthesis of these areas provides a comprehensive view of how digital interfaces influence business interactions and relationship management strategies.

The foundation of this review was constructed through a thorough examination of existing scholarly work, focusing primarily on theses and dissertations that have previously addressed similar themes. This search was conducted using the e-library resources of Jamk University of Applied Sciences, which provided access to a broad range of academic contributions in the field. The electronic search was strategically conducted by using keywords such as "B2B digital commerce," "customer relationship management in B2B," "customer experience in e-commerce," and "interpersonal communication in digital business environments." This approach ensured a comprehensive collection of relevant literature that addresses both the theoretical support and practical implications of webstores on customer relationships in a B2B framework.

2.1 Customer Relationship management

Customer Relationship Management later referred as CRM is a crucial part of any B2B operations, as in today's competition, customers are not only buying the product or service, but also the long-lasting relationship and the loyal, trustworthy relationship. CRM is not only serving the customer, but usually also supports the company's long-term strategies, by focusing on keeping the current customers happy. With well-organized CRM tools it also gives a lot of data for the company to see that how the customers are doing and what they might need more in case they are underperforming compared to the expectations that the company might have set for them. This also allows the companies to see that which customers are the real key accounts and which are not, as the data can show that how much money for example a customer brings in, and then the company has the chance to see that which relationships are the ones to focus on. This way also to create a crafted services to serve the most valuable customers with the best possible way to keep them delighted by the services available for them by the supplying company. (Fjermestad & Robertson 2006, pp. 21-32.)

There are multiple authors writing about the fine details that the customer relationship management includes, but Jobber et al.(2019) states it well that even though in B2B sales it is always about closing the next sale, companies need to remember that the continuous cashflow is kept also by keeping the current, loyal, customers contented, and when that basic building block is well taken care of it is also more safe environment for the salespeople to focus on getting the new leads in when they know they have the CRM system working well, as they can use that also as a

unique selling point. Because even if your product would be the best in the world, you will not have reliable long-term customers if you do not treat them like gold.

2.2 Webstore (design and functionality)

Online stores also known as webstores are nowadays a crucial part of the day-to-day life of a consumers and businesses, as more and more products and services are moved only through this electronic commercial platform that gives the opportunity to reach millions of consumers all over the world from your home office or a regular corporate office. Hallavo (2013) discusses how there is three types of webstore sales, business to business (B2B), Business to Customer (B2C) and from customer to customer (C2C), and we will be focusing on the B2B side on this thesis. Webstore moves the tools that were usually in hand of the salesperson to the customer in a way that the customer can now operate freely in the webstore and make the purchasing decision all by themselves. This releases a lot of resources to be used in more advanced operations and development work and this way cuts the expenses from the company, all through it does not fully cut away the sales process but tries to ease out the customers decision making to a way that they would favor your goods or services. Especially in the case company, as the sales department is not as large as in some bigger corporations, this can ease out the customer by not having to wait as long for the order confirmation through email when the webstore would work fully automatically, so the boost in the efficiency and convenience for the customers operating from all over the world would help and streamline the purchasing process drastically.

Even in B2B sales it has been seen that buyers are getting more active and will use more time in finding information about the products and also about the companies they are operating with, this is leading to the challenging phenomena from the salesperson point of view, where the buyers can be harder to close to the deals as the information about competing companies and products is at their fingertips and they believe more in their own reasoning, rather than the salesperson (Rangajaran, et al., 2019). Close to 75% of B2B customers prefer operating the purchases through a webstore rather than operating with a salesperson, and after the decision of purchasing is done over 90% state that they want to just buy online and not interact with a sales representative (Hoar, 2015). This is driving companies targeting B2B sales channels to embrace “self-service” e-

Commerce for the customers and see that how the traditional B2B salesperson is used in this picture, as the eCommerce is more based on creating buyer personas to target customers and integrating different types of digital tools throughout the sales process.

2.3 Customer experience

When we think about a certain company and what kind of emotions and thoughts it creates in us, it is all created from the experiences we have had on them. Maybe the way they have advertised their products, or how you have seen it in the social media or on the shelf of a store, or if you have visited their store and you were treated nicely, and this also counts a visit at their webstore. All of these are crafting an image in your head about the company and about their way of doing things, all of this is also part of your customer experience (CX) and this way the overall feeling you get when you encounter the company. (Schwager & Meyer 2007, 1.)

