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BUSINESS STRATEGIES IN TIME OF CRISIS: LATEST DEVELOPMENTS AND TRENDS

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Preface

This thesis analyzes the existing literature on business strategies, addressing their modification and implementation in a crisis through a systematic literature review (SLR) and empirical case studies. Thus, this thesis aims to explain how firms behave during unforeseen events that can bedevil business going-concern. The plan of action, extensively explored and discussed through the present dissertation, aims to encourage future research in the debate on business strategy during crises - searching for future directions in the strategy field. The preface explains the study's overarching goal and briefly summarizes the key points of the single-taken papers while emphasizing the connections between them. Three papers compose the dissertation, addressing the following research questions:

1. What business strategies are adopted by SMEs during the different stages of unexpected events? (Paper 1)
2. 2a) Why are some firms more resilient than others in a context of crisis?; 2b) What are the strategies that make them resilient? (Paper 2)
3. 3a) What kind of ordinary and extraordinary CXs take place in a phygital context?; 3b) What flexible and agile strategies can firms use to affect phygital CXs? (Paper3)

A comprehensive SLR can be found in the first paper. In contrast, the second and third papers present single-case and multi-case studies.

The first paper of the present thesis analyzes the evolution of SMEs' (small and medium-sized enterprises) business strategies in times of crisis from a novel perspective by identifying the circularity of the crisis phases (i.e., crisis prevention, crisis response, and crisis recovery) (Elliott et al., 2005; Hills, 1998; Smith, 1990).

Despite the importance of crisis management for SMEs, existing literature (e.g., Herbane, 2010; Kraus et al., 2013) focuses on large businesses and overlooks small

enterprises. As a result, how SMEs adapt their business strategy in the face of unexpected occurrences remains an attractive and understudied study issue in business, economics, and management studies that requires a proper theoretical foundation (Herbane, 2010; Kraus et al., 2012; Naidoo, 2010).

This paper summarizes how SMEs react in crises by performing an SLR (Denyer et al., 2008; Macpherson et al., 2015; Tranfield et al., 2003) and illustrates core themes in previous research concerning the phases of crisis prevention, response, and recovery. This first study's outcomes develop a circular event framework and represent the leading business strategies implemented by SMEs in different moments of unpredicted circumstances - better understanding what strategies are suitable according to the specific moment of the crisis: (1) flexible planning, financial resources, proactiveness, and collaboration during the crisis prevention phase; (2) cost minimization and cash flow protection, revenue generation - operations and business model pivoting, stakeholder relationships, and dynamic approaches during the crisis response phase; (3) business model re-configuring, and stakeholder and employee relationships re-establishment, in the crisis recovery phase.

The second paper of the thesis provides an initial empirical investigation of business strategies in crisis times, referring back to the suggestion for future research of the first study, that is, testing and validating the proposed "circular" framework.

The study's motivation is to examine why and how some firms are more resilient than others in a context of crisis (i.e., what makes them more resilient), helping firms adjust, prosper, and succeed in turbulent environments. To fulfill the objective mentioned above, the study adopts a qualitative research design and performs a theory-building process based on an in-depth exploratory multiple-case study (Eisenhardt, 1989; Miles and Huberman, 1984; Yin, 1994), investigating the AEC (Architectural Engineering and Construction) industry (studying the "case" of Norwegian firms in the civil/industrial construction sector). To do this, data and interviews were collected in collaboration with the BI - Norwegian Business School - Centre for Construction Industry[1].

[1] The Centre for Construction Industry conducts high-quality research that informs the construction sector (in a broad sense), governmental bodies, and society at large on the possibilities and difficulties that the industry faces today. The Center focuses primarily on process research in order to understand and realize changes in the industry, as well as how the sector is evolving into a sustainable and digital area.

The second study's outcomes, summarized in a theoretical framework, raise managers' and practitioners' understanding of effective strategies for dealing with fast-changing business circumstances in which unexpected and undesirable occurrences might jeopardize organizational goals. It provides critical strategies and innovative behaviors to allow managers to assess and improve their business strategies when the crisis threatens business continuity. The findings define and deepen five strategic responses that will support businesses to remain resilient throughout a crisis: "forerunner strategy", "rational strategy", "sensitive strategy", "resourceful strategy", and "visionary strategy". Thus, ten typologies of firm behaviors are introduced throughout the empirical analysis, proposing a framework in the context of the AEC industry while stimulating future theoretical and empirical research on this subject.

The third and final paper of this thesis extends the body of business strategies by looking at how organizations rethink their business after a crisis (i.e., considering the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic), bouncing back again while developing new ways of doing business

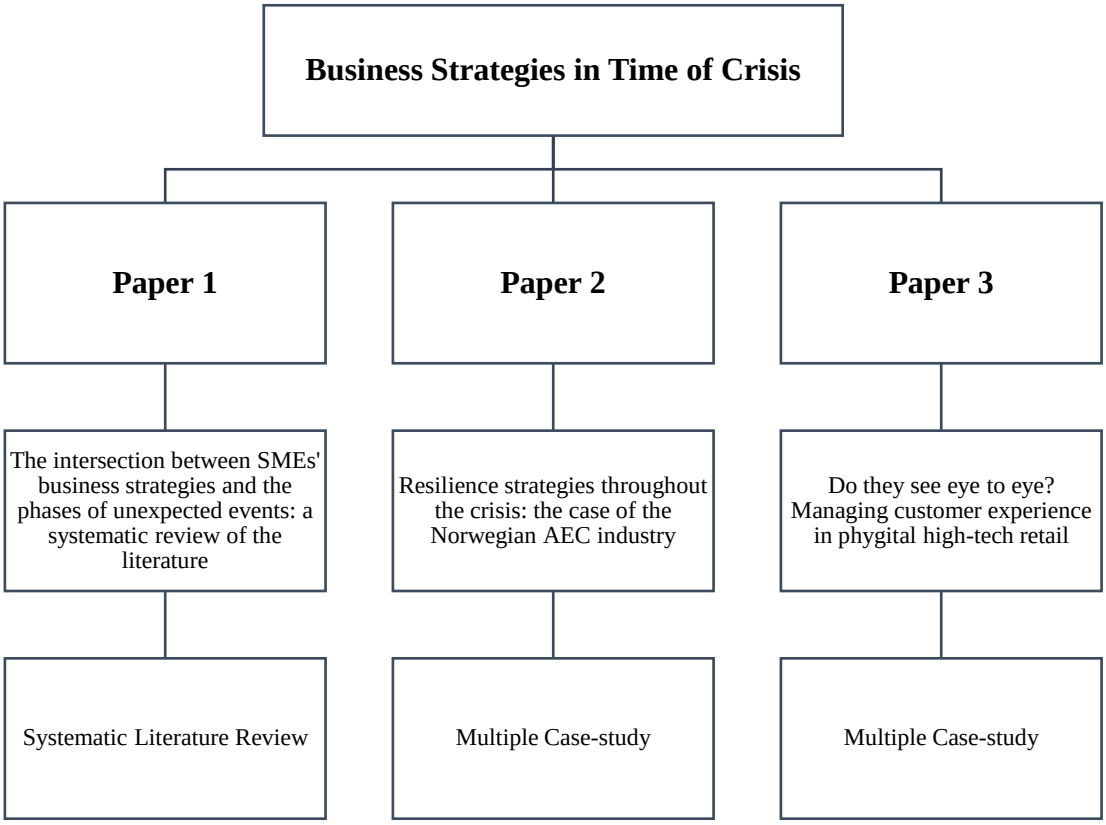
This paper's objective is to empirically investigate business strategies during a context of uncertainty in organizations, to understand how they pursue and implement activities, behaviors, and actions. To reach this goal, this study uses a theory-building approach through a single-case study research design in retail, examining the crucial role of phygital customer experiences in the first phygital store in Europe, in Milan: the Webidoo Store.

