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The impact of e-commerce on employees and their engagement in a store setting:

A Qualitative study of the retail industry

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Abstract:

This thesis investigates the impact of e-commerce on in-store employees and their engagement in the retail industry. Using qualitative methodology and semi-structured interviews, the study explores employees' perceptions of how e-commerce affects their roles in physical stores. Focusing on the traditional retail sector, diverse employees from various retail establishments participate, providing comprehensive insights through open-ended questions. The primary objective is to enhance understanding of the relationships between e-commerce and employee engagement, aiming to develop a conceptual model that elucidates interrelationships and mutual influences. By addressing a research gap and examining the effects of e-commerce from the employees' viewpoint, this research contributes to the existing theoretical understanding. This thesis will answer the following research question;

“How does e-commerce influence employees and their engagement in the retail industry?”

Findings reveal that the growth of e-commerce has necessitated changes in retail stores, leading to the development of new services and adaptations to evolving consumer preferences. Employees have adjusted their roles accordingly. Shifts in customer behaviours, driven by increased access to product information and online ordering, result in reduced interactions with store employees. Additionally, the introduction of new tasks driven by store adaptations elicits mixed responses. Some employees appreciate the increased engagement resulting from the diversity and variety of tasks. However, others feel disconnected from their primary role of assisting customers when assigned logistical and preparatory tasks, leading to decreased engagement. The study uncovers a sense of competition between e-commerce and physical stores as perceived by employees. While some integrate e-commerce as a tool within retail operations, others fear its negative impact, potentially causing downsizing and closure. In summary, this thesis offers valuable insights into the influence of e-commerce on in-store employees and their engagement in the retail industry. The findings highlight the complex dynamics between e-commerce, employees, and customer behaviours, emphasizing positive and negative outcomes. Understanding these influences enables retail managers and organizations to develop strategies that mitigate negative effects and foster employee engagement in an evolving retail landscape.

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1.0 Introduction

The initial chapter of this thesis will introduce the chosen topic of study and provide an overview of both the research problem and the theoretical background. Subsequently, we will present the research gap that we aim to address. Additionally, this chapter will present the research question and this study's purpose, providing readers with a clear understanding of the objectives of our research.

1.1 Choice of subject

The selection of this research topic was a result of conscientious deliberation and thinking, taking into account our individual interests and academic orientations within their respective university master's degree. One of us is pursuing a master's degree in business development, while the other is engaged in a master's program specializing in marketing. The shared interests lie in comprehending human behavior and unraveling the underlying motivations that drive individuals' actions. During the process of refining the focus of this thesis, we considered several crucial factors, including their personal interests, the relevance of the subject matter to their respective degrees, and the feasibility of conducting a comprehensive study within the given timeframe allotted for the master's thesis.

To ensure the research's viability, we explored various options, examining both the business landscape and the specific demographic groups that would be the subjects of investigation for the thesis. We carefully assessed the potential accessibility and availability of relevant industries and individuals for research purposes. After a thorough assessment we determined that the retail industry offered a compelling and pertinent context for their study. It was a domain that captured their attention due to its intriguing dynamics and significant societal impact. While both of us possessed a foundational understanding of the retail industry as consumers, their curiosity was further piqued by insights shared by acquaintances and professional connections. These stimulate a desire to delve deeper into the industry and gain a more nuanced understanding of its inner workings.

We aimed to closely examine employees in the retail store, particularly those who frequently interact with customers. Their focus was on understanding how e-commerce has influenced in-store employees and subsequently their work engagement. We both have a keen interest in e-commerce, the retail industry, and mechanisms behind employee engagement, which led them to explore the connections between these areas. Given the industry's current landscape, e-commerce holds significant relevance. To ensure feasibility in terms of time and resources, the study specifically focused on employees in physical stores. Upon delving deeper into the subject, it became evident that this particular perspective and orientation had not been extensively researched before. This study is expected to enhance the understanding of the connections between e-commerce and employees in the traditional retail industry, with a specific focus on how e-commerce can impact their work engagement.

1.2 Problem background

The retail industry has in the past years undergone significant digital transformation, driven by the increase of e-commerce. For example, technology is often implemented more into the retail

stores and their systems (Mostaghel. et. al. 2022). Business models have changed and tried to adapt to the new demands and shopping has increased extensively in the last years, especially online (Mostaghel. et. al. 2022). It is imperative to comprehend the impact of these changes on various factors. Working in retail today is vastly different compared to a few years ago due to the rapid growth of e-commerce. For instance, within the last four years there has been a noticeable surge in e-commerce, partly attributed to the Covid-19 pandemic (Mashalah, 2022; Salem & Nor, 2020; Sudhakaran, 2022). Data from Statista (2023) demonstrates a significant increase in e-commerce activity during the onset of the pandemic in 2019 and 2020 compared to preceding years.

This overall growth in e-commerce has resulted in various shifts in consumer behavior, with consumers emerging as key drivers behind its continuous evolution (Vakulenko et al., 2019). The changes in customer behaviors driven by e-commerce include an increased emphasis on pre-purchase information search (Cavalinhos et al., 2021; Timoumi et al., 2022; Wolf, 2021), a slight rise in impatience due to expectations of efficiency (Shavitt & Barnes, 2020) and heightened consumer awareness of product costs (Chava et al., 2022).

Both through the changes in customer behavior as well as an effect of the pandemic, e-commerce has significantly impacted traditional stores. Consequently, the evolving role of physical stores has become a suggested area of research (Wolf, 2023). To adapt, many retailers have attempted to integrate e-commerce into their existing stores to gain competitive benefits (Pettersen and Colbjørnsen, 2019). Moreover, the emergence of new e-commerce companies has intensified the competition in terms of service offerings (Jo. et al., 2022). The advancement of e-commerce has also resulted in distinct pricing dynamics between online platforms and physical retail stores (Jo. et al., 2022). While a few studies have explored the effects of e-commerce on specific practices and in-store tasks in traditional retailing (Cavalinhos et al., 2021; Dayarian & Pazour, 2022; Timoumi et al., 2022), they have predominantly focused on consumer or organizational perspectives. Thus, despite the evident impact of e-commerce on the retail industry and traditional stores, studies often overlook the employees working in the store. Hence, there is both an opportunity as well as a need for research examining the perspective of in-store employees.

Employees play a crucial role in traditional retailing and contribute to the overall success of the organization (Kandampully et al., 2018; Manthiou et al., 2020; Pine, 2020; Weber & Chatzopoulos, 2019). Furthermore, these employees have the potential to greatly enhance the customer experience through human interaction (Bolton et al., 2019; Harris, 2007). Additionally, they are instrumental in effectively integrating e-commerce into existing business processes (Kumar & Ayedee, 2021; Rahayu & Day, 2017). However, to maximize their performance, it is desirable for employees to exhibit a certain level of engagement towards their employer and work.

Employee engagement refers to the degree to which an employee is dedicated to and actively engaged in their organization (Anitha, 2014). It offers numerous benefits, including overall happier and more active employees (Meskelis & Whittington, 2020). For an organization to attain success, it is critical to acknowledge and effectively manage the challenge of employee engagement strategies, as it can impact the overall performance of the organization (Zhang. et. al. 2023) Consequently, identifying the factors that contribute to low engagement levels is insufficient; comprehending and exploring how employees perceive their own engagement and its changes is essential for the organization to be able to take appropriate action (Babalola et. al, 2022).

Furthermore, the factors that drive employee engagement levels among employees who are working with customers, in-store employees, are critical for businesses to develop effective strategies to improve the quality of service they provide to their customers. According to Kumar and Pansari (2016), this is to ensure customer satisfaction and be able to stay competitive. To consistently deliver exceptional retail experiences that foster customer loyalty, retailers must nurture engaged employees capable of providing personalized interactions (Meskelis & Whittington, 2020). Failing to do so can lead to significant losses, as disengaged employees pose financial burdens through increased hiring costs and reduced sales due to low job satisfaction and subsequent high turnover rates (Saxena & Singh, 2015).

To conclude, examining the relationship between employee engagement and e-commerce can help businesses identify potential areas for improvement in their customer service operations in the store. Therefore, managers need to understand how employees in traditional retail stores have been influenced by the growth in e-commerce, in order to identify its impact on the employees engagement that has the potential to offer several benefits to both the organization and its customers.

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1.3 Theoretical background and research gaps

E-commerce refers to the online trading of goods and services through internet or electronic networks (Turban et al., 2020). This concept has gained significant popularity in the past few years, driven by the rapid growth of the internet and its increasing utilization in commercial transactions by both consumers and businesses (Turel & Serenko, 2012). Over time, the scope of e-commerce research has expanded to encompass various topics, including online marketplaces, social commerce, mobile commerce, and electronic payment systems (Chen et al., 2020; Huang et al., 2020; Iglesias-Pradas & Acquila-Natale, 2023). Khan (2016) defines e-commerce as the online buying and selling of goods and services, as well as using the internet for price comparison and product research before making a purchase. This definition highlights the significance of information search within the realm of e-commerce, which according to studies by Kumar & Ayodeji (2021), Fouskas et al. (2020) and Cavalinhos et al., (2021) has been positively linked to customers' in-store experiences, retailer perception and overall purchase-process.

The rise of e-commerce has sparked significant transformations for consumers and the overall retail industry. As an example, e-commerce's convenience has raised customer expectations for ease and efficiency, leading to increased impatience (Shavitt & Barnes, 2020). Furthermore, its increase has created more proactive customers who seek information prior to making purchases (Cavalinhos et al., 2021; Timoumi et al., 2022; Wolf, 2021). E-commerce is now widely used in retail, offering opportunities for integration and enhancing the in-store experience to attract customers (Burt & Sparks, 2003). It serves as a platform connecting consumers, businesses, suppliers, and the internet itself (Jain et al., 2021). Studies emphasize the importance of maintaining physical stores alongside e-commerce strategies, as the retail industry has been influenced by e-commerce, impacting customer behavior and expectations (Beckers et al., 2021).

The growth of e-commerce and changes in customer behaviors have prompted transformations in traditional retail stores, impacting employees' tasks and activities. As an example, an omni-channel strategy enables customers to pick up online orders in-store or allows employees to

place orders on their behalf (Dayarian & Pazour, 2022). Furthermore, with the increased use of mobile devices for information gathering before purchases, the role of the salesperson has indirectly changed, as customers rely less on in-store interactions (Cavalinhos et al., 2021). Electronic devices affect customer behaviors by influencing information gathering and cognitive load, with employees potentially easing or exacerbating cognitive load depending on the customer's intention (Wolf, 2023).

E-commerce has reshaped customer interactions in stores, necessitating a shift in employees' approach to secure sales, attributed to customers' access to real-time information and comparative choices (Timoumi et al., 2022). However, it is evident that human interactions by store employees can enhance customer experiences (Bolton et al., 2019; Harris, 2007; Kandampully et al., 2018; Manthiou et al., 2020; Pine, 2020; Weber & Chatzopoulos, 2019). Despite significant changes brought by e-commerce, in-store shopping remains popular, with 43% of consumers choosing it as the preferred channel (PwC, 2023). Therefore, integrating e-commerce with physical stores and leveraging the unique customer experiences created through human interactions by employees is essential for success (Alamro & Tarawneh, 2011; Chuang et al., 2007; Kumar & Ayedee, 2021; Rahayu & Day, 2017; Scupola, 2009).

One way to accomplish great interactions with customers is for the retailer to enhance the engagement of the employee. Employee engagement refers to the level of commitment and active involvement an employee has in their organization and its values (Anitha, 2014). Kahn (1990) introduced the concept of 'personal engagement' as a qualitative research finding, defining it as the utilization and expression of oneself in work roles, both within and beyond expected performance. Employee engagement yields various positive outcomes for organizations, including improved attitudes, job satisfaction, customer satisfaction, and business performance (Byrne, 2016). Studies consistently link employee engagement to lower turnover, increased customer satisfaction and loyalty, improved safety, and higher productivity and profitability (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002). Furthermore, a strong positive relationship between employee engagement and customer satisfaction has been supported by multiple studies (Coffman, 2000; Ellis & Sorensen, 2007; Heintzman & Marson, 2005; Coffman & Gonzalez-Molina, 2002). These findings emphasize the strategic importance of prioritizing employee engagement for organizational success.

There are multiple drivers of employee engagement. Monetary incentives, adequate compensation, hygiene factors, positive feedback, and effective communication are all factors that influence employee engagement, with the effectiveness depending on implementation and contextual factors (DeNisi & Smith, 2014; Demerouti & Cropanzano, 2010; Sparrow & Balain, 2010; Semi, 2022; Byrne, 2016; Saks, 2006; Jiang et al., 2012; Kelliher & Anderson, 2010; Mandler et al., 2021). Implementing an effective engagement strategy can be challenging due to multiple influencing factors (Gupta & Sharma, 2019). Factors such as organizational climate, recognition programs, growth opportunities, leadership styles, and more can impact the success of implementation (Jenkins & Delbridge, 2013). Furthermore, employee engagement is influenced by individual differences (Meskelis & Whittington, 2020; Mohamed et al., 2018). Personal characteristics and attitudes play a crucial role in engagement, impacting performance and productivity (Meskelis & Whittington, 2020; Kumar & Pansari, 2015).

In a store setting, employee engagement can be influenced through effective communication, feedback, and recognition (Zhou & George, 2001). Employee performance and its measurement, such as sales volume, can impact motivation and engagement (Hauwaert et al., 2022; Lyngdoh et al., 2021). The relationship between performance and engagement depends

on how well employees handle setbacks or deviations from expected sales quotas (Lyngdoh et al., 2021). Workload also affects employee emotions, with hectic stores leading to neutrality and slower-paced stores fostering positivity (Klein, 2021). Sales volume and workload impact employee engagement depending on the individual's perception and experiences (Klein, 2021).

E-commerce research has primarily focused on organizational effectiveness and improving customer experiences and satisfaction, while the increased adoption of e-commerce, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, has led to changes in customer behaviors and expectations (Turban et al., 2020; Gomero-Fanny et al., 2021; Agarwal, 2019; Mashalah, 2022; Vakulenko et al., 2019; Shavitt & Barnes, 2020). The impact of e-commerce on traditional retail stores has prompted the study of the changing role of physical stores, hence, there is a need for research focusing on the perspective of store employees. Store employees play a crucial role in enhancing the customer experience and effectively implementing e-commerce within the organization, emphasizing the importance of their engagement in their work (Bolton et al., 2019; Manthiou et al., 2020; Rahayu & Day, 2017). Research has shown that engaged employees contribute to work productivity (Meskelis & Whittington, 2020), job satisfaction (Saxena & Singh, 2015) and customer satisfaction (Ellis and Sorensen, 2007), making employee engagement an essential factor in achieving retail success. The combination of e-commerce, employees in the traditional retail industry and employee engagement, has in prior research, not been studied. Therefore, our thesis aims to make theoretical contributions through a focus on these topics. Thus, this study will examine the influence of e-commerce on traditional stores from the perspective of the employee, as well as look at its impact on their engagement. Engagement that in turn, plays a crucial role in delivering exceptional customer experiences and avoiding financial losses for retailers.

1.4 Research question

In order to perform this research and accomplish its purpose of gaining knowledge and understanding of how e-commerce influences employees and their engagement in the retail industry, the following research question has been constructed.

“How does e-commerce influence employees and their engagement in the retail industry?”