Now in the 21st century we are living the era of the customer, and the success is forming on understanding the customer experience and the remarkability of it for the business, it is comprehensive experience, what the customer has or has not felt during the contact with the company. Example for a successful customer experience would be when the company succeeds to make customers life easier, fill up the needs and expectations or even go over them, customer experience aims to reach and create meaningful and positive feelings to create a certain type of bond with the company. (Saarijärvi & Puustinen 2020, pp. 31–35.)

Holma et. al. (2021) states that especially in B2B field, the customer experience is concentrated on keeping the current customers and streamline the overall feeling other companies are having on your company and this way possibly narrow down the expenses on creating new leads. But you should also remember that B2B is also from human to human, so there are always emotions also when communicating and this is why the experience is still very important part of the interaction.

Shaw an Ivens (2002) discusses that the philosophy of companies at the moment is that they are formed inside out, that is usually seen as the companies grow around themselves and then try to get more customer focused, but it might get hard if the customer needs will not bend to the systems and processes the company is having. This leads to the fact that companies should focus more on building themselves outside in, so that they form themselves around the customer and

this way all the systems and processes are focusing on what is the best for the customer and this way enable better growth as customer can feel themselves to be important part of the process as they should.

In conclusion, the customer experience mixes the company's physical presence with the feelings it has raised in the individual, this experience can be built up in multiple occasions or it can be formed with just a quick glance of a logo of the company and this is one of the reasons it might be so hard to stay competitive or neutral on a field where you are competing for the customers.

2.4 Interpersonal communication

As mentioned, the H2H human to human interaction is still a crucial part of establishing and sustaining B2B customer relations. And this is where the individual's interpersonal communication also steps in when the businesses are interacting, and all the participating parties are building the relationship that the possible sales relation is manufactured on top of. (Koponen, 2021)

Koponen (2021) introduces well what kind of a salesperson the B2B customers are satisfied to interact with, the fundamental characteristics are the understanding of products and services being sold, including the market they are operating in, ability to address challenges effectively, coordination of the sales operations and competence to communicate. Also, accurate product information, ability to comparison and justification regarding the products combined with effective sales skills will relief the possible pressure between the customer and ease out the sales process. It will help the process of partnering when both parties are sharing values and committing to the relationship with trust, this way customer will feel satisfied, and the common understanding can be reached. (Koponen, 2021)

Due the increasing growth of e-commerce, B2B sales have moved more and more towards digital platforms, and this is challenging the sales with the increase in customer expectations in the more competed field, as entering the online market is rather easy and everybody can reach all the same customers. Nowadays it is possible that the relationships are fully executed online and real-life face to face meetings will never happen, this leads to the need of deeper understanding of the importance of interpersonal communication through online channels. All this combined with the

more than often needed custom solutions to serve the customer with trust, and need of long-lasting tight relationships that can be harassed with the raising competition. By understanding the complexity of interpersonal communication, one can see that some customers do not want to build long lasting or meaningful relationships, but as most of the customers in B2B interactions want, they highly appreciate the easiness of working with a well-known salesperson, and this is the key reason why skillful salespersons who can communicate talentedly with the needed tools to the customer can help the business to keep their customers. And this is the core reason why B2B companies need to be very focused also to see the importance of interpersonal communication skills that will boost the customer relationships. (Koponen, 2021)

3 Methodology and implementation

This thesis explores how the case company's current B2B customers would perceive a webstore service as their sole purchasing option and examines its potential impact on customer experience and relationships from the customers' perspective. There were three interviews with the representatives of the B2B customers conducted and inspected for this qualitative research, and the methodology of these interviews is explained in detail in the following chapters.

3.1 Research objectives and problem

The starting point for planning the research is to define and select the research problem, which can be expressed as one or several questions. According to Grönfors & Vilkkä (2011, pp. 22–24), having a genuine interest in the topic makes it easier to carry out the research and maintain motivation from start to finish. A well-defined research problem helps clarify the study's purpose and goals. As Kananen (2015, pp. 45–46) notes, delimiting the research problem guides the thesis, although excessive delimitation can separate the research purpose from its original context.

