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COVID's Positive Implications on Business-to-Business Salesperson Communication and Customer Interaction

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Abstract – This article aims to investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on industrial salesperson communication with buyers, specifically focusing on the positive outcomes. The authors use a qualitative data collection approach based on grounded theory. Thirteen executives, primarily from the transportation industry, were interviewed. Based on the executive interviews, this study develops the pandemic-induced customer interaction model for the industrial market, drawing from the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and innovation diffusion theory. This study is the first to examine the positive impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on business-to-business sales organization communication. This study contributes to the literature through the creation of the pandemic-induced customer interaction model.

Key Words – COVID, Sales, Customer Interaction, Communication, Qualitative

Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers, and Practitioners - This study develops a pandemic-induced customer interaction model for industrial organizations. Organizations can use this model to better understand how the pandemic may have positively impacted customer interactions through the adoption of technology.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a major disruptor globally, going back to the 1918 Spanish Flu (Moritz, 2020). The economic consequences of the COVID-19 global pandemic have had impacts on every country (Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020). For example, 192 governments closed their schools, sending over 1.5 billion learners home (Fry, 2020). Countries worldwide have entirely or partially shut their doors to foreigners and trade (Chriscaden, 2020; Kayak, 2021). For United States citizens, of 225 countries, 65 countries are completely closed, 156 are partially open, and four countries are entirely open (Kayak, 2021). Travel restrictions are not just global but have impacted domestic travel as well. Previously, as of December 2020, travel restrictions were associated with 21 states as well as the District of Columbia (Fox, 2020). Approximately half of the global workforce, totaling 1.65 billion people, were at risk of losing their livelihood

(Chriscaden, 2020). According to the UN International Labour Organization (2021), the job loss impact in 2020 was nearly four times the number lost during the global financial crisis of 2009.

Not only has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted society, but it has also led to significant and dramatic changes in how businesses operate (Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020). Some of the business changes that have occurred since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic include: shelter-in-place or safer-at-home orders, nonessential business closures, remote employment, digression of women in the workplace, supply deficiencies with demand contraction, economic contractions, work-family conflicts due to school closures, employee well-being concerns, and rolling government policy changes (Bartik et al., 2020; EWNutrition, 2020; Kirk & Rifkin, 2020; ManagementEvents, 2020; Rauhala, Narayanswamy, Shin, & Ledur, 2021). Remote work continued in late 2021 due to new virus variants such as Delta (Cadman et al., 2021). Overall, the United States' gross domestic product (GDP) suffered a 3.5% loss in 2020, the biggest loss in 74 years (Mutikani, 2021).

Although a vast amount of popular press articles have focused on the negative ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been significantly less focus on how the pandemic led to beneficial changes for businesses. For example, some industries, such as professional delivery services, game makers, wine and liquor stores, home improvement and hardware stores, drive-in movie theaters, box subscriptions, in-home workout products, and telehealth services, benefited as a result of the pandemic through increased sales ("Companies Benefit from COVID-19," 2021). However, all business-to-business organizations were forced to adapt and be resilient to the constantly changing environment in order to survive.

One specific job function that required adaptation during the pandemic was business-to-business sales. Before the pandemic, many industrial B2B salespeople primarily communicated with customers face-to-face (Marshall & Vredenburg, 1991). In-person meetings have been perceived as more impactful than other approaches to business because of the two-way interaction (Cano, Boles, & Bean, 2005). During the pandemic, in-person meetings were not possible because of business closures and travel restrictions. Additionally, many buyers were working remotely (Kirk & Rifkin, 2020; Rauhala et al., 2021). This forced the sales communication process for industrial B2B salespeople to adapt quickly to incorporate alternative modes of communication.

To date, little to no academic research has explored the positive aspects of the pandemic as it relates to business-to-business communication with customers. Therefore, this exploratory study aims to investigate how business-to-business industrial sales organization communications have been impacted and how those impacts may be beneficial to organizations. This research extends the literature in three ways. First, this qualitative study of key executives from various industrial businesses gives a firsthand account of the changes in the daily operations experienced because of the pandemic. Second, based on these executives' interviews, a suggested pandemic-induced customer interaction model is developed. Third, managerial implications using Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and innovation diffusion theory are provided to enhance the business success of industrial sales organizations.

