

MASTER'S THESIS

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How relationships thrive, not survive:

A study on how the Global Pandemic has influenced Inter-organizational Relationships in the Fish farming Industry.

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Abstract

Facing uncertain circumstances, where parts of the world are still torn by a global crisis, some in which are on a healing path, touching the surface of change, navigating the uncharted ways of how we live, will see the world, and communicate with each other. As of February 2023, the respiratory disease Coronavirus has been reported in a total 755 million confirmed instances, affecting countries and territories at a global scale with 6.8 million cases of demise (*Epidemiological Update on COVID-19*, 2023). There is hardly any doubt that the Coronavirus disease has played a role in how organizations and businesses operate within the last three years, but to which degree has it affected forms of relationships and communication businesses have with their customers? A crisis gives rise to a unique environmental setting that shapes the behavioral dynamics among the participants of a collaborative alliance, and we find that the current body of literature has yet to give substantial attention to this phenomenon in latest time. In the culmination of our master's degree, our article is therefore a result of deep reflection and understanding of our subject area of inter-organizational relationships, communication, branding, loyalty, and how it has changed between organization and customer due to the Coronavirus disease restrictions dynamically. We seek to present a comprehensive analysis of theory, methodology, research, and findings in the area relevant to our study.

Acknowledgments

This thesis represents the culmination of our studies in the Master of Science in Business program at Nord University Business School, with a specialization in International Trade and Marketing.

The journey has been filled with challenges and opportunities. Given that the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic still influences the business community, organizations continue to adapt, changing the environment and circumstances. However, it has also been an enriching experience, providing us with a deeper understanding of a research field that has captivated our interest. Choosing to present our master thesis in the form of an article stems from our desire to push ourselves a little extra, and we wish to share our results with you readers.

The completion of this master's thesis would not have been possible without the invaluable support of several individuals whom we would like to acknowledge.

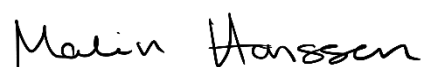
First and foremost, we express our sincere gratitude to our supervisor and professors, namely, Professor Frode Nilssen, Professor Frank Lindberg and Professor Tor Agnar Korneliussen, whose wealth of knowledge and passion for the research field has been a constant inspiration. We also thank Alf-Gøran Knutsen for providing us with information and as a responder to our interviews and questions. Finally, we also thank our families and friends who have provided unwavering support during this journey.

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INTRODUCTORY CHAPTER

Theoretical perspective

This chapter will act as an introduction to the theory in the article presented at the latest stage of this study, and we specify that this chapter seeks to create an understanding from the reader as to why the following theories are applied to the research. The theoretical evidence has as its primary objective to support the intention of the article to find out what is happening underneath the visible relationship between business A (Kvarøy Fiskeoppdrett) and business B (Whole Foods Market), and how it has changed dynamically over time. The theoretical framework in this chapter is based on 4 different perspectives on business relationships, thus being *Transactional, Relational, Network, and Dynamic*.

The *transactional* perspective sees business relationships as a sequence of actions that maximize business profitability. This creates a focus on negotiating and managing contracts and agreements to ensure each party receives a fair value exchange.

This mentioned Kleinaltenkamp et al. (2015, p. 06) have the transactional perspective that “*a business relationship is the consequence of market transactions between a supplier and a customer that is not random.*” By not being random, they suggest that circumstances can make it appear logical or imperative to establish a systematic connection between market transactions or that can result in such a connection being created. They also imply that “*Every business relationship begins at the time of the first transaction*” (Kleinaltenkamp et al., 2015, p. 07). The initial transaction/purchase/selling leads to the following number of repurchasing/reselling decisions. These decisions are, according to the transactional perspective a relationship where the parties want to receive the most amount of profitability. The transactional perspective is a short-term negotiation strategy and does not care for the extent of the relationship building long-term relations.

The *relational* perspective emphasizes the significance of constructing trust, commitment, and cooperative actions between parties. In contrast to the transactional perspective, the relational focuses on developing long-term relationships. These are based on mutual benefits and shared goals.

Contrary to transactional perspectives, Moosmayer et al., (2013) argue that business research largely overlooks the crucial aspect that industrial business is primarily based on relationships rather than transactions. They contend that the presiding perspective of “one-off” deals and focus on maximizing economic profitability is inadequate and that the relationship between the involved parties is very important. The long-term perspective prioritizes fostering and maintaining strong relationships, which is essential to the business's success.

The *network* perspectives field of vision shows that business relationships are interconnected in a web of networks. The focus address business abilities to identify and leverage relationships in this web of networks to achieve common goals.

“The network approach changes the perspective from an autonomous, self-reliant view of organizational action and outcomes to one that is essentially relational” (Zaheer et al., 2010, p. 62). They argue that networks provide access to resources and capabilities from outside the organization. The power of actors is said to be both augmented and restricted by networks. Resource dependence theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003) provides one rationale for power distribution in inter-organizational relationships. It proposes that as a firm becomes more reliant on the resources of its partners, the partners gain greater control over the firm, thereby increasing their power over it. Rosenbloom & Larsen mentions that the current way- and talk of global business and network implies that with the right technology, the global businesses in our world will operate together like the reliability and precision of a “Swiss watch”. Their study suggests that culture is, in fact more important than the current way- and talk presumes, and that culture acts as a noise towards networking and globalizing.

The *dynamic* perspective recognizes the constant evolvement of business relationships and the circumstances around them, over time. As this happens, the focus is on adapting to the changes and grasping the opportunities that come with the dynamic change. Flexible strategies to maintain and enhance relationships are in the interest of the businesses.

Håkansson & Snehota, (1995) has a perspective of business relationships that were quite frowned upon in the 90s. They speak of relationships between organizations as neglected for a long time by economics and scholars. In contrary to this, today’s dynamic perspectives acknowledge the relationship between organizations and how they can dynamically improve and impair. The perspective covers relationships that

exist between various businesses, as well as the relationships between businesses and the government. It also encompasses the crucial relationship that businesses have with their customers. One reason behind this; *“The widespread impact of digitalization affects everything from personal relationships augmented by social media and their services”* (Gray & Rumpe, 2015). In dynamic relationships, culture can create differences and distance in which businesses operate within and with each other. *“Both the sender and the receiver of a message are products of their own fields of reference or expertise, that is, the sender has been socialized given his or her own external cultural environment, as has the receiver. The less these two fields of experience or reference overlap, the more ‘distant’ one person’s cultural background is from another’s, and the more difficult clear communication and understanding is between the two.”* (Rosenbloom & Larsen, 2003). The distance Rosenbloom & Larsen speaks of is what they refer to as “cultural distance”. They suggest the contrary to the belief that geographical distance is the only reason keeping businesses apart from operating with each other like clockwork. Hofstede (1991) refers to culture as the “software of the mind”, implying that culture shapes and influences the way individuals think, act, behave, communicate and interact with the world around. (Hall, 1990) describes culture as communication and that if communication is to be effective, decoding and understanding the message of the sender properly is essential. Without decoding, the receiver can perceive the message from the source differently, creating communication differences, therefore, cultural distance.

In our dynamic research, we have chosen to take on the lens of the dynamic framework. This is natural and does not contradict the study, where we will go into deeper perspectives of dynamic relationships later in the article itself. We want to delve deeper into communication and loyalty and how it affects the time relationship Kvarøy Fiskeoppdrett has with Whole Foods Market (WFM) from the period 2008 to 2023, in an event context.

Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodology for collecting and analyzing data for our research. We provide a detailed account of the research question and how it is addressed through qualitative methods. Specifically, in-depth interviews were chosen as the primary source of data collection because they provide rich and detailed insights into the research topic.

A qualitative research approach was selected to ensure the study was grounded in real-world observations and experiences (Johannessen, Christoffersen, & Tufte, 2011). Our analysis is based on a comprehensive examination of the collected data, allowing us to identify patterns and themes that emerged from the interviews. We then used these findings to answer our research question rigorously and systematically.

Selecting an appropriate methodology is critical, and the research question guides the direction. Given our explorative research question, qualitative methodology is the best choice for this study. Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to research the impact of the pandemic (COVID-19) on Kvarøy Fiskeoppdrett's inter-organizational relationships with key- accounts in the United States.

Case design

A qualitative case study is a research approach that enables the exploration of a phenomenon within a specific context using various data sources. It employs multiple lenses to uncover diverse aspects of the phenomenon (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

According to Kaarbo and Beasley (1999), a case study is a research approach that entails the investigation of a phenomenon in its authentic context, acknowledging the influential role of the context itself. This methodology recognizes that the context in which the phenomenon occurs can have a profound impact on its understanding and interpretation.

Based on our study objective, we have chosen to study a single organization of fish farming (Kvarøy Fiskeoppdrett) for our analysis. The goal is to gain a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the phenomenon and context under investigation, but also for the lack of comparable organizations with equivalent combined factors that influence the context: size, geographical placement, similar market strategy, and segment.

Data collection

The qualitative case study is a research methodology that helps explore a phenomenon within some context through various data sources. It explores through different lenses to reveal multiple facets of the phenomenon (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Data relevant to the subject is collected through in-depth interviews with a small fish-farming company's CEO and related the web, articles, magazines, and field conversations. This allows us to compare the data collected back and forth between the different types of sources.