This research explores the possible impact of B2B webstores on customer relationship experience (CX). Traditionally, B2B sales rely on face-to-face interactions to build strong relationships. However, webstores offer convenience and efficiency, potentially changing how customers interact with businesses. The purpose of this research is to investigate the potential benefits and draw-

backs of B2B webstores for customer relationships. By understanding how webstores affect customer experience, we can identify strategies for the commissioning company to leverage this platform while maintaining strong relationships with their customers.

The purpose of this research is to investigate the potential benefits and drawbacks of B2B webstores for customer relationships. By understanding how webstores affect customer experience, we can identify strategies for the commissioning company to leverage this platform while maintaining strong relationships with their customers. One challenge lies in measuring the impact of webstores on a complex concept like customer relationships. Additionally, different customer segments may have varying preferences for webstore adoption and its impact on their experience.

To guide the investigation and understand the complex relationship between B2B webstores and customer experience, this research poses a central question: Does the use of a B2B webstore impact customer experience? The objective is to analyze the implications of requiring the case company's customers to use a B2B webstore exclusively, focusing on the effects on customer relationships and satisfaction. This analysis will aid Simucube in designing a B2B webstore solution that not only facilitates transaction efficiency but also encourages stronger customer relationships. Furthermore, it will determine whether maintaining a traditional sales process, such as through emails, is more beneficial for preserving customer experience.

3.2 Qualitative approach

In B2B contexts with a limited customer base, traditional quantitative research methods may not turnout statistically significant or reliable data. This is a crucial consideration when designing research for a small to medium sized company B2B webstore. To address this challenge, qualitative research offers a valuable approach.

Qualitative research aligns with an interpretivist approach, as Bryman & Bell (2015) suggest, where data is analyzed based on the human actions. It prioritizes understanding the meanings participants ascribe to their experiences, ultimately aiming to generate theory grounded in those interpretations. This social science methodology emphasizes in-depth discussions and lived experiences over quantifiable data. Unlike quantitative methods, qualitative research doesn't seek to

control or measure data. Instead, it allows freedom for rich narratives to emerge, requiring researchers to make complex connections and interpretations to create a cohesive understanding. This approach ultimately aims to achieve generalizability of insights based on the captured experiences.

Qualitative research is like having an open conversation with your B2B customers. It allows them to share their unique stories, challenges, and motivations in their own words, providing a deeper understanding that goes beyond simple data points. Every B2B customer has a unique journey, and qualitative research helps capture the specifics of each organization. By giving them space to tell their full story, you can gain deeper understanding – unexpected insights that lead to effective solutions. Open-ended questions are key, allowing them to describe their experiences freely. These conversations can even reveal best practices you never knew existed. Qualitative research goes beyond data to build stronger relationships and deliver solutions that truly meet your B2B customer needs.

The qualitative approach has proven highly effective for this study, which focuses on the relatively small customer base of B2B clients utilizing the webstore. Qualitative methods facilitate a comprehensive exploration of individual opinions, thereby enabling the generation of rich and contextual insights. This is particularly valuable in contrast to quantitative methods, which may not capture the nuanced perspectives of users.

Understanding the depth of customer experiences is essential, given the limited breadth of the customer base. Such understanding is crucial for making informed decisions about potential areas for improvement. The in-depth interviews conducted as part of this research have been useful in revealing the reasoning behind customer decisions, thus providing valuable insights that influence strategic planning.

Furthermore, as the B2B webstore is a recent initiative within the case company and has been subject to limited prior research, feedback from current users is invaluable. It offers a direct measure of the webstore's performance and usability from the user's perspective. This feedback is essential for assessing the effectiveness of the webstore and guiding future enhancements.

3.3 Research method

In this research the data is collected through interviews with the current customers of the company. All the interviews will be done remotely online using Microsoft Teams, the research questions including the topic are communicated through email. Research problem is organized to form a series of questions, that helps to carry our conversation while also giving the details on the topic and allowing the researcher to create themes. The interviews will be transcribed open Microsoft Teams-software and this way made also easier to read out when analyzing the data. The interviews are conducted through a semi-structured interview frame, so that the questions will help to answer the research questions without limiting the answers the interviewee will tell. This way the results can be trusted, and the questions will not lead the interviewee to any direction, rather just gives some guidelines to follow the topic.