This third study's outcome and framework provide a framework illustrating the main typologies of ordinary ("hostile", "controversial", and "disappointing") and extraordinary ("passionate" and "explorative") CXs that can arise in phygital contexts. Also, it identifies some key flexible and agile strategies ("decompressive strategy", "mentoring strategy", "prompting strategy", and "entertaining strategy") that companies might follow to adjust their offerings and respond quickly to the different forms of phygital CXs to create a more compelling experience tailored to customers' needs, preferences, and expectations. This work's findings strengthen the knowledge of business strategies throughout critical business situations, explaining the benefits of a constant proactive attitude, particularly in turbulent and fast-changing circumstances.

Table 1 illustrates the overall thesis structure and the contribution provided by the

three studies.

Table 1: Overall thesis structure



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Paper 1

The Intersection between SMEs' Business Strategies and the Phases of Unexpected Events: a Systematic Review of the Literature

Keywords: Crisis management; disaster; recovery; resilience; COVID-19; SMEs; business strategies

The Intersection between SMEs' Business Strategies and the Phases of Unexpected Events: a Systematic Review of the Literature

Abstract

Despite the relevance of crisis management for SMEs, existing literature primarily targets large firms, paying less attention to smaller businesses. As a result, how SMEs transform their business strategies during the specific phases of unexpected events remains an unexplored research topic. The present conceptual paper aims to develop a framework examining the kind of strategies that may be implemented by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) throughout the different stages of unexpected events. The paper reports a systematic literature review (SLR) to summarize how SMEs react in times of crisis and illustrate core themes in previous research concerning the phases of crisis prevention, response, and recovery. The study develops a circular event framework and presents the leading business strategies implemented by SMEs in different moments of unpredicted circumstances: (1) flexible planning, financial resources, proactiveness, and collaboration during the crisis prevention phase; (2) cost minimization and cash flow protection, revenue generation - operations and business model pivoting, stakeholder relationships, and dynamic approaches during the crisis response phase; (3) business model re-configuring, and stakeholder and employee relationships re-establishment, in the crisis recovery phase. The conceptual nature of this work stimulates further theoretical and empirical studies. Future research should empirically test and validate the proposed framework within specific research settings. The present research represents a valuable benchmark for managers and practitioners to understand better what strategies are suitable according to the specific moment of the crisis. The study's originality lies in analyzing the evolution of SMEs' business strategies in times of crisis from a novel perspective by identifying the circularity of the prevention, response, and recovery phases.

Keywords: Crisis management; disaster; recovery; resilience; COVID-19; SMEs; business strategies

1. Introduction

Crisis management defines a systemic procedure, supported by internal and external stakeholders, aimed at identifying signs of crisis, avoiding and planning for possible distress, and recovering and learning from the crisis (Mitroff, 1988; Pearson and Mitroff, 1993; Pearson and Clair, 1998).

Scholars have developed two main conceptualizations of crisis: crisis-as-an-event and crisis-as-process. The crisis-as-an-event perspective mainly focuses on investigating the aftermath of a crisis. Conversely, the crisis-as-process perspective focuses on the need to examine crisis-fostering conditions and the mechanisms of organizational weakening (Roux-Dufort, 2007). Such a perspective also analyzes the evolution of crises and how organizations react to crisis stages (Williams et al., 2017).

Over the past decades, academic attention toward crisis management has gradually increased (Fallini, 2017; Pusceddu et al., 2021a) due to the volume, nature, and impact of recent disasters (Doern et al., 2019). Today, the unexpected Coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) outbreak has considerably furthered this topic's salience. The many lockdowns and their impact on economies worldwide have significantly contributed to unprecedented distress "with no documented equivalent in the entrepreneurship literature" (Kuckertz et al., 2020, p. 2). Notably, the setbacks imposed by the lockdown of all non-essential businesses both limited and eliminated opportunities to generate revenue for many firms, thus fundamentally changing the way they do business (Moi and Cabiddu, 2020; Pusceddu et al., 2021b). These problems are even more complicated for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Indeed, with their limited ability to overcome the involved risks and sustain costs due to the reduced business activities, SMEs, are facing complex problems related to the lack of funds and liquidity in their attempts to implement social-distancing measures and regulations to operate and reopen during this health emergency (Fairlie, 2020).

Despite the relevance of crisis management for SMEs, existing literature (e.g., Herbane, 2010; Kraus et al., 2013) primarily targets large firms but pays less attention to smaller businesses. As a result, how SMEs transform their business strategies during unexpected events remains an exciting and unexplored research topic in business, economics, and management studies that needs a solid theoretical basis (Herbane, 2010; Kraus et al., 2012; Naidoo, 2010).

The present paper attempts to fill this gap by answering the following research question: "What business strategies are adopted by SMEs during the different stages of

unexpected events?". A systematic review of the literature about crises in the context of SMEs has been performed (Denyer et al., 2008; Tranfield et al., 2003). Following the crisis-as-process perspective, the findings have been organized into three main phases: crisis prevention, response, and recovery (Elliott et al., 2005; Hills, 1998; Runyan, 2006; Smith, 1990).

The study contributes to extending prior literature on crisis management by investigating how SMEs may modify business strategies to address crises. It also proposes a framework that highlights the circularity of the crisis prevention, response, and recovery phases, as well as propositions that categorize the main strategies intersecting with the different phases of unpredicted circumstances. Notably, since all strategic responses are based on previous experience, the same experience can lead to several strategic responses during the crisis' various phases. Moreover, each strategic response can affect the others. From a managerial perspective, this research supports managers and practitioners in implementing or redefining their business strategies by suggesting the most suitable strategy according to the sequences belonging to uncertainty.

2. Methodology

To identify how small businesses react in times of crisis, a systematic literature review has been conducted (SLR) (Denyer et al., 2008; Tranfield et al., 2003). This is a replicable, scientific and transparent process (Thorpe et al., 2005) that follows specific procedures designed to reduce review biases and errors (Tranfield et al., 2003), thereby improving the quality of the review process and its results (Mihalache and Mihalache, 2015). Moreover, it summarizes and organizes the literature accumulated in a specific field (Wang and Chugh, 2014), thus providing evidence of the study's validity by replicating exact steps during the review process (Wang and Chugh, 2014).

The SLR has been performed by leveraging two databases, i.e., Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus, searching for the keywords (Crises OR crisis OR disaster* OR recover* OR resilience OR COVID* OR Coronavirus) AND ("small business*" OR "small firm*" OR "small enterprise*" OR "small organization*" OR SME OR SMEs), thus restricting the research to the business, management, accounting and economics subject areas. The study focused on papers that had been published in the January 2010 - July 2020 period to capture the latest developments and trends on the topic (Danese et al., 2018).

The research yielded a total of 1657 articles. After eliminating duplicates, the list

of articles has been reduced to 1379 titles, proceeding with the article selection by closely reading the abstracts. Papers that did not investigate business strategy changes in SMEs due to unexpected challenges and those that did not have crisis management at their core have been excluded. Furthermore, non-relevant papers that primarily focused on crises or/and SMEs through an exclusively advanced financial and banking perspective have not been considered. The "grey literature" (i.e., books, book chapters, conference proceedings, dissertation abstracts, and working papers) was excluded. As a result, a total of 89 articles were identified. A few papers were not available in full-text, thus reducing the sample to 75 articles. Thirty-nine articles were, hence, considered to be suitable for the analysis. Following hand searching and citation tracking, 14 additional articles were selected. A final sample of 53 papers was obtained (see Appendix 1, 2, 3, 4).