Literature Review

Industrial salespeople engage in activities such as traveling, relationship building, selling activities, entertaining, prospecting, supporting products, mitigating conflict, and supporting channel activities (Moncrief III, Marshall, & Lassk, 2006; Sleep, Dixon, DeCarlo, & Lam, 2020). As part of the selling activity, salespeople need skills to build trust and rapport, ask relevant

questions, listen effectively, mitigate conflict, and communicate with existing and potential customers efficiently and effectively (e.g., Cicala, Smith, & Bush, 2012; Moncrief III et al., 2006; Rangarajan, Peasley, Paesbrugge, Srivastava, & Stewart, 2020; Sleep et al., 2020; Wiatr Borg, Brashear, & Vagn Freytag, 2012; Zeiss & Chapman, 2020). Salespeople also need to understand the product or service, provide technical assistance and training, and work trade shows (e.g., Chaisrakeo & Speece, 2004; Illescas-Manzano, López, González, & Rodríguez, 2021; Moncrief III et al., 2006).

In essence, these salespeople are revenue generators since they play an active role in increasing current and prospective customers' organizational sales (Matthews, Edmondson, & Ward, 2021). To complete this task, these sales representatives engage in a variety of communication methods with buyers. Salespeople must be adequately trained in order to adapt their presentation based on the different communication styles of buyers (Alnakhli, Singh, Agnihotri, & Itani, 2020; Williams, Spiro, & Fine, 1990). According to Cano et al. (2005), both buyers and sellers prefer richer communication methods, such as face-to-face or telephone, over other methods (e.g., internet, extranet, e-mail). However, a more recent study by Anders, Coleman, and Castleberry (2020) found that communication preferences have changed such that buyers preferred to receive messages first via e-mail, then phone/voice mail, followed by face-to-face. The preference for virtual meetings and social media was also substantially lower than the previously mentioned communication methods (Anders et al., 2020). New communication methods that are increasing in popularity as a result of advances in technology used in sales include social media, click-to-call, web conferencing, and artificial intelligence chatbots (Bill, Feurer, & Klarmann, 2020; Homburg, Morguet, & Hohenberg, 2021; Illescas-Manzano et al., 2021). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, communication methods were rapidly forced to change, at least temporarily. Yet, no research was found that investigated how this change impacted business-to-business sales organization communication, leading to the following research question:

RQ: How has the COVID-19 pandemic positively influenced the way business-to-business industrial salespeople communicate with customers?

Study Design and Data Collection

This study aims to examine how salesperson communication and customer interactions have changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. To investigate the communication changes, a qualitative interviewing methodology using grounded theory was employed. This methodology was selected because of the exploratory nature of the study and the depth of complex information desired (Johnson & Matthes, 2018), as well as the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic is a unique and life-altering event. Research using a qualitative interviewing technique using grounded theory has been utilized in a number of recent industrial studies (e.g., Åge & Eklinder-Frick, 2017; Malshe & Krush, 2020; Zeiss & Chapman, 2020)

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with thirteen executives from a variety of U.S. heavy industrial business-to-business organizations approximately six months into the pandemic. These executives were selected using a theoretical sampling approach since these respondents had specific knowledge related to the topic under investigation (Corbin & Strauss, 2007; Johnson & Boeing, 2016; Tuli, Kohli, & Bharadway, 2007). Respondents were interviewed over the telephone, with each interview lasting between 20 and 45 minutes through open-ended questions. All interviews were recorded, yielding over six hours of recordings. Each interview was

transcribed verbatim using otter.ai immediately following interview completion. Additionally, the recordings and transcriptions were analyzed for accuracy. In these interviews, respondents were asked a series of questions related to the pandemic and the changes in their business from various aspects (i.e., customers, employees, operations). Probing was used throughout the interviews to gain further insight and encourage elaboration. Interviews were conducted until theoretical saturation occurred. Theoretical saturation occurs when no new insights are obtained from additional data (Creswell, 2014).