1.5 Purpose

The general purpose of this master thesis is to gain a deeper understanding of how electronic commerce (e-commerce) influences in-store employees and their engagement. Furthermore, the study is conducted through a qualitative method including semi-structured interviews to obtain insights on how employees perceive the influence of e-commerce on their professional role as retail workers in physical stores. The thesis is limited to the traditional retail industry and includes employees with experience of working in different types of retail stores. The questions asked were mostly open ended as the aim was to gather knowledge and nuanced understanding from the interviewees. The objective of this thesis is to expand the understanding of the relationships between e-commerce and employees in the traditional retail industry, and how e-commerce ultimately may influence the engagement in their work.

The primary goal of this study is to propose a conceptual model that elucidates the interrelationships and mutual influences among identified themes and factors. Specifically, it seeks to uncover the aspects resulting from e-commerce that influences employees and their

engagement in physical retail stores. Theoretically, the goal with this study is to contribute to filling the current research gap between the impact of e-commerce on employees working in physical retail stores, from the perspective of the employee. The practical aspiration of this thesis is to provide managers and organizations within the retail industry knowledge of how employees in retail stores are influenced by e-commerce and how in turn it impacts their work engagement. The underlying objective is to highlight the reasons behind the impact of e-commerce on employees, shedding light on both the positive and negative outcomes resulting from this influence, as well as to identify what can be done to mediate the outcomes.

2.0 Methodological assumptions

This chapter is to present our philosophical assumptions and our pre assumptions concerning the research. In addition to this, a research approach and a research design will be presented. Furthermore, arguments and statements on the process to search for the literature concerning the theoretical part of this thesis will be presented.

2.1 Research philosophy

The research philosophy, or paradigm is a type of philosophical framework that guides the researcher to construct the study. There are two different assumptions when it comes to the philosophy in a study; ontology and epistemology (Collins & Hussey, 2014). These two are commonly used in academic research and are different ways to look at the world and how the reader views the concept of knowledge (Wahyuni, 2012). Below will be an explanation of the two philosophical assumptions as well as a connection to this thesis and its authors. We will also explain what philosophy is present during this research and why it suits this study.

2.1.1 Ontology

According to Saunders et al. (2016, p. 124), researchers who seek to develop new knowledge in a specific field are guided by assumptions regarding the appropriate way to conduct research. These assumptions are part of a researcher's research philosophy, which refers to a "system of beliefs and assumptions about the development of knowledge" (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 124). Bell et al. (2019, p. 25) suggest that philosophical considerations and assumptions play a crucial role in shaping how research is carried out and interpreted in business studies. The research philosophy encompasses various dimensions of beliefs and assumptions, including ontology, epistemology, and methodology (Bell et al., 2019, p. 25).

Ontology, as described by Saunders et al. (2016, p. 127), is a philosophical perspective concerned with the nature of reality. In simpler terms, ontology aims to understand what is real and exists, as well as to establish a framework for examining reality (Thomasson, 2015, p. 133-134). The goal of research guided by ontological assumptions is to capture reality and acquire new insights that can lead to valuable knowledge (Thomasson, 2015, p. 141). Two contrasting views regarding the nature of reality are objectivism and constructionism, both of which are relevant to ontology (Bell et al., 2019, p. 26-27).

Objectivism, as an ontological position, holds that reality exists independently of social actors and their influence (Bell et al., 2019, p. 26). Furthermore, objectivism proposes that there is only one social reality that is experienced by all individuals (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 128). In contrast, constructionism is an alternative ontological position that acknowledges subjectivity and the role of social actors in shaping reality (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 130; Bell et al., 2019, p. 27). Unlike objectivism, constructionism emphasises that reality is constructed through the interaction between social actors who share a common interpretation of how reality is perceived (Onuf, 2013, p. 8). Reality is not considered definitive, but rather constantly evolving and subject to revision as beliefs and assumptions regarding social reality shift (Onuf, 2013, p. 3-4).

The ontological position adopted in this thesis is constructionism, as we as authors believe it

is important to consider a diverse range of perspectives, experiences, and reflections on how social actors perceive their reality (Onuf, 2013, p. 7). Rather than being restricted to an objectivist view of reality as independent from social influence (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 130). The research question and purpose of the thesis were developed based on this ontological stance. The central objective is to gain a deeper understanding of how e-commerce has impacted store employees in the retail industry and, in particular, how this has affected their engagement. The ontological stance guided the research design and focus of our study.

2.1.2 Epistemology

The field of epistemology is concerned with the development of knowledge and how to determine what constitutes acceptable new knowledge (Bell et al., 2019, p.29; Saunders et al., 2016, p.127). The ontological position is a crucial starting point as it determines the subsequent epistemological position of how knowledge will be obtained based on the view of reality (Bell et al., 2019, p.29). In epistemology, there are two positions that determine how knowledge about reality is developed: positivism and interpretivism (Bell et al., 2019, p.30). Embracing objectivism as an ontological position enables researchers to obtain knowledge from observations or various measurements that capture objective reality (Bell et al., 2019). Furthermore, the epistemological position derived from objectivism is also referred to as positivism (Bell et al., 2019, p.30). Since this study is based on constructivist ontology, the philosophical stance of positivism, that involves working with observable social reality to produce law-like generalizations (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 135) is discarded.

Saunders et al (2016, p. 140) highlight that interpretivism differs from positivism in that it emphasises that humans create meanings, and are therefore different from physical phenomena. In other words, humans are a source of new insights and knowledge based on interpretations of their own reality (Saunders et al., 2016, p.140). Unlike positivism, interpretivism is considered complex and cannot be limited to "law-like generalisations" when creating new knowledge (Al-Ababneh, 2020, p. 80). Interpretivism is based on the ontological position of constructionism and seeks to obtain profound understandings and interpretations of the nature of subjective reality (Bell et al., 2019, p. 31; Saunders et al., 2016, p. 140).

Rather than generalising empirical findings, interpretivism underscores the importance of embracing the different interpretations and realities of a diverse group of people, contributing to a richer understanding of the research object (Saunders et al., 2016, p.140). Bell et al. (2019, p. 31) suggest that knowledge based on interpretivism can be gained through observations or interviewing people, focusing on essential follow-up questions such as "how" and "why". The ultimate aim is to elaborate on the answers, leading to a further in-depth understanding of which aspects shape the participants' perceived reality (Bell et al.,2019,p.31).

In this thesis, we adopt an interpretivist position, as we believe that knowledge development is a social process that involves the experiences of social actors and their interpretations of reality. Our research question and thesis purpose are designed to enable a range of possible explanations, answers, and reflections from employees, who we view as key contributors to knowledge development in this area (Saunders et al., 2016, p.140). By engaging with our interviewees and collecting their personal experiences and reactions to e-commerce in the retail industry, we have gained valuable insights and knowledge of the phenomenon, as well as its impact on employees and their engagement.

2.2 Research Approach

Conducting research can involve various approaches depending on the impact that previous theories have on the research subject (Saunders et al., 2016, p.144). There are three different approaches that can be utilised: deductive, inductive, and abductive. The deductive approach starts with previous theories and aims to collect data, generate hypotheses based on those theories, and subsequently test them to either verify or reject their validity (Saunders et al., 2016, p.144). This approach also takes a broad set of general assumptions to generalise the findings into specific populations or contexts (Ketokivi & Mantere, 2010, p.316; Saunders et al., 2016, p.144-145). To generalise accurately, the sample size must be chosen carefully and be sufficient (Saunders et al., 2016, p.146). Deductive research seeks to find explanations regarding causal links and correlations between variables (Saunders et al., 2016, p.146). Previous research and theories are used to create hypotheses that will be tested through a well-structured methodology and the use of quantitative data (Saunders et al., 2016, p.145-146).

The inductive approach collects qualitative data through methods such as interviews, allowing for exploration of potential themes and patterns in the research phenomenon (Saunders et al., 2016, p.147). The focus is often a smaller sample to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' views, interpretations, and perceptions on a specific research topic (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 147). Induction has the advantage of not being limited to a strict methodology and allows for the collection of data that leads to more explanatory and nuanced findings on how or why a specific phenomenon is perceived or interpreted as it is (Saunders et al., 2016, p.147). Consequently, a new theory or conceptual framework can be established based on the findings of the study (Saunders et al., 2016, p.147).

Lastly, the abduction approach incorporates elements of both induction and deduction by using both theory and data collection (Saunders et al., 2016, p.148). Generalizations are derived from both general and specific observations, and data is used to explain factors within conceptual frameworks, followed by the investigation of the validity of the findings (Saunders et al., 2016, p.148). Abduction is described as "collecting data to explore a phenomenon, identify themes and patterns, generate a new or modify an existing theory, and subsequently test it through additional data collection" (Saunders et al., 2016, p.145).

In this thesis, we have adopted and implemented the inductive approach. Our research question and purpose aim to seek a profound understanding of a complex research phenomenon and why employees perceive things the way they do. Therefore, our study values the experiences and knowledge of a smaller sample to establish a deeper and more conceptual understanding of the phenomenon. Saunders et al. (2016, p.145) identifies this as fundamental in the inductive research approach. This research practice requires a methodology that enables the collection of data providing a richness of interpretations, views, and experiences, which contributed to the creation of the conceptual framework. The conceptual framework allowed for a presentation and explanation of the research findings.

2.3 Research design

A research design is aimed at justifying technical decisions related to a research project (Blaikie, 2009). It constitutes one of the three fundamental elements that the researchers must consider during the research process, alongside ontology and epistemology (Sobh & Perry, 2006). When conducting research, researchers can utilize two primary methodologies: qualitative, which for instance involves using words as data, and quantitative, which involves

using numerical data for analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013). As this thesis has adopted an interpretivism position, believing that knowledge development is a social process, using a quantitative study is ruled out. This is because of quantitative methods' failure to consider the impact of people's social reality on certain research subjects (Bell et al., 2019, p.181), which goes against the position of interpretivism. On the contrary, qualitative methods generate knowledge through subjective interpretations of people's realities and contribute greater depth to data collection (Bell et al., 2019, p.356).

Qualitative research methods are commonly associated with constructionism, interpretivism, and the inductive approach to research (Saunders et al., 2016, p.168). The objective of these methods is to gather data based on individual reflections, interactions, and perceptions, ultimately leading to the development of a conceptual framework that explains patterns and themes related to a specific phenomenon (Saunders et al., 2016, p.168). Data can be collected through various means, such as semi-structured interviews or observations of individuals within specific contextual settings (Bell et al., 2019, p.357). While qualitative data collection methods provide in-depth and detailed data, there are criticisms suggesting that these methods are excessively subjective and challenging to generalize the findings (Bell et al., 2019, p.374). Additionally, the subjective nature of qualitative research poses difficulties in replicating the study for other researchers (Bell et al., 2019, p.374).

Another approach is mixed-method research, which involves the combination of quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques and analytical procedures (Saunders et al., 2016, p.169). By integrating both qualitative and quantitative methods, researchers can complement each other and generate a more comprehensive set of data (Saunders et al., 2016, p.171). However, mixed-methods research presents challenges due to inconsistencies in research philosophies, particularly in terms of ontological and epistemological stances (Bell et al., 2019).

In this thesis, we have opted for a qualitative approach as our research method. This method allowed for a comprehensive data collection process, leading to a deeper understanding of the research topic, which aligns with the purpose of our study. By consistently adhering to chosen philosophical assumptions and approaches, our research design has established a solid foundation. Throughout the entire research process, this qualitative research design has guided us and ultimately facilitated the development of a conceptual model and the provision of answers to our research question.

2.4 Preconceptions

During the process of conducting research, both qualitative and quantitative, it is important for researchers to acknowledge and recognize their own pre-existing knowledge and preconceptions (Nyström & Dahlberg, 2001). It is possible that our preconceptions and pre-understandings will primarily influence the types of questions posed during interviews and shape the subsequent discussions pertaining to the analysis of the obtained results. By acknowledging the potential impact of our own perspectives and ensuring a reflexive approach, researchers can strive for a more comprehensive exploration of the research topic.

In this study we have a limited but basic knowledge about e-commerce, as we both have used it several times when shopping as consumers and customers at physical stores. One of us as authors have at one point in their career worked in retail and are aware of how it is to be an

employee at a retail store. In addition to this both of us have studied both e-commerce and employee engagement at Umeå University, something that has given them a good amount of knowledge of the subjects. The knowledge and preconception of employee engagement and the e-commerce industry was on a level which made it possible for us to create an appropriate interview guide. In addition to this both of us have done a master thesis before this one, and were therefore prepared and skilled in how to produce and perform a study in this range and capacity.

As business administration students with prior knowledge in our research field, we acknowledged the presence of our pre-understandings. Our education has exposed us to various theories on retailing, employee behavior, and customer behavior in multiple courses. Consequently, we entered this study with our own assumptions and beliefs about what should be included, particularly in our theoretical framework. However, to challenge our assumptions and ensure the inclusion of well-established theories in these research areas, we conducted an extensive literature review across all relevant fields. This process guided us toward scholarly accepted theories and concepts that we subsequently incorporated into our work.

While our pre-understandings and personal interest in these business areas played a role in selecting our research topic and formulating our research question, we remained vigilant of potential biases. In addition to our acquired knowledge and existing theories on retail and employee behavior, we both possessed personal experiences with e-commerce as consumers. These experiences shaped our perceptions of this specific retail area. To mitigate potential biases, we dedicated a significant amount of time to reviewing literature across all our research areas. This allowed us to broaden our knowledge base and, more importantly, adopt a critical mindset towards our preconceptions, a crucial aspect throughout the research process as emphasised by Alvesson and Sandberg (2022, p.406).

3.0 Theoretical framework

This chapter will review previous research. It will look at different important and relevant areas that research shows are connected to the major subjects, e-commerce and employee engagement, in this thesis. The relationships between them and its connection to the theoretical framework will be presented and discussed at the end of the chapter.

3.1 E-commerce

3.1.1 Conceptualization of e-commerce

E-commerce can be described as the buying and selling of goods and services over the internet or other electronic networks (Turban et al., 2020). The concept has been around for over two decades and has grown in popularity, particularly in the past few years (Turban et al., 2020). The emergence of e-commerce as a research field can be traced back to the late 1990s when the internet began to gain widespread popularity (Brynjolfsson & Smith, 2000). According to Turel and Serenko (2012), e-commerce research has been driven by the rapid growth of the internet and the increasing use of electronic commerce by consumers and businesses.

In recent years, the field of e-commerce has expanded to include a wide range of topics, such as online marketplaces, social commerce, mobile commerce, and electronic payment systems (Chen et al., 2020; Huang et al., 2020; Iglesias-Pradas & Acquila-Natale, 2023). According to Lee and Lin (2005), e-commerce can be classified into two main categories: business-to-consumer (B2C) and business-to-business (B2B) e-commerce. B2C e-commerce refers to the buying and selling of goods and services between businesses and individual consumers, while B2B describes the buying and selling of goods and services between businesses (Lee & Lin, 2005). In this thesis we will only be focusing on e-commerce that is aimed towards customers.

Wigand (1997, p. 2) characterises e-commerce as any form of economic activity managed through electronic connections. The authors Damanpour and Damanpour (2001) describe e-commerce as the online business activities that leverage internal and external relationships to generate value and capitalise on market opportunities arising from the dynamics of the interconnected economy. Niranjanamurthy et al. (2013) characterise e-commerce as the facilitation of the process of buying and selling various goods, including electronic items and a wide range of other products. In addition, Khan (2016) defines the concept as “*Electronic commerce, or e-commerce, is the buying and selling of goods and services on the Internet. Other than buying and selling, many people use the Internet as a source of information to compare prices or look at the latest products on offer before making a purchase online or at a traditional store*”. Important to note, is that this definition specifically states information search on the internet as part of e-commerce. Providing customers with sufficient information about products and services is therefore crucial in both e-commerce and traditional retail.