3. Intersecting SMEs' business strategies with crisis phases

The business strategies have been organized into intersecting categories to clarify how crisis events affect SMEs. These categories allow a summary of the literature that addresses this research topic. Ten SME strategies were identified across three phases: crisis prevention, response, and recovery (Elliott et al., 2005; Hills, 1998; Smith, 1990) (see Table 2). Crisis prevention investigates the concepts of mitigation and planning (Fink, 1986). Crisis response focuses on how organizations shift resources to minimize business damage (Hale et al., 2005). Finally, crisis recovery is when organizations "learn" from the crisis (Elliott et al., 2005; Hale et al., 2005; Smith and Sipika, 1993).

Table 2: Crisis phases and SMEs' strategies during unexpected events

Phases	SMEs' strategies	Issues explored	Sources
CRISIS PREVENTION	Flexible planning to be resilient against potential destructive crisis effects	SMEs focus on building robust businesses to deal with crises.	Ates and Bititci (2011); Demmer et al. (2011); Gunasekaran et al. (2011); Ha et al. (2020); Herbane (2019); Hong et al. (2012); Moneva-Abadía et al. (2019); Thun et al. (2011); Vargo and Seville (2011)
	Financial resources to mitigate unexpected risks	SMEs ensure they have adequate resources in their business to safeguard business management and supply chain.	Kraus et al. (2012); Tognazzo et al. (2016)
	Proactiveness to promote and anticipate changes in demand	SMEs look for opportunities to gain competitiveness. They aim to become more customer-centered and forge a solid client base.	Cassia et al. (2012); Demmer et al. (2011); Gunasekaran et al. (2011); Herbane (2010); Hong et al. (2012); Ismail et al. (2011); Kraus et al. (2012); Le Nguyen and Kock (2011); Naidoo (2010)
	Collaboration to	SMEs find outside help	Ates and Bititci (2011); Branicki et al.

	create a sharing and open environment	by building deep complementary alliances, thus creating an open business environment.	(2018); Demmer et al. (2011); Doern (2016); Gunasekaran et al. (2011); Ha et al. (2020)
CRISIS RESPONSE	Cost minimization strategies and cash flow protection	SMEs focus on their financial resources. They reflect on which unnecessary spending to pause or cut back to protect their cash flow, cover potential absences, and generate liquidity.	Battisti et al. (2013); Bourletidis and Triantafyllopoulos (2014); Doern (2016); Edvardsson and Teitsdóttir (2015); Eggers and Kraus (2011); Giannacourou et al. (2015); Hong et al. (2012); Kottika et al. (2020); Mayr and Lixl (2019); Mendoza et al. (2018); Morrish and Jones (2020); Pal et al. (2012); Parker and Ameen (2018); Shafi et al. (2020); Smallbone et al. (2012); Thorgren and Williams (2020)
	Revenue generation strategies: operations and business model pivoting	SMEs innovate to stay top-of-mind in their existing customers' minds, thus stimulating demand and renewing supply.	Alberti et al. (2018); Antonioli and Montresor (2021); Bamiatzi and Kirchmaier (2014); Battisti et al. (2013); Bourletidis and Triantafyllopoulos (2014); Cioppi et al. (2014); Dias et al. (2020); Doern (2016); Edvardsson and Teitsdóttir (2015); Eggers and Kraus (2011); Giannacourou et al. (2015); Hong et al. (2012); Johansen (2020); Kottika et al. (2020); Lado et al. (2013); Le Nguyen and Kock (2011); Macpherson et al. (2015); Madrid-Guijarro et al. (2013); Mayr and Lixl (2019); Mayr, Mitter, and Aichmayr (2017); Morrish and Jones, (2020); Pal et al. (2012); Pal et al. (2014); Pal et al. (2013); Shafi et al. (2020); Smallbone et al. (2012); Thorgren and Williams (2020); Tsilika et al. (2020)
	Stakeholder relationship: what SMEs need others for	SMEs mobilize practical resources, strengthen or build stakeholders' relationship, and ask for support.	Adekola and Clelland (2020); Cioppi et al. (2014); Dias et al. (2020); Doern (2016); Eggers and Kraus (2011); Giannacourou et al. (2015); Ha et al. (2020); Macpherson et al. (2015); Mayr and Lixl (2019); Mayr et al. (2017); Mendoza et al. (2018); Morrish and Jones (2020); Ogawa and Tanaka (2013); Shafi et al. (2020); Thorgren and Williams (2020); Vargo and Seville (2011)
	Dynamic approaches in small business management	SMEs use learning orientation, ambidexterity, causal, and effectual decision-making logic to ensure minimal disruption.	Battisti, Beynon, Pickernell, and Deakins (2019); Dolz, Iborra, and Safón (2019); Iborra, Safón, and Dolz (2019); Laskovaia et al. (2019); Osiyevskyy et al. (2020)
CRISIS RECOVERY	Business model re-configuring: developing an innovation mindset within SMEs	SMEs accept risks and design new business models.	Doern (2016); Ha et al. (2020); Hong, Huang, and Li (2012); Le Nguyen and Kock (2011); Mendoza et al. (2018); Morrish and Jones (2020); Shafi et al. (2020); Thorgren and Williams (2020)
	Re-establishing stakeholder and employee relationships	SMEs re-establish stakeholder relationships, thus relying on their support.	Asgary et al. (2012); Doern (2016); Ha et al. (2020); Hong et al. (2012); Mendoza et al. (2018); Morrish and Jones (2020); Shafi et al. (2020); Thorgren and Williams (2020)

3.1. The crisis prevention phase

This first phase investigates SMEs' crisis prevention strategies to prevent unwanted crisis outcomes.

Crisis prevention is about mitigation and planning (Fink, 1986). During this phase, small business leaders - entrepreneurs/business owners, CEOs, and managers - and employees seek to understand how to prepare best, whether they have already experienced adversity from an unforeseen situation or not.

According to previous literature, SMEs should stay focused on: flexible planning to be resilient against potential destructive crisis effects (Herbane, 2019; Moneva-Abadía et al., 2019); financial resources to mitigate unexpected risks (Kraus et al., 2012; Tognazzo et al., 2016); proactiveness, to promote and anticipate changes in demand (Cassia et al., 2012; Herbane, 2010); and collaboration, to create a sharing and open environment (Branicki et al., 2018).

Flexible planning to be resilient against potential destructive crisis effects

Small businesses' preparation for the road ahead is as fundamental as their present performance when going through difficult times.

Researchers have shown that SMEs hyper-focus on contingency planning to build a robust business to deal with crises during the prevention phase (Hong et al., 2012). In this regard, various studies show SMEs' need to be agile and have plans to prevent unwanted crisis outcomes promptly and immediately respond to changing landscapes (Ates and Bititci, 2011; Gunasekaran et al., 2011; Herbane, 2019).

Creating a flexible organizational structure and developing a "crisis-ready" culture to facilitate resilience are essential in SMEs. By doing this, SMEs develop proactive, long-term strategic, and resilience-planning activities - such as long-track strategic record planning, crisis management plan setup, and investment in equipment infrastructures (Vargo and Seville, 2011). Scanning the external environment is necessary to detect warning signs that could prompt an impending crisis (Hong et al., 2012). Furthermore, insurance purchasing becomes a foremost priority for small businesses to protect the company from financial losses, whereas an external event manifests as a crisis within the organization (Ha et al., 2020; Hong et al., 2012).

Fascinating insight into crisis prevention comes from solutions to strengthen the firm's capacity to focus directly on customer needs. Therefore, paying attention to socially responsible strategies (e.g., recycling and reducing emissions and waste, saving

energy to achieve greater efficiency, introducing alternative energy sources, using, purchasing, or producing organic items) can restore the firm's reputation and maintain competitiveness (Moneva-Abadía et al., 2019).