The respondents were from a variety of industries; however, a majority worked in the transportation industry, such as automotive, commercial vehicle, and infrastructure. All respondents were from the United States; however, 76% of the respondents were employed in multinational corporations, with 45% of respondents having either global responsibilities or frequent interactions with customers or suppliers outside the United States. Overall, the respondent's ages ranged from 46 to 66, with an average of 53 years. Respondents worked in the industry, on average, for thirty years. Background company information such as region as well as personal information including role, years in the industry, and revenue responsibility are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1: Biographical Sketch of Respondents

<u>Respondent</u>	<u>Role</u>	<u>Years in Industry</u>	<u>Revenue Responsibility</u>	<u>Region of Country</u>
1	Sales Director	31	\$30M	Midwest
2	Vice President	30	\$40M	Southeast
3	Sales Director	36	\$37M	Midwest
4	Sales Director	32	\$40M+	Southeast
5	Vice President	35	\$115M	Midwest
6	Regional Director	33	\$30M+	Southeast
7	National Account Manager	20	\$20M	Midwest
8	Owner	35	\$10M +	Midwest
9	Call Center Manager	27	\$10M +	Midwest
10	Product Director	27	\$40M	Northeast
11	Global Director	32	\$100M +	Midwest
12	Owner	20	\$10M +	West
13	Engineering Director	30	\$20M +	Midwest

Data Analysis

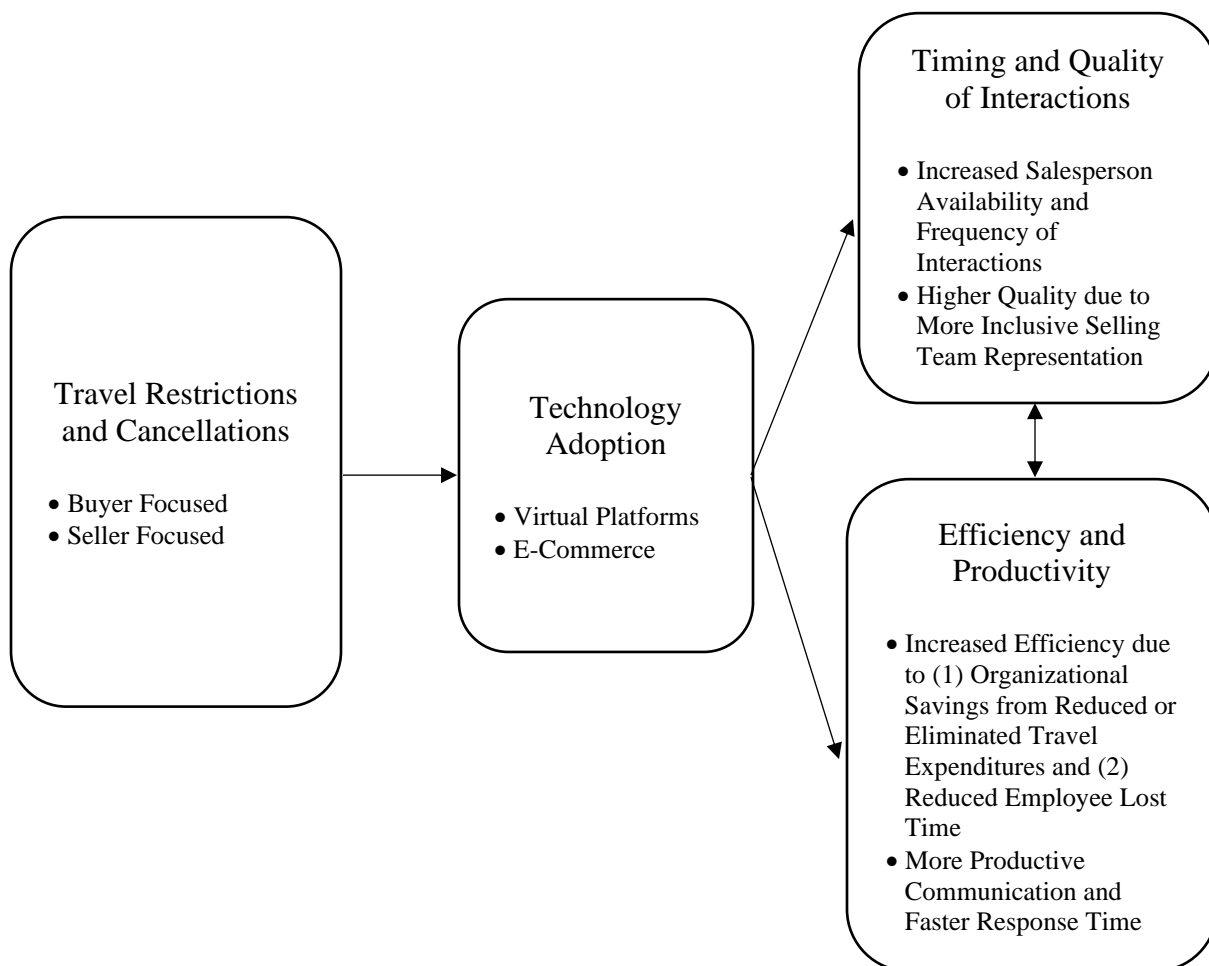
A multi-step approach was used to analyze the interviews. First, each research team member listened to the interview recordings and read the transcriptions looking for overarching themes and relevant sub-themes. These themes and sub-themes were initially coded by each researcher individually. Second, once the researchers reached an agreement on the themes and sub-themes, an independent judge was provided with the interview data to judge the accuracy of the themes and sub-themes. Third, the data were then coded using the qualitative analysis software, NVivo