In depth-interviews

We conducted in-depth interviews to comprehensively understand the internal and external motivations of the relevant informant within our topic. This approach was deemed necessary due to the nature of our problem statement, which required us to collect detailed information. Through this method, we gathered significant insights and perspectives that would enable us to address our research questions effectively.

The argument for utilizing interviews to gather information in this thesis is to provide informants with an increased opportunity for unrestrained self-expression. In addition, given the complexity of the social phenomena, interviews offer a means of detecting subtle nuances and other elements that serve as descriptive determinants, critical to comprehending both interpretive skills and individual motivations (Johannessen, Christoffersen, & Tufte, 2011).

To enhance the comprehensiveness of information derived from informants, we adopted a systematic approach of identifying crucial sub-themes within the problem statement and structuring the interview guide accordingly. Our sub-themes are delineated into three temporal phases, offering a dynamic view of the study objective: pre-pandemic, pandemic, and post-pandemic. As Johannessen et al. (2011) emphasized, it is crucial to specify subcategories within the overarching themes to ensure the inclusivity of all relevant aspects. In addition, we anticipated that unforeseen topics and issues might emerge during the interviews, underscoring the indispensable role of flexibility in data collection and organizational methodology.

Design of interview guide

Developing an interview guide is a powerful instrument for acquiring crucial information that will form the foundation of the analysis. Preparing and planning a comprehensive interview guide is essential for obtaining sufficient information from the informants (Johannesen et al., 2011).

We conducted two in-depth, semi-structured interviews over two different dates.

This was because the process was time and energy-consuming, allowing the interviewee and the interviewers a more pleasant experience. Most importantly, it allows us to fact-check and cross-check the interviewee's statements by re-validating the questions.

The nature of our interviews was semi-structured, and several structural improvements were implemented, making different sections. During our meetings, we discussed the topics of the introduction, pre-restriction, and under-restriction phases.

During the introductory phase, we introduced ourselves and the project we were working on and explained the interview's significance concerning the project and other formal purposes for documentation and utilization. Given that the interview is conducted as a case study, we briefly presented the problem statement and sub-themes to ensure the interviewee had a clear understanding of the bases for the topic of discussion. During this period, we also conducted a brief period of small talk to get the conversation starting and more naturally merging towards the interview. The theme of the small talks is centered around their most recent project launched—one of their most well-known partnerships with a high-profile establishment overseas and recent travels.

The interview's primary section is scoping on the changes in maintaining and developing new business relationships pre-pandemic, pandemic, and post-pandemic. The questions had a wide range of sub-topics related to technological solutions for communication, key relationships, crisis management, and the overall experience of their relationships.

The questions dealt with the informant's own views on the topics and their knowledge and impression of their recipients of the information. The conversations during the interviews were comfortable and fascinating, making the assurance needed to have a trusting connection.

The last section connects the final threads by allowing the interviewee to clarify their statements and give additional topics they consider applicable. Here the interviewee took the chance to

elaborate on and explain that the overall results of the pandemic have made them more potent in their market position.

Data Analysis

We extracted meaning from the sources, interviews, articles, field notes and magazines to conduct the data analysis. We are transforming the meaning articulated by research participants during data collection into concise phrases that preserve the intended message (Malterud, 2001). Utilizing “meaning condensation” during data analysis allows for reducing the text volume while extracting meaningful insights from each interview segment.

Malterud (2001) recommends that researchers review the text to understand the content comprehensively and subsequently identify natural "meaning units" within the text. The meaning units are then rephrased while maintaining their intended meaning and grouped into themes that align with the research objective. In the final stage, each theme's key points are incorporated into a descriptive statement demonstrating each segment's meaning (Malterud, 2001).

The reason for our choice of data analysis is that the nature of the method provides a systematic approach to data handling. Consequently, this makes a valuable contribution toward enhancing our overall comprehension of the interviews and additional data effectively. Furthermore, after the interviews, we took our time to discuss the initial findings and plan for the next step of our assignment. During the interviews, we used a tool in the Teams application to transcribe and record our discussion, with a signed agreement from the interviewee.

This helps us concentrate further on the actual conversation rather than getting the conversation documented on paper. However, the automatic transcription needed to be more comprehensive; therefore, we had to review it to ensure all data was written correctly and in line with the recordings. During this part, we also took our time to create detailed descriptions of each category and theme and subsequently extracted units of meaning predicated upon these identified themes. In the final analysis, we compressed the extracted pieces of meaning while ensuring that fundamental elements were kept.

Quality of the study

There are four set standards to help us ensure the quality of the research is dependable.

Guba and Lincoln (1989) operate with measurements of validity, reliability, transferability, and verifiability (referred in Johannessen et al., 2011; referred in Mehmetoglu, 2004).

Validity:

Validity refers to the degree to which measures and research findings accurately depict the phenomena intended to describe (Johannesen et al., 2011).

In contrast to quantitatively oriented researchers, numerous "qualitative researchers" assert their focus not on objective truth but on the participant's subjective perspective. However, the primary aim of qualitative research remains to generate knowledge and understanding about the phenomenon being studied. Through exploring the respondent's version of the truth, qualitative researchers aim to uncover deeper meanings and insights into the research topic (Moret-Hartman, Wilt, Reuzel, & Grin, 2007). The discussion of validity plays a crucial role in assessing the reliability of research outcomes and examining the goals and parameters of the techniques employed. This implies that discussing validity serves as a tool for refining methodology. Nevertheless, it is essential to note that validity is depended upon a given methodology's specific aims and context, as Yanow (2000) points out (Moret-Hartman, Wilt, Reuzel, & Grin, 2007).

We have taken significant measures to guarantee the validity of our research by thoroughly comprehending both existing and related theories on the subject. This was achieved by thoroughly examining prior studies and engaging in dialogues within our academic community. The complexity of theories and the requirement for their development has sometimes made the process lengthy. However, we could incrementally apprehend their content by reading these theories repeatedly. This approach has facilitated the ability to establish connections between our research and proceeding studies, thus allowing us to gain a more intricate perspective on our research topic. We also used multiple data sources to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings and analysis.

Reliability

Reliability examines whether there is a connection between the phenomenon studied and the data collected (Johannessen et al., 2011; Mehmetoglu, 2004).

The study process must be consistent and reasonably stable over time and across researchers and methods (Miles, Huberman, & Saodaña, 2020).

Several approaches, including auditing, may be employed to obtain reliable data and appraise the researcher's documentation, presentation of data, methods utilized, and decision-making (Johannessen et al., 2011; Mehmetoglu, 2004). To enhance the study's reliability, we comprehensively documented the entire research process, including a detailed description of the context and informant.

Transferability

The transferability of research results refers to the extent to which they can be applied to a different phenomenon or context (Johannessen et al., 2011; Mehmetoglu, 2004). In this study, we organized data and developed various terms, concepts, theories, and interpretations with potential applicability to future research endeavors. In addition, our findings can be transferred to other contexts or phenomena.

Compatibility

Qualitative researchers are typically anticipated to offer a distinct and insightful perspectives in their studies. Nonetheless, the research findings must stem from the study and not be influenced by the researcher's biases or subjective viewpoints (Johannessen et al., 2011; Mehmetoglu, 2004). In addition, researchers must emphasize detailing all decisions made throughout the research process to ensure readers can equally comprehend and evaluate the study (Johannessen et al., 2011; Mehmetoglu, 2004).

In the methodology chapter, we have presented a comprehensive justification of the decisions made in the study. In the discussion chapter, we have provided a comparative analysis and discussion of our interpretations of the data concerning prior research. All interviews were recorded and transcribed to ensure that responses were not misinterpreted, thus promoting confirmability.

Like all research methods, our method and design have limitations and weaknesses. We have one informant from the company itself and the general industry, so the selection of informants - or lack thereof- might not accurately represent the case and may provide a weak basis for conclusions. To enhance the study, we could have fact-checked with other workers within the company, with the clients, and within the industry. Thus, in this case, the informant selected is the most emerged within the scope of the research question. Based on this and with casual conversations about the research themes with people from the industry at the “Årsarrangement Sjømat Norge 2023”. Consequently, we believe that the data collected from this informant and other sources (articles, interviews, the web, magazines) provides a unique and representative perspective on how the pandemic has affected Kvarøy’s ability to Communicate, maintain existing- and pursue new Customers.

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ARTICLE

Abstract

Facing uncertain circumstances, where parts of the world are still torn by a global crisis, some of which are on a healing path, touching the surface of change, navigating the uncharted ways of how we live, will see the world, and communicate with each other. As of February 2023, the respiratory disease Coronavirus has been reported in a total 755 million confirmed instances, affecting countries and territories globally with 6.8 million cases of demise (*Epidemiological Update on COVID-19, 2023*). There is hardly any doubt that the Coronavirus disease has played a role in how organizations and businesses operate within the last three years, but to which degree has it affected forms of relationships and communication businesses have with their customers? A crisis gives rise to a unique environmental setting that shapes the behavioral dynamics among the participants of a collaborative alliance, and we find that the current body of literature has yet to give substantial attention to this phenomenon in the latest time. In the culmination of our master's degree, our article is therefore a result of deep reflection and understanding of our subject area of inter-organizational relationships, communication, branding, loyalty and how it has changed between organization and customer due to the Coronavirus disease restrictions dynamically. We seek to present a comprehensive analysis of theory, methodology, research, and findings in the area relevant to our study.