Studies within e-commerce have concluded the importance of information about products and the quality of the information for enhancing the customers’ satisfaction and value-creation through its usefulness and convenience (Kumar & Ayodeji, 2021). Additionally, adequate information can be crucial for the customers’ impression of a retail website and trust towards the brand (Fouskas et al., 2020). Additionally, offering customers the opportunity to conduct an information search, through adequate amounts of information presented on the internet, has been shown to positively impact the customers experience in the store (Cavalinhos et al., 2021; Roggeveen & Sethuraman, 2020). According to a study by Timoumi et al., 2022, consumers tend to primarily use online channels for information search in the pre-purchase stage of their journey, particularly when the retailer adds more online channels to a multichannel customer process.

The main advantage of providing information online is that the customer is able to do information searches through the use of the Internet, both easily and when needed. Consequently, this has the potential to affect how prepared the customer feels at the time of purchase which in turn can affect the customers' overall perception of the retailer (Roggeveen

& Sethuraman, 2020). Given this background and the overall proven importance of information search as a commonly used part of e-commerce, Kahn's (1990) definition of e-commerce will be the basis for this thesis.

3.1.2 Customers' response to e-commerce

The emergence of e-commerce has triggered a wide range of transformations affecting both consumers and the retail industry. Consequently, these changes have elicited diverse responses from customers. Today, however, it can be argued that the continuous growth in e-commerce is partially driven by consumers themselves (Vakulenko et al., 2019). Studies have found that before the Covid-19 pandemic, young consumers opted more for online shopping, while older consumers have now joined e-commerce as an effect of it, thus, purchasing preferences have shifted (Nistor, 2021, p. 160; Sudhakaran, 2022). Furthermore, research also demonstrates that the pandemic shifted consumers' behaviors and attitudes toward e-commerce that consequently have led to its growth (Mashalah, 2022; Salem & Nor, 2020; Sudhakaran, 2022).

This change in customer responses to e-commerce has led to an overall change in retail as well as the practices used in the industry in order to keep up. Furthermore, as a rapidly evolving field, several current and future trends are shaping the future of it. One such trend is the rise of mobile commerce (m-commerce), which refers to the buying and selling of goods and services using mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets (Huang et al., 2020). According to Huang et al. (2020), m-commerce is expected to grow rapidly in the coming years, driven by the increasing use of mobile devices and the availability of mobile apps that enable easy access to e-commerce sites. Another trend is the rise of social commerce, which refers to the buying and selling of goods and services through social media platforms. In a study by Chen et al. (2020), the authors suggest that social commerce has the potential to revolutionise e-commerce by integrating social media with e-commerce, thereby enhancing the shopping experience for consumers.

A further trend is online-to-offline (O2O) commerce combines online and offline channels, which means bringing online consumers into "real-world" stores or using the online channel to drive offline sales (Yao et al., 2022). One way to accomplish this is by using omni- and multi-channels (Iglesias-Pradas & Acquila-Natale, 2023). According to Timoumi et al. (2022) customers that are users of omni-channels when shopping, i.e. use multiple channels during their shopping journey, have been found to be of more value to the retailer as they contribute to a large volume of the total sales.

According to Vakulenko et al. (2019) the customer experience within e-commerce is shaped by the various service encounters, or touchpoints, that collectively form the intricate customer journey. There are three touch points which, according to the authors, consist of delivery options designed to the targeted segment, constant improvement of innovative service tools and a holistic perspective of the entirety of the process. Furthermore, Chava et al. (2022) states that e-commerce platforms today tend to offer a wide range of choices, as they can aggregate products from multiple vendors and sellers. This means that consumers have access to a more diverse selection of products, information and thus, can find what they need without having to visit a store (Chava et al., 2022). Similarly, Chawla and Kumar (2022) observed that factors such as the availability of "cash on delivery option (COD)," comprehensive information on the corporate website of the e-commerce entity, and an efficient grievance/complaint resolution mechanism are three critical elements that contribute to building consumers' trust in e-commerce transactions.

Generally, e-commerce offers a greater degree of convenience in shopping, which has impacted the customers' expectations of ease and efficiency when shopping, which has resulted in more impatience in customers (Shavitt & Barnes, 2020). Additionally, the increase in e-commerce has in addition to this created more active customers that often look up the product or service beforehand in order to collect information (Cavalinhos et al., 2021; Timoumi et al., 2022; Wolf, 2021).

3.1.3 The physical stores' response to e-commerce; employee impact

Today, the use of e-commerce in different forms is something more frequently used in retail. According to a study on the effects of e-commerce on traditional retailing, the authors concluded that due to the innovative nature of e-commerce, stores have the opportunity to integrate it in order to use it to their advantage or enhance the experience in the store in order to attract customers (Burt & Sparks, 2003). Additionally, e-commerce can be used between different actors such as consumers, businesses but also suppliers or even the internet itself (Jain et al. 2021). Several studies have drawn a similar conclusion and emphasised the importance of continuing use of the physical stores even when a company implements an e-commerce strategy. According to Backers et al., (2021) the physical store setting has been significantly influenced by the emergence of e-commerce, in the retail industry. The authors claim that this influence can, among other factors, be attributed to alterations in customer behavior and expectations (Beckers et al., 2021).

A study on Norwegian booksellers by Pettersen and Colbjørnsen (2019) revealed that the stores performing the best in the international marketplace are those combining physical and digital assets, for instance through the omni-channel model. This is due to the difficulty for competitors to mimic it which gives the store a competitive advantage (Iglesias-Pradas & Acquila-Natale, 2023, p. 663-664; Pettersen and Colbjørnsen, 2019). In a study by Zimmerman et al. (2019) the effect of m-commerce and other similar functions of smartphones, was examined on the sales in stores. The study concluded the effect to be generally positive when the phone simplifies the shopping experience (Zimmerman et al., 2019).

Many changes and transformation of practices and tasks in traditional retail stores has materialised as a result of the growth of e-commerce and the subsequent change of customer behaviors. This has led to a necessary adaptation by physical stores where changes have been made in employees' tasks and activities in the store. According to a study by Dayarian & Pazour (2022), the influence of e-commerce, specifically through the use of an omni-channel strategy, has led to opportunities for customers to pick up their online order in the store, or for the employees to make online orders for the customer. According to Cavalinhos et al., (2021) due to an increase in customers' use of mobile-devices that can provide the customer with information that they need for their decision-making before a purchase, the role of the salesperson in a store has indirectly changed in the past years. As the customer can access more information, having an interaction with the store employees becomes less important, consequently impacting the overall need for the salesperson (Cavalinhos et al., 2021). Stated by Wolf (2023) the use of electronic devices has impacted the customer behaviors through information gathering associated with cognitive efforts. This has in turn affected the customers' purchase behaviors and attempts to lower the cognitive load, especially in circumstances where the customer uses the mobile device in the store (Wolf, 2023). The conclusion that can be made from this is that the employee in this case can both ease or worsen the cognitive load of the customer, depending on the customer itself and their intention with visiting the store.

Similarly, Timoumi et al. (2022) stated that e-commerce has led to a change in how stores have to work with the customer interactions in order to win sales. This is mainly due to the customers' access to information and the ability to compare available choices in different stores, in real time (Timoumi et al., 2022). However, the authors in the study exclusively focus on the digital part of sales and propose a cross-channel strategy, there is thus little focus on the actual work in store and how it can affect interactions with the consumer (Timoumi et al., 2022). Especially how the employees have the ability to improve customer experiences through human interactions (Bolton et al., 2019; Harris, 2007; Kandampully et al., 2018; Manthiou et al., 2020; Pine, 2020; Weber & Chatzopoulos, 2019). A change in customer experience has the potential to, in turn, affect the purchase behavior of the customer (Hult et al, 2019). Additionally, according to a survey by PwC (2023) 43 % of consumers choose in-store shopping as the most popular shopping channel, followed by 34% using mobile phones and 23% through computers. Thus, despite big changes brought by e-commerce in traditional retailing, both for the physical store and its employees, the store should not give up. Instead, use strategies that combine e-commerce with the store in order to gain competitive advantages (Iglesias-Pradas & Acquila-Natale, 2023, p. 663-664; Pettersen and Colbjørnsen, 2019). As well as encouraging engagement among its employees that combined with human interactions, ultimately create unique customer experiences (Bolton et al., 2019).

3.2 Employee engagement

3.2.2 Conceptualization of employee engagement

Employee engagement can be broadly characterised as the extent to which an employee is committed to and actively involved in their organization and its beliefs (Anitha, 2014). In his groundbreaking qualitative research conducted in 1990, Kahn (1990) introduced the concept of 'personal engagement,' which he defined; *“The harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles; in engagement people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during in-role and extra-role performance”*. According to Kahn (1990), engaged employees go beyond mere participation and actively employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally while performing their roles. He further identified three psychological conditions - namely, meaningfulness, safety, and availability, that distinguish between engaged and disengaged employees (Khan, 1990).

Progressing in a different direction, Maslach et al., (2001) presented an alternative conceptualization of employee engagement and described it as; the opposite of burnout. Based on the research conducted by the authors, it was determined that there are six specific work situations that can either contribute to burnout or promote engagement among employees (Maslach et al., 2001). These situations include workload, control over one's work, rewards and recognition, the presence of a supportive community and social network, the perception of fairness within the organization, and alignment with personal values (Maslach et al., 2001). Building upon these ideas, Schaufeli, Salanova, et al. defined employee engagement as a state of mind in the work context that is characterised by positive feelings, fulfilment, and a deep sense of involvement, as well as traits such as vigour and dedication in one's work. A more recent study by Kumar and Pansari (2014) characterised employee engagement as a multidimensional construct that encompasses various facets of employees' attitudes and behaviors towards the organization.

The antecedents to employee engagement can be categorised into three constructs; employee-focused, job-focused, and organization-focused factors (Chandi & Rahman, 2020). According

to Chandi and Rahman (2020) employee-focused constructs encompass attitudinal and behavioral preferences, affective/cognitive state, traits, resources, and overall well-being. Job-focused constructs primarily relate to specific job aspects, such as autonomy, job control, and cognitive job demands. The authors continue to state organization-focused constructs as a representation of the general organisational philosophy, including management commitment to service quality, development opportunities, and high-performance work practices (Chandi & Rahman, 2020).

3.2.3 Win-win: potential outcomes of Employee Engagement

There are several potential effects or outcomes as a result of employee engagement and can include benefits for both the organization due to positive attitude and job satisfaction as well the customers through customer satisfaction and engagement. In essence, employee engagement is seen as a highly desirable state that organisations strive to cultivate in their workforce, as it is believed to lead to better business results and overall success (Byrne, 2016). Krishnan (2021) examined employee engagement characterised by full commitment and emotional investment in work. The findings demonstrated that engaged employees are more likely to pursue personal objectives while contributing to the organization's overall success (Krishnan, 2021). Furthermore, employee engagement is gaining more recognition due to its ability to promote individual well-being as well as performance, which ultimately enhances a company's competitiveness (Kwon & Park 2019).

Furthermore, research has consistently shown that employee engagement, as measured by factors such as involvement and enthusiasm, is linked to various organisational outcomes. For example, Harter, Schmidt, and Hayes (2002) found that employee engagement is associated with lower turnover rates, improved customer satisfaction and loyalty, enhanced safety, and increased productivity and profitability. Moreover, multiple studies have demonstrated a strong positive relationship between employee engagement and customer satisfaction (Coffman, 2000; Ellis and Sorensen, 2007; Heintzman and Marson, 2005; Coffman and Gonzalez-Molina, 2002). This evidence underscores the importance of employee engagement in driving organisational success and highlights the need for organisations to prioritise employee engagement as a strategic priority.

Engaged employees are more productive, creative, and committed to their organization, leading to increased job satisfaction, improved customer satisfaction and subsequently higher profitability (Harter et al., 2002; Saxena & Singh, 2015). In particular, research by Maslach et al. (2001), Saks (2006), and Shuck et al. (2011) has indicated that companies with higher levels of employee engagement enjoy a lower turnover rate compared to those with lower engagement levels. This implies that employees who feel valued and connected to their organisation are less likely to seek employment opportunities elsewhere, and are more likely to remain committed to their current employer. Therefore, although there is no guarantee that engagement automatically leads to better performance, it is still essential for companies to focus on as a way of reducing turnover and keeping the employees happier.

Additionally, employee engagement has been shown for its direct impact on customer engagement or their indirect influence through the mediating role of employee engagement (Kumar & Pansari, 2016). There are six following factors that have been identified as influences on customer engagement due to employee engagement; exploring factors such as employee customer orientation, customer service-focused job crafting, personal resource

utilisation, customer-perceived autonomy and job control, and organisational-level improvements can yield insights into the mechanisms driving employee and customer engagement (Kumar & Pansari, 2016). According to Tremblay (2022) frontline employees are more likely to exceed customer expectations when they engage in behaviors that extend beyond their assigned roles, such as assisting their colleagues. However, research indicates that an excessive level of helping behavior can deplete personal resources and lead to heightened role overloads, as a result, it has the potential to negatively impact customer outcomes. Hence, the customers should remain the focus even for the most engaged employee.

According to a study by Trivellas et al. (2010) motivation helps change the mindsets or attitudes of employees but may not necessarily elevate their levels of job performance. In the case of a store employee there may be external factors that influence their performance that are beyond their control. However, other studies have questioned this conclusion and states instead that there is a positive link between employee engagement and performance (Carter et al., 2018; Ho et al., 2011). Thus, there are evident reasons for why employee engagement is something that is important for a company's success and development. When employees are engaged, they are more inclined to display proactive actions that result in improved job performance (Saks 2019; Krishnan. N. 2021). Engaging employees has a positive impact on job performance by encouraging psychological empowerment, job satisfaction, and organisational commitment. To conclude, studies reveal that engaged employees typically engage in better job crafting behaviors that ultimately lead to enhanced job performance (Robertson et al., 2019).

3.2.3 Drivers; the forces behind Employee Engagement

A number of drivers that can be used by organisations have been identified with the purpose to increase the levels of engagement among the employees. In order to enhance employee engagement within retail, top management must systematically evaluate the factors that drive engagement and develop appropriate strategies to promote and amplify engagement levels (Choudhury & Mohanty, 2019). Additionally, the drivers can both be external and internal, while the external drivers are factors such as environmental changes, customer - and market expectations, the internal drivers are rooted in the attitude and commitment of the individual (George et al., 2021).

In literature, various forms of rewards such as pay-for-performance and monetary incentives have been studied in relation to motivation, engagement and performance of both the organization and the respective individual. Monetary incentives can have different effects depending on the context as well as the employee, with studies even suggesting a difference in impact of monetary incentives between genders (Sittenthaler & Mohnen, 2020). Research by DeNisi and Smith (2014) showed a positive relationship between monetary incentives and employee engagement and performance, with the effect being stronger for tasks that require greater cognitive effort. While monetary incentives can initially boost engagement, it is important to recognize that their impact on long-term engagement may be limited. Monetary incentives serve as a means for organisations to motivate employees to maintain high performance and conform to specific behaviors or tasks (Qomariah et al., 2022). However, poorly designed monetary structures can hinder efforts to foster engagement within organisations (Demerouti & Cropanzano, 2010; Sparrow & Balain, 2010). Moreover, when individuals feel that their salary falls short of meeting their essential needs, money becomes the primary motivator until those basic needs are fulfilled (Semi, 2022).

In a study by Bakker and Demerouti (2008), it was found that job resources such as clear communication and feedback have a positive impact on employee engagement. Similarly, Demerouti & Cropanzano, (2010), Saks (2006) and Sparrow & Balain, (2010) presented that external sources of feedback such as positive feedback, recognition and encouragement have been conceptually linked to intrinsic motivations that can lead to engagement. In a study by Gino and Schweitzer (2008), it was found that employees who received positive feedback from their managers were more likely to be proactive and engaged in their work.