13. Finally, using the NVivo 13 software, tree-node structures were developed, and the themes and sub-themes of the reviewers were compared for reliability. Overall, interrater reliability using the approach advanced by Rust and Cooil (1994) was .94, exceeding the recommended threshold for qualitative studies. Further, any minor differences were resolved through discussion.

Discussion

The model suggested based on the study results is shown in Figure 1. This model focuses initially on the travel restrictions and cancellations due to the COVID-19 pandemic since this is the impetus for change in communication. As a result of these restrictions, business-to-business companies were forced to adopt various technologies to engage in customer communication. However, these communication methods led to positive changes through enhanced timing and quality of interactions as well as increased efficiency and productivity. To further illustrate the thirteen respondents' commonalities and create a virtual representation of the relevant topics, a word cloud was created of the 150 most used words with more than five characters in length (see Figure 2).

Figure 1: Suggested Model of Pandemic-Induced Customer Interaction



travel was eliminated or significantly reduced. Additionally, nine of the respondents mentioned restrictions coming from the buying organization. These restrictions focused predominantly on visitors not being permitted unless it was due to extraordinary circumstances. Examples of respondent comments as it relates to travel restrictions can be found in Table 2.

Table 2: Examples of Respondent Quotes Related to Travel Restrictions

<u>Travel Restriction</u>	<u>Respondent Quote</u>
Seller Focused	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "...If we do go to a customer, we actually have them fill out a questionnaire...," Respondent 7 • "...the travel budget basically went to zero," Respondent 10 • "...you can only travel to that one customer you can't go see a bunch of customers, even if they're right next door to each other....," Respondent 9 • "...Anytime someone reports to me in the organization, if they got to travel, they got to send in a request....and when you come back, tell me who you saw...we got contact tracing for everything...," Respondent 5 • "...it has to get approval three levels up...to stay in a motel one night...," Respondent 8
Buyer Focused	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "...Probably a third of the customers said not allowed to see you anymore....," Respondent 6 • "...a lot of places won't let you do face to face...when we did finally get someone to a customer and he found out they were on an airplane, they would not allow them into the facility at all....," Respondent 7 • "...the biggest challenge we have is getting face-to-face meetings because customers don't want you in their building, or they have their own restrictions....," Respondent 8 • "...you don't get to just say, I'm going to be in your area. I'd like to just stop by, and if I can help you with anything, I'll help you. It's got to be with purpose...," Respondent 2 • "...they don't want to have face-to-face unless it's an emergency or critical...," Respondent 4

Technology Adoption

Because of the travel restrictions, business-to-business sales organizations implemented technology as a workaround. Of the respondents, 100% discussed the use of technology to communicate with customers during the pandemic. However, all of the respondents mentioned technology usage, and how technology was implemented varied by the organization. Some respondents highlighted how they used technology to communicate virtually with customers (e.g., Zoom, Teams, Skype). In contrast, others brought up how their organizations expanded their e-commerce platforms to provide more detailed product and service information since in-person customer interaction is limited. Some specific examples of comments made by respondents are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Examples of Respondent Quotes Related to Technology