Keywords

- Inter-organizational relationships
- Communication
- Loyalty
- Culture
- Business 2 Business
- Marketing
- Branding

Introduction

Throughout the past ten thousand years, fishing has served as a fundamental source of livelihood for the people of Norway and as an essential factor for the placement of our communities. Aquaculture is a natural extension of Norway's proud traditions as a fishing

nation, and commercial earnings became easier to regulate when Norway was the first Atlantic salmon farming nation. An industry that now has earned over 50 years of successful experience (Norwegian Seafood Council, 2020). Moreover, making the fish farming industry is one of the country's fastest-growing and most profitable industries and nearly the only industry - together with offshore energy and maritime - where Norway controls the entire value chain (Tveterås, Reve, Haus-Rev, Misund, & Blomgren, 2019).

Like any other sector, Norwegian fish farmers get affected by global events. So, when the pandemic struck Norway in March 2020, the industry met challenges. Literature findings examining the trade implications of Covid-related measures indicate that lockdowns adversely influenced global value chains (Lafrogne-Joussier et al., 2022). Additionally, the declined demand for various products resulted in reduced trade across different sectors (Bartik et al., 2020; Hayakawa & Mukunoki, 2021; Espitia et al., 2021). However, the measures implemented in response to Covid-19 presented opportunities for certain entities while posing challenges for others (Straume et al., 2022). In this study, we argue that how an organization survives and sometimes thrives depends on the dynamic relationship between businesses A and B. It also depends on how this relationship is communicated and nurtured over time, building, maintaining,- and polishing the branding and digital marketing.

We are writing this study with a shared interest in finding out how, despite all contradictions, a company can not only survive a global crisis but come out of it stronger. Furthermore, we want to show how other companies can achieve the same goal with relationship-building between customers and consumers, good communication, the ability to adapt to changing environments, and how loyalty is a factor that builds up over time between two parties. Therefore, this study aims to find the answer to; *How does the situation of a global pandemic influence inter-organizational relationships in the Fish farming Industry?*

Theoretical framework

Operationalizing relationships in the context of our study, we focus on the aspects of communication and loyalty. We utilize the theories to what degree, how- and why they affect Kvarøy Fiskeoppdrett's relationship dynamically. By dynamically, we address the time and events affecting the relationships between 2008 to 2023.

Dynamic relationships take various forms, including partnerships, alliances, communication, marketing, joint ventures, networks, and consortia affected by time. Business relationships have with time, become increasingly important in today's globalized and complex business environment (Casey, 2008). The dynamic relationship is an exchange perspective with mutual benefits from both organizations (Schmidt & Kochan, 1977). In context to our study, we part the communication into business-to-business communication and communication toward a strong brand.

Business-to-business Communication

The exchange perspective implies that there is a form of communication and grade of loyalty between company A and company B, and we specify that these phenomena do affect the relationship. Due to the unprecedented situation, the global business environment has become unusually challenging, and this has inevitably impacted business communication in a significant way (Hitt et al., 2021). This phenomenon can be attributed to the fact that the entities involved in a collaborative alliance are entangled within an intricate network of interdependencies, which consequently affects the magnitude, caliber, and modality of their dealings, owing to the multitudinous external restrictions stemming from the Covid-19 pandemic (Arslan et al., 2022). The severity of this circumstance is further heightened when conducting business activities on an international level, where the members of a relationship are geographically, culturally, and psychologically distanced from each other, leading to an increased degree of uncertainty and complexity in the fulfilment of their responsibilities (Fath et al., 2021). Understanding the fundamental concepts such as source, receiver, message, channels, feedback, and noise is essential to our approach to the theory of communication processes. It is the basic view of how communication is a means of transferring information from the source of the information, encoded to a message sent through a channel to a receiver of information. David Berlo describes the elements of communication in his SMCR model (Berlo, 1960). Berlo's model does however as mentioned not include and account for how the source and receiver perceive and convey the information (Cuofano, 2023), and is a one way transaction of information. Therefore, feedback and noise are of little to no emphasis. Communication is an ever-changing and evolving dynamic process, not bound by a linear path, but inherent to human nature. It serves as a mean to express, exchange, and convey behavior, emotions, thoughts, and gather valuable feedback from recipients. Ultimately, the primary goal of communication is to foster mutual understanding and redirect the flow of information

towards that end (Pereira et al., 2021). The feedback is considered the response of the recipient and is therefore present during interactive and transactional communication. Echoing Beaver, *“Communication noise can be defined as any barrier preventing an effective communication process. When a form of noise disrupts the communication process from the sender to the receiver, it is considered communication noise.”* (Beaver, 2022).

Communication toward a strong brand

“Like any important term in the field of media, culture, or communication, the meaning of social media is contested. Social media are those that allow people: to say or make things; to share those things with others; and to have that saying, making, or sharing made visible to still others” (Meikle, 2016, p. 04). Oke et al. (2016) state that there is of substantial significant for marketing teams to respond to the needs of consumers when planning marketing strategies and that this can result in strengthening the brand, making customer relationships more robust. Social media is a form of communication and a product of dynamic communication resulting from technological advances and digitalization.

Chen et al. (2013) also refer to the social platforms for building consumer-brand relationships. The Internet's capacity for interactive communication positions it as a valuable tool for cultivating relationships. Within the online realm, an opportunity exists to acquire comprehensive behavioral insights into consumer decision-making and establish customer relationships through active engagement and knowledge from customer interactions. (Turri, Smith, & Kemp, 2013). These communities exhibit characteristics of multi-faceted communication, conversion, and collaborative interactions (Tuten & Solomon, 2013). During these interactions, a meaningful connection can be developed for the consumer toward the brand. According to the literature, relationships characterized by emotional attachment or connection are established through the foundation of identification and shared values (Meffert, Niessing, Plassmann, Iyer, & Evanschitzky, 2013).

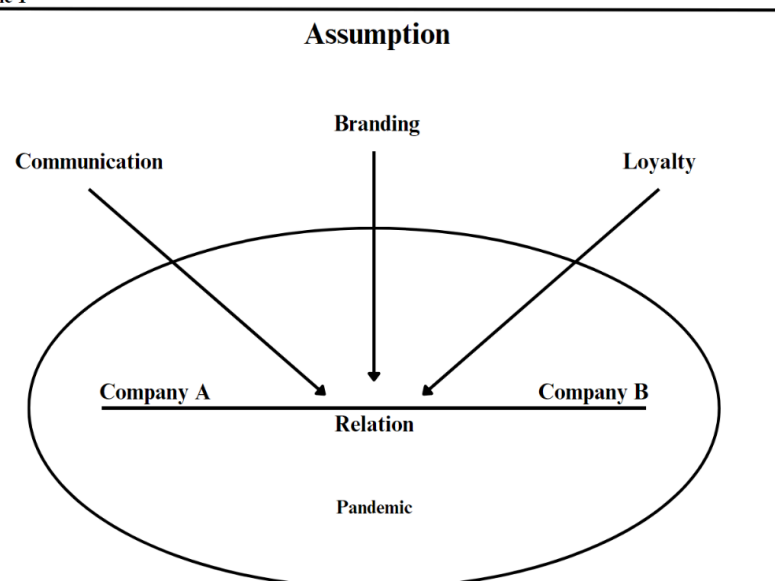
We acknowledge that the field of social media is vast and controls much of the communication from and to organizations. We have all heard the story of Kodak, where brand awareness could have hit better at the end. *“Awareness refers to the strength of a brand’s presence in the consumers mind.”* (Aaker, 2012). To be on the top of mind, the consumers require adequate performance and quality.

Loyalty

Pongton & Suntrayuth (2019) research suggests that "improving communication satisfaction can improve employee satisfaction, engagement, and performance.". In certain situations, environmental pressures can give rise to opportunistic relational and communicable behaviour (Keranen et al., 2020). In fact, exposure to a crisis scenario can elevate the importance of inter-organizational justice in preserving partner commitment, thereby preventing the potential negative consequences that the crisis may bring (Matopoulos et al., 2019). A crisis's impact on a business relationship's performance can be alleviated by preserving partner commitment (loyalty) through inter-organizational relations & communication. The unexpected and volatile nature of a crisis can also lead to a breakdown of trust between business partners who are struggling to navigate the challenges brought about by the crisis, lessening the power of the relationship (Bengtson et al., 2013). As mentioned earlier, feedback is a form of the communication process, and unmentioned, this measures the degree of loyalty over time. If the feedback is positive, naturally the loyalty will rise, contrary to lessening if the feedback is negative. Achieving loyalty, therefore, requires a beneficial value of feedback dynamically from the business partner or consumer.

Based on the aforementioned theories, we arrive at a theoretical model in Table 1, that describes and assumes which fields influence the relationship between business A and business B, in the external environment of a pandemic.

Table 1



Methodology

Research setting

The company and the industry

Kvarøy Fiskeoppdrett is a relatively small fish-farming company located in Lurøy in Nordland County and employs around 50 people (Glibstrup, 2023). As a third-generation family business, Kvarøy relies on this aspect as a key part of its marketing strategy. Their core concept is “offering salmon of very high quality, without compromising either our environment or the welfare of our fish.” (Kvarøy Fiskeoppdrett AS, n.d).

At the start of 2020 – right before the pandemic struck, the company took a gamble and launched its premium brand for sale only in the USA, Kvarøy Arctic; today, 90 percent of production goes to the USA (Jensen, 2022). One of Kvarøy's segments over the sea is finished products that go straight to the store shelves. Among the selection are salmon burgers and sausages (Njåstad, 2022). This adds a unique perspective to the national industry's brand-building and market strategy. Today, their Instagram account “Kvaroyactic” has over 25 thousand followers – which is unusual within their industry, giving them a significant advantage in advertising and promoting their products.