Financial resources to mitigate the unexpected risks

One of the biggest concerns during crises is cash flow. When it comes to SMEs, to endure uncertain and unpredictable times (Fink, 1986; Hermann, 1963; Quarantelli, 1988), it is necessary to improve business liquidity, thus ensuring that SMEs have adequate resources before and after unexpected situations. This action safeguards business management and the supply chain. Minimizing risky projects is necessary due to their negative interaction effect on SMEs' performance when combined with market turbulence (Kraus et al., 2012). The accumulation of slack - that is, surplus resources - serves to buffer against adversity and favor the pursuit of a sustainable competitive advantage. Therefore, it is essential to accompany SMEs through unforeseen events (Tognazzo et al., 2016).

Proactiveness to promote and anticipate changes in demand

Scholars argue that to contain "economic turmoil" times, SMEs seek incentives to gain competitiveness; they aim to become more customer-centered and forge a solid client base (Cassia et al., 2012; Herbane, 2010; Kraus et al., 2012; Naidoo, 2010).

Implementing an agile approach with operational - i.e., improving the current products for existing customers - and strategic capabilities - i.e., creating new markets and introducing a unique value proposition to reach new customers - significantly enhances the organization's resilience (Ismail et al., 2011).

SMEs need to reflect critically on the changes in demand and trends they can anticipate. This behavior can subsequently highlight the need to find radical new pivots to reposition SMEs' product and service offerings. Promoting innovative products or services to existing consumers by looking for new international markets for SMEs' trading activities makes it far easier to evolve positively and grow in the wake of a crisis (Herbane, 2010; Le Nguyen and Kock, 2011).

Collaboration to create a sharing and open environment

Research has established that finding outside help by building meaningful complementary alliances - with loyal customers, suppliers, employees, and competitors -

helps create an open business environment (Ates and Bititci, 2011; Branicki et al., 2018; Ha et al., 2020).

Collaboration is an excellent practice for the following unexpected challenges, a resource of resilience, and a critical small business value to limit the adverse consequences of unforeseen situations. Asking for support from SMEs networks and creating connections among teams is crucial. This approach involving everyone around the organization sustains mutual side knowledge sharing and provides immediate effect expertise in the areas where SMEs lack the required coping skills to solve the crisis. Creative partnership implementation increases innovation, efficiency, and flexibility in SMEs. Creating an open and transparent culture within the small business by encouraging organizational members to report potential problems and challenges could help develop an organization's anticipation mindset.

Therefore:

Proposition 1a (P1a): The adoption of strategies such as flexible planning during the crisis prevention stage increases SMEs' ability to mitigate unwanted crisis outcomes.

Proposition 1b (P1b): The adoption of strategies such as financial resources during the crisis prevention stage increases SMEs' ability to mitigate unwanted crisis outcomes.

Proposition 1c (P1c): The adoption of strategies such as proactiveness during the crisis prevention stage increases SMEs' ability to mitigate unwanted crisis outcomes.

Proposition 1d (P1d): The adoption of strategies such as collaboration during the crisis prevention stage increases SMEs' ability to mitigate unwanted crisis outcomes.

3.2. The crisis response phase

Researchers have considered the response phase significant, as the decisions that are made in this timeframe can mitigate the crisis' destructive effects (Elliott et al., 2005).

To navigate challenges and fight adversity, SMEs try to be open to change - to upskill and re-invent their business approach. Although it is not always easy for SMEs to go through a crisis, they can rapidly convert it into a massive opportunity if they can handle these events in stride by "embracing change" in their performance.

In this phase, significant focus is directed towards cost minimization strategies and cash flow protection (Eggers and Kraus, 2011; Smallbone et al., 2012), revenue generation strategies - operations and business model pivoting (Macpherson et al., 2015; Morrish and Jones, 2020), stakeholder relationships (Doern, 2016; Mayr et al., 2017), and dynamic small business management (Battisti et al., 2019; Osiyevskyy et al., 2020).

Cost minimization strategies and cash flow protection

In the crisis response stage, earnings are considerably put at risk (Runyan, 2006), and SMEs are required to have a deep understanding of their financial resources.

On the one hand, during unpredicted events, financial risks (i.e., risk of default, business failure, bankruptcy) increase, and, on the other hand, profit margins tend to decrease. Therefore, having adequate resources to navigate small businesses through a crisis, thus minimizing costs and generating revenues, is indispensable. Numerous studies highlight the importance of clarifying business priorities to identify which types of spending to pause or cut back to protect cash flow, cover potential absences, and generate liquidity (Battisti et al., 2013; Eggers and Kraus, 2011; Smallbone et al., 2012). A great place to start is related to human resources - employees' wages and emoluments. These expenses significantly weigh on SMEs' balance sheets. Therefore, in times of uncertainty, they are often reduced or cut (Battisti et al., 2013; Mayr and Lixl, 2019; Smallbone et al., 2012).

Small business leaders share tough, instant decisions that impact people's lives to ensure they can weather the tough times ahead. In doing so, they contribute to keeping cash in the company while providing a timely defense against challenging events and limiting the crisis' adverse consequences. When revenues decrease, SMEs optimize their workforce by maintaining the most operationally talented employees and laying off their non-productive workforce to ensure business operation efficiency (Hong et al., 2012; Thorgren and Williams, 2020). SMEs transparently communicate with organizational members to make them understand the rationale of the business decision. They update employees on what is happening inside the organization, even though it can be challenging for small business leaders to predict future scenarios.

When SMEs expect revenue to rebound soon, flexible furlough schemes (i.e., temporary leave without pay and reduction of working hours following the established law) might be the best option to enable SMEs to control cost reduction (Battisti et al., 2013; Smallbone et al., 2012). Interrupting personnel recruitment in the company and

gradually reducing salaries are other approaches to better managing small business revenues (Kottika et al., 2020; Thorgren and Williams, 2020).

Small business leaders focus on their core values under unexpected circumstances, allocating financial resources to their most profitable assets. From this perspective, seeking to reduce loss-making and risky investments to focus on more profitable ones constitutes a wise attitude (Mayr and Lixl, 2019; Parker and Ameen, 2018).

Reasonable cash reserves in the company and available government grants are the best funding for SMEs to take advantage of and inject financial resources internally to buffer against adversity and mitigate some of the risks involved (Doern, 2016; Morrish and Jones, 2020). Indeed, due to current economic volatility and business financial constraints, external debt (i.e., bank loans) is highly discouraged since SMEs encounter difficulties in paying it back (Smallbone et al., 2012).

Revenue generation strategies: operations and business model pivoting

Revenue generation strategies concern the multiple efforts implemented by SMEs to be at the forefront of responding to a crisis, thereby seeking new opportunities in the marketplace.

Managing financial resources wisely, re-evaluating or shifting the current business model and the value proposition, thinking outside the box, and adapting - remaining anchored to the business' core values - are meaningful methods to achieve business success.

Scholars strongly emphasize repositioning and value proposition flexibility to decrease costs and boost sales (Lado et al., 2013; Macpherson et al., 2015; Mayr and Lixl, 2019; Tsilika et al., 2020).

Flexibility is the hallmark of successful small businesses, leading to a new focus in SMEs' corrective actions and pivoting (Hampel et al., 2019) and therefore moving away from the organization's current strategy to pursue a new direction. This approach aims to create a unique offer for SMEs to drive change proactively - i.e., shifting business thinking from surviving to a crisis to thriving. The market is moving toward SMEs' operations, so staying aligned with and exploring new revenue streams was critical. Therefore, generating an offer that stands out from others on the market is necessary, thus implying an absolute added value and revenue generation.