<u>Technology</u>	<u>Respondent Quote</u>
Virtual Platforms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "...it's all virtual, and you engage with the platform that the distributor uses, if it's Zoom, Teams, Skype..." Respondent 3 • "...we'll ship the [product] to the customer, and then when the customer gets it, they'll set up a virtual meeting and then my [salesperson] will actually just go through all the features..." Respondent 7 • "...the biggest difference now that I see is that in the past, even with the Teams or Skype, we didn't really use the video. And today, we do. So it's not unusual that you have a call, and you're actually seeing the person almost as if that person was in the same room and that that has, for me, that has really changed the game..." Respondent 11 • "...everybody is doing something, whether it's Microsoft Teams or Zoom or some online infrastructure, we're doing that kind of communication regularly with the channel partners..." Respondent 10 • "...understanding embracing technology, being able to use the full suite of Microsoft products. So you know, Microsoft Teams is big for us. Now. It's bought out Skype. And so that's been key for us...now my guys spend a lot of time in their garages, shooting demonstration videos that they can use later.... they're doing virtual demonstration, so that value selling and or competencies around virtual selling has been huge....," Respondent 2 • "...technology implementation is typically a lot longer than it's been since the beginning of the pandemic...people that were not previously comfortable with virtual meetings and they have had no choice but to become acclimated." Respondent 1
E-Commerce	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "The winners in this have been the distributors that have a vibrant e-commerce platform and the ability not just to transact business, but the ability to attract new customers from a virtual platform....[Company A has] seen increases in e-commerce of over 100% this year. ...[Company B] has transacted more business, through their portal and their e-commerce platform's in the last three months than they have in the entire timeframe they had an e-commerce portal..." Respondent 3 • "...in a digital world where you don't sell face to face, you sell through technology and platforms. So, we have modified the website in short order to do virtual selling...So they come on our website, start with a chat, that chat migrates to a video, to Face Time type meeting..." Respondent 2 • "...it is now a race for virtual, how much video content can I put...out there and through social media and how can I sell through social media today?... it's those who have made those that kind of investment, and when you've got an online storefront, nobody knows your real size. If you get a good brand recognition, and most of that is through social acceptance, social media acceptance. If you're really good, what we actually have found is that some of the smaller companies, even competitors, in our space, that have been really strong in the social media presence, have really demonstrated significant laneway of branding and have been really good at penetrating the marketplace..." Respondent 10

Positive Outcomes of Travel Restrictions and Technology Adoption

As a result of the adoption of technology in the industrial business-to-business organization, respondents discussed various outcomes that positively impacted the organization. These

outcomes include timing and quality of customer interactions as well as efficiency and productivity. Each of these outcomes is discussed in more detail below. Tables 4 and 5 illustrate some quotes from respondents mentioning these positive outcomes.

Timing and Quality of Customer Interactions

Of the respondents, 85% discussed how customer contact timing had changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. How specifically the timing changed varied by the organization. For most, interactions with customers became shorter and more frequent. However, for one respondent, the timing of customer contact became less frequent but longer in duration. Overall, the responses show that the company salesperson's relationship development process has changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Now, salespeople are engaging with the customer on a more frequent basis and addressing the specific customer concerns as they arise rather than holding a number of issues until the salesperson's next visit. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the salespeople interviewed perceived that buyers were satisfied with the customer service level being offered. The buyers are looking for answers in a timely fashion to their immediate concerns. See Table 4 for examples of specific references related to the timing of customer contact by respondents.

Efficiency and Productivity

Of the respondents, 85% mentioned how their organization adapted to these new conditions to create increased efficiency and productivity. One way this increased productivity came about was because salespeople no longer had the downtime related to traveling. Therefore, salespeople were now more flexible and available to all their customers. Companies were also able to benefit from the decrease in travel budgets. Another way respondents highlighted increased efficiency was due to better communications not only within the organization but with customer interactions as well. Multiple respondents also noted how salespeople were more productive because the changing salesperson-buyer dynamic relationship allowed salespeople to handle customer issues and concerns as they arose. Furthermore, due to the adoption of technology like Zoom, salespeople can now communicate with customers using video effectively. Salespeople also increased their skills in using other video features (e.g., share screen, demonstrations, etc.). More explicit quotes related to efficiency and productivity can be found in Table 5.

Creative Work Arounds

Although all respondents mentioned technology usage because of the COVID-19 pandemic, three respondents (23%) also directly mentioned some form of in-person meetings. Due to either company's restrictions, these meetings, in many cases, required creative workarounds. For example, Respondent 5 mentioned, "We're literally having meetings in the park with some of these guys so we can get face to face and reintroduce ourselves," while Respondent 6 mentioned, "...we were delivering product outside...we were dropping product off on the doorstep, and they were coming and getting it." Therefore, technology couldn't replace 100% of the seller-buyer relationship needs.