At the end of 2022, IntraFish published that the US has, over time, become Norway's largest consumer market, measured in value for salmon and trout (Jensen, 2022). As a result, the year before Kvarøy group had a turnover of over NOK 1 billion, with Kvarøy Fish Farming having a profit of over NOK 60 million (Njåstad, 2022).

The pandemic

The pandemic contributed to turbulent times for most of the world – and the fish-farming industry is no different. The sudden shutdown of society worldwide between January and March 2020 affected the seafood industry through several channels (Norges sjømatråd, 2020). During these uncertain times, navigating the market and providing the optimum solution for your customers under the pressure of “fresh fish” can be challenging.

At the start of the pandemic, infection control restrictions, which caused activity and private consumption to fall over large parts of the world, led to less demand in the restaurant segment and a fall in the price of salmon (Johansen, et al., 2021). As a result, the value of Norwegian seafood exports also fell and was below the trend for half a year.

For the rest of the pandemic, salmon prices fluctuated considerably during the corona period. Usually, the price is lower in the second half of the year compared to the first half of the year, mainly due to increased volume, both from Norway and globally (Aandahl, 2021). When the corona started, the price was at a historically high level, but the price fell sharply at the beginning of the pandemic (Aandahl, 2021). However, as consumption patterns adapted to a new situation, opportunities arose through other sales channels, preferably the grocery market. Demand has been directed toward more processed and frozen products within the grocery market (Johansen, et al., 2021).

The primary objective of this study is to research the impact of the pandemic (COVID-19) on Kvarøy Fiskeoppdrett's inter-organizational relationships with key- accounts in the United States. To get an insight into how the pandemic has affected Kvarøy Fiske oppdrett business relationships, we collect information about pre, post, and during the pandemic (covid-19) during the interviews.

Data collection

To initiate our study, we engaged in a comprehensive review of the industry and relevant theoretical frameworks to enhance our understanding of the subject, the case's company and the study's contextual background. This also contributed to a more refined design of the interview guide.

A qualitative case study is a research methodology that allows for the investigation of a particular phenomenon in a specific context, utilizing a range of data sources. This approach employs multiple perspectives to reveal various dimensions of the phenomenon (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Due to the nature of the objective study, we applied a criteria-based selection of the informant. The informant needed to have a specific experience within the company and the timeframe connected to the thesis (Johannessen, Christoffersen, & Tufte, 2011).

The data is partly collected on two in-depth interviews with the CEO of Kvarøy Fiskeoppdrett, Alf-Gøran Knutsen. His primary education is in teaching from the campus of Nesna at Nord University, he also has a year of economics from Troms, and lastly, a year of “market competence for the Norwegian seafood” industry from NHH in Bergen. Before becoming a CEO, he had three-year experiences within Kvarøy, going through various work tasks, including box stacking, fish smoking, and economic administration.

Before, during, and to a significant extent following the pandemic outbreak, the respondent assumed the responsibility of communicating with their customers. However, due to the very recent launch of their brand, the team that today exists in the US still needs to be fully

Table 2. Research phases, engagement, and timeline

Pre interview	Studying fish-farming, communication, and the pandemic: articles, interviews, web and magazines, january – march.
First in-depth interview	In-depth interview with CEO of a small fish-farming company, 20. march.
Data review	Going over collected data, comparing statements from existing interviews, articles, and magazines, and preparing for a new interview, 20. march - 12. april.
Attending Årsarrangement Sjømat Norge 2023	Attending presentations about the industry and casual conversations and informal interviews with other leaders from fish-framing companies about the pandemic and communication, 28. march.
Field notes review	Review the collected data from our field trip and plan for the following interview, 29. march.
Second in-depth interview	Second in-depth interview with CEO of a small fish-farming company, 13. april.
Data review	Going over collected data, comparing statements, and adding additional data from existing interviews, articles, and magazines, 14-28 april – may.

implemented. Therefore, the CEO is acquiring a unique experience and criteria necessary to contribute to the case.

Throughout the entire duration of our study, we collected supplementary data by conducting extensive literature reviews and analyzing interviews, magazines, articles, and online sources. The purpose of this data collection was twofold: firstly, to expand our existing dataset, and secondly, to confirm statements provided by the interviewee, thereby ensuring the validity and reliability of the gathered information.

In addition, we engaged in informal interviews conducted through casual conversations and direct observations during the "Årsarrangement Sjømat Norge 2023" event. These interviews facilitated discussions regarding the impact of the pandemic on both individual companies and the broader industry, while also highlighting the crucial role of communication during these challenging times. Furthermore, these interactions resulted in an enhanced understanding of the industry and provided us with valuable information, which we documented through the systematic collection of field notes based on the presentations delivered at the event.

Interviews

We conducted in-depth interviews to comprehensively understand the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic had on Kvarøy's ability to maintain and create new key-business relationships in the United States. Our objective was to obtain information on creative strategies to maintain and foster new relationships during a crisis and the impact of the choices on their business. We asked the interviewee questions about the business relationships before, during, and after the Covid-19 pandemic to comprehend better the changes and choices made. As well as capturing the attitudes of the results.

The two interviews took place over Teams in norwegian, the platform served as a tool for recording and transcription. After the interviews, the transcription was carefully reviewed towards the recording to ensure all the data was correctly obtained.

The two in-depth interviews were deliberately spaced apart to facilitate data processing and allow for careful validation of the participant's statements. Additionally, this practice

contributed to a more comprehensive and streamlined interview, providing a more comfortable experience for the interviewers and the interviewee.

Analysis

According to Brinkmann and Kvale (2015), the process of meaning condensation typically relies on coding and involves summarizing the meaning conveyed by interviewees into concise formulations. This technique entails compressing lengthy statements into more concise expressions that capture the essential essence of what was originally communicated.

To analyse our findings we conducted different categories and extracted related meaning units during this time. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) suggest that the interpretation process can be facilitated by using meaning condensation as a practical tool.

The reason behind our selection of data analysis method stems from its systematic nature, which offers a structured and organized approach to managing and interpreting the collected data. This methodological choice is driven by the understanding that a systematic approach enables us to effectively handle the amount of data generated from the interviews and additional sources. By employing this method, we aim to extract meaningful insights and enhance our overall comprehension of the interviews.

This process allows for the identification of commonalities, differences, and relationships among the interview responses, enabling us to discern meaningful patterns and themes. The systematic handling of data also enhances the transparency and replicability of our analysis, enabling other researchers to assess and validate our findings.

Findings

In the same dynamic structure as the utilized methodology, we present the findings before, during, and after the coronavirus disease struck. The findings will be presented in order from 2008 to the current date, 2023, for the sake of the study objective, the beginning events starting when Alf-Gøran Knutsen entered the position of CEO. The purpose of this chapter is to present the dynamic data we have developed through our research and present them chronologically.

As mentioned earlier, the data is designed from our research method in *Table 1* and will contribute as the basis for the contributions of this study.

Before Covid-19 (2008 - 2020: 12. march)

Our findings from before the pandemic (covid-19) show the efforts put into their relationship with their connections overseas and their market position and branding. Our research discovered the excellent foundations that Kvarøy Arctic gained before launching their new brand just before the pandemic, which created connections over several years.

As Alf-Gøran Knutsen stated about the connection:

«We have sold salmon to the USA since 2008, actually, and in 2012 it got a little bigger, and wholefoods market has been our main customer, the ones we have been working with since the start, we have sold via an importer and distributor in the USA since 2012 in all years. »

He added in the interview that their product and brand made a breakthrough in the market because of their wish as a company to cater to and develop products that are considered “safe” and “clean.” .

“Yes, that is why we invest so much in the USA. It is the focus on the right things. It is what it is, one and only. We started selling because Americans focused so much on the right things, like no other place.”

Although it developed into a strong relationship over the years, with the CEO of Kvarøy being in the U.S. 5-6 times a year, however, their first meeting with WFM was at a seafood fair in Brussels, which was not initially planned as part of a more comprehensive market strategy. Instead, the start of the fairytale overseas was more of an opportunistic occurrence.

“It was a random meeting in Brussels at a seafood fair in 2008. They had heard of us, so to speak.” (Alf-Gøran Knutsen, the CEO of Kvarøy, 2023)

In 2017, just five years after WFM became Kvarøy Arctic’s most important customer, Amazon bought WFM for 13,7\$ billion (Debter, 2017). This would not negatively affect the relationship but rather serve as an opportunity for the company to use Amazon’s digital platforms in later years. The founder and CEO of Amazon, Jeff Bezos, said this in a statement after the news was confirmed:

“Whole Foods Market has been satisfying, delighting, and nourishing customers for nearly four decades – they are doing an amazing job, and we want that to continue” (Debter, 2017).

Additionally, the relationship was not the only one of growth. However, the individuals they initiated contact with would also snowball in the ranks within the WFM company:

“The people that I meet, which was then at a lower level, i.e., they worked regionally with seafood in Whole Foods and were responsible for purchasing regionally. Now they are in charge of everything that involves seafood, i.e., all seafood in Wholefoods.” (Alf-Gøran Knutsen, the CEO of Kvarøy, 2023).