Investing in customers facilitates the building of long-life loyalty and trust. Knowing the clients enhances revenue generation. This entails being passionate about

listening to them to understand their specific troubles, empathize, and feel the urgency to accommodate their in-depth needs. A key ingredient is being fast and centered around meeting customers' (physiological, safety, love/belonging) needs. Quickly pivoting SMEs' offering, repositioning, and providing a greater range of products or services that are likely to break into the market and remain relevant in the "new normal" is an excellent method to fill the needs gap (Macpherson et al., 2015; Madrid-Guijarro et al., 2013).

Appropriately strategizing and analyzing what markets SMEs will enter is part of an innovation mindset. New perspectives, habits, and priorities change consumers' buying behavior. When SMEs know their market's nuances, they can easily navigate changing periods and attract different customer segments. Blue-sky thinking (Wrigley et al., 2016) enables SMEs to design new effective solutions for the market they believe are approaching. Consumers do not need perfect products, especially when crises unfold, so sometimes the right solution is to provide them with slight adjustments to the products they are familiar with (Bamiatzi and Kirchmaier, 2014). SMEs need to be passionate. Introducing customized products or services is a way to face the rapid evolution of consumers' behavior (Bamiatzi and Kirchmaier, 2014). To be persuaded to buy, customers need disposable income. Cheaper and inferior products and services can suit cash-strapped audiences' requirements (Bamiatzi and Kirchmaier, 2014).

The present literature analysis shows how investments in innovation related to the value proposition and the production process are closely linked and often complementary (Bamiatzi and Kirchmaier, 2014). Process innovation is one of SMEs' most defining characteristics and improves the production chain's operational efficiency and quality (Antonioli and Montresor, 2021; Macpherson et al., 2015; Madrid-Guijarro et al., 2013; Morrish and Jones, 2020; Plechero, 2018; Tsilika et al., 2020). It helps SMEs bring money into the business, remain competitive, and meet customer demands.

For some SMEs' operations, outsourcing is an alternative to manage adversity and sustain growth (Edvardsson and Teitsdóttir, 2015; Pal et al., 2012). SMEs hyper-focus on the business activities they are good at, to which they delegate the most time and high resource allocation tasks. Outsourcing helps to keep costs under control and increases efficiency.

Once the newly adapted products and services are created, internationalization strategies facilitated by globalization's powerful impact make the brand known outside national borders, thus reducing risks when the domestic and international economy change (Bamiatzi and Kirchmaier, 2014; Battisti et al., 2013; Eggers and Kraus, 2011;

Mullaymeri et al., 2015).

Finally, researchers stress how budgeting funds for external marketing communication channels - such as social media, websites, catalogs, and public relations - should be at the forefront when reaching out to SMEs' target audience to ensure on-brand messaging and brand identity (Bamiatzi and Kirchmaier, 2014; Eggers and Kraus, 2011; Lado et al., 2013). In light of the crisis, communicating means informing consumers about organizational values - what the business stands for and what the SMEs' employees take pride in, gauging how the company is performing, presenting changed products and services, and provoking customers' responses to purchase.

Stakeholder relationships: what SMEs need others for

During the heightened state of a crisis, SMEs need to mobilize practical resources. Regardless of cuts in the payment chain, when critical situations wreak havoc on small businesses, it is strictly necessary to strengthen or build their relationship with stakeholders - for example, suppliers, clients, the surrounding community, organizational members, and other businesses - and ask for support (Doern, 2016; Eggers and Kraus, 2011; Macpherson et al., 2015; Mayr et al., 2017; Morrish and Jones, 2020; Ogawa and Tanaka, 2013). Communication during crises covers a central role: when difficult news needs to be shared, leadership is necessary to ensure honesty and clarity toward employees and general stakeholders. Thus, extra support, reassuring, and encouraging SMEs' staff (Ha et al., 2020) is essential.

SMEs genuinely consult with everyone they think can help and engage in team building. Bilateral expertise, skills, and resource sharing are great methods to devise new strategies and seize business opportunities. SMEs need to be unashamed in seeking help and accepting their need for collaboration. Maintaining stakeholder relations is part of the roadmap that favors establishing an innovative business culture amenable to communicating and listening to others, being knowledgeable about what other people know, and implementing what they have learned. Furthermore, by facing mutual difficulties, cooperation can provide more favorable terms for vendors' and suppliers' agreement renegotiations, thus ensuring loss minimization (Mayr and Lixl, 2019; Thorgren and Williams, 2020).

Dynamic approaches in small business management

During periods of uncertainty and turbulence in the small business context, another

aspect concerns the development of dynamic and reactive behavior.

Learning orientation (Battisti et al., 2019), defined as “the ability of an organization to create, transfer, and integrate knowledge and modify its behavior to improve performance” (Altinay et al., 2016, p. 872), helps SMEs sustain their performance. In particular, it encourages businesses to constantly challenge the status quo and strive for constant enhancement, leading to a more versatile and adaptable way of doing things (Altinay et al., 2016).

In improving SME behaviors, scholars have also identified ambidextrous strategies - leveraging existing assets, knowledge, and competencies (exploitation) or trying to develop new ones (exploration) (Osiyevskyy et al., 2020) - as successful elements to best react to tough times and ensure minimal overall disruption.

From a strategic management perspective, to support the competition, scholars highlight the importance of continually focusing on causal and effectual decision-making logic approaches (Laskovaia et al., 2019). In particular, while the emergent nature of effectual logic allows businesses to make incremental investments that help them step forward and adapt to changing circumstances, causal decision-making is considered a collection of highly reflective and rational practices that reinforce prediction and strategic planning (Laskovaia et al., 2019).

Accordingly:

Proposition 2a (P2a): The adoption of strategies such as cost minimization and cash flow protection during the crisis response stage increases SMEs’ ability to navigate unforeseen challenges and fight adversity.

Proposition 2b (P2b): The adoption of strategies such as revenue generation - operations and business model pivoting - during the crisis response stage increases SMEs’ ability to navigate unforeseen challenges and fight adversity.

Proposition 2c (P2c): The adoption of strategies such as stakeholder relationships in small business management during the crisis response stage increases SMEs' ability to navigate unforeseen challenges and fight adversity.

Proposition 2d (P2d): The adoption of strategies such as dynamic approaches in

small business management during the crisis response stage increases SMEs' ability to navigate unforeseen challenges and fight adversity.

3.3. The crisis recovery phase

The third phase focuses on understanding the recovery strategies adopted by SMEs in the aftermath of unexpected challenges.

During the post-crisis stage (Smith, 1990), SMEs reconsider all the measures they wish had taken before the unpredicted event, modify the organization structure, and implement preventive action items for the future (Doern, 2016; Le Nguyen and Kock, 2011).

Turning "learning" (Elliott et al., 2005; Hale et al., 2005; Smith and Sipika, 1993), in the sense of transforming business behaviors (Pauchant and Mitroff, 1992) into innovative actions, is essential in going back to the basics. Nevertheless, the learning approach within SMEs is often limited in a more practical sense (Doern, 2016). One reason is the perceived lack of control and limited ability to change within small businesses (Herbane, 2010).

Elaborating upon previous studies, the areas on which SMEs should stay focused during this crisis containment process can be broken down into business model re-configuring (Morrish and Jones, 2020) and the re-establishment of stakeholder and employee relationships (Doern, 2016; Hong et al., 2012).

Business model re-configuring: developing an innovation mindset within SMEs

In this stage, the literature highlights a common trend adopted by SMEs in spotting opportunities to do things differently and being more open about encouraging a risk-taking culture (Morrish and Jones, 2020).