The methodology employed in the thesis was a semi-structured interview. Unlike structured interviews that utilize questionnaires, there are no rigid formats or sequences in the questioning. The interview progresses thematically, with varying degrees of emphasis on each theme depending on the discussion's flow. The aim is to ensure that each interviewee's unique perspective is expressed, even though the overarching themes are consistent across all interviews. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2011, 47, 48)

To address the research question, "Does the use of a B2B webstore impact customer experience?", semi-structured interviews were utilized. These interviews featured open-ended questions to allow informants to discuss their experiences with the webstore freely, highlighting aspects most significant to them. Informants were selected based on their extensive or moderate experience with the current B2B webstore, ensuring that their insights would be pertinent and rich. This approach aimed to capture a range of interactions and impressions, providing depth to the study's findings. Interviews lasted no longer than 30 minutes to maintain focus and optimize informant comfort and engagement. The discussions were transcribed to facilitate detailed analysis and ensure that interpretations were firmly based on the informants' actual words.

3.4 Data Analysis

Analysis of this thesis is based on content analysis, that is a scientific technique that systematically and objectively deduces and analyzes data presented in interview or textual formats. This method encompasses two distinct approaches: content dissection and content analysis. Content dissection involves the quantitative description of text within documents. In this research, there was a data-driven approach to content analysis. This approach facilitated a general verbal description of the data and enabled the construction of a theoretical framework based on the findings. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, 117.)

To analyze the collected data, several steps were undertaken. Initially, the data was collected through semi-structured interviews, each of which was transcribed using Microsoft Teams software to ensure accuracy. The transcripts were precisely reviewed to identify relevant themes and patterns. This process involved coding the data by highlighting key phrases and statements related to the research question. For example, one participant noted, "The webstore is very efficient for quick orders, but it does not feel as personalized as dealing with a sales representative."

Based on the categorized data, a theoretical framework was developed to understand the impact of B2B webstores on customer relationships. This framework helped to explain the balance between efficiency and relational depth in digital commerce. The analysis highlighted that while webstores significantly enhance operational efficiency and customer satisfaction by streamlining the purchasing process, they present new challenges in maintaining the relational dynamics essential for long-term customer loyalty.

One participant emphasized, "I like how quickly I can place orders without waiting for a sales representative to get back to me. It speeds up our procurement process significantly." However, the research highlighted that while webstores are effective in facilitating transactional efficiency, they are less equipped to support the relational aspects of customer interactions crucial for long-term relationship building. Another participant stated, "We appreciate the convenience, but sometimes we need that personal touch to discuss special requirements or issues."

These insights indicate the need for businesses to balance efficiency with personalized customer engagement. To address this, it is recommended that companies integrate features into their webstores that support interpersonal communication and relationship building without compromising operational efficiency. Features such as personalized recommendations, customer support chat, and interactive forums can enrich the customer's experience, making the digital platform a comprehensive relationship-enhancing tool.

3.5 Validity and reliability

In qualitative research the researcher needs to evaluate the reliability of the information based on the findings of the research and in academic research the trustworthiness of the research can be measured with the reliability and validity of the research. Reliability refers to the consistency of the research and can be strengthened by techniques like re-testing participants or having multiple researchers analyze the data for consistency. Validity, on the other hand, reflects whether the study is truly measuring what it intends to. Researcher can enhance validity by clearly defining the research questions and target group, using various data collection methods, and ensuring their findings align with existing knowledge in the field. While achieving complete objectivity is challenging due to potential researcher bias, careful documentation, justifications for decisions made, and awareness of one's own biases can contribute to a more credible study. (Kananen 2017,173-176).

When planning this study, there were concern about the company's B2B webstore. It seemed clumsy and unfinished, which was surprising for a company known for high-quality products. Researcher was worried this might make B2B customers doubt the company's professionalism and service quality.

It was also expected to uncover the main issues customers were facing with the website. Identifying these pain points was crucial, as understanding them would help tailor solutions to improve the user experience. These initial thoughts guided how the research was designed, especially the interview questions. The goal was to dig deep into customer experiences and find out exactly what wasn't working.

This approach helped to stay objective and open to data that might support or contradict the initial impressions, ensuring the research remained balanced and grounded in actual user feedback.