In an interview with IntraFish in 2020, he discussed that the fish was delivered through Blue Circle, resulting in a unique "standing" above the pond. They added that the collaboration is what has made it possible for the company to take the step to launch its new brand (Nygård, 2020).

In our interview, Alf-Gøran Knutsen said the new brand was founded in December 2019 and launched in February 2020 under the name “Kvarøy Arctic.”. Up to this point, the US had become Kvarøy’s most important market, working towards various segments and accumulating about 20 customers. They also launched their social profiles in January 2020, which involved taking full responsibility for their marketing and their history as a brand.

The point of impact & during Covid 19 (2020: 12. March - 2021: July)

On the 12 of March 2020, Norway's then-prime minister Erna Solberg stood on the podium and effectively shut down Norway. This creates an out-scale for individuals and businesses that we could only imagine in hindsight. Alf-Gøran Knutsen, the daily manager of Kvarøy, is on a plane heading to Norway from New York City, and only barely gets home in time before airline industries shut down temporarily. The next flight was only a week apart, planned to arrive at a seafood fair in Boston, where he had to call one of the employees, asking them to leave the plane at the last minute because of uncertainties. At this point, cancelations of current plans were implemented, and changes to business strategies were developing.

Alf-Gøran Knutsen states:

“We were very optimistic, to begin with, and thought it would pass, but eventually realized it would be a bit longer than expected.”

Although Kvarøy was early on categorized as an exceptional industry in relation to producing food (reliefs in regulations), new decisions had to be made. The plan for a physical presence around fairs and meetings in the U.S. to promote its venture into the restaurant segment was shelved, and new communication tools were used for the first time, if not more frequently. From the interview, Alf-Gøran Knutsen speaks of Kvarøys relation to digital communication tools and mentions that the use of Teams was not rare internally in the organization, the new part being the use of digital communication towards their customers across the pond and the escalation of social media usage:

“I was very active and worked a lot with the US and marketing there in SOME and simply in meetings with the customers. We met many more customers than I would have done if I had traveled around and greeted everyone.”

Kvarøy even faced an opportunity to market in a way that still is used by their marketing team today. A live feed from the fish-farming areas where you can get on and learn what they were working with on the fish farms. Kvarøy was now part of IBM Food Trust, a network of food manufacturers, distributors, retailers, and producers who work together to maintain a shared and secure record of food system information using blockchain technology (*Kvarøy Arctic IBM Blockchain*, 2020). Kvarøy is allowing businesses such as select WFM locations in the United States and Canada and restaurants to access the provenance history of their Arctic salmon and the feed used to raise them by scanning a QR code (*Kvarøy Arctic IBM Blockchain*, 2020; Sire, 2020). *Kvarøy Arctic IBM Blockchain* (2020) mentioned, “In the past three months, Kvarøy reports a dramatic increase in demand for fresh seafood in the U.S., shipping twice the anticipated volume.” This is due to the shutdown of culinary experiences in the U.S., where reportedly 22% of active business owners dropped only from February 2020 to April 2020 (Fairlie & Fossen, 2021), and the demand for in-store fish purchases rose. Even if demand rose, fish transport to foreign markets became more complex over time. “To the US, where the transport capacity for fresh salmon from Europe was greatly reduced in week 12, the export of fresh whole salmon fell by 89 percent, while the export of fresh fillets was maintained at the same level as last year” (‘Siste status’, 2020). At this point, the cost of logistics of product transportation increased drastically. Sales and marketing director at Seaborn, Maria Guadalupe

Elias Barroso, stated the following and was also confirmed by other parties in the aquaculture industry at the seafood fair in Bergen:

“For the US, the popular destinations such as New York and LA are also difficult to get good prices on. Then you have to be out very early. Previously it cost NOK 10 per kilo for shipping, and now, we are talking NOK 20-22. In addition, there are no more direct routes from Norway. You must go via Amsterdam and London, so you lose a day in transit. There are some direct routes to Asia and the Middle East, and we deliver to customers quickly. We have continuity. As with the Middle East, there is more continuity than the USA, says sales and marketing director at Seaborn, Maria Guadalupe Elias Barroso.”

Alf-Gøran Knutsen also confirms this, saying that logistics were arguably the most prominent problem during the pandemic because over 70% of the fish is transported by planes, making logistics costs reach four times the price of usual transportation before the pandemic hit. However, even if the prices rose, Kvarøy had *“Loyal customers who were willing to pay the extra to receive our fish.”*

“We went from around 20 customers to having one customer when covid hit.”

The customer Alf-Gøran Knutsen speaks of is WFM, and according to our findings, WFM has been the essential key customer for Kvarøy during the Covid pandemic. Losing almost all of the customer base in a crisis situation does not often indicate that things will go well. Nevertheless, the loyalty between Kvarøy and WFM still shows hope during the pandemic where Alf-Gøran Knutsen states:

"It is no secret that those of us who do fish-farming has challenges, but there are challenges that can be solved if you have customers who see the value in it."

In order to establish itself in the American market, several criteria must be met. This means that Kvarøy has set some goals and follows standards that not everyone else does. One of these standards is WFM's specific standard, which Kvarøy is one of only three breeders in the world that meets the requirements (Sire, 2020). These standards have led to credibility and an increase in Kvarøy's product portfolio. In August 2020, the launch of salmon burgers/dogs took place. This was a strategy towards reaching the American barbeque market, as Alf-Gøran Knutsen states:

“Barbeque is deadly serious. It is not something you mess with over there. It is almost a sport.”

This new venture required good marketing, especially when there are such cultural differences which in turn can affect communication. This led to collaborations with chef-type influencers, reaching consumers through social media platforms. Serious ventures require more people. Alf-Gøran Knutsen mentions in the interview that 11 new employees have been hired, all American except one responsible from Norway. This new venture and the collaboration with WFM has led to WFM giving out annual awards to Kvarøy, including winning "Perishable Supplier of the Year in 2020", for the manner they have gone out of their way for their customers ('Kvarøy Arctic Is Whole Foods Market "Perishable Supplier of the Year"', 2021; *Whole Foods Salutes Kvarøy Arctic as 'Perishable Supplier of the Year' | Frozen Foods Biz*, 2021).

“I think most people have no idea what it actually costs. It was very expensive, but in the long run, it was about building the relationship and making sure we are who we are today.”

Claiming that without the pandemic, Kvarøy would not have been what they are today. Kvarøy has focused on building its relationship with WFM over time, which has been nurtured and developed, leading to something a quick fix of a strategy cant achieve, namely loyalty.

After and present date (2021: July - present date)

In July 2021, the pandemic's grip loosened over most U.S. states (The New York Times, 2021). Based on their Instagram posts is also around this time that Amazon launches Kvarøy Arctic "bundles," where they have gathered different variations or multiple of the same product. Their reasoning for the product bundling is; “*In addition to saving money, it also cuts down on waste!*” (Kvarøy Arctic, n.d).

As the restrictions loosen, the “way of life as before the pandemic” and for things to “get normal” seems to take over the world slowly and steadily. One of the results of this, it becomes easier to travel again. As Alf-Gøran Knutsen said, it is becoming much of traveling again, but he made an addition to the team to reduce the traveling - hopefully:

“It is the way that Americans are Americans, so say, they opened in 2021, so I have been there almost once a month, but now I have sent a Norwegian over there to take over, so last week I had my last trip that is on schedule this year.”

Adding that the perspective of the changes the pandemic brought on was not all negative, although they do not seem to be long-lasting:

“There were some good changes, less traveling, and we achieved more sustainability during this period. However, I am afraid we will be back on the old track before we know it.”

Another result of the reopening is that consumers can gather again to eat at restaurants and attend events. As a product, it opens other segments to take part in for Kvarøy Arctic again.

“Right now, we are working towards restaurants and fresh markets, we are also working towards the sports event, of all possible things. In the USA, there are many sporting events, so for the sausage and the burger, that's where we worked towards.”

As an effect of the connections built under the pandemic, the undercarriage of salmon in the market and the reopening of their amount of customers have risen:

“And it was initially reduced a little, so to speak, but turned out to be bigger than what it was.”

However, they are now in the luxury position where they have to prioritize their customers and segments to reach their volume capacity.

“So we say "no" to new customers often because we simply do not have more volume to sell. Furthermore, of course, it is a luxury position, but there is an under coverage of salmon in general. That is the reason why the salmon price is so high.”

During an interview with IntraFish, he elaborated on this: *“I say no more than yes. Then you are in the right position”* (Njåstad, 2022).

The importance of taking responsibility for one's marketing and storytelling was a theme in several presentations during the seafood fair in Bergen. Whereas Silje Remøy, Pelagia's general counsel, held a presentation on “The fairytale that has just begun” that highlighted the “four s's” which are visibility, circularity, storytelling, and collaboration. All of which Kvarøy Arctic has put considerable efforts into both during and after the pandemic. As a result of the

efforts put in the storytelling and communication of social media planning during the pandemic and with the consistent trend of publishing 4-5 posts a week, their most utilized Instagram, “Kvaroyarctic” has gained a significant following. Their posts consist of an approach containing recipes, live footage, influencers, giveaways, food art, family-orientated, activism, and Norwegian-related content. As Alf-Gøran Knutsen shared in our interview:

“Just go to our profile, I was about to say. Then you see that what it is not is not, it isn't just random. It is very, very well thought out and very carefully planned every single month, every single week.”