Further types of drivers are social and hygiene incentives to make the employee thrive at work. Hygiene refers to factors such as company standards and management, technical supervision, working environment, and relations within the organization and higher management (Zhang et al., 2020). Harter et al. (2002) showed that employee perceptions of their organisation's mission and purpose, and their relationships with coworkers and supervisors are also important antecedents of engagement at the workplace. This is supported by the research by (Byrne, 2016) who concluded that the environment the employee is in has to a large extent to do with both their performance and their engagement.

The people who are around you at work have an impact on how you see the environment and can have an effect on how you behave at work. Positive and hard working people are something that have a tendency to make other coworkers perform similarly (Tuong et. al. 2021). This conclusion has been drawn by Demerouti & Cropanzano, (2010) and Sparrow & Balain, (2010) who found that external sources of feedback such as sincere recognition and encouragement have been conceptually linked to intrinsic motivations that can lead to engagement. In a study by Gino and Schweitzer (2008), it was found that employees who received positive feedback from their managers were more likely to be proactive and engaged in their work, as well as more likely to seek out new opportunities for learning and development.

Company policies and practices have the potential to contribute to higher levels of engagement (Jiang et al., 2012). However, the effect of standardised practises can be mixed, depending on the degree and environment of the standardisation (Mandler et al., 2021) whilst the employee may find support from the standardisation, there is a risk that it takes away focus from dynamics of a moment and shifts the focus on the actual standard procedure instead (Mandler et al., 2021). In the case of a store, the risk would be that the employee focuses on standardised sales-protocols, rather than the specific encounter and interaction with the customer. Thus, it can reduce the employees' encouragement to take initiative and take on work beyond their role. According to Kelliher and Anderson (2010) policies can have both positive and negative effects on employee engagement, depending on how they are implemented and managed.

To summarise, the drivers of employee engagement are many. Monetary incentives have the potential to increase employee engagement (DeNisi & Smith, 2014). However it depends on the use of the incentive and primarily influences the employee more short-term. Additionally, monetary compensation is a basic prerequisite for engagement (Demerouti & Cropanzano, 2010; Sparrow & Balain, 2010). When the salary does not meet the individual's needs, their primary focus will be on money and little effort and engagement beyond that, until that need is met (Semi, 2022). Hygiene factors such as company environment and social relations within the organization, are likewise important for engagement (Byrne, 2016). Additionally, feedback, positive encouragement and communication have a potential positive impact on employee engagement (Demerouti & Cropanzano, 2010; Saks, 2006; Sparrow & Balain, 2010). Human resource policies and practices can have a two-fold effect on engagement, depending on how it is used and the context of which it is used (Jiang et al., 2012; Kelliher & Anderson, 2010; Mandler et al., 2021).

3.2.5 Employee Engagement; its practical use

Employee engagement is a complex part of business, and many different factors have an effect on it. Organisations are placing more emphasis on engaging their employees and this trend is becoming more widespread globally (Tanwar, 2017). However, many organisations face difficulties when it comes to implementing a strategy that supports employee engagement due to the number of aspects and circumstances that can influence it (Gupta & Sharma, 2019). For instance, factors like the organization climate, employee recognition and rewards programs, opportunities for growth and development, leadership styles and more can all have an impact on the success of the implementation (Jenkins & Delbridge, 2013). Additionally, the integration of this type of strategy can result in different outcomes due to differences in the individual employees (Jenkins & Delbridge, 2013).

The level of employee engagement is influenced by the individual differences of each employee (Meskelis & Whittington, 2020; Mohamed et al., 2018). Additionally, research has revealed that there is a noteworthy association between an employee's emotions, self-confidence, and their level of engagement at work (Sriwidadi et. al., 2022). This indicates that an employee's personal characteristics, attitudes, and beliefs can play a crucial role in their level of engagement, which can ultimately impact their performance and productivity at work (Meskelis & Whittington., 2020; Kumar & Pansari, 2015). Employees who are engaged are often proactive, extroverted and see themselves as an important part of the company (Kumar & Pansari, 2016). Research also suggests that these employees work more efficiently, which can lead to minimised personal cost for the company (Kumar & Pansari, 2016). Some research suggests that there is a possibility that an employee's engagement at the workplace is influenced by their personal drive, inclinations, and principles, more than external factors like the policies or management style of the organization (Meskelis & Whittington, 2020). Thus, one way for an organisation to impact the engagement of its employees is to focus on the personality traits of the individual, rather than trying to enforce it from the outside (Meskelis & Whittington, 2020).

Furthermore, there are different ways employee engagement can be influenced in a store-setting specifically, which is the contextual focus of this thesis. According to Zhou and George (2001) one practice that can promote employee engagement in a store-setting is effective communication. When employees are well-informed about organisational goals, performance expectations, and their roles within the store, they are more likely to feel valued and engaged. Moreover, regular feedback and recognition for their contributions can also increase employee engagement (Zhou & George, 2001). According to findings by Hauwaert et al. (2022) the performance of an employee can positively influence their motivation and in turn higher levels of engagement, given that the performance is measured and hence, more clear to the individual. Performance, the context of a store employee, can be measured through the sales volume, or so-called sales performance (Lyngdoh et al., 2021).

However, the sales performance of the store employee has the potential to both negatively and positively influence their engagement. This is according to Lyngdoh et al. (2021) depending on how well they are selling and the psychological perspective of the employee, i.e how well they handle setbacks or gains when the sales volume deviates from their expected quota, set either by themselves or the company. Thus, the employee's performance is not always positively related to their engagement in sales, such as in store.

This is further demonstrated by Klein (2021), who claims that the amount of work for a store employee has been proven to influence their emotions - in hectic stores employees often shows neutrality, while they often display more positivity when the store is more slow-paced (Klein, 2021). Some research argues that this indicates a negative relationship between the emotions

of the employee and sales volume (Klein, 2021). However, according to Klein (2021) this conclusion is misleading, as it regards more so to the actual work overload of the employees rather than the number of sales. To conclude, sales volume and work-load will influence the engagement of the employees in various ways, very much depending on how the employee experiences their work and irregularity from expected sales volume.

3.3 Employee engagement and e-commerce

To conclude this theoretical chapter and thoroughly show the theoretical standpoint for this thesis, a description of the relationships between e-commerce and employees, and the importance of their engagement will be given in this subsection. This is to display all the intersections of the subjects, as well as to give a clear idea of what the focus of this study will be and why. E-commerce has generally been studied from a customer- or organisational-oriented approach (Turban et al., 2020). Thus, the main focus of several studies has been to study how e-commerce can be applied by the organization effectively (Gomero-Fanny et al., 2021; Kremez et al., 2019; Propenkova & Nikishin, 2020; Religia et al., 2021; Taher, 2021). Furthermore, much of the research on e-commerce has examined how it can be managed in order to improve customer experiences (Agarwal, 2019; Dandona et al., 2022; Tsagkias et al., 2021). As well as how it can be used to impact the overall customer satisfaction (Habeeb et al., 2021; Kumar & Ayodeji, 2021; Sumrit & Sowijit, 2023; Tsagkias et al., 2021).

There has been an evident increase in e-commerce in the past years, partially due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Mashalah, 2022; Salem & Nor, 2020; Sudhakaran, 2022). Statistics show a palpable spike in e-commerce between the year of 2019 and 2020 at the beginning of the pandemic, compared to the years before that (Statista, 2023). The overall growth in e-commerce throughout the past decades has led to various changes in customer behaviors and it is today evident that consumers are a driving factor behind the continued development of e-commerce (Vakulenko et al., 2019). The changes in customer behaviors has resulted in a more active consumer where information search before a purchase is something becoming more common (Cavalinhos et al., 2021; Timoumi et al., 2022; Wolf, 2021). Additionally, because of the ease of use when shopping online, customers have generally become slightly more impatient due to their expectations of quickness and efficiency (Shavitt & Barnes, 2020). Furthermore, the potential to drive down prices has made consumers more aware of the costs of products (Chava et al., 2022).

These changes in customers' behavior, due to the increase in e-commerce, have had a consequent impact on traditional, so-called brick-and-mortar stores. Due to this, the changing role of the physical store has been a suggested field of study (Wolf, 2023). A frequent route for traditional retailers has been to integrate e-commerce with their existing stores, through and omni- or multichannel strategy, with the benefits of creating a competitive advantage (Iglesias-Pradas & Acquila-Natale, 2023, p. 663-664; Pettersen and Colbjørnsen, 2019). Some studies have examined specific practices and in-store tasks in traditional retailing, as effects of e-commerce (Cavalinhos et al., 2021; Dayarian & Pazour, 2022; Timoumi et al., 2022). However, they have generally been conducted from a consumer- or organisational perspective, thus, there is a need for studies from the perspective of the employee working in the store.

Employees serve an important role in traditional retailing and for the organization as a whole. For instance, store employees have the potential to greatly improve the overall customer experience through human interaction (Bolton et al., 2019; Harris, 2007; Kandampully et al., 2018; Manthiou et al., 2020. Pine, 2020; Weber & Chatzopoulos, 2019). Additionally,

employees provide an important role to how well e-commerce may be used in the existing procedures of the company (Alamro & Tarawneh, 2011; Chuang et al., 2007; Kumar & Ayedee, 2021; Rahayu & Day, 2017; Scupola, 2009). However, in order to perform the best, it is ideal that the employees have some level of engagement aimed towards their employer and their work. The potential benefits of employee engagement are many, including work productivity (Meskelis. S., & Whittington. J.L. 2020; Kumar. V., & Pansari. A. 2015) and job satisfaction within an organization (Harter et al., 2002; Saxena & Singh, 2015). Moreover, employee engagement has been shown to improve customer satisfaction (Coffman, 2000; Ellis and Sorensen, 2007; Heintzman and Marson, 2005; Coffman and Gonzalez-Molina, 2002) and customer engagement (Kumar & Pansari, 2016). In order to consistently deliver an exceptional retail experience that fosters customer loyalty, retailers must cultivate engaged employees who can provide personalised interactions (Meskelis & Whittington, 2020). Without such employees, retailers risk incurring substantial losses. Disengaged employees can be financially burdensome for employers, resulting in increased hiring costs and decreased sales due to low job satisfaction and subsequent low retention rates (Saxena & Singh, 2015).

Given these circumstances, this thesis aims to study the influence of e-commerce on employees in the traditional retail industry, with the basis of an employee-oriented approach in a store setting. A additional focus will be imposed towards the engagement of the employees, that can lead to many recognized benefits for both the organization and the customer.

4.0 Practical Method

The purpose of this chapter is to get a better understanding of how the data was collected and how it was processed. Here the sampling and access to interviewees will be presented in addition to the planning and preparation before them. Furthermore we will explain how the interviews were executed

4.1 Data Characteristics

According to Saunders et al. (2016), research data can be classified into two types: primary data and secondary data. Primary data are specifically collected for a particular study or purpose, involving observing, systematically documenting, analysing, measuring, and attempting to comprehend the behaviors of individuals related to a research phenomenon (Hox & Boeije, 2005). Such data contributes to the overall body of knowledge that can be reused by other researchers, which is known as secondary data (Hox & Boeije, 2005). Secondary data may provide new insights and outcomes in different contexts, as it can be interpreted in ways that differ from its original intention (Saunders et al., 2016). In contrast, when analysing current statistics and historical events, secondary data is deemed more appropriate (Bell et al., 2019, p. 297-300).

Hox and Boeije (2005) highlight the advantages and disadvantages of primary and secondary data. Primary data is advantageous as it adds new information to the research, and can be tailored to the research question, serving the purpose of the study. Thus, primary data refers to data collected specifically for a particular purpose, utilising the most effective tools and procedures suitable for the given task (Hox & Boeije, 2005). The collection of primary data can be to reach different goals and purposes, such as describing contemporary or historical attributes, conducting comparative research, or have the purpose to facilitate learning and teaching (Hox & Boeije, 2005). Primary data is generated by the researcher who maintains control over the design, collection, analysis, and reporting processes, and is typically employed to address specific research questions (Blaikie, 2010). However, collecting primary data requires considerable effort, time, and money, often involving experiments or interviews. On the other hand, secondary data is easier to collect, requires less time and money, and is often stored in data archives or databases, as noted by Hox and Boeije (2005). Nevertheless, secondary data may not be adapted to fit the research question in the same way as primary data. Additionally, depending on where the data is stored, accessing it can be challenging, but this has become less problematic since the advent of the internet (Hox & Boeije, 2005).

As stated by Bell et al. (2019, p. 301-302), accessing secondary data can be difficult, making it challenging to obtain all the information required for a particular study. Moreover, understanding employees' engagement may be proven difficult through the use of secondary data. Therefore, this thesis utilises primary data as its primary source to gain a deeper understanding of how e-commerce has influenced the engagement of store employees in the retail industry. Although some forms of engagement in this context potentially can be tracked, such as improved performance and productivity, it might not be feasible to gather all the information needed from different sources, as well as knowing if the performance is a direct effect of engagement and not other various factors. Additionally, by collecting primary data we ensure a high level of trustworthiness and quality. Consequently, this thesis collected data through interviews with employees who work in retail stores.

4.2 Data Collection

4.2.1 Planning the Interviews and Designing the Interview Guide

According to Bell et al. (2019, p. 436-437), interviews can be structured to different degrees, from highly formal and standardised to informal without predetermined questions. Semi-structured interviews fall between the two, where there is still a structure and some overall themes, but the questions may vary depending on the interviewee's responses (Bell et al., 2019, p. 436). To explore predetermined topics and themes while allowing for changes depending on the conversation flow, this thesis conducted semi-structured interviews. This approach allowed for emphasis on certain parts of the interview depending on the interviewees' responses, while disregarding questions that were irrelevant given the individual's answers. The adaptability of this approach was necessary for understanding the interviewees' perceptions and reasoning, which is crucial to the objective of this thesis. By conducting semi-structured interviews, this study created room for adjusting questions depending on each individual's responses, thus increasing the possibility of achieving an in-depth understanding of the employees involved in the study.

The main objective for this thesis is to get a deeper understanding of how e-commerce has changed employees' engagement at work. We have conducted interviews with people who work in retail today and have at least one or more years of experience to ensure we collect data that is relevant and can be seen as trustworthy and accurate. According to Bell et al. (2019, p. 439), an interview guide is used to provide a framework for the study's themes. In the case of a semi-structured interview, it is particularly important to develop an interview guide to focus on the study's most important areas, which are designed to answer the research question (Bell et al., 2019, p. 440). The themes should be based on relevant theories and literature that are relevant to the research topic. If the themes are not properly selected, the interview may lack direction (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 402). Additionally, the themes should be arranged in a logical order that complements each other (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 402).

The interview in our thesis (see Appendix 1) starts with more general questions about the participants' experience in the retail industry as well as their work tasks. The purpose of this was to set the frame of the interview, gain insights in their experiences and work as well as build confidence with the respondent, which according to Bell (2019, p. 439) is essential. The subsequent questions deal with the participants' awareness and opinion of e-commerce, both in the personal as well as professional life. The questions were open-ended and because it was a semi-structured interview we also asked follow up questions when necessary. This was to gain insights into their perception of e-commerce which is the focal point of this study. The following questions regard how the store, as well as themselves, practically work with e-commerce. Additionally, we ask if they have perceived a change in their work and customers' behaviors due to e-commerce. The next section of the interview guide manages the participants' engagement towards their work. This to establish why and what makes them more engaged in their job. The next questions deal with different drivers of engagement and how the employees perceive how their employer attempts to engage them. Towards the end of the interview guide the questions are about specific types of drivers of engagement, as well as if the participants themselves think that their engagement has an influence on their performance. We aimed to give the employee ample amount of time to think and answer the question. We always waited a couple of seconds after their answer to see if they had any more thoughts, and often during this time they added something more to their answer. There is a consistent logic throughout the guide to begin with more open questions and then narrow it down to more specific aspects and elements of both e-commerce and employee engagement.