To ensure the research reliability in this thesis, responsible conduct of research is being followed by being sure that the research is done with precision and honesty from the research design through data collection and analysis. This is established with well designed and executed research that is transparently reported in a clear manner providing all the information that the researcher found out during the whole process. (Responsible Conduct of Research (RCR) 2023.)

To ease the potential influence of my own biases during the interviews, several precautionary measures were implemented. The interview questions were crafted to be open-ended, encouraging participants to provide responses that reflect their own perspectives rather than conforming to any preconceived notions I might hold.

Furthermore, before conducting the interviews, the set of questions prepared was reviewed by colleagues working on the B2B sales. This review process was instrumental in validating the neutrality of the questions. The colleagues were asked to look over each question for potential biases and suggest modifications to ensure that the questions did not lead the interviewees or imply preferred answers. This feedback was crucial in refining the questions to enhance their objectivity and to ensure that the data collected would accurately reflect the unbiased perspectives of the participants.

Validity and reliability are essential for strong research, guaranteeing trustworthy and accurate results. Without them, the findings could be inconsistent, biased, and unreliable. This can severely limit the research's usefulness, potentially making it even unusable in the worst case.

3.6 Research ethics

The core principle of research ethics is transparency throughout all stages of the research process, from conducting the study to generating results and publishing the findings. This means researchers must fully describe their methodology, explain how they arrived at their conclusions, and disclose any factors that may have influenced their decisions or interpretations. By maintaining transparency, researcher allow for investigation of their work, enabling others to assess the research

for potential inaccuracies or biases. Data access, analytical transparency, and production transparency form the foundation of a researcher's ethical obligation to facilitate the evaluation of their knowledge claims. In simpler terms, researchers must be open about how and where they collected their data, how they developed theories during analysis, and what methods they employed throughout the study. (Lupia et al., 2014). By adhering to these principles, researchers demonstrate their commitment to ethical research practices and ensure the validity of their findings.

This research is using data only from the real-life sources in the form of current B2B customers of the case company that are authorized partners. The base knowledge for the research has been conducted through multiple academic sources to have the correct information regarding the discussed topics like webstore, customer experience and customer relationship management, and this increases the validity of the research.

4 Results

This chapter will take closer look into the main findings of the interviews had with the current webstore users. There are four main themes the results are focusing on, and these are the following:

- Transactional vs. Relational experience
- Efficiency of Webstore vs. Traditional Email Transactions
- Customer satisfaction
- User Experience and Interface Design

The interviewees were informed in beforehand that what is the goal of the research, why they are part of it, assured that all the results are analyzed anonymously as well as that this is purely voluntary for them to get their honest and real opinions.

Interviewed customers are all from different size of companies, from different countries, with different kind of backgrounds. But work on the same business field of sim racing, offering very similar kind of services for their customers and are all keen users of a reliable purchasing platforms, yet their experiences highlight varied webstore utility and design solutions.

These customers were interviewed as the perceived value of their experiences and opinions were seen as the most valuable source for this research, due to their relative usage rate of the partner webstore was the highest from the possible interviewees. And this was seen as a great addition to give value for the future research and the development work of the partner webstore, as the main goal for the client company is to develop their automated sales processes from where they are now to a next level, and the information from the current customers can be seen as a valuable asset in this work.

4.1 Transactional vs relational experience

Understanding the nuances between transactional and relational strategies is crucial for aligning operations with customer expectations and long-term goals. While transactional interactions focus on quick, one-off exchanges, relational strategies build on ongoing relationships and customer loyalty.

The interviewees responses suggest that the webstore primarily supports a transactional customer experience. The process of using the webstore is described as straightforward, focusing on the efficiency of transactions like login, product evaluation, and ordering. This indicates that the webstore is experienced as facilitating quick and efficient purchasing decisions without significant personal interaction needed. This would go hand in hand with the theory Hoar (2015) was suggesting that most of the people prefer the human free interaction as more efficient when making the purchase, especially when the product being purchased is already decided.

There is basically no indication that the interviewees would feel that the partner webstore would offer a relational experience, but regarding the overall feeling the interviewees shared during the interview was very positive, so the missing of relational content has not been seen as an issue for now for these customers. The client company needs to still be conscious about this fact as the webstore is aimed to be implemented for a remarkably larger audience the individuals' preferences will vary a lot between the customers, and others might need a lot more personalized experience for their needs.