A crisis's most prominent feature is sparking uncertainty and triggering market volatility (Fink, 1986; Hermann, 1963; Quarantelli, 1988). Investing in resources takes time and energy. Not all SMEs' recovery investments will necessarily be compensated. Sitting back and doing nothing while constrained does not lead to game-changing solutions. Positive adaptation is more likely to carry small businesses through difficult times and drive the company into the future.

Scholars have shown how SMEs revisit their insurance policies (Doern, 2016; Ha et al., 2020), diversify their product-service offer, develop new business models, and guide the organization to the other side of its current trouble (Morrish and Jones, 2020).

SMEs' primary objective is to achieve organizational goals – i.e., delivering, creating, and capturing value. Nevertheless, even though it may seem like a massive undertaking, innovating and experimenting are essential in adapting to new situations and potentially developing unexpected and more effective ways of doing business. In this regard, some SMEs have made fast, agile moves from repurposing their target market to a complete shift in production lines (Shafi et al., 2020). Moreover, they have tried to invest in side businesses (Morrish and Jones, 2020), despite the possibility that the new company will not be successful. SMEs' behavior is beyond a classic situation where they would have acted more deliberately. SMEs act this boldly with the only attempt to recover and get out of the crisis. Thus, to stay in balance: have a payoff that exceeds the expenses.

Several scholars have demonstrated how SMEs review their business model distribution channels to reach out to their target customer segments and deliver their value proposition (Morrish and Jones, 2020). Being strategically agile (Doz and Kosonen, 2008; Weber and Tarba, 2014) is considered a primary feature of developing innovative ideas (Weber and Tarba, 2014) in changing scenarios. When the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded globally, SMEs were forced to adapt, thus changing how they perform. SMEs cannot afford to wait to innovate. In the "new normal", it is vital to continue learning methods better suited to changing environments and continuous adaptations. When an unexpected event makes the physical location shut down, striving for positive adaptation, implementing an active response, and accelerating problem-solving are fundamental for SMEs to ensure business continuity. By enhancing their decision-making boundaries, opportunity-seeking SMEs shift relatively quickly away from a distribution channel that is no longer direct and physical but rather virtual and online (Shafi et al., 2020; Thorgren and Williams, 2020). Leveraging technology in the best way possible enables SMEs to rethink how they deliver services. More specifically, this behavior responds to a particular need of the moment - a temporary practice born out of necessity – in the course of a recovery phase that SMEs could maintain in the long term. This action requires adopting a new and robust vision for small businesses. One example is delivery service to customers' homes to rebuild business operations and reopen while considering a new normal ongoing situation (Shafi et al., 2020; Thorgren and Williams, 2020), where conditions are not yet those of the past. A crisis can therefore become a catalyst to bolster creativity and resilience, thus pursuing new business growth successfully.

Difficult situations require new ways of doing things. Nevertheless, there is no need to wait to start innovating. Companies understand the importance of humanely and

empathically approaching customers following unplanned and unexpected events. SMEs aim to enhance the product's visibility and communicate closeness to the consumer throughout the situation that is being experienced. Pushing critical messaging, therefore, takes on an important role.

Re-establishing stakeholder and employee relationships

Designing new business models and adapting them to changing situations involves re-establishing stakeholder (i.e., community, suppliers, customers, and employees) relationships and relying on their support (Doern, 2016; Hong et al., 2012; Morrish and Jones, 2020).

Collaboration is considered an inner strength to supplement deficiencies (i.e., lack of funding) and provides SMEs with the extra energy they need to navigate critical occurrences. Drawing upon leadership teams ensures a sense of community where everyone can benefit from the new knowledge. All small businesses' tools and expertise, combined with those of the people they have access to, enable the fostering of new ideas and the implementation of creative solutions.

After difficult times, the perceived loss of control over future scenarios may lead employees to explore other work opportunities. Business leaders may initially consider downsizing to wrest control from the current ambiguous situation. Hiring capable staff and retaining old employees becomes extremely hard. Nevertheless, SMEs cannot stop investing in human resources. In this regard, smart and exciting insights come from recovery plans for rehiring, establishing personnel funds (Ha et al., 2020; Hong et al., 2012), and training personnel in disaster response (Ha et al., 2020).

Figure 1 provides a visual summary of the proposed framework, highlighting the circularity and the intersection of the prevention, response, and recovery crisis phases with small business strategies.

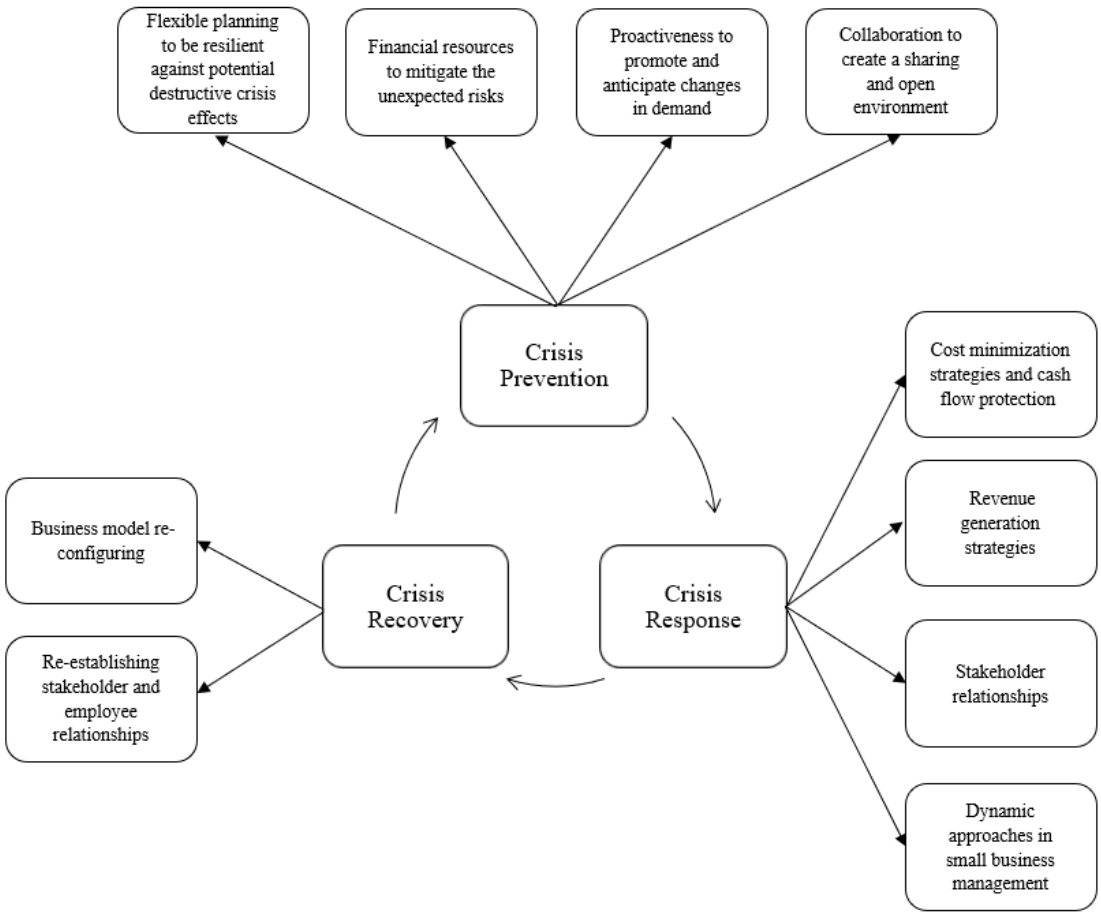
Hence:

Proposition 3a (P3a): The adoption of strategies such as business model re-configuring during the crisis recovery phase deepens learning relevance when bouncing back from unexpected challenges and increases the likelihood of breakthrough results.