Table 4: Examples of the Positive Outcome for Timing and Quality of Customer Interactions from Respondents

<u>Category</u>	<u>Respondent Quote</u>
<p>Increased Salesperson Availability and Frequency of Interactions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "...It's quicker and shorter durations because that's just the way everybody is now, they don't have the time...now they're wearing multiple hats. So, if you get time, you better be quick and direct to the point. " Respondent 7 • "...it's very easy to have regular calls and to have a quick interaction with a customer that potentially you wouldn't have had in the past. " Respondent 11 • "...you might end up talking to the customer four or five times in an hour to solve an issue just because you were readily available...", Respondent 8 • "...frequency of contact with customers and distributors is probably higher, not probably, it is higher now than it's ever been. Because you can do the phone, you can do the virtual; you can be on and off in 30 minutes...distributors and manufacturers aren't afraid to get on the phone with you because they don't have to say no to lunch. They don't have to say, I'm sorry, you got 30 to 40 minutes and feel bad because they know you flew in and it took you a day, you can really get to business. I mean, there's still chitchat. Don't get me wrong; we're still humans...", Respondent 2 • "...the frequency has gone down, but when you do engage, the duration of engagement increases...", Respondent 3 • "...we implemented an out-of-the-box program ... that allows us to track customer's interactions and we pulled all their influence traits in ..., we will have an average of 21 interactions with us...So before COVID, our average customer had maybe nine or so interactions in total, and then post, it was a ton more....increase your frequency; you decrease the duration...", Respondent 12 • "...I talk a lot to the customers now and looking back on my travels because I was traveling every week, there was a lot of deadtime where you're on an airplane or in a meeting. With this change, I'm 100% accessible now. I'm not in a spot where my phone has to be turned off....", Respondent 4
<p>Higher Quality due to Inclusive Selling Team Representation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "...We were getting a lot more participation in meetings because people can attend very quickly. They don't have to travel. They don't have to go somewhere. So you probably get the broader spectrum of people that you wouldn't have had before...", Respondent 11 • "...Zoom gives you equal quality of voice and ability to share data, see video, and communicate with each other...and there are engineers in two or three different states taking part in the same meeting to pick one customer...our customers are...on three or four different sites as well...", Respondent 13

Table 5: Examples of the Positive Outcome for Efficiency and Productivity from Respondents

<u>Category</u>	<u>Respondent Quote</u>
<p>Increased Efficiency due to (1) Organizational Savings from Reduced or Eliminated Travel Expenditures and (2) Reduced Employee Lost Time</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "...They're not spending time in cars...And you're saying we don't really need to travel anymore; we can do what we're doing right now. It works really well... we're not going to have the same level of contact face to face in the same room as we used to; I don't think that's ever coming back. We've proven now that we don't need to do that and we can save a lot of money not doing it...They don't have to travel. They don't have to go somewhere...," Respondent 11 • "...Looking back on my travels because I was traveling every week, there was a lot of deadtime where you're on an airplane or in a meeting...," Respondent 4 • "...my role has probably spent more time benchmarking competitor products as a result, which is different. I have a much better understanding being at home and sitting on the laptop and looking up and benchmarking than compared time when I did it would have been in the office; it just allows me some more flexibility to go do that...," Respondent 10 • "...my team has gotten considerably more efficient because there isn't a number of days of driving, the number of days of flying in a given week right there. They wake up, and they're doing things digitally, right on their computer starting at eight o'clock in the morning on Monday...," Respondent 2 • "...So all of a sudden, the team's bandwidth almost doubled...like having twice the staff overnight, just by freeing up people's time...[sales appointment is] actually down to 34 minutes. And so you take that old sale, which was about an hour plus drive time...And so far the customer satisfaction has been great...," Respondent 12
<p>More Productive Communication and Faster Response Times</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "...the intensity of engagement increases greatly. So what I mean by that is instead of seeing them ten times a month, maybe only see him three times a month, but the laundry list of issues grows, and you prioritize the ones that need to be solved the quickest...," Respondent 3 • "...we've adapted pretty quickly just because we had to, everybody's had to adapt...So, ironically, maybe we're actually communicating a little bit better because we just have to...," Respondent 9 • "...you would get a call or an e-mail, and then you handle it...where you might have taken care of three or four things during a physical visit, you're taking care of things as they popped up for the customer...," Respondent 8 • "...They are spending all this time collaborating and either internally or reaching out to their customers. We have touchpoints that are working pretty well...We were getting a lot more participation in meetings because people can attend very quickly...," Respondent 11 • "...I talk a lot to the customers now...I'm 100% accessible now. I'm not in a spot where my phone has to be turned off...," Respondent 4