These results indicate also strongly that the webstore indeed enhances the transactional efficiency of buyers, and as the webstore is seen so transactional the customer might not even necessarily feel it would be replacing the relational elements facilitated by personal interactions.

4.2 Efficiency of webstore vs. traditional email transactions

The findings made from the interviews offers an answer to the comparative analysis of webstores and traditional email transactions in B2B. The results clearly highlight the advantages of webstores over traditional email methods. These insights are essential for understanding how digital sales platforms are reshaping modern business practices and the ways we interact with customers.

The results of this research clearly show a strong preference for webstores over traditional email methods for handling purchasing needs within B2B environments. This preference can be attributed to several key factors that enhance user experience and operational efficiency. First of all, webstore significantly reduces the back-and-forth communication that is often necessary with email transactions to confirm product availability and details.

Furthermore, the streamlined order attachment process in webstores simplifies the purchasing procedure. Customers can directly attach and adjust their orders without needing to wait for a response, which is often the case with email transactions. This autonomy not only speeds up transactions but also empowers customers, giving them control over their purchasing decisions without unnecessary delays.

Another significant advantage of webstores is the reduced potential for communication errors. Emails are prone to misinterpretations and overlooked details, which can lead to errors in order fulfillment. The structured nature of webstore interfaces minimizes these risks by providing clear, standardized forms and order confirmations, thereby reducing the likelihood of errors and subsequent customer dissatisfaction.

Adding value to these results, it's essential to consider the impact of these factors on customer loyalty and retention. The efficiency and user-friendly aspects of webstores can contribute to a more positive customer experience, which is crucial for building long-term business relationships. In today's competitive market, the ability to offer a seamless, error-free purchasing environment is

a significant competitive edge. Moreover, businesses can leverage the data gathered from webstore interactions to further refine their offerings and customer service strategies, enhancing overall business performance and customer satisfaction.

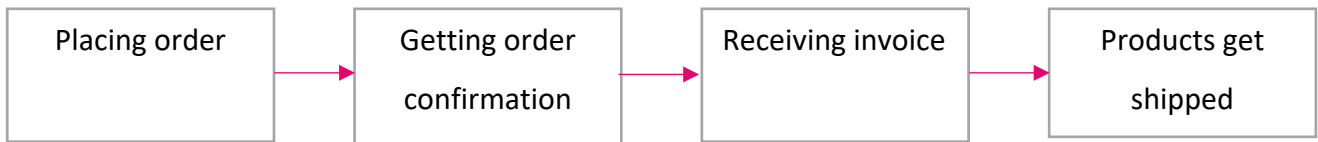


Figure 4.1 Straight forward purchasing process between B2B parties.

The Figure 4.1 above indicates the simplified order process between the B2B customer and the pain point for the customers when dealing with email ordering instead of the webstore comes between the first two phases of “placing order” and “getting order confirmation” as the resources in the clients sales team are limited and the time of getting the confirmation by email can be remarkably longer, due to the fact that the employee has multiple other questions to check in email with all the meetings during the day. This, compared to the webstore where the customer can check all the needed products straight away and get the confirmation of order straight away without needing to wait the email from the salesperson.

4.3 Customer Satisfaction

All through the expectations regarding the customer satisfaction of using the webstore for these customers were rather low from the researchers’ point of view the feeling and answers from the customers indicated totally different viewpoint to the usage of the webstore. Because based on the gathered information, it is clear that the interviewed B2B customers exhibit a high level of satisfaction with the current webstores’ functionality, and there are couple factors that contribute to this view.

1. Lack of frustrations

The Lack of significant frustrations or challenges reported by users suggests that the webstore effectively meets their expectations and needs in terms of functionality and reliability. It needs to be remembered that the sample of this research is rather small, but the feedback strongly indicates the satisfaction of customers and implies that the webstore as

it is now, succeeds in the design and the operational aspects align with the needs of the customers.

2. Dominance over traditional methods

As seen in the research one of the main points appearing in almost all of the fields is the efficiency and ease of use the webstore perceives compared to the traditional purchasing methods like an e-mail or a phone call. This shift towards digital solutions offers a more streamlined, error-free, and time-efficient process, which is highly valued by businesses looking to optimize their operations.