To evaluate our interview guide we had our first and second draft evaluated by our supervisor through emails as well as a personal meeting. We then revised the guide according to received communication and feedback. To pre-test the revised draft further we asked the questions to fellow students to make sure it could be understood and give further insights in how the questions could be perceived. The purpose of this assessment was to create an effective and easily comprehensible interview guide that is appropriately designed to answer our research question, while also ensuring that it is understandable to the participants. Overall the interview guide was understood by the respondents. There were a few times where they asked us to clarify our question or a specific word. At these times we tried to explain the question and also reminded them of something they said that led to us asking the question.

4.2.2 Sampling Technique

When considering an appropriate sampling technique for a study, several factors need to be taken into account, such as research type, question, purpose, and approach (Saunders et al., 2016). As this thesis is part of business research, two suitable sampling techniques are probability and non-probability sampling (Creswell, 2007). Probability sampling is typically employed in quantitative studies where statistical generalisations are made (Creswell, 2007). This approach ensures that each person in a population has an equal chance of being selected (Saunders et al., 2016). On the other hand, non-probability sampling is useful when the participants must be appropriate for answering the research question and achieving the study's objectives, and therefore, it is most appropriate for the researcher to select them (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 295-297).

The appropriate sample size for a study depends on the research's nature. According to Saunders et al. (2016, p. 297), when the research aims to gain extensive understanding and insights, the actual data collection and analysis are more valuable and critical than the sample size. In other words, the emphasis is on quality over quantity. However, a general principle is to continue sampling until no new insights, themes, or information is discovered (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 297). Furthermore, when using in-depth interviews, the sample size is suggested to range between 5-25 participants, depending on the group's characteristics (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 297).

Our research aimed to gain insights into how e-commerce has influenced the engagement of employees in retail stores. In order to achieve this, we used a non-probability sampling method to select a diverse group of participants and capture a range of themes in their responses (Saunders et al., 2016). We established specific criteria for selecting participants, such as requiring prior experience with working in retail stores, meaning they were currently employed in a store with extensive experience from working in a store. We wanted the employees to have experienced working in retail for some time in order for them to be able to see changes over the past years, and have examples to provide in their questions. Through a selection process that included these criteria, we identified potential participants within the selected population.

We quickly noticed that asking employees who were in a retail store did not get us any volunteer participants. The employees did not want to be interviewed, nor did they state that they had the time, even during their break or after their shift had ended. We instead choose to ask connections on social media such as LinkedIn, where we noticed people were more open to plan for an interview when they had time. This led to it being easier to find participants. Additionally, as we had the option to conduct the interviews using Zoom or Microsoft Teams it was more flexible for the respondents to carve out time for the interview and they became easier to schedule.

To ensure that participants had some experience with working in a retail store. We asked questions regarding their experience and type of store they currently work in. This was in order to reach insights from participants from different industries of the retail industry. Those who did not meet the experience criteria were excluded. Ultimately, our sample size consisted of a total of six participants. The size of a study's sample depends on the research nature, with emphasis on data collection and analysis quality rather than quantity for gaining extensive understanding and insights (Saunders et al., 2016). Generally, sampling should continue until no new insights or information are discovered, and for in-depth interviews, a suggested sample size ranges from 5 to 25 participants based on group characteristics (Saunders et al., 2016). Our research aimed to gain insights into employees' perceptions of the impact of e-commerce in the retail industry.

To achieve this, we employed a non-probability sampling method, specifically selecting a heterogeneous group of participants to capture diverse themes in their responses. Therefore, our sample consisted of participants employed in several different types of stores, such as; in furniture, clothing, electronics, sports and bookstores we managed to capture many different sectors within the entire retail industry. Our purpose of this was to gain differences in experience from employees working in different types of stores and through that a broader perspective of e-commerce's influence of employees within the entirety of the retail industry. We included participants with diverse experiences from various types of stores in order to add nuance to our study and increase the likelihood of reaching data saturation. By avoiding bias that could arise from including individuals with experiences in working in only one part of the retail sector, we aimed to capture a broader range of influences from e-commerce. Additionally, this approach allowed us to gain deeper insights into employees' diverse reasoning and reactions, which are undoubtedly shaped by their individual experiences.

4.2.3 Conducting the interviews.

In general and in order to avoid influencing or directing participants' answers, and ultimately the results of a study, interviewers should strive to remain as impartial and unbiased as possible (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 394). Therefore, it is important to carefully plan aspects such as participant preparation, question wording, and interviewer professionalism and trustworthiness before conducting interviews (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 397).

The chat messages sent out to the potential participants contained a very brief description of our research purpose and how we would handle their personal data. By giving the participants this information immediately, we aimed to establish credibility and reassurance. During the interviews, we reiterated the study's purpose and provided information on ethical considerations, such as anonymity and the right to terminate the interview without explanation. While this information was included in the first message, we emphasised it during the interviews to promote confidence and trust in participants (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 397).

Bell et al. (2019, p. 440) suggest that the location and environment of an interview can impact the interviewee's responses and overall impression. A quiet and comfortable place without unnecessary distractions is preferred, where the risk of being overheard or disturbed is minimal. As we conducted all interviews remotely digitally, either using Microsoft Teams or Zoom, we could not control the actual surroundings of each participant. However, one benefit of having the interviews online, and not in the stores or somewhere else were that they were not distracted. By collaborating with the interviewees of when we could have the interview, we made sure the interviewees were prepared and ready for an interview as well as had time to

conduct it without interference. We made sure that the participants were comfortable in their surroundings and that they felt that they could do the interview at their location during that time. We ensured that our appearance was professional to demonstrate credibility and inspire confidence in our participants (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 405). We asked questions neutrally to avoid influencing the participants in any direction or showing any bias towards a specific answer (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 399). We formulated questions in a way that left room for interpretation and kept a neutral body language to prevent any biases (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 408-409). We maintained a professional demeanour and avoided word choices, nods, or smiles that could potentially affect the participants' responses (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 410). By doing so, we aimed to ensure that our interviews were as objective as possible and to prevent our personal opinions from impacting the results of our study.

Despite the advantages of internet-mediated interviews such as accessibility and resource efficiency when in-person meetings are not feasible, there is a risk of compromising the quality of the interview due to technical and sound problems (Bell et al., 2019, p. 451). However, we were able to generally avoid these issues, or at the very least manage them instantly as they arose. The length of each interview ranged from around 15-40 minutes. During the interview, we noticed that the employees often had good and clear examples to the answers they provided. The interviewees most of the time quickly understood the question and could think of several examples, explanations and thoughts. When asking them followup questions, the employees were able to in a very good way explain further, their thoughts and explain how it is for them. The employees seemed to be eager to answer the questions and provide good and clear answers. This study consists of six interviews with employees from different stores, thus, covering a larger share of the retail industry. In order to keep their anonymity they will be referred to as “Employee A” , “Employee B” etc.

Table 1: Interviewee and interview information

	Participant	Experience	Store type	Setting	Date	Duration of the interview
1	Employee A	5	Furniture store	Internet mediated (Teams)	2023-04-26	32:12 minutes
2	Employee B	3	Kitchen supplies store	Internet mediated (Teams)	2023-04-27	32:52 minutes
3	Employee C	2	Clothing store	Internet mediated (Teams)	2023-05-10	28:37 minutes
4	Employee D	2	Electronic store	Internet mediated (Zoom)	2023-05-02	15:21 minutes
5	Employee E	4	Bookstore/clothing store	Internet mediated (Zoom)	2023-05-02	40:46 minutes
6	Employee F	6	Sports equipment/clothing store	Internet mediated (Zoom)	2023-05-05	20:44 minutes

4.2.4 Transcription

When conducting qualitative interviews, it is common to use audio-recording devices to capture the participant's words and expressions, which facilitates the transcription process (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 572). Audio-recording is essential to ensure that nothing is missed during the interview, as this could lead to incomplete or inaccurate transcriptions (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 572). However, it is important to note that audio-recording may make the interviewee self-conscious, affecting their responses to the questions (Bell et al., 2019, p. 445). Transcribing qualitative interviews with open-ended questions can be time-consuming, with one hour of interview potentially requiring several hours to transcribe (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 572). Automatic voice-recognition software is available to transcribe interviews more efficiently (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 573). While voice-recognition software offers some time-saving benefits, there are also risks associated with its use (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 573; Moore, 2015).

In this thesis, we have partially utilised an automatic speech recognition and transcribing software. Either Microsoft Teams or Zoom was used for all of our interviews, both these platforms are typically used for online meetings and presentations. Microsoft Teams has a built-in AI speech recognition function that allows for real-time transcription during audio recordings (Microsoft Teams, 2022). However, despite the software's ability to reduce the time and effort required for transcribing data, it still encountered word errors, difficulties in recognizing various accents, and other inaccuracies. As a result, we had to carefully review the recorded material and correct any mistakes, as well as supplement non-verbal contributions, such as pauses or hesitations in the interviewees' responses. Regarding the interviews conducted using Zoom, which do not have the ability to transcribe in real-time, we had to listen to the interviews and transcribe the material manually, something that took time. The advantage of this way of working, on the other hand, was that we learned the material very well, something that benefited us for the analysis of the data. Additionally, because we conducted two interviews in Swedish while writing the thesis in English, we recognized the importance of accurate translation when selecting quotes from the transcription. We made a concerted effort to identify comparable words and phrasing in order to capture the essence of what was said during the interviews.

4.3 Data Analysis

After collecting data, the next step is to analyse and structure the findings in qualitative research. This is typically done through a thematic analysis, which involves identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (themes) within qualitative data (Bell et al., 2019, p. 519; Clarke & Braun, 2017, p. 297). Themes highlight essential and salient aspects related to the research question, often visible through patterns in participants' responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). Due to the large and complex nature of qualitative data, the researcher is highly involved in choosing and judging which themes are present and relevant to incorporate in the analysis. Therefore, thematic analysis allows for an open approach that does not limit how the researcher conducts the analytical process (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 2). However, this openness could potentially lead to a lack of clarity on how to establish an accurate and effective thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 2).

To ensure an effective and useful analysis, a methodological and systematic approach is necessary (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p. 386). Adopting a step-by-step approach that includes all six phases can help create a transparent and credible analytical process (Braun & Clarke, 2006,

p. 87; Nowell et al., 2017, p. 4). In our thematic analysis, we used the six phases of a step-by-step approach as a guiding tool throughout the analytical process to achieve a trustworthy and systematic analysis.

In the first phase of the step-by-step approach, researchers must familiarize themselves with the data by carefully examining overall findings and reading through the collected data multiple times (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). This phase requires that the data has already been transcribed, so that researchers can move on to the next phase of coding the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87-88). After reviewing and revising the transcriptions of our interviews, we analysed the data to gain an initial understanding of recurring patterns, which we later categorised in the next phase of our thematic analysis. The first emerging patterns were more overarching in order to capture broader patterns that relate to each other in the data. Some patterns included talk about customers as well as mentioning specific work tasks that had arisen due to e-commerce. Interestingly, the first phase of the data analysis indicated that many respondents' engagement had not been impacted by e-commerce. However, further analysis of the data revealed a contradicting pattern.

The second phase of generating codes involves identifying and segmenting significant aspects and reflections found in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 88). During this phase, we underlined and highlighted relevant sections and sentences in our transcribed data, in order to both categorise similarities and make them more visible and easier to work with in the subsequent phases. In this phase we focused on more underlying patterns describing the respondents beliefs, attitudes and indicators to engagement.

The third phase of the thematic analysis involves identifying themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.89). These themes encapsulate a broader aspect of the data, and the list of codes from the second phase is assigned to the most appropriate theme (Braun et al., 2006, p.89; Nowell et al., 2017, p. 8). We compiled the identified codes based on their shared characteristics in this phase, using different tables to categorise them accordingly. As a result, different overall themes began to emerge. In total we identified 33 sub themes originally, however some we determined as irrelevant in answering our research question and therefore discarded. Additionally, we merged some of the themes. For instance, we had one sub-theme of customers wanting the shopping to be easy and another sub-theme with the customer expecting the employee to be quick, ultimately we merged them to the subtheme ease and efficacy expectations. Following the third phase we had a total of 18 sub-themes.

The fourth phase emphasises the importance of critically assessing the relevance of the themes, rejecting some, or merging others if they are too similar (Braun et al., 2006, p.91). In the subsequent fifth phase, the key characteristics of each theme are defined in a coherent and distinctive manner (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.92). During both phases four and five, we focused on determining whether the themes were differentiated by their characteristics and the specific codes they corresponded to. We also excluded themes that lacked a significant amount of data to support them, which is also cited by Braun and Clarke (2006, p.91) as a reason for rejecting themes.

Once all relevant themes were identified for this thesis, we utilised a thematic network analysis, which is an illustrative tool described by Attride-Stirling (2001, p.387) that provides a visual overview of all identified themes and their interrelatedness. It is important to note that the thematic network should not be seen as an analysis in itself, but rather as a tool for presenting the identified themes (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p.389). The thematic network analysis involves structuring the identified themes into different levels of themes: basic themes, organizing

themes, and global theme(s) (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p.388-389). Basic themes are segments found in the transcribed and coded material that, when compiled together, form a broader representative theme called the organizing themes. The organising themes provide an understanding of the main areas of themes included in the analysis, which ultimately answer to the global theme. The global theme encompasses all identified themes in relation to the research topic and is considered the core theme of the research (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p.389). Using this thematic network analysis in our thesis not only guided the organization of identified themes in a more structured way, but also contributed to a visual and holistic presentation that aided our interpretation and analysis of the different themes and their interrelatedness (see Figure 1).