Theoretical and Managerial Implications

This research highlights the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on industrial business-to-business salespeople's communication with the organization's current and prospective customers. Because of the travel restrictions and cancellations that became customary due to the COVID-19 pandemic, salespeople were forced to adopt technology to communicate with customers. As a result of this technology adoption, organizations uncovered several positive implications because of the pandemic based on the interviews conducted. Specifically, these positive findings included changes in the timing and quality of customer interactions as well as increased efficiency and productivity of their salesforce. Based on the results, these findings were not necessarily related to the size of the organization. Even small and medium-sized companies were able to be successful due to flexibility in making necessary changes in a timely fashion, given the opportunities and threats that occur during a crisis (Eggers, 2020).

When examining these exploratory qualitative results, two theories can be utilized to help make sense of these findings. These theories include the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and innovation diffusion theory (Rogers, Singhal, & Quinlan, 2019). The Technology Acceptance Model originated in 1986 and examined how external variables impact perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use, further impacting attitudes, intentions, and adoption behavior (Davis, Bagozzi, & Warshaw, 1989). This model has been tested, expanded, and modified in a variety of contexts since its origin. Some of the new external variables tested include subjective norms, experience, and perceived self-efficacy (e.g., Awa, Ojiabo, & Emecheta, 2015; Doleck, Bazelais, & Lemay, 2018; Stock, Edmondson, Espinosa, Riggle, & Sincich, 2016; Suhartanto, Dean, Ismail, & Sundari, 2019). On the other hand, innovation diffusion theory examines the rate innovation is adopted over time (Rogers et al., 2019). Five characteristics that have been shown to impact the rate of diffusion include complexity, relative advantage, compatibility, trialability, and observability (Ferster, 2017).

In this specific situation, due to the external variable of the COVID-19 pandemic, technology acceptance and adoption (TAM) happened quicker than it would have, had the pandemic not occurred because of sheer necessity. Since travel was restricted or canceled, business-to-business salespeople could not continue the communication status quo with current and potential customers. Instead, they had to find alternative means to communicate with customers adequately through the adoption of technology. Therefore, the technology related to virtual platforms (e.g., Zoom, Teams, Skype) and e-commerce was deemed essential and perceived as useful for ongoing communication with customers. Not only were these virtual platforms perceived as useful, but the technology was also considered relatively easy to use, resulting in large-scale and quick adoption of these innovations based on the executive interviews conducted. This adoption was further sped up since both the selling and customer organizations needed to utilize these technologies to communicate effectively. The external environment had changed to such a degree where the old means of communication was no longer permissible or acceptable, highlighting the relative advantage of communication technology over these pre-pandemic methods.

As mentioned previously, the success of an organization is not based on the organization's size. Instead, the organization's embracing of technology allowed it to continue communicating effectively with its current and prospective customers. In essence, organizations that embraced technology found success, while those resistant to change did not. Based on the interviews, some organizations opted to enhance their e-commerce or social media platforms, while others focused

on developing videos or utilizing virtual meeting platforms (e.g., Zoom, Teams) to communicate with current and potential customers. For example, Respondent 10 highlighted how "the mom and pops, because traditionally they're a storefront activity, have clearly suffered...online retailers are the ones moving product...because they're able to show things more virtually... they're the ones that were seeing the record years." However, Respondent 10 further highlights how "smaller companies that have been really strong in the social media presence have really demonstrated significant laneway of branding and have been really good at penetrating the marketplace." Respondent 3 made a similar comment stating that "the winners in this have been the distributors that have a vibrant e-commerce platform and the ability not just to transact business, but the ability to attract new customers from a virtual platform." These comments demonstrate that it is not the organization's size but the adoption of potentially complex technology that has helped distinguish the winners from the losers in the marketplace. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, business-to-business industrial sales organizations have sped up the rate of technology diffusion across their organization. Essentially, the COVID-19 pandemic escalated digital initiatives into digital imperatives to ensure future company success (Engler, 2020).