Proposition 3b (P3b): The adoption of strategies such as the re-establishment of

stakeholder and employee relationships during the crisis recovery phase deepens learning relevance when bouncing back from unexpected challenges and increases the likelihood of breakthrough results.

Figure 1: The circular event framework of SMEs' business strategies in a time of crisis



4. Discussion and theoretical contribution

Despite the vast body of available knowledge on crisis management, research in the context of SMEs is still in its infancy. By elaborating on prior crisis management literature, this study contributes to extending current research in meaningful ways. First, research on small business strategies to face unexpected situations was fragmented across different fields. Previous studies have mainly analyzed specific aspects or outcomes related to facing such conditions of uncertainty (Doern, 2016; Morrish and Jones, 2020). This work contributes to providing a more solid theoretical basis, thus identifying the features that, collectively and in an integrative manner, define SMEs' strategies across the different stages of a crisis event. Furthermore, this study has defined a framework of strategic responses to a crisis in the context of SMEs that better aligns with the proper

definition of crisis as an unexpected, ever-changing event (Bazerman and Watkins, 2004; Fink, 1986; Hermann, 1963; Quarantelli, 1988; Weick et al., 1999).

Secondly, this study contributed to extending prior literature by developing a three-stage circular event theoretical framework on SMEs' strategies when coping with crises, thus differentiating such strategies across the phases of crisis prevention, response, and recovery.

Crisis prevention. Previous research on the crisis prevention process has shown that preparing for unforeseen situations is key to positive results (Elliott et al., 2005; Fink, 1986; Hale et al., 2005; Quarantelli, 1988; Smith, 1990). In particular, the effectiveness of an organization's crisis response depends, to a certain degree, on the amount of preparation it conducts before the crisis (Pearson and Clair, 1998). By extending prior literature, this study has generated new insights into the link between the prevention phase and strategic behaviors. This study specifies that, in the crisis prevention phase, the four main strategies that could increase SMEs' capacity to mitigate and prevent unwanted crisis outcomes include: fostering ongoing and intensive planning activities to enhance SMEs' flexibility and adaptability to shape destructive crisis effects (Herbane, 2019; Moneva-Abadía et al., 2019), the equipment of financial resources to mitigate risks involved in a crisis (Kraus et al., 2012; Tognazzo et al., 2016), proactive actions to promote and anticipate changes in demand (Cassia et al., 2012; Herbane, 2010), and collaboration (Branicki et al., 2018).

Crisis response. Earlier studies defined the crisis response phase as significant since the choices that are made in this timeframe can minimize the crisis's disruptive effects (Elliott et al., 2005). By improving prior literature, this study suggests that four other strategies increase SMEs' ability to navigate unpredicted challenges and fight adversity during the crisis response phase: cost minimization and cash flow protection (Eggers and Kraus, 2011; Smallbone et al., 2012), revenue generation - operations and business model pivoting (Macpherson et al., 2015; Morrish and Jones, 2020), stakeholder relationships (Doern, 2016; Mayr et al., 2017), and dynamic approaches in small business management (Battisti et al., 2019; Osiyevskyy et al., 2020).

Crisis recovery. When analyzing the post-crisis stage (Smith, 1990), prior scholars argue about "learning" (Elliott et al., 2005; Hale et al., 2005; Smith and Sipika, 1993) in

terms of transforming business behaviors (Pauchant and Mitroff, 1992) into innovative actions to go back to business as usual. Nevertheless, the learning approach is often limited within SMEs (Doern, 2016) due to their perceived lack of control and limited capacity to change in small businesses (Herbane, 2010). By extending previous studies, this research has sustained that during the recovery phase, SMEs that concentrate on business model re-configuring – i.e., developing an innovation mindset within SMEs - (Morrish and Jones, 2020) and the re-establishment of stakeholder and employee relationships (Doern, 2016; Hong et al., 2012) foster their recovery from unexpected challenges and the likelihood of breakthrough results.

A final contribution is related to the circularity of the proposed framework. While previous literature has considered crisis management strategies more sequential than circular (i.e., focusing on the event's occurrence rather than the intersection and effect that each phase has on subsequent ones) (Runyan, 2006), this paper contributes to existing literature highlighting the circularity of the crisis prevention, response, and recovery phases. As illustrated in figure 1, the strategic responses implemented during the crisis phases - prevention, response, and recovery - have separable effects and interact with one another. All the strategic responses develop through prior experience; therefore, the same experience may simultaneously contribute to different strategic responses during the crisis's various phases. Moreover, each strategic response may affect one another. During the prevention phase, the strategic responses affect the development of management responses by influencing the recovery phase and how managers interpret and exploit it when a new crisis occurs.

5. Managerial implications

The present study provides significant managerial insights into SMEs' efficient crisis management strategies. This is a salient topic because of the current challenging times due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

More specifically, this research increases SMEs managers' and practitioners' awareness of efficient business strategies to cope with fast-changing business scenarios where unexpected and adverse events can threaten organizational goals. Practitioners should recognize the benefits of correctly implementing a crisis-ready culture when crises strike.

Notably, a crisis is an evolving circumstance, that is, an event that continuously

evolves. Crisis management is an ongoing process that must be carried out throughout the company's life. As a result, it is fundamental to understand the importance of continuously implementing up-to-date strategies to improve SMEs' performance effectiveness and ensure business continuity. More importantly, these strategies will be cyclically repeated within the company through a system that operates continuously in which the company cannot afford to underestimate any step.

Moreover, the proposed framework could help managers develop a "crisis-ready" mindset within SMEs to emerge in turbulent, unpredictable, and competitive business landscapes. For instance, during the crisis prevention phase, the former will have to implement actions to prevent a possible crisis from jeopardizing the business system (e.g., ensure they have enough financial resources to prevent changes in consumer demands). Then during the crisis response phase, managers will have to avoid crystallizing their business model. It does not matter if the latter has always worked flawlessly. Crisis changes circumstances and people, and adapting business management to new consumers' needs is essential. Finally, in the crisis recovery phase, managers will have to take advantage of what they have learned during the crisis prevention and response phases to restore the company to its original functioning.

Thanks to the proposed framework, this study tried to understand not only how SMEs may adjust their strategies in the different moments of a crisis (pre, during, and post-crisis) but, more importantly, what strategies could be most suitable according to the cyclic, different, specific moments related to emergencies. The findings of this study may provide remarkable and valuable insights for managers and practitioners to foster resilience in competitive and turbulent marketplaces by understanding which strategies could be more suitable according to the specific phases of distress (i.e., crisis prevention, response, and recovery) (Elliott et al., 2005; Hills, 1998; Smith, 1990). Another critical lesson managers could learn from this study is that implementing an integrated, strategic crisis-action plan with speed and resourcefulness is fundamental in reducing chaos and accelerating decisions. They will have to plan for the days preceding an unexpected event and an extended period of uncertainty.

6. Limitations and future research

Given the growing necessity to understand SMEs' business strategies during the phases of unexpected events, this study adopted a clear and rigorous literature review approach based on a careful selection of journals to advance current knowledge of this

topic. While these findings rely on a thorough and reliable systematic literature review to extend knowledge in an up-and-coming research area, this study acknowledges some limitations that may be addressed by future research.