Adding the key to consistency and good planning:

“yes, the people that work with this, make a plan for 1 year into the future, all the time, who we are going to collaborate with, who we are going to publish, when we are going to publish, how we are going to publish it .”

In August of 2021 there had their first following “top” gaining over 1000 followers in that month alone, where their previous monthly stats where roughly 100-300 (Social Blade, 2023). This growth of followers contributed to Kvarøy Arctic reaching 20 000 followers in January 2022. Since July of 2022 and till this date, they have gained about 1000 followers a month, landing them at about 25 000 followers (Social Blade, 2023). That amount of followers is far more than other prominent brands within the industry, giving them a significant advantage in communicating their products and history to a larger audience on social media, as shown in *Table 3*.

Table 3.
Overview over the instagram-followers of fish-farming companies

Name	Amount
Kvaroyarctic	25 346
Leroyseafood	6 875
Leroy norge	4 130
Mowiglobal	3 503
Nordlaks	2 045
Nordicblusalmon	1 554
Novasea_as	1 432
Cermaqnorway	1 058
Griegseafoodbc	1 022
Kvaroykids	785
Cermaq_group	503
Mowinorge	376

Retrieved from Instagram: 11.05.23

During 2022 and 2023, Kvarøy Arctic also won multiple nominations and awards, with one being Fast Company's "list of the world's most innovative companies," where Kvarøy Arctic landed #2 on the list of the "small and mighty" category. The list is described as follows:

"The world's most innovative companies play an essential role in addressing the most pressing issues facing society, whether they are fighting climate change by spurring decarbonisation efforts, ameliorating the strain on supply chains or helping us reconnect with one another over shared passions." - David Lidsky, Fast Company Deputy Editor (The fish site, 2022).

Another award was in March of 2023 at the Expo East's NEXTY Awards in the category "best new frozen product" for their *original salmon hot dog*. The reason for the award is:

"The world has a food waste problem, but Kvarøy is here to help. Made of unused salmon trimmings and cut-offs in Strada, Norway, Kvarøy offers a unique approach to reducing food waste with these quick and easy Salmon Hot Dogs. Like regular hot dogs, they can be heated in a pan or on the grill, and they offer a smooth, buttery taste—all while delivering the recommended daily allowance of omega-3s in just one serving."(Nexty Awards, 2022).

In the middle of this, Kvarøy launched its sustainable packaging in July 2022. By embracing sustainable packaging, they reinforce their core mission of promoting sustainable farming practices on land and in aquatic environments. This breakthrough aligns with their ongoing efforts to foster sustainability, including collaborating on developing eco-friendly fish feed, harnessing the power of fermented microalgae for omega-3 fatty acids, and numerous other initiatives (Kvarøy Arctic, 2022). Their customers, including Whole Foods Market, have already adopted this innovative packaging. At the end of 2022, 75% of Kvarøy Arctic's packaging will be transitioned to this *cutting-edge* material (Kvarøy Arctic, 2022). Half a year later, in February of 2023, Kvarøys *Salmon hot dogs* are available nationwide in all WFM seafood sections (Kvarøy Arctic, 2023).

As an ending note for the impact the pandemic has had on the company and the results of the efforts put in, Alf-Gøran Knutsen stated:

“Thanks to the pandemic, I do think without the pandemic, we would not have been so well, let us call it - well established, but we are pretty big in the US, and on social media, I think I can almost say that without being arrested, but I do not think so there are any salmon brands in the US that are at our extent and have as many followers as we actually have.”

Supplying:

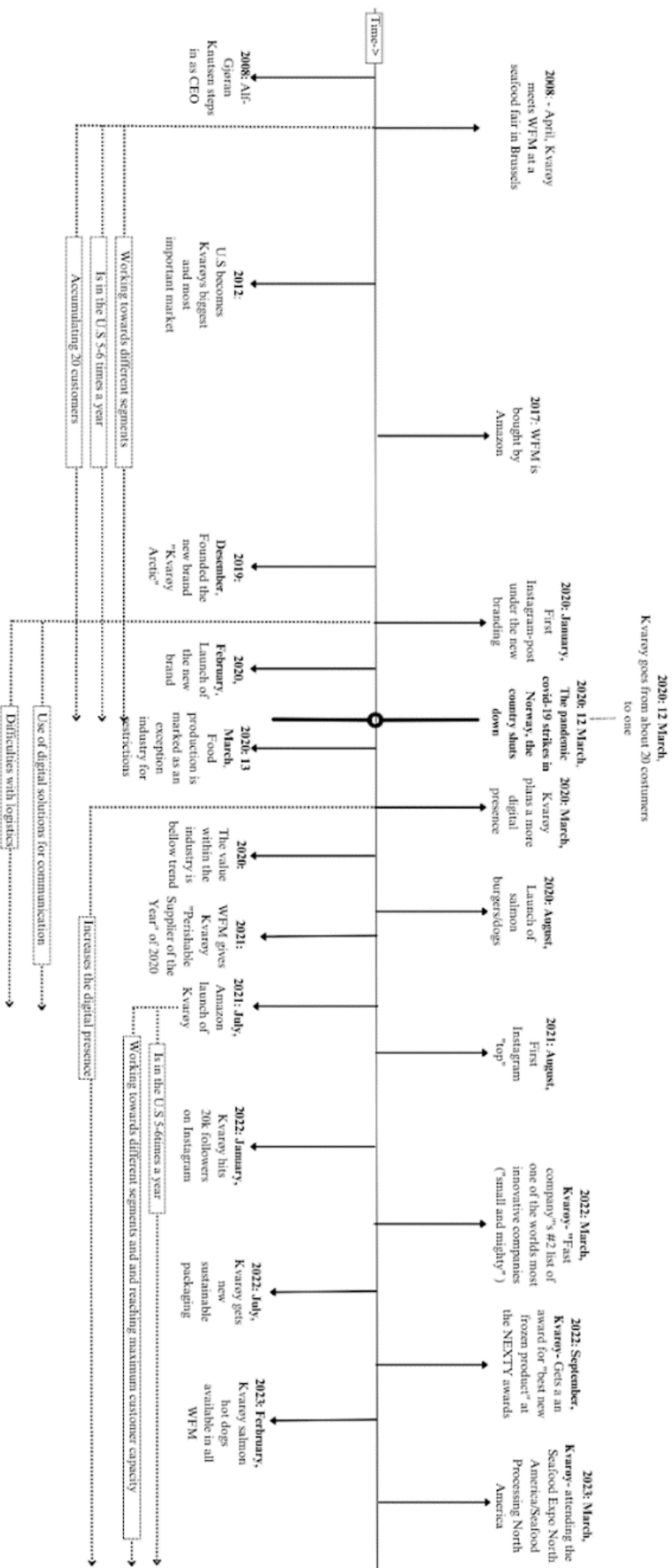
“We now have customers who have been with us through the ups and downs, and we have been involved in their ups and downs so that they understand that things are the way they are. The prices are the way they are.

As for us, it is perhaps a little different than for others in terms of how we were able to turn around and so quickly in relation to the plans we had and make new plans and implement them and let us now say that it was not a pandemic, that we were going to build what we have built it to without a pandemic - then we would have been weaker than we are today. To be completely honest.”

Summary

The following model in Table 4, defines the events occurring between 2008 to the present date and explains the findings above summarised as:

Table 4: Timeline of events



**Other events have occurred; these are the ones that we choose to focus on, due to our study objective*

Before:

- Kvarøy Arctic had established strong connections overseas and had a solid market position and branding before the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Kvarøy Arctic has been selling salmon to the USA since 2008, with Whole Foods Market (WFM) as their main customer since 2012.
- Kvarøy Arctic's success in the market was attributed to their focus on developing "safe" and "clean" products.
- The initial meeting between Kvarøy Arctic and WFM happened by chance at a seafood fair in Brussels in 2008.
- In 2017 Amazon acquired WFM, but this acquisition did not negatively affect the relationship between Kvarøy Arctic and WFM.
- Kvarøy Arctic used Amazon's digital platforms as an opportunity for their business.
- The individuals at Kvarøy Arctic initially contacted within WFM saw their positions grow within the company.
- Kvarøy Arctic collaborated with Blue Circle for fish delivery, which contributed to the success of their new brand launch.
- Kvarøy Arctic launched their new brand, "Kvarøy Arctic," in February 2020, with the US becoming their most important market.
- Kvarøy Arctic had around 20 customers in various segments in the US and launched their social profiles in January 2020.

During:

- The Covid-19 pandemic significantly impacted Kvarøy Arctic and the seafood industry in Norway.
- Kvarøy Arctic had to cancel their plans for physical presence at fairs and meetings in the US. Instead, it relied on digital communication tools and social media to connect with customers.
- Kvarøy Arctic joined IBM Food Trust, a network that uses blockchain technology to provide transparency and traceability in the food system.
- The demand for fresh seafood in the US increased during the pandemic, but logistics and transportation challenges caused increased costs and reduced export capacity.
- Kvarøy Arctic faced significant logistics problems due to the reliance on air transportation, leading to a fourfold increase in logistics costs.

- Despite the challenges in the market, Kvarøy Arctic maintained loyalty from its key customer, Whole Foods Market (WFM), which remained its primary customer during the pandemic.
- Kvarøy Arctic met specific standards required by WFM, which increased its credibility and expanded its product portfolio.
- Kvarøy Arctic launched salmon burgers/dogs to target the American barbecue market and collaborated with chef-type influencers for marketing.
- Kvarøy Arctic hired new employees, mostly Americans, to support their new ventures in the US market.
- The collaboration with WFM led to Kvarøy Arctic receiving awards, including "Perishable Supplier of the Year in 2020".