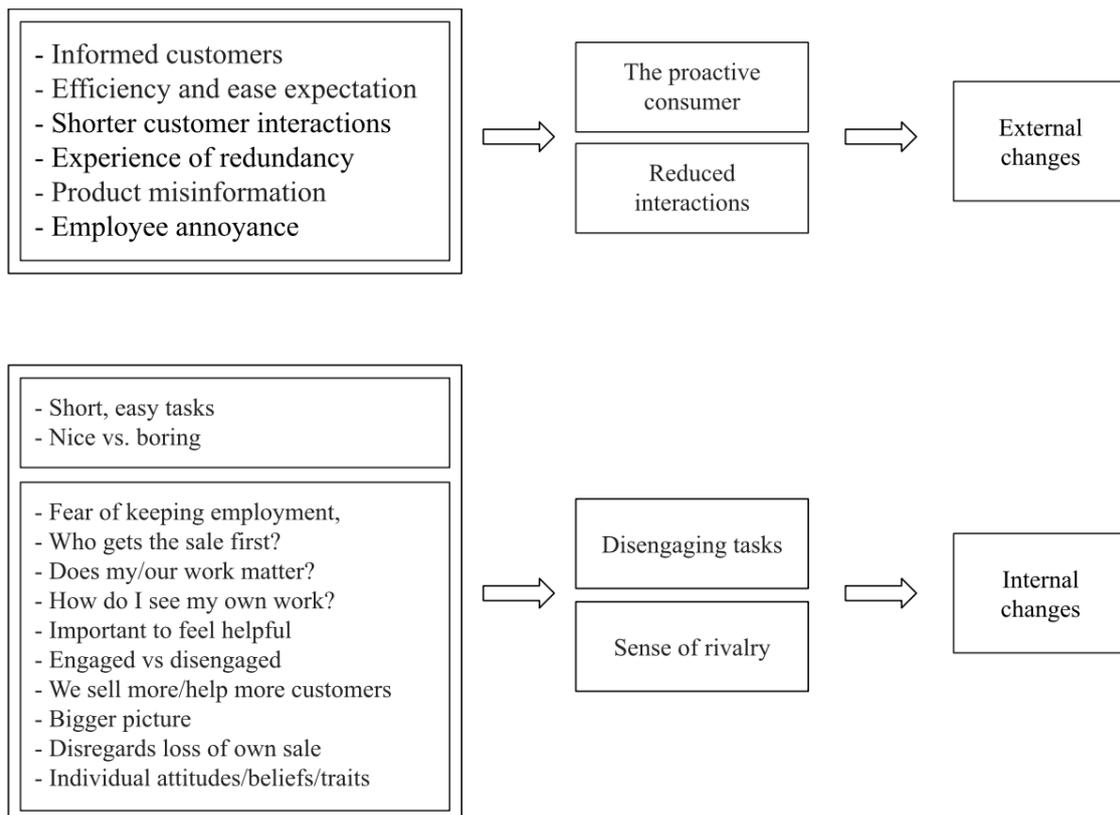


Figure 1: Thematic analysis

Upon completing the thematic network analysis, we moved onto the final phase of the thematic analysis process, which involves presenting our findings, patterns, and themes in a convincing manner that serves as the basis for answering our research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 93). In this final phase, our focus was to highlight the most crucial aspects of our data, in order to ensure the rigor and comprehensiveness of our analysis.

4.4 Ethical Considerations

When conducting qualitative research, such as semi-structured interviews, establishing trust and obtaining truthful and authentic answers from interviewees is crucial (Qu & Dumay, 2011,

p.252). However, ethical considerations must be taken into account to ensure that the research process does not impose any harm on the interviewees (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006, p.319; Qu & Dumay, 2011, p.252). This requires transparency about the purpose of the study and the interview process, as well as obtaining informed consent from the participants (Qu & Dumay, 2011, p.253). Although it may be beneficial to disclose the purpose of a study before conducting interviews in order to increase trust and clarify key themes, it can also have negative impacts on participants by influencing their perceptions of the research topic (Qu & Dumay, 2011, p. 253). In line with ethical considerations, it is recommended that interviewers debrief participants on the research purpose after the interview to provide closure and increase transparency (Qu & Dumay, 2011, p. 253). Finally, privacy and confidentiality considerations are important in research, as participants have the right to remain anonymous and their data must be protected from external access (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006, p. 319). Participants must give informed consent, which is essential for their comfort and willingness to participate (Bell et al., 2019, p. 123).

It is important to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of participants in qualitative research. Participants have the right to remain anonymous in order to protect themselves from potential harm or consequences, such as if their employer or manager were to discover their answers (Qu & Dumay, 2011, p. 254). This right to privacy is closely linked to the participants' consent, which is a crucial factor in establishing a sense of trust between the researcher and the participant (Bell et al., 2019, p. 123). Any data collected from the interviews should be stored and maintained in a confidential manner, which means that it is safeguarded and cannot be accessed by external parties (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006, p. 319).

The ethical considerations were carefully incorporated into our research methodology in the thesis. At the outset, we provided potential participants with information about the research purpose and the interview process, as well as informed them of their right to anonymity. Only after obtaining their consent to participate in the interview, a date was scheduled. During the interview, we reiterated the procedure and the conditions regarding rights and consent to prevent misunderstandings or potential harm. We also briefly explained the study's purpose and addressed any questions or uncertainties the interviewee may have had. To protect the confidentiality of the data collected from participants, all information was stored solely on Microsoft Teams.

5.0 Empirical Findings

In this chapter we will present the empirical finding of our study. It will be divided into themes to give the reader an easier time to follow and understand the relationships with the two main themes e-commerce and employee engagement.

5.1 External changes

Through the interviews we found out that e-commerce and its advancements into the retail industry and stores have led to a couple of changes. These changes include customer behaviors, where customers now are acting in a different way when shopping and that the interaction between the employees is getting shorter. All of the participants pointed out changes in customers' behaviors due to e-commerce, which in turn found patterns that influenced their engagement in different ways.

5.1.1 A more proactive customer

All of the participants shared that they had noticed changes in customer behaviors, generally they described the customer as know what products they want before entering the store. Secondly, the customers are more informed of things such as product qualities and if the product is in stock at the store etcetera. Thirdly, there was an expressed impression that customers expects efficiency, ease and that the employees are quick in their service. This service can include anything from getting a product or online order from the warehouse, informing the customer about something or charging them at the cash register. Lastly, some had noticed a difference in the amount of customers visiting the store and that they claimed to be due to the increase of e-commerce and more customers ordering online instead.

Many respondents stated that many customers are aware of what product they want to get before even entering the store. The customers have now prepared more before coming to the store. When asked how they perceive e-commerce changing customers' behaviors, Employee E stated: *"Yes, in such a way that many people come in and, for example, show a picture from our website and then they want to see the product directly."* Employee E continued this answer by saying: *"It's not so much that they come in just to check what's available, but they still know roughly what they want when they enter the store"*.

Additionally, most of the study's participants described customers as more informed when they enter the store. When asked how they notice e-commerce influencing their profession, Employee F answered: *"The customers might be a bit more well-read when they come, they know what we have in stock and often they check their equipment before and so on, so they often come very well informed."* Employee B elaborated on this by talking of how they experience that customers often have done some research before coming to the store and nowadays knows more of what the options are and what they want. Employee B states; *"They have already looked at what design they want and what measurement, so they are well prepared"*.

Some of the interviewees expressed that they had experienced customers wanting their shopping experience to be easy and efficient as a consequence to e-commerce being so easy and more commonly used. As a result it was expressed that the respondent experienced an expectation from the customer, to be more quick when assisting them in the store, otherwise leading to impatience or annoyance from the customer. When asked how they perceive that e-commerce has affected the customers' behaviors, Employee D described a situation when a customer became annoyed that it took a while to get the order to them. Employee D: *"The customer's behavior is like its supposed to be so easy like I ordered it online, it's supposed to be no problem, because for them it is no problem because they just click a button and pay for it."*

Employee A shared a similar experience of customers having unreasonable expectations due to e-commerce making everything more quick and easy. When asked how they noticed a change in the behavior of the customers, Employee A said: *“I have found that it’s like customers believe that everything is robotic, like everything has to be there, but in reality so many things can happen.”* Following up on this notion, when asked how they experience e-commerce influencing their interactions with the customers, Employee A stated that: *“They want everything to be very simple for them and very fast, and we don’t get in the way of the customer experience and we do everything very short so it goes well.”*

A few of the respondents stated that the amount of customers has decreased in recent years, while others stating them thinking it being the same as a few years ago. When asked in what ways they had noticed e-commerce changing recently, Employee A said: *“I have noticed that the customer flow in the last year has been very, very low, like it has dropped”* When asked how they have observed e-commerce having an influence on the profession of salespeople, Employee F shared a similar observation: *“There are fewer customers in general, maybe I haven’t noticed a huge difference myself, but it’s mostly that I hear it a lot when I’m at work that it used to be more hectic before.”*

Some of the respondents talked about how e-commerce has allowed customers that otherwise would need to travel far to get to a store, to simply order online instead, which they indicated was one of the reasons for a decrease of number of customers in the store. For instance Employee B explains that people used to travel quite far to reach the store, as it is the only one of its kind in the region, but now they can order the products instead. Employee B: *“Many of our customers used to come from far away and now they don’t necessarily have to do that.”*

5.1.2 Shorter customer interactions

A commonly experienced effect of the change in customers’ behavior was described by many to be shorter interactions. Many expressed a level of frustration, boredom or disengagement as a consequence of shorter customer interaction. Some gave examples of customers being wrongly informed either about the product or the stock of the store, after doing their own information search. Additionally, due to the common habit of shorter interactions, some respondents expressed that they enjoyed working more when they had fewer customer interactions some days. Others even experience annoyance now when a customer wants to interact longer with them and ask more questions, because they are not used to it. Due to the experienced change in the number of customer visits to the store, some respondents stated that they have less customer interactions now compared to a few years ago.

When answering how they notice e-commerce influencing the customer interactions, Employee E said; *“It usually shows through faster customer interactions, or at least when people come in who have already seen something on the website that they want.”* Several employees stated that they think it is boring when there are too few customers to help and relates that to a lower engagement from their side. Employee A stated: *“It can be boring when there are no customers or there is nothing to do”*. While employee C states *“When there are no customers to engage with, my engagement isn’t very high”*. Employee F shared how it can sometimes be frustrating when customers have no questions because they have looked it up in advance by stating: *“If a customer comes in and already knows what they want, then you are quite redundant as a salesperson.”*

Furthermore, due to the customers often conducting their own information search before visiting, they sometimes get the wrong information. Some respondents expressed that this happens sometimes and that they usually ask what the use of the product is to get an idea if the customer has the right information. Employee F stated: “ *I usually try to ask some questions and sometimes they have misunderstood what it is they need, especially if it comes to slightly more advanced equipment*”. Other respondents stated that the customers often believe that everything that they can find online can also be found in the store. Employee C explained: “*Clients believe that everything they see online is in the store which is not always the case, so they take a quick browse around and see this particular item online but when they come to the store it's not there and it becomes a whole interaction.*” Employee C continues to explain that many interactions now are regarding the difference in price and offerings from in store products compared to the products online. Employee C states; “ *And another thing is probably pricing, because seeing things online might be a little different than seeing it in the store, I think it's another interaction that is very disappointing.*”. Additionally, Employee A expressed frustration when customers have expectations, formed through their experience of e-commerce, that cannot be met in the store. Employee A stated “*It is frustrating when they are unhappy because their expectations are not met and we can't do anything about it*”.

Sometimes the shorter interactions even led to feeling redundant as a seller when the customer does not need help or ask for advice when making a purchase. However, there was some cases where the habit of having mostly short customer interactions led to the employees being more used to them and therefore having a more negative reaction when customer sometimes want to interact longer. Employee D expressed a somewhat positive experience of shorter customer interactions. When asked how they perceive e-commerce, Employee D stated that: “*When I'm working, and I'm just like "I don't want to do anything today" and then someone comes in and you are like "I don't want to help this customer today", like you're just in a bad mood and he just comes and says "I'm just getting my online order", "nice, that takes no time" and you just pack it up, give it to him and then he's gone.*” Employee A expressed the feeling that due to the fact that most of their customer interactions have become shorter, they sometimes think a longer customer interaction can be annoying. When asked how shorter conversations with customers have impacted their engagement, Employee A stated: “*Sometimes it's quite ok with shorter and shorter conversations with our customers, but the bad thing is that I expect to have short conversation with every customer so if a customer now has like several questions, I can treat it like "oh this is an annoying customer".*”

5.2 Internal changes

While customer behaviors and customer interactions are external consequences to e-commerce, the following change in employees tasks and attitude are internal changes to e-commerce. When asked directly if they believe e-commerce has influenced their engagement, many of the participants indicated that they did not think so. However, in this study we have found that the change in the external factors of customer behaviors and subsequent customer interactions, has affected the employee, as well as their engagement, through a change in easier tasks and attitude of competition or collaboration.

5.2.1 Disengaging tasks

Due to the influence of e-commerce on the retail industry, it is no surprise that our findings indicated a change in store tasks for the employees. Generally, the respondent expressed a change in tasks due to the change in customer behavior and interactions. The tasks were

indicated to be more repetitive and quicker by the respondents. For instance, one respondent indicated that the tasks related to e-commerce are often left to the less experienced employees in the store, due to their simplicity and repetitiveness, Employee C states: *“We provide a variety of other things and the e-commerce option is a great insight to what we provide, regardless of the fact that we are a retail store”*. Furthermore, the tasks included packing and sending online orders from the store or preparing orders that have been made online to be picked up from the store. When asked the question of how e-commerce’s impact of store tasks, Employee D responded: *“Just I have more tasks, because then I have to put all the stuff in the mail that has to go in the mail for something that someone ordered online, or getting the online order for someone that is coming to get it.”* Additionally, when asked how their tasks have changed, Employee A stated: *“For example we have a service called click and collect that allows people to pick up their products which they have paid for and just come up and get it.”*

Additionally, helping the customers make the order online while at the store is another added task to some of the employees. When asked how e-commerce had influenced their store tasks, Employee E stated: *“Yes well it’s that we have both through our checkout system and sales program directly connected to the website, so that what we order, we can see if we have it on the website or if we have it in store and if we can order it from the website to our customers directly.”*

One of the employees that was interviewed talked about how the store is automating several services, for example customer service and making it available on the website as well and not only in the store. This has resulted that some of the customer service tasks have gone over to be digital and more work is digital. When asked the question of how e-commerce’s impact of store tasks, Employee E stated that: *“It has made it a little more where it can be small things like we have to pick up and place goods at the checkout, for example when people have put it away via the website to pick it up in store, so, these are basically tasks that have been added due to the increase in purchases made via the website.”*

The findings of this study showed the employees saw both positive and negative aspects to the changes in tasks. When asked what the positive and negative parts of the changes in tasks due to e-commerce Employee A stated that: *“I think I like when we offer services that we can do in the store for them and they can just pick it up and everything because it gives me more work, but the negative is that I don’t have any customer experiences.”* When asked what makes them most engaged, some of the respondents said, more work in general. For instance, when asked when they are most engaged Employee D expressed: *“At least for me, when I have something to do, time goes by so fast”*. Indicating the work, work or tasks of any sort made them more engaged by simply keeping them busy.

When asked the same question regarding when they are most engaged, Employee E answered: *“It will probably be those days when there is a sale or similar and we have a lot of customers because then you get more work, or you work like all the time and you don’t think about much else, if it’s quiet in the store, it’s easy to stand with your phone or something on the computer or similar.”* This indicates, similarly to other respondents, that although more work tasks in general improved their engagement, most still preferred the work involving the customers in some way.

5.2.2. A sense of rivalry; competing with e-commerce?

Some of the participants expressed a feeling of being in competition with e-commerce. The reasons for this were many, either individual perceptions or practical factors such as competing for sales. Many of the participants indicated that an increase in e-commerce has led to downsizing in the store and that not as many employees are required to keep the store running today as previously. When asked if they sometimes feel that they are competing against e-commerce, Employee A stated: *“Sometimes I think yeah, because it’s like we are competing to have our store alive so we don’t get shut down and then we lose our jobs”* When asked how they had noticed e-commerce changing in recent years, Employee E stated that: *“Yes, well it has become more common to see new types of services and we have to stay competitive.”*

A similar feeling was shared by others of the participants as well. When asked if they perceive to be in competition with the store Employee F shared that: *“A lot, but I think that is also precisely my workplace because there you literally compete with them, if we pick the orders in our store before they get the online store to do it, we get the sale, so it’s not in a bad way necessarily but it is a common form of competition that is absolutely there.”* This respondent particularly expressed a certain level of indifference to this experienced competition. When talking about how the cases where they help a customer that expresses that they are going to purchase the product online instead of in the store, Employee F expressed: *“I don’t really care, maybe it’s a bit harsh but I mean, I have given the help and will get paid regardless and it may not sound charming at all, but right then and there I don’t feel that it is very important either, but they do what they need to do.”*

The attitude and overall perspective of the employee was found to somewhat impact the perception of the influence of e-commerce. For instance, the respondents that claimed the most positive influences on e-commerce as store employees, were also the ones that seemed to think more of the bigger picture for the sales of the company. When asked how they perceive that e-commerce has influenced their job, Employee D stated: *“Yes, well for us it has had a positive effect in the way that I believe that we sell more products due to it.”* Although this employee indicated a negative impact on their engagement due to e-commerce, they thought firsthand of the benefits to the entire store or company when thinking about the influence of e-commerce Employee E expressed a similar notion when asked the same question: *“Specifically like sales, it increased a lot.”* These respondents talked about the impact of e-commerce on the sales of the company more generally and not only the sales of the store. Contrary, the respondents indicating the most negative influence of their engagement from e-commerce thought primarily of the effects on their own role. For example, when asked how e-commerce has impacted their work, Employee F, said: *“Yes, it is noticeable, first of all, there is a decrease in sales.”* Compared to Employee D and E, this respondent primarily indicated that they thought about impact from the perspective of the store and not the general company. Additionally, some of the participants indicated that an increase in e-commerce has led to downsizing in the store and that not as many employees are required to keep the store running today as previously, this could be an underlying factor to the employee feeling like they, in the physical store, are in competition with e-commerce.