It's crucial to not just sit back on initial success. Businesses evolve, technology progresses, and customer needs change. This means the webstore must periodically undergo reviews and updates to stay relevant and effective. Regularly engaging with customers to ask for their input can reveal valuable insights for refining the webstore. Adding new features that cater to emerging needs, along with maintaining stringent security and privacy standards, can boost customer satisfaction and foster deeper loyalty.

4.4 User experience and interface design

The user experience of the webstore has emerged as a pivotal factor in customer satisfaction within B2B transactions. The initial impressions and continued approval of the webstore are predominantly positive, with its simplicity being a crucial attribute. Initially perceived as merely basic, the webstore's minimalistic design has proven to be a significant advantage. This simplicity meets users' needs without the clutter of unnecessary complexity, embodying the principle that efficiency is paramount in B2B environments. Such an approach not only facilitates quick navigation but also minimizes the cognitive effort required from users, allowing them to concentrate on their purchasing decisions.

The functionality of the webstore is appreciated for effectively addressing transactional needs. However, it is primarily viewed as a transactional tool rather than a platform for cultivating relationships. This perspective opens an opportunity to enhance the platform by integrating features that foster relational interactions without compromising its efficiency. These enhancements could

be especially beneficial for customers seeking long-term engagements and might look for more than just transactional efficiency in their interactions.

Feedback from users indicates specific areas that require improvement, such as the clarity of product descriptions and the breadth of the product range. Enhancing these aspects is crucial as they help prevent misunderstandings and ensure that the webstore meets the diverse needs of various businesses. Detailed and clear product descriptions are essential for enabling users to make informed decisions without the need to pick up the phone or write email to the salesperson. Expanding the product range can cater to specific and varied demands, increasing the utility and appeal of the webstore.

While it is important to maintain the minimalist design that users appreciate, there is also a value in exploring ways to incorporate elements that support building relationships. Features known from usual B2B webstores, such as enhanced customer support, interactive elements like customer reviews or forums, and personalized recommendations based on past purchases could enrich the user experience.

To continuously improve the webstore, further research into how different segments of B2B customers interact with the interface could offer valuable insights. Understanding these interactions can guide tailored improvements, making the webstore more intuitive for both novice and experienced users across various different customers.

While the webstore's design currently meets transactional needs effectively, there is substantial potential for growth. By enhancing product clarity, expanding the range, and introducing features that facilitate relationship building, the webstore can significantly elevate the overall user experience, meeting a broader spectrum of B2B customer requirements and preferences.

5 Conclusion

This thesis has explored the impact of webstores on customer relationships within B2B contexts. By conducting qualitative research through interviews with B2B customers, this study has provided

insights into how digital platforms, particularly webstores, are redefining traditional business interactions.

The central research question was: Does the use of a B2B webstore impact customer experience? The findings suggest that webstores enhance transactional efficiency and customer satisfaction by streamlining the purchasing process. A significant majority of customers prefer the autonomy and immediacy offered by webstores over traditional methods like email transactions. This shift not only reflects a change in customer behavior but also underscores the importance of digital adaptability for businesses aiming to thrive in an increasingly competitive market.

One participant emphasized, " In the beginning I found it very basic but it does what it is supposed to do in a very simple and minimalistic way so I like it!."

However, the research highlighted that while webstores are effective in facilitating transactional efficiency, they are less equipped to support the relational aspects of customer interactions crucial for long-term relationship building. This separation between transactional efficiency and relational depth poses a strategic challenge for businesses.

The findings indicate the need for businesses to balance efficiency with personalized customer engagement. To address this, it is recommended that companies integrate features into their webstores that support interpersonal communication and relationship building without compromising operational efficiency. Features such as personalized recommendations, customer support chat, and interactive forums can enrich the customer's experience, making the digital platform not just a transactional tool but a comprehensive relationship enhancing tool.

5.1 Discussion

This chapter explores the implications of the research findings in relation to the initial expectations and theoretical perspectives discussed in the literature review. The analysis considers the practical and strategic implications of webstore integration in B2B settings, detailing both strengths and limitations as observed through the study.

Initially, the hypothesis was based on the assumption that customers might perceive the webstore as clumsy and lacking in necessary information, presenting an unfinished appearance. This expectation stemmed from its design focus on backend efficiency over user interface elegance. However, contrary to these expectations, the findings indicated that customers were generally satisfied with the webstore, primarily valuing its efficiency and autonomy. This supports the literature on CRM in B2B operations, which emphasizes the importance of maintaining long-term customer relationships and using CRM tools to cater to key accounts, aligning with the practical acceptance of B2B buyers who prioritize functionality and efficiency.