After:

- In July 2021, the pandemic's grip loosened over most U.S. states, leading to a gradual return to normalcy.
- Amazon launches Kvarøy Arctic "bundles," offering different variations or multiple products together to save money and reduce waste.
- Travel becomes easier again, but Kvarøy Arctic hires a Norwegian team member to reduce the need for frequent travel to the U.S.
- The pandemic brought some positive changes, such as less traveling and increased sustainability, but there is a concern that things will return to the old ways.
- Kvarøy Arctic expands its market segments to include restaurants, fresh markets, and sports events.
- Despite initial reductions, the customer base has grown, and the company has to prioritize customers due to maximize its volume capacity.
- Kvarøy Arctic's social media presence, particularly on Instagram, has gained a significant following through well-thought-out and carefully planned content.
- The company has won multiple nominations and awards, ranked #2 on Fast Company's list of the world's most innovative companies in the "small and mighty" category.
- Kvarøy Arctic launched sustainable packaging in July 2022, transitioning 75% of its packaging to eco-friendly material.
- The CEO attributes the company's success to the pandemic, as it helped establish Kvarøy Arctic in the U.S. market and gain a significant social media presence.

- The company values its long-standing customers and understands the challenges they face, which influences the pricing of its products.

Discussion & Contributions

This article introduces the question, “How does the situation of a Global Pandemic influence Inter-organizational relationships in the Fish farming industry?”. This chapter consists of a series of events that sheds light on the nuances of relationships between Kvarøy and WFM. Going away from the theoretical model presented in the theory chapter, we now seek the importance of understanding what occurred and influenced the relationship between businesses. By examining the events from 2008 to the present, we explore how these key insights broaden the existing second-hand literature and contribute to the B2B relationships research field. We claim three contributions to the field of research.

The role of communication

It turns out that the pandemic has had a significant impact on the communication between Kvarøy and WFM. What started as communication on an almost purely personal level changed over time to fully digital. This meant that Kvarøy had to adapt to the change in order to keep the strong relationship they had built upfront. Although the communication tools in the transition were not new for Kvarøy, their use was new. This created conditions for communication noise, which did not appear to affect the relationship between Kvarøy and WFM in any significant way. We assumed that communication would be negatively affected by cultural differences and technological noise, but this was not the case, in fact, it was quite the opposite where cultural differences functioned as a strength of the relationship. Hitt et al., (2021) argued that the global business environment has become unusually challenging, impacting the aspects of communication, and Pereira et al., (2021) speak of communication as an ever-lasting dynamic process. From the results in our data, this seems to be proven in both ways, as for the positive aspects of digitalizing communication such as cost reduction and better time management. On the other hand, the results show that once the pandemic ended, things quickly went back to traveling to be there in person again and prioritizing personal over digital communication once more. This is a good indicator that personal communication was preferred by the organizations and therefore built better and stronger relationships. Afterward, digital communication tools have also been seen as useful, considering that it has created platforms to

communicate with not only retail customers but also individual consumers, strengthening the brand.

The meaning of a strong quality brand

Simultaneously as building a strong business connection over time, there is also a need to survive in a market. However, staying in a competitive market environment necessitates more than existing; organizations must develop a distinctive and reputable brand identity that resonates with their target audience. Building a solid brand is connected to many of the same critical concepts of a good business relationship and requires a positive consumer perception of trust, loyalty, and differentiation. Our research findings indicate that the Kvarøy's core marketing strategy has consistently emphasized quality and value, catalyzing relationships and ultimately allowing its successful entry into the U.S. market. This focus on quality and value has been present throughout their interaction, resulting in various prizes and nominations reflecting the impact on the market and their overall brand.

Kvarøy's focus on branding also escalated online. Oke et al. (2016) stated that there is substantial significance for marketing teams to respond to the needs of consumers when planning marketing strategies. This can result in strengthening the brand and making customer relationships more robust. Based on our findings, a primary contributing factor to the company's successful outcome amidst the pandemic is its focus on adaptive planning and market strategies. Kvarøy's ability to take advantage of the more digital life that the pandemic brought consumers. By leveraging Instagram's broad user base, Kvarøy is tapping into new audiences and expanding its brand's visibility on a global scale. Corresponding with the existing theories, Turri et al. (2013) refer to the online realm as an opportunity exists to acquire comprehensive behavioral insights into consumer decision-making and establish customer relationships through active engagement and knowledge from customer interactions.

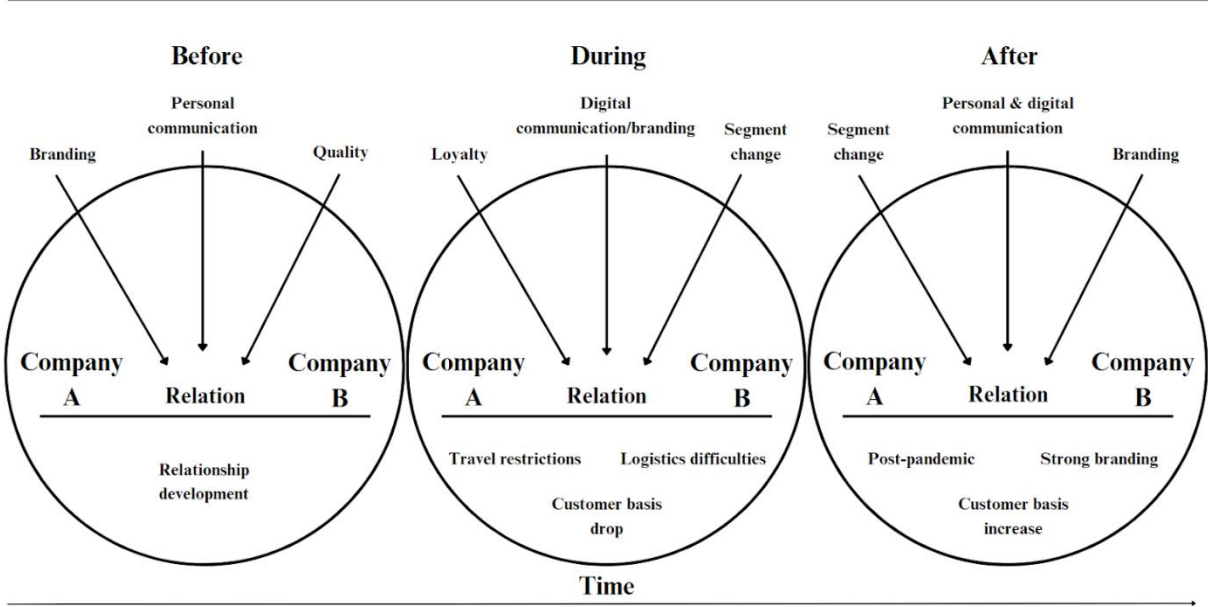
Secondly, Instagram's emphasis on visual content enables businesses to craft a compelling and aesthetically pleasing brand image. Through Kvarøys high-quality photos, live videos, recipes, and stories, they convey their unique values, products, and history visually compellingly, thereby offering a deep emotional connection with their target audience (Meffert, Niessing, Plassmann, Iyer, & Evanschitzky, 2013). Finally, Instagram's interactive features, such as likes, comments, and direct messaging, foster meaningful engagement between brands and their followers. Instagram is crucial for Kvarøy to establish a strong brand presence, connect with its audience, and thrive in the competitive digital landscape.

Our study offers a dynamic perspective on communication, resulting in findings that digital communication toward consumers strengthens the brand and its position in Kvarøy’s inter-organizational relationships.

How a relationship develops over time

In the same fashion as the theoretical model in Table 5, we present a dynamic empirical model. This model is based on the findings from the previous chapter, describing what is affecting the relationship between business A and business B, and how it changes over time, and what external environments the businesses are in.

Table 5



It turns out that the answer to the research question in relation to the dynamic perspective is larger and more complementary than we had imagined. Contrary to the model from the theoretical assumption, the empirical data says that we must have three different circles, each representing three periods of time, with different influencers and different environments. Companies that are in a dynamic relationship environment must be much more adaptable than we thought. We assumed that communication, branding, and loyalty were the three factors that would have the most say on the relationship Kvarøy has with WFM. This turned out to be correct but in different eras, with more factors to play a part such as quality and segment change. Of course, we add that most factors play a part in each era to some degree, but others are of greater value and we therefore have focused on 3 main empirical moderators for each time

period. We also underestimated the environment the businesses find themselves in. From findings, Alf-Gøran Knutsen and the field notes from the seafood fair in Bergen mentioned a series of different external events that changed their structure and way of doing things. These external environmental factors also changed rapidly over time, making the situations very uncertain, again demanding a high level of adaptiveness from Kvarøy.

From the empirical data, we find that Kvarøys branding, personal communication, and quality had a substantial effect on its relationship with WFM before the events of the pandemic. This first phase affects their success in the second phase, where the pandemic completely changed the way of communication from personal to digital. The loyalty nurtured from 2008 to the event of the pandemic made the customer connection to WFM stand strong, not losing them as their main customer, and increasing the degree of loyalty even further. The segment change in the second and third phase makes their portfolio greater, accessing more customers. Returning from digital communication methods to a mix of personal and digital methods acts as a solution for cost reduction, the convenience of time, and relation-building. The results of this and polishing the branding post-pandemic creates a situation where they not only make it through a pandemic but comes out of it stronger.