However, the outcome of the feeling of being in competition with e-commerce was divided. While some displayed somewhat of a lower mood and negative impact on their engagement as a result, others showed indifference towards e-commerce despite this perception. In contrast to competing with e-commerce, some of the participants expressed a sense of working together

or collaborating with e-commerce in their role. They conveyed a feeling of having better results and an increase in overall sales for the company since the rise of e-commerce. Several employees viewed e-commerce as a tool and something that is a part of their job now. Employee E said: *“Yes well it’s that we have both through our checkout system and sales program directly connected to the website, so that what we order, we can see if we have it on the website or if we have it in store and if we can order it from the website to our customers directly.”*

Employee A continues to explain that they have a service where customers can order products online and pick them up at the store. Employee C also saw a clear integration between their store and the company's e-commerce and explained that they now have more options on how to shop and where to find information for the customers, something that the employer means makes it much easier for the customer. Employee C states; *“They are very much integrated all like i mentioned before, we do have an online option for a lot of clients we have. They do have an option for like shipping, so I think that's an option that we provide the clients and it's easier that way as well and it always works with what we have available in the store.”*

Despite some employees accepting e-commerce and having a more positive view on it, there were employees who were unhappy with what changed behavior it has brought and talked about how it affected both their engagement and motivation. When asked if they believed a different level of integration between the store and the e-commerce would have had a different influence on their engagement, Employee E stated: *“I believe so, because if people had come there to feel and check out products and then go home and order them instead, I would have ended up questioning why I was there and doing some kind of sales job for them in the first place.”*

It is also possible to argue that this perceived competition between store and e-commerce in some cases had the potential to lead to increased engagement among the participants, as a result of the competitive aspect of the whole thing with the ultimate goal of trying to win the sale. For example employee B talked about how the department has had goals and everyone worked hard to reach it, making them all put more effort into reaching these goals and increasing many employees' engagement. They were also able to see their goals for the store in comparison to the goals from e-commerce based on the purchases from the website.

6.0 Analysis and discussion

This chapter will present the themes that were derived from the empirical findings. It will analyze the external changes as well as the internal changes and how it connects to e-commerce and employee engagement. We will analyze and discuss the empirical finding and finally present a conceptual model for the study.

6.1 External changes; creating a spark

In brief, the findings from our study indicated a perceived change in customer behavior and subsequently customer interactions due to e-commerce. This is supported by previous studies within the field of e-commerce (Mashalah, 2022; Salem & Nor, 2020; Sudhakaran, 2022).

6.1.1 A more proactive customer

The empirical findings of this study highlight the significant impact of e-commerce on the retail industry. As shown in the theoretical framework, the advent of e-commerce has resulted in several transformations, affecting both the overall retail sector and individual stores. From our findings, it is notable that evolving shopping behaviors of consumers have been influenced by the growth of e-commerce. This is something that was anticipated and is supported by previous studies (Mashalah, 2022; Salem & Nor, 2020; Sudhakaran, 2022). Based on statements from our respondents in this study, we can draw the conclusion that e-commerce today is affording the consumers greater options, convenience, and expediency in their purchasing processes. Which is supported by previous studies by Chava et al. (2022) and Shavitt & Barnes, 2020. Consequently, consumer actions, routines, and procedures when shopping have undergone substantial modifications, something noticed and voiced by the employees participating in this study.

Contemporary consumers are no longer reliant solely on physical stores for product information and availability. Instead, they increasingly rely on online platforms to look for product details, compare options, and make informed decisions prior to even setting foot in a brick-and-mortar store. This is coherent with a previous study by Chava et al. (2022) that concludes that customers today can find information and what they need without entering a store. Furthermore, studies by Timoumi et al. (2022), Cavalinhos et al., 2022 and Wolf, 2021 have all drawn a similar conclusion about customers' information search.

From our study, it is evident that the respondents have observed an increase in customers who arrive at the store already well-informed about their desired products, including specific features such as colors, sizes, or other specifications. Furthermore, based on our findings, customers are seemingly equipped with comprehensive knowledge about the store's inventory and available alternatives. According to studies by Cavalinhos et al. (2021) and Roggeveen & Sethuraman (2020), the information search done by the customer serves an important purpose of positively impacting the customer's experience in the store. Furthermore, Roggeveen & Sethuraman (2020) states that the information search has the capacity to influence the customer's sense of preparedness during the purchasing process, subsequently impacting their overall perception of the retailer. Thus, from previous studies together with our findings, we can conclude that customers' knowledge before they visit the store has an important purpose in their buying process and can benefit the store as well as the brand.

It is imperative to acknowledge that while consumers have become increasingly proactive in acquiring information prior to making purchases, the respondents in our study pointed out that it does not necessarily mean the customer always has the right information regarding the product. They also stated that sometimes the customers have misinterpreted the products intended use. In these cases the respondents indicated excitement in being able to help the customer through their knowledge about the product and based on their expressed needs. This notion from our study shed light on how employees can play a crucial role in the customers' experience and ultimate potential satisfaction. Coherent with research by Bolton et al. (2019), Harris (2007), Kandampully et al. (2018), Manthiou et al. (2020), Pine (2020) and Weber & Chatzopoulos (2019) that demonstrates how employees possess the capability to enhance customer experiences through personal interactions. This creates an opportunity for employees to experience heightened engagement, as they continue to perceive themselves as essential and indispensable both to the store and to the customers' overall shopping experience. Something that was supported by our findings as the respondents stated that they want to be able to help the customers, as well as feel like they possess more knowledge of the products compared to them.

During this study it became clear that employees have a mixed perception of e-commerce influencing the number of customers visiting the store. While some stated an expressed decrease in customers in the store, others experienced that it had not changed that much. By having fewer customers, employees consequently don't have as much to do and automatically fewer interactions in their work. The experienced inactivity in stores has been shown to have a different impact on the employees through the workload. While a study by Klein (2021) indicates that more hectic stores are related to more neutral employee behavior and calmer stores entail more positive employee behaviors, our findings indicate the opposite. The respondents in this study claimed to be more engaged when they experienced a higher workload, without a lot of work they stated to be easily bored. However, there was a difference in what type of workload made them more engaged. Most respondents stated that work through helping customers and making sales made them most engaged, while a few indicated that the more repetitive tasks sometimes made them more engaged in their work than through customer interactions, this was highly dependent on their mood that day. In summary, contrary to previous research suggesting that busier stores result in neutral employee behavior and calmer stores lead to more positive behaviors (Klein, 2021), our findings indicate that employees in this study were more engaged when experiencing a higher workload, with the type of work partially determining their level of engagement.

6.1.2 Shorter customer interactions

As e-commerce has brought significant transformations to the consumer shopping behaviors, it has meant a change in dynamics of customer-employee interactions within physical retail stores. Something that is supported by previous research on the effect of changed customer behavior on in-store procedures (Cavalinhos et al., 2021; Wolf, 2023).

According to some of the respondents in this study, the shift in consumer behavior has created a sense of redundancy among store employees, as customers no longer require as much of their assistance with detailed explanations regarding product offerings and functions. The employees

in this study stated that they sometimes perceive themselves as less essential, as customers are increasingly self-sufficient. This is supported by authors Cavalinhos et al. (2021) and Wolf (2023) that studied the influence of e-commerce on the practices and tasks in store. The conclusions drawn from both studies indicate that as customers gain access to a greater amount of information, the significance of interacting with store employees diminishes, thereby affecting the overall necessity for salespersons (Cavalinhos et al., 2021; Wolf, 2023)

Consequently, customers enter the store with a clear intention to select and purchase their desired products, diminishing the need for extensive interactions with store employees. The interviews conducted with retail employees in this study corroborate the connection between changes in customer behavior and the employees' perceived usefulness. Thus, the responses from this study are in accordance with the studies by Cavalinhos et al. (2021) and Wolf (2023). Furthermore, the respondents in this study indicated that when they are feeling less useful in terms of providing product information or guidance, their sense of purpose and engagement is affected. However, their sense of purpose and engagement is influenced in different ways. While some experience a decrease in their engagement due to a decrease in tasks involving longer customer interactions, others feel more engaged due to the simplicity of the tasks connected to e-commerce, such as packaging and posting online orders. This can be dependent on individual differences among the respondents, for instance a difference in extroversion or attitude could account for this difference. Something that is coherent with previous studies on the effect of individual differences on employee engagement (Kumar & Pansari, 2016; Meskelis & Whittington, 2020; Mohamed et al., 2018).

The majority of employees stated that the interactions with customers had become shorter now compared to how they used to be some years ago. The reasons that we can see from interviews are that customers now are more prepared when coming to the stores. Because consumers now look up what they want in advance to a greater extent, they don't need to ask the employees where certain products can be found or what options they have regarding the kind of product they are looking to purchase. This trend poses challenges for employees, as the diminished need for customer assistance reduces the duration and depth of their interactions with shoppers. Consequently, employees perceive a difference in their role as information providers as well as the necessity for them to be there, something that clearly has made employees feel less engaged at work.

We can see a connection between the two external changes that are happening to retail stores because of e-commerce. More proactive customers who don't need as much help from the staff at times means that they don't interact with the employees as much. Both of these changes can be seen having influenced the employees. The employees are there to help and assist the customers and when the interactions and contact with customers decrease, they feel as if they are not needed as much. To feel that you are not needed and have less purpose have been shown to affected employees in retail stores. Their engagement becomes lower when they feel as if they are unnecessary.

This study showed that this does not have to be the case for every employee. Employees who showed a favorable attitude to perform other tasks and be working with minimal customer interactions saw the shorter interactions and their decreased frequency saw this as something positive. This difference is particularly interesting because it can be seen as the people who are more lazy at work and those who don't like their work see fewer and shorter interactions as a positive change in retail. A similar discovery was made in this study when we noticed that employees tend to be more used to these shorter interactions. When shorter and fewer

interactions are becoming the new normal, the ones who are standing out and are different can be seen as annoying by the employees. When customers want help, ask questions and are having longer conversations with staff, the employees can be so used to the opposite that they see these rare occasions as negatively impacting their engagement.

Additionally, it is noteworthy to see that customers have the tendency to believe that a physical store has the same products, the same options and the same prices. This is not the reality and when the employees have to explain to consumers that there can be disparities, the consumer has a tendency to display impatience. This is supported with the study by (Shavitt and Barnes (2020) that revealed that the convenience of online shopping has resulted in customers developing a slightly higher level of impatience, driven by their expectations for swift and efficient transactions. The respondents stated that when these negative emotions of a consumer are directed towards them, who sometimes can not do anything about the circumstances, they feel as if they get blamed for something that is out of their control. This was expressed to lead to annoyance and defeat, as well as sometimes impacting their short-term engagement.

Furthermore it is not uncommon for the employees to have to explain how there can be differences between the information that the customer has gathered on their own and what actually is the case for the particular store. When employees have to deal with explaining to customers how e-commerce is integrated into the store and how it works it is making the employee frustrated and less engaged. The reason for this can be many but from this study, employees show a reluctance to explain to customers that what they believed to be true is unfortunately not. To have to give customers disappointing news and be with a customer who does not get what they expected are tearing on employees' engagement and enthusiasm.

6.2 Internal changes; help or harm to employee engagement.

6.2.1 Disengaging tasks

The primary objective of this thesis is to investigate the impact of e-commerce on employee engagement. The emergence of e-commerce has influenced customer behaviors, resulting in companies to modify the tasks assigned to their employees. A notable trend observed among employees is the increasing number of customers who opt for online ordering and then choose to pick it up in the store. Which was coherent with studies on e-commerce's influence on store tasks (Dayarian & Pazour, 2022). Consequently, employees are now more involved in order preparation for customer pickup. Additionally, employees frequently find themselves stationed at the cash register, primarily assisting customers with payment transactions and facilitating the retrieval of their ordered products. This is something that we can see have had an effect on their engagement by limiting the tasks where new encounters, interactions and situations are occurring. While some people thrive with doing tasks that are not related to interacting with others or the tasks where repetitive activities are needed. It can definitely be questioned why they work in a retail store if they don't like to talk to others. At the same time it is understandable that employees can find it tiring to talk and assist customers all day for a longer period of time and thus e-commerce can be seen as coming with some relieving changes to their work and tasks.

There can also be more to do overall for the employees with these additional tasks. Some of the employees interviewed discussed that there has been a decrease in the amount of customers. Despite this, was it some employees who did not share this view? The ones who did not see an

overall decrease in customers still saw the changed behavior and thus saw these new tasks, including packing and preparing orders as an additional set of tasks, something that not everyone saw as something positive. This difference in perception is supported by research that suggests that frontline employees who are performing the same or similar tasks can have a difference in how they see work and how they are behaving while performing their work (Mascio. D. R., 2010). To have more tasks made it more stressful for the employees and this added stress led to lower engagement in work. This study could also see that at some stores the hurting process had been affected in the last couple of years and new employees had become less common. More tasks and not more staff to deal with the new set of challenges the stores now face is easy to see how it affects the engagement of those working there.

6.2.2 The sense of rivalry

Some employees expressed a sense of competition with e-commerce, either due to individual perceptions or practical factors such as sales competition. Downsizing in physical stores due to the rise of e-commerce was mentioned by participants, leading to a feeling of competing to keep the store open and preserve their jobs. However, some employees showed indifference towards this competition, stating that they would still get paid regardless of customer choices.

The attitude and perspective of employees seemed to impact their perception of e-commerce's influence and its impact on their engagement. This is something supported by previous studies displaying that the attitude or beliefs of an employee impacts their overall engagement towards work (Meskelis & Whittington., 2020; Kumar & Pansari, 2016). Those who viewed e-commerce positively often considered its benefits for the overall sales of the company, while those with a negative view focused more on the impact on their own roles. Downsizing in stores could contribute to the employees feeling in competition with e-commerce.

The outcome of perceiving competition with e-commerce varied among participants. Some experienced lower morale and decreased engagement, while others remained indifferent. On the contrary, some employees expressed a sense of collaboration and integration with e-commerce, seeing it as a tool that improved overall sales for the company. They mentioned the integration between physical stores and the company's e-commerce platform, offering options for customers to shop online or in-store.

Despite acceptance by some employees, others were unhappy with the changes brought about by e-commerce, citing negative effects on their engagement and motivation. The perception of competition with e-commerce raised questions about the purpose of their sales job when customers opted to order online instead of visiting the store. In some cases, the perceived competition with e-commerce had the potential to increase employee engagement due to the competitive aspect of striving to win sales. Employee B mentioned how department goals fostered teamwork and increased efforts among employees.