The study challenges some existing assumptions in the literature regarding the necessity for highly polished digital interfaces to achieve customer satisfaction in B2B webstores. While much of the literature emphasizes the importance of comprehensive information and a polished look, this research suggests that efficiency and functional integration with other business processes can be equally, if not more, significant to customer satisfaction. For businesses, this could suggest a shift in how resources are allocated in webstore development, advocating for a balance between investing in backend integration and operational efficiencies, and enhancing the interface and customer usability, which are still crucial components of the overall customer experience.

5.2 Limitations

This study was designed to maintain high standards of validity and reliability, incorporating qualitative data collection method and aligning findings with existing scholarly knowledge. However, qualitative research inherently faces challenges in ensuring complete validity and reliability. The study's validity might be constrained by the specific circumstances surrounding the case company's webstore. Initial perceptions of the webstore as clumsy and unfinished might have influenced the framing of research questions aimed at uncovering specific customer issues. Despite efforts to minimize researcher bias, such as crafting open-ended interview questions and having them peer-reviewed, subjectivity in interpreting qualitative data remains a potential limitation.

Reliability was sought through consistent research methods, including the re-evaluation of interview questions by colleagues to ensure neutrality and prevent leading questions. However, the variability in human responses and the limited scope of the interview sample could affect the replicability of the findings under different conditions or in varying contexts.

Ethical considerations were addressed, emphasizing transparency throughout the research process. This transparency was important in documenting the methodology, data collection, and analysis, facilitating external verification and critique. However, reliance on data from a specific group of current B2B customers, all authorized partners of the case company, might limit the generalizability of the findings. While this approach ensured the relevance and applicability of the data to the case company, it may not represent broader B2B market experiences with the webstore.

These limitations, associated with validity, reliability, and ethical considerations, significantly impact the interpretation of the study's findings. They highlight the need for caution in generalizing the results beyond the studied context and suggest areas for further research. Future studies could benefit from expanding the sample size, incorporating different B2B contexts, or employing quantitative methods to complement the qualitative findings, thereby enhancing generalizability and reliability. Understanding these limitations is essential for accurately interpreting the research findings and framing future studies that may seek to explore similar themes.

5.3 Implications for future research

Future research should aim to expand the sample size and include a more diverse range of industries to test the generalizability of these findings. Further studies could also explore the impact of improvements in webstore design on customer opinions, particularly in terms of information availability and interface aesthetics. Insights from the literature review on the importance of CX and interpersonal communication suggest exploring how digital interfaces can be enhanced to improve the customer experience while compensating for the reduced human interaction. This could involve examining how advanced CRM tools integrated into webstore platforms can support ongoing customer relationships in a less person-dependent manner.

The complex interplay between customer expectations, experienced utility, and perceived value in the context of B2B webstores challenges traditional notions within the field of e-commerce and customer relationship management. By focusing on the functional aspects that customers prioritize, companies can enhance their digital commerce strategies. However, it remains essential to continue enhancing the user interface and information quality to ensure that webstores meet comprehensive customer needs, balancing efficiency with engagement. This approach not only

aligns with evolving customer expectations but also enhances long-term customer loyalty in an increasingly competitive digital marketplace.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Interview questions

Background:

1. Could you tell me a bit about the size of your company and your role within it?
2. How many times a month you use our webstore?

Impact of B2B Webstores on Customer Relationships:

1. Can you describe the process you typically follow when making a purchase through our webstore?
2. How do you feel about the user experience in our webstore, particularly any initial impressions you might have had?
3. What can you tell me about the efficiency of using our webstore for your purchasing needs?
4. How do you feel it compares to operating through email.
5. Could you describe the aspects of the webstore that stand out to you, whether they make your experience easier or more challenging?
6. Are there any features or services that you think could be added to our webstore to enhance your purchasing experience?
7. Have you faced any challenges or frustrations while using the webstore? Can you describe them?
8. Is there anything else about your experience with our webstore that you would like to share?
9. Do you have any final thoughts or suggestions for how we can improve our service to better meet your needs?