Conclusion

We asked the question; How does the situation of a Global Pandemic influence Inter-organizational relationships in the Fish farming industry?

In conclusion, the research findings highlight the significant impact of the pandemic on the communication between Kvarøy and WFM. Initially, the communication was predominantly personal but gradually shifted to digital platforms. Despite the challenges posed by this transition, Kvarøy successfully adapted to the change, maintaining the strong relationship they had established with WFM. Surprisingly, the cultural differences and technological noise did not negatively affect the relationship; instead, they served as strengths. This underscores the dynamic nature of communication, as highlighted by previous studies.

During the pandemic, digital communication tools offered benefits such as cost reduction and improved time management. However, as the pandemic subsided, personal communication regained prominence, indicating its preference by the organizations and its role in building stronger relationships. Nonetheless, digital communication tools have proven useful in reaching not only retail customers but also individual consumers, strengthening the brand's position.

The research also emphasizes the importance of building a strong brand identity in a competitive market environment. Kvarøy's focus on quality and value has consistently propelled their success, resulting in recognition and accolades. Their adaptive planning and market strategies played a vital role during the pandemic, utilizing digital platforms like Instagram to expand their brand's reach globally. Instagram's visual content and interactive features have facilitated a deep emotional connection with their target audience, fostering meaningful engagement and establishing a strong brand presence.

The study offers insights into how relationships evolve over time. The empirical model highlights the need for adaptability in dynamic relationship environments, with various factors influencing different eras. Communication, branding, loyalty, quality, and segment change all contribute to the evolving relationship between Kvarøy and WFM. The external environmental factors further add to the complexity, demanding high levels of adaptiveness from Kvarøy.

In summary, Kvarøy's emphasis on branding, effective communication strategies, and adaptability have contributed to their success and resilience during the pandemic. Their ability to navigate the changing communication landscape and build strong relationships has reinforced their brand position and customer loyalty. The research provides valuable insights into the dynamic nature of communication and the importance of brand development in the ever-changing business landscape.

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Interview guides

Tema	Spørsmål	Oppfølgingsspørsmål:
Fase 1: Informasjon	<p>2. Informasjon:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gjennomgang av problemstillingen, temaet for samtalen (før, under etter pandemien) og hva intervjuet skal brukes til. (formål, bakgrunn) Gjennomgang av deres rett til å trekke seg fra intervjuet og/eller ikke svare på et eller flere spørsmål. Hvordan de eventuelt kan trekke seg ved en senere anledning. Gjennomgang av deres anonymitet og vår taushetsplikt. Informasjon om lydopptak og skriftlig samtykke til dette. 	
Fase 2: Innledende spørsmål	<p>3. Overgangsspørsmål:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hvor lenge jobbet dere ut mot Whole Foods før dere fikk gjennombrudd av avtalen? Hva vil du si skiller Kvarøy fra de andre fiskeoppdrett selskapene? 	

<p>Fase 3: Fokusering (før) - innledende</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hvordan opprettholdt dere kontakt med kunder pre covid-19? • Hvordan opplevde dere disse relasjonene? • Hva var de viktigste faktorene for å holde kontakt og hvor hyppig ble dette gjort? • Hvilke erfaringer hadde dere med teknologiske løsninger (hjelpemidler) før covid? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Både eksisterende og nye?
<p>Fase 4: Fokusering (under)</p>	<p>5:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hvordan har pandemien påvirket dere? • Hvilke strategier ble satt på plass for å kompensere for covid? • Hvilke teknologiske løsninger ble brukt for å holde kontakten med kunder? • Hvordan har Kvarøy opplevd reiserestriksjoner i forbindelse med pandemien? • Hva føler du har vært en utfordring for dere i denne perioden? • Hva føler dere har vært en mulighet? • Hvordan har dere håndtert og tatt vare på deres 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hvordan tenker dere at pandemien har påvirket oppdrettsnæringen generelt? • Hvordan opplevde dere denne overgangen?

	<p>eksisterende relasjoner i denne tiden?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Har organisasjonen vært i stand til å tilnærme seg nye kunder mens reiserestriksjonene har vært gjeldende? • Har dere hatt noen kundeforhold som dere eller den andre parten har avsluttet under pandemien? • Hvordan påvirket denne perioden deres relasjon til kundene? • Kan du beskrive aktiviteter som bedriften din har gjennomført i løpet av nylige markeds turbulenser for å håndtere problemer i nøkkelen din kundeforhold? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hvilke planer har organisasjonen for å forbedre evnen til å opprettholde eksisterende og innhente nye kunder dersom reiserestriksjoner skulle oppstå igjen? • Hvordan har dere tilnærmet dere nye kunder under denne pandemien? • Hva var grunnlaget for dette?
Fokusering (etter)	<p>6.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hva har dere lært om å drive virksomhet under slike restriksjoner? • Hvilket endringer er det deres ser som et resultat av disse restriksjonene? • Har antallet jobbreiser blitt redusert, økt eller er det tilsvaret likt pre covid? • Hva er det beste i dine relasjoner med nøkkelukunder nå? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tror du disse endringene vil være langvarig? • Hva er den eventuelle begrunnelsen?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kan du beskrive hva som kan være utfordrende med deres kunderelasjoner akkurat nå? • Kan du beskrive noen aktiviteter bedriften din foretar for tiden for å innlede noen nye relasjoner med kunder? 	
Fase 6: Summering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hva er ditt syn på endringene som covid har medført ift å holde kontakt eller bygge relasjoner? • Kan du beskrive resultatene av handlingene dine for å administrere deres nøkkelukundeforhold? • Hva føler du har vært mest signifikant faktor eller "kjernen" for håndtering av relasjoner? • Er det noen andre kommentarer du ønsker å komme med relatert til dette emnet? 	
Fase 7: Formalitet Spørsmål:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hvor gammel er du? • Har du noen hobbyer eller interesser? • Hvor har du tatt utdanning? • Hvilken utdanning har du? • Hvilken erfaring har du? • Hva er din nåværende stilling og hvor lenge har du hatt denne? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kan du fortelle meg litt om din erfaring i oppdrettsnæringen?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Kan du fortelle meg litt om bedriften som du jobber for?	
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Ettersendelse av intervju spørsmål:

For oppfriskning lister jeg også med problemstillingen:

“How have Temporary travel restrictions affected Fish-farming organizations' ability to Communicate, maintain existing- and pursue new business customers?”

Deler opp resterende spørsmål i samme kategorier som intervjuet; før (ferdigstilt), under -og etter pandemien, samt oppsummering og formaliteter.

Her gjelder også punktet om at du kan velge å ikke svare på et eller flere av spørsmålene.

Du velger selv hvordan du ønsker å svare på disse spørsmålene, om det er per direkte i mail, i dokumentet (sendes igjen i retur) eller eventuelt over en telefonsamtale/nytt video møte når det måtte passe deg.

Under pandemien:

- Måtte det bli gjort noen endringer ift spesifisjoner av ordere under denne perioden? Hvordan ble det håndtert og kommunisert?
- Hvilke planer har organisasjonen for å forbedre evnen til å opprettholde eksisterende og innhente nye kunder dersom reiserestriksjoner skulle oppstå igjen?
- Hva er den største utfordringen dere opplevde iht denne pandemien? (gjerne utdyp)
 - Og hvis dette spørsmålet på neste punkt også kan fokuseres mot kommunikasjon?
- Hvordan opplevde dere kompetanse nivået for teknologiske løsninger hos deres nøkkel-kunder? (eventuelt; hva gjorde dere for å kompensere eller tilrettelegge?)

Etter pandemien:

- Hva har dere lært om å drive virksomhet under slike restriksjoner?
- Du beskrev i det tidligere intervjuet at dere nå må “takke nei til kunder” og at etterspørselen nesten er for stor ... Hva tror du kan være grunnen for dette?
 - Og hva er det som gjør at dere ikke kan ta på dere den mengde kunder?
- Kan du beskrive noen aktiviteter bedriften din foretar for tiden for å innlede noen nye relasjoner med kunder?
 - Hvordan har denne blitt endret nå som reiserestriksjonene er lettet?
 - Tror du disse endringene vil være langvarig? (gjærne utdyp)

Summering:

- Hvordan vil du beskrive kulturen blant dine kunder i USA? (kontra Norge?)
 - Føler du kommunikasjonen med dine kunder i USA byr på noen problemer?
- Kan du utdype mer om den markedsføringsplanen som ble nevnt under forrige intervju? (som et produkt av pandemien)
 - I deres egne kanaler benytter dere markedsføring direkte ut mot konsumenten eller b2b?
- Hva er ditt syn på endringene som covid har medført ift å holde kontakt eller bygge relasjoner?
- Kan du beskrive resultatene av handlingene dine for å administrere deres nøkkelkundeforhold?
- Er det noen andre kommentarer du ønsker å komme med relatert til dette emnet?

Formaliteter:

- Hvor gammel er du?
- Hvor har du tatt utdanning?
- Hvilken utdanning har du?
- Hvilken erfaring har du?

- Hva er din nåværende stilling og hvor lenge har du hatt denne?
 - Kan du fortelle meg litt om din erfaring i oppdrettsnæringen?
- Kan du fortelle meg litt om bedriften som du jobber for?