Overall, employees' perceptions of competition with e-commerce varied, with some embracing it as a collaborative tool and others expressing negative effects on engagement. The influence of e-commerce on employees in the retail industry is complex and depends on individual perspectives and the overall integration between physical stores and online platforms.

6.3 Conceptual Framework

The analysis of our empirical data has resulted in a presented conceptual model that illustrates how e-commerce, through external and internal changes, influences employees and their work engagement within the retail industry. We found among our participants, as well as through previous studies, that e-commerce has impacted the behavior of customers. Supported by previous research, this influence has partially occurred through the information search made possible as a consequence of e-commerce, which has led to more active and subsequently more informed customers. This influence is two-fold, according to our respondents, more well-informed customers often leads to shorter interactions between the employee and the customer as the customer knows what they want. However, in some cases, the customer conducting their own information search, led to the customer being misinformed about the product, price or the stock of the store. Which in turn was indicated to lead to an increase in engagement among the employees, who get the chance to express their knowledge about the product or such, and help the customer.

Furthermore, shown in our findings as well as previous research, e-commerce has led to customers' expectations of ease and efficiency. This risks creating frustration both from the customers perspective, who's experience does not match its expectations, as well as the employees perspective that feels like the situation is out of their control and wants more understanding from the customer. Additionally, due to the habit of shorter customer interactions, the employees expressed that they sometimes experienced annoyance with a customer if they asked a lot of questions or engaged with them longer. One respondent also indicated that they sometimes think the shortened or even complete lack of customer engagement can be nice, especially if they are having a bad day.

The external changes caused by the impact of e-commerce, does in turn influence factors that can be described as the internal changes of e-commerce. The changes in customer behaviors and customer interactions has in turn led to a change in tasks. This includes easier, more repetitive tasks, described by most as more boring but by some, as nice, due to their simplicity. The tasks include packaging online orders from the store and mailing them to the customer, going to the warehouse to collect online orders from customers and making online orders for the customers in the store.

The second factor influenced by the external changes due to e-commerce is the attitude of the employee that determines if they experience competition or collaboration with the e-commerce in the store. In this study, we have discovered that the employees with a greater team mentality and think of the bigger picture for the entire company, not just the store, are more positively impacted by e-commerce. While the employees that think more individualistic, and have a greater focus towards their own tasks or the tasks of the store, experience more of a competition with the influences of e-commerce. This, does in turn mean that the internal changes caused by the external changes that have been triggered by the influence of e-commerce in the retail industry, impacts the actual engagement of the employee. Thus, it is not instantly influenced by e-commerce, but instead it is through a sort of chain-reaction of changes. Additionally, this complex influence caused by e-commerce, explains why the employees themselves instinctively felt that e-commerce had no real influence on them or their engagement.

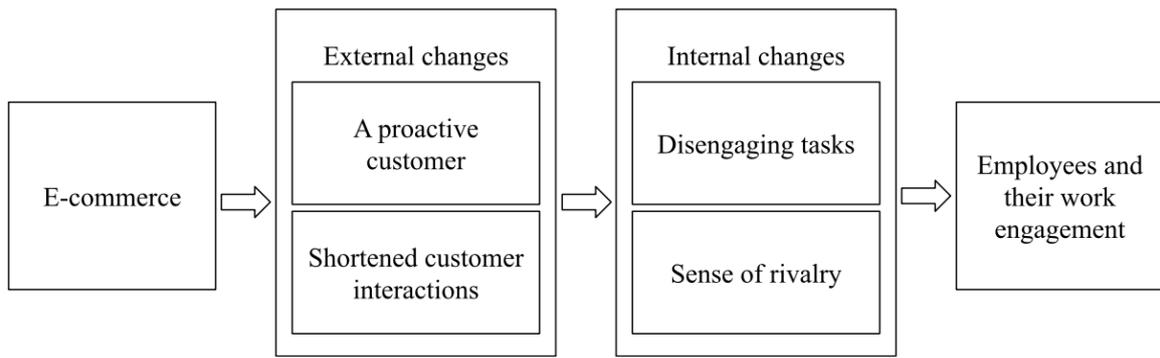


Figure 2: Conceptual Framework

7.0 Conclusion

In this chapter we will answer the research question and conclude the finding and results of the study. The chapter will also contain the theoretical contributions, managerial contributions as well as the societal ones. We will finally present the study's limitations and give suggestions for future research.

7.1 General conclusions

This thesis purpose is to better understand how e-commerce is influencing employees and their engagement in the retail industry. First of all we can see by prior research leading up to today, that e-commerce is growing and becoming more popular with consumers. We can also see that e-commerce has forced retail stores to create new service offerings and adapt to the new way that retail is taking. With both the stores and the customers changes that employees who work in the store noticed it has become necessary for them to adapt as well. The external factors that this study found was that because of new, added or changed services provided by the retail industry and the individual stores, customer behaviors have changed. They are now proactive and planning their shopping before reaching the physical stores. The increased possibilities to find product information and make orders online has led to customers coming to the store more sure of what they want and what is available. There were however signs that pointed out that customers sometimes had a tendency to be overconfident in knowing what they needed. This was more when it was purchased regarding more advanced products where the employees could be seen as still being very valuable and beneficial for the customer. The engagement was affected when customers now just come into the stores, pick up what they ordered or looked up online and then pay for it.

Furthermore this study showed how the interaction between employees and customers are getting both fewer and shorter. This is partly connected to the fact that sometimes the customers do not need the help and assistance of the store employees. The fewer and shortening interactions have led to employee engagement changing. For some their engagement rises when they don't always have to talk to or interact with customers. For the majority however, they saw this as something monotonous and their engagement decreased. For those who like to interact with customers and see that as their main job see these new shorter interactions as worsening of their job and say that it has affected their engagement negatively because of it.

These external changes that are an effect from e-commerce have sparked a new set of tasks for the employees. As mentioned the stores are adapting to the demands of their customers and thus have employees been tasked with additional or changed objectives to perform when working. It became clear in this study that employees also here have different opinions about what these new tasks have brought. While the ones who want a more diverse and change set of tasks are very open to the fact that not only do they have to assist the customers. They now have other tasks and that has increased their engagement. Others explain the new tasks in a different way. To not help customers as much but conduct more logistics and prepare orders can lead to a decrease in employee engagement as they do not feel as if they are doing what the main purpose of the job is; to help the customers.

Finally this study can show that a rivalry with e-commerce and the stores are something that employees noticed. While not everyone sees e-commerce as the competition, but has the attitude where it's used as a tool and an integrated part of retail, there are some who are afraid that it will affect the store in a negative way. Stores downsizing and are at a greater risk of closing down is a clear effect on employee engagement.

The purpose of this study was to get a better understanding of how e-commerce has affected employees and their engagement in the retail industry. We have shown that e-commerce has led to new customer behaviors and shorter interactions between staff and customers. These two are external effects on the employees as it is e-commerce, something that comes from the outside, that is the reason behind it. We then see that these changes have led to some internal changes from employees and their engagement. New and different tasks have become a normality for employees and finally the view and attitude of retail have been affected by them. Some employees see e-commerce as the competitor while others see it as an integrated part of the new retail industry. External changes have thus led to internal changes with the employees and this study shows how it is affecting employee engagement.

7.2 Theoretical contributions

This master's thesis aims to address the research gap concerning the impact of e-commerce on employees and their engagement in physical stores. Previous research showed few studies specifically examining the intersection between employees in physical stores and the influence of e-commerce. Therefore, this study contributes to the existing literature by bridging theoretical knowledge from both areas and shedding light on their connection in the contemporary landscape.

Through an in-depth exploration, this study investigated how employees perceive and respond to the presence of e-commerce. It reveals that there are varying attitudes among employees towards the emergence of this new era. Additionally, this research highlights the significant role of external factors in driving the changes observed in the retail industry. Noteworthy are the demonstrations of how customer behavior has undergone transformations, with e-commerce playing a pivotal role in these shifts.

Furthermore, this study gives more theoretical knowledge to the evolving nature of interactions between retail employees and customers today. These have long been considered crucial for both retailing and customer experience. It reveals that these interactions have become less prominent in the current landscape, as customers' engagement with employees has become fewer and shorter in duration. The needs and demands of which consumers have today look different compared to before and this can be seen by practical changes in the types of tasks performed by staff.

By examining the interplay between e-commerce and the experiences of employees in physical stores, this thesis offers valuable insights into the complex dynamics shaping the retail industry. It enhances our understanding of how e-commerce impacts employees' engagement and provides a foundation for further exploration in this field. Ultimately, this research serves as a resource for individuals seeking to gain a deeper comprehension of the intricate relationship between e-commerce and employees in physical stores in today's evolving retail environment.

7.3 Managerial contributions

This study offers a comprehensive analysis of the impact of e-commerce on the retail industry. It investigates the changes that have come to retail stores and their employees, providing insights into the evolving landscape. By examining consumer behaviors, market dynamics, and technological advancements, the study reveals the challenges and opportunities that have arisen as well as how engagement is being affected by these changes. It also explores the implications for employee roles, customer interactions, and job satisfaction. Additionally, strategic responses such as omni-channel integration and personalised experiences are discussed. Overall, this study provides valuable insights for practitioners, policymakers, and researchers navigating the evolving retail sector.

Employees have and still are a crucial part of the retail stores. Customer experience, customer satisfaction and ultimately company success have been connected to the important work employees contribute to. There are many reasons for why e-commerce and employee engagement is imperative to have a good and up to date understanding of companies, their leadership and all those all down to the employees themselves. Employees need to thrive and be happy at work, or they are likely to quit. Employee turnover is something companies want to avoid because it's a big investment to hire new employees. Furthermore employees want to be happy at work and feel engaged when working. To understand what influences the engagement levels can be key to improve both the employees and the company.

With the increasing prevalence and adoption of e-commerce, it becomes crucial to comprehend its implications in order to effectively harness its potential. This necessitates a deeper understanding of how e-commerce is shaping consumer behavior, transforming business models, and impacting various industries. By recognizing the opportunities and challenges associated with e-commerce, organizations can strategically adapt their operations, marketing strategies, and customer experiences to fully leverage its benefits. Consequently, this understanding becomes instrumental in optimizing business outcomes and staying competitive in today's digital landscape.

7.4 Societal contributions

Although this thesis primarily focuses on corporate companies and employee engagement levels, it is essential to recognize the broader societal implications. Society is constantly evolving, and the individuals within it are also experiencing and influenced by the changes. By examining the impact of e-commerce on our society and how it has transformed consumer behavior and shopping patterns, this study not only benefits corporate companies seeking to maintain competitiveness but also holds relevance for employees and the general population. Understanding how these changes and effects influence both physical retailers and the individuals working within the stores, enables us to adapt, capitalize on opportunities, and optimize societal quality.

Adaptation and competitiveness among companies in response to consumer demands contribute to a society where competition keeps prices affordable without compromising quality. The introduction of new services by retail stores should be viewed as a positive development. It is crucial to stay attuned to these changes, utilizing them as catalysts for growth and motivation for improvement. The retail industry exemplifies this adaptability, and our study sheds light on the impact of such strategies on company performance. Moreover, it

underscores the significance of employee engagement, which plays a pivotal role in maintaining high levels of performance in stores and ensuring their success. Employees have always played a key role in the retail sector, assisting and enhancing the shopping experience for customers.

Employee engagement is a critical factor that transcends the boundaries of the retail sector and applies to every workplace. By gaining a deeper understanding of employee well-being, motivation, and aspirations, companies can strive to create an environment that fosters mutual benefits. When organizations prioritize the needs and satisfaction of their employees, it creates a win-win situation. Engaged employees not only demonstrate improved performance, but they also experience personal growth and enhanced well-being. Organizations that prioritize employee engagement understand the powerful impact it has on overall organizational success. Engaged employees are more likely to go above and beyond their job responsibilities, exhibit higher levels of creativity and innovation, and contribute to a positive work culture. Therefore, fostering employee engagement is not only beneficial for individual employees but also for the overall success and sustainability of the organization. And by improving the wellbeing of people at their work it will consequently affect society as a whole. We need a society that has good competition between firms, hard working and happy employees who have appropriate skills and mindset to perform their tasks.

7.5 Limitations and future research

Although this study has made significant contributions to the research field, it is important to acknowledge that there are limitations. The constraints of limited time and resources have impacted the study conducted in this thesis. To advance the understanding of the research topic, it would be beneficial for future research to undertake a study with a larger sample size by making a bigger study where more stores are in different locations.

In the present study, six interviews were conducted, providing valuable insights within the given context. However, to enhance the applicability of the findings to a larger population, a larger sample should be included in future research. This study looked at employees who were all coming from different stores. Future research can go deeper into one particular store to get a more accurate understanding from the entire team of employees. By incorporating a more diverse and extensive sample, researchers can capture a broader range of perspectives and experiences, thereby ensuring a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Likewise did the study only look at the employees on the floor, working closely with the customers. It could be very interesting for future studies to look at how other types of employees are influenced and what attitudes and views they have on e-commerce and how it affects theory engagement.

Furthermore, in this study, an inclusive approach was adopted by examining various types of stores within the retail industry. While this approach offers a broad perspective, future research could focus on specific types of stores to provide more accurate and nuanced insights specific to those retail contexts. By delving deeper into particular retail types, future studies can uncover

relationships and dynamics unique to those specific contexts, allowing for a more comprehensive analysis.

Therefore, it is recommended that future research endeavors allocate sufficient time and resources to undertake studies with larger sample sizes. Additionally, exploring specific retail types within the broader retail industry can provide valuable insights into the dynamics and relationships specific to those contexts. By addressing these recommendations, future research can overcome the limitations of this study and contribute to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the research area.

The interviews in this study were conducted through internet based communication, Teams and Zoom. It is possible that having interviews in person would have an effect on the results and it can be easier to get an understanding of how the person really feels when meeting them in person. Furthermore the interviews were planned in advance, something that can have led to employees thinking of what and how to answer instead of answering unprepared for being interviewed.

8.0 Reference list

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9.0 Appendix

Interview guide

1. How long have you worked in a retail store?
2. What are the main tasks within your role?
3. In what ways have you noticed e-commerce changing in the last years?
4. What is your opinion of e-commerce?
5. How do you notice e-commerce having an influence on your profession?
6. Do you feel like you're competing against e-commerce? In what ways?

7. How integrated is your store with the company's e-commerce? Could you give us some examples?
8. How would you say that e-commerce has impacted your tasks in the store?
9. Have you noticed a change in the number of customers in recent years? How has it changed?
10. How do you perceive that e-commerce has affected the customers' behaviors? How have you noticed this in the store? Can you give us some examples?
11. How do you experience that e-commerce has affected the interactions between you and the customers?
12. How engaged would you generally say that you are in your work?
13. When would you say that you are most engaged in your work? Why?
14. What would you say mainly impacts your engagement in your work? Can you provide us some examples of what would increase or decrease your engagement?
15. How would you say that customers' behaviors influence your engagement with your work? In what ways?
16. How has e-commerce influenced your engagement in your work? Can you give us some examples of how?
17. Have you noticed if your employer is working to get you engaged in your work? If so, in what ways?
18. How does feedback from your manager influence your engagement?
19. How do standardised practices set by your employer influence your engagement?
20. To what extent do you feel that you are compensated fairly for your job?
21. How would a higher salary influence your engagement?
22. How do your colleagues influence your engagement?
23. How does communication within the workplace influence your engagement?
24. How do you think your engagement influences your job performance?
25. Do you have any additional comments or thoughts that you would like to share with us?