For those companies that embraced technology due to the COVID-19 pandemic, their organization experienced several benefits. These benefits included the timing and quality of customer interactions as well as increased efficiency and productivity. Based on the interviews conducted, due to technology adoption, organizations found that their business-to-business industrial salespeople were speaking to customers more frequently than before the COVID-19 pandemic, thereby increasing salesperson efficiency. These salespeople were able to better address concerns and needs quickly due to regular calls instead of waiting for the salesperson's next in-person visit. Additionally, individuals from different locations or cross-functional teams were now able to participate in customer interactions on a single virtual platform meeting, therefore, increasing the quality of the customer experience at no additional charge to the organization. Further, because the salesperson was not unavailable due to traveling and entertaining, customers could reach the salesperson on a more frequent basis. This lack of travel and entertaining, along with the technology adoption, allowed salespeople to spend more time interacting with a higher number of customers. Even though many executives reported sales being down between 10 and 30%, profits were able to remain relatively flat since travel budgets were eliminated or greatly reduced due to the travel restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Due to the pandemic, hiring practices at business-to-business industrial sales organizations have likely changed. Future salespeople being hired by these organizations may need to have technical skills in order to increase the likelihood of them being hired. The extent of the technical skills will vary by the organization, with some desiring prior virtual platform usage (e.g., Zoom), while other organizations may seek candidates with video production and editing skills. Further, many sales organizations will likely continue to utilize virtual hiring platforms such as Handshake or HireVue, which became popular during the pandemic. Organizations have realized cost savings due to the virtual hiring platform adoption for HR personnel (Love, 2020). Furthermore, adaptive selling skills will continue to be a highly sought-after skill set for industrial sales representatives. The pandemic made it clear that businesses and employees needed to be flexible and willing to adapt to ever-changing marketplace conditions. Finally, future salespeople may need to embrace creativity to solve customer problems effectively. This was highlighted throughout the interviews due to the sudden and vast travel restrictions that eliminated the traditional customer interaction approaches employed before the pandemic.

When predicting how business-to-business industrial sales organizations may communicate and interact with customers after the pandemic is over, a blended model will likely exist (Samuels, 2020). It is unlikely that organizations will revert entirely back to pre-pandemic conditions because of the enhanced efficiency and productivity gained from the rapid diffusion of technology. Instead, a blended model may require sales organizations to consider how the customer desires to interact. Now that customers may be more comfortable with technology, some customers may desire to continue using the digital platforms implemented during the pandemic, while others may desire more of a return to pre-pandemic in-person communication methods or even a combination of the two. In addition, sales organizations may not be quick to approve the pre-pandemic amount of travel and entertainment expenses now that these organizations have found success using digital platforms. The success gained during the pandemic from the organizations interviewed did not necessarily result from the same level of pre-pandemic sales but from the reductions in travel and entertaining expenses, helping keep profitability close to pre-pandemic levels.

Conclusion and Suggestions for Further Research

This study qualitatively investigated the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on business-to-business industrial sales organizations. Results from thirteen executive interviews led to the creation of the Pandemic-Induced Customer Interaction model, highlighting how travel restrictions and cancellations led to technology adoption, resulting in benefits such as timing and quality of interactions and enhanced efficiency and productivity. The Technology Acceptance Model and innovation diffusion theory were used to frame these results. Specifically, the COVID-19 pandemic was introduced as a new external variable that impacts technology acceptance and adoption. Finally, managerial implications and expected post-pandemic changes were discussed.

As with all research, limitations pose opportunities for future study. This study interviewed thirteen industrial executives from a variety of U.S. industries. In the future, it would be useful to incorporate quantitative studies using a larger sample size to validate these qualitative findings. Further, although the business executives interviewed sold products and services internationally, it would be useful to include respondents from international organizations headquartered outside of the United States to investigate changes in other countries. In the future, it would be helpful if additional research on businesses that earned less than \$10 million were examined in order to determine if the findings are more generalizable. Finally, this qualitative study was conducted mid-pandemic; therefore, it would be helpful to complete a follow-up study post-pandemic to investigate the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic communication changes.

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