This study concentrated on peer-reviewed publications and excluded unpublished research, results presented in book chapters, and conference findings (Nolan and Garavan, 2016). Notably, this study only focused on articles that satisfied stringent quality and content criteria (e.g., using the keyword "SMEs"). As a result, some SMEs-related studies and books have been excluded (Danese et al., 2018), with non-relevant papers that primarily focused on crises or/and SMEs through an exclusively advanced financial and banking perspective. The present analysis also suffers from common SLR flaws, such as omitting relevant studies that could have impacted the study's creativity and innovation (Easterby-Smith et al., 2010; Wang and Chugh, 2013).

By extending knowledge on this nascent line of inquiry, future studies could further deepen and explore additional strategies that could be employed to conceptualize crisis response strategies across different stages.

Furthermore, future studies could extend this field through empirical research by examining what happens in a specific sector when companies need to change their business strategies at a given time during a crisis and testing the proposed framework to validate it effectively. From a financial-level research perspective, future research avenues could investigate specific aspects of the turnaround and impact of financial resources on unexpected risk.

Finally, starting from the paper's theoretical propositions, future studies could also deepen the impact of identified strategies on SMEs' competitive performance during the different phases of a crisis.

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Paper 2

Resilience Strategies throughout the Crisis: the Case of the Norwegian AEC Industry

Keywords: Crisis; recovery; resilience; COVID-19; Coronavirus; SMEs; business strategies; manufacturing sector; multiple-case study

Resilience Strategies throughout the Crisis: the Case of the Norwegian AEC Industry

Abstract

This study sheds light on strategies that firms can develop to become resilient in the face of crises answering the following research questions: Why are some firms more resilient than others in a context of crisis? What are the strategies that make them resilient? Thus, five typologies of resilience strategies are introduced to describe ten behaviors that could support businesses to be resilient throughout a crisis. Data collected through face-to-face interviews on the Norwegian architecture, engineering, and construction (AEC) industry, during the most recent COVID-19 crisis were used to achieve the fixed goal. The findings illustrate each of the five strategies, i.e., "forerunner strategy", "rational strategy", "sensitive strategy", "resourceful strategy", and "visionary strategy". From a managerial perspective, this paper aims to understand efficient strategies companies may build on to be resilient amid crises.

Keywords: Resilience, strategies, AEC industry, COVID-19, crisis, multiple-case study

1. Introduction

Firms usually deal with regular crises of different natures - for instance, the 2008 financial crisis and the 2014-16 oil crisis are just a few examples - experiencing new scenarios every time they emerge. The last crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, which for many months in 2020 has halted the world, has irreversibly altered the global economy by creating a threatening vicious circle with national lockdowns announced worldwide (Kuckertz et al., 2020).

Despite typically knowing how to handle a fire in one of their offices, a break-in, or accidents at the site where one employee is injured, firms realized the most efficient risk analysis, preparedness plan, and team could not have predicted a crisis of the size of COVID-19 with a lockdown from one day to another. Even less the intermittent protraction of closers over time (He et al., 2020).

When the pandemic subsided, and the entire globe gradually re-entered gear, a mix of forces in the market started out playing simultaneously. In this scenario, firms have been forced to deal with post-pandemic challenges (i.e., shortages of some materials, like semiconductors, wood, steel, and other raw materials), making it hard to satisfy the demand (Paul et al., 2021). Then, geopolitical upheaval and the ongoing complicated conflict between Russia and Ukraine have kept seriously challenging the supply chain because of lack or low steel production, affecting deliveries and provoking worthy inflation of raw materials and energy (Khorana et al., 2022).

This case is not unique to specific firms. What we are experiencing, with its variables and causes, is wreaking havoc on businesses worldwide. Furthermore, we are now so internationally connected that a crisis in one world area will significantly influence people in all other parts - including employees and clients - with leaders needing to improve their ability to operate amid crises and uncertainty - absorbing the expenses to prevent a fall in turnover and halt in production (Khlystova et al., 2022).

Amid crises such as the ones that have lately occurred, there has been a particular need for companies to be resilient. Thus, while some sectors and organizations collapsed, experiencing significant setbacks, there have been industries that proactively raised their resilience threshold, handling the chaos dumping on them in stride and performing well when the pressure was on. What happened? What did these firms do that resulted in their success? How did these firms build resilience over time?

It is widely acknowledged that resilience is a specific organizational capability related to a company's ability to adapt to changing environments quickly, timely, and

straightforwardly (Vickers and Kouzmin, 2001). As a result, it is necessary to strengthen a company's resilience in the face of unpredictable circumstances and to be better equipped to deal with future scenarios (Mithani, 2020; Soluk et al., 2021), allowing businesses to emerge from a crisis more robust than before (Duchek, 2020). Nevertheless, organizational resilience remains a challenging task in the academic literature. This also depends on how resilience is defined, which is far from a consensus among academics (Bhamra et al., 2011; Parker and Ameen, 2018), considering its applicability to various fields, transversality, and multidimensionality (Linnenluecke, 2017).

Even though the significance of resilience and the extensive body of knowledge on resilience literature (Alexander, 2013; Linnenluecke, 2017; Sabatino, 2016; Sutcliffe and Vogus, 2003; Van der Vergt et al., 2015), literature on the strategies firms adopt to be more resilient throughout the crisis has been lacking (Parker and Ameen, 2018). Remarkably, previous scholars have highlighted different perspectives, for instance, acknowledging the existence of three crisis phases, i.e., crisis prevention, response, and recovery (Elliott et al., 2005; Hills, 1998; Smith, 1990), making a first attempt to examining throughout the different stages of a crisis, the kind of strategies that firms may implement (Pusceddu et al., 2021, 2022). As these three phases and strategies emerge from the literature, it is interesting to understand which strategies have enabled greater resilience. Other studies have provided a constrained, temporally bracketed overview of the literature on extreme events, organized around an "ideal type" event sequence with six phases: incubation period, incident and crisis management, investigation, organizational learning, and implementation (Buchanan and Denyer, 2013). Nevertheless, scholars have missed the opportunity to broaden the focus on resilience and analyze, through a specific study, why and how some firms are more resilient than others in a context of crisis (i.e., what makes them more resilient) and, therefore, the efficient strategies adopted that allowed them being exceptionally resilient.

This paper attempts to fill this gap by investigating firms' strategies to support resilience throughout the crisis from the perspective of executives. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the many lockdowns in economies worldwide have crucially increased the interest in resilience literature (Chhatwani et al., 2022; Mena et al., 2022). Specifically, the research question of this study is two-fold: (1) Why are some firms more resilient than others in a context of crisis?; (2) What are the strategies that make them resilient? We investigate these research questions through an exploratory multiple-case study in the context of the Norwegian AEC sector (Eisenhardt, 1989; Miles and

Huberman, 1984; Yin, 1994) by analyzing 15 cases and conducting qualitative interviews with 17 executives. We selected the AEC sector because it has been exceptionally resilient even during crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, confident in planning new hires with an increase in business volume over three years (Ronchetti, 2022). The proposed research question investigates the strategies that supported AEC firms to be more resilient than others in other industries. Hence, this study focuses on why (i.e., which strategies have endorsed their greater resilience) and how some sectors, such as the one in question, can stand the crisis more than others.

This study strengthens the literature on strategies that support firms to be resilient throughout crises, systematically organized in a framework that categorizes the main strategies, developing five main strategies, systematically organized in a framework that categorizes and classifies ten business behaviors to support firms to be resilient amid crises.

2. Theoretical background

The term resilience originally stems from the Latin root word *resilire* and *resilio*, which means rebound or bounce back (Alexander, 2013; Klein et al., 2003). This concept originates from the early 70s in ecology, emphasizing the system's ability to cope with and absorb disturbance (Holling, 1973). Since then, academic interest in resilience has spread across disciplines, including psychology (Bonanno, 2004; Luthans, 2002), organization sciences (Linnenluecke, 2017; Sutcliffe and Vogus, 2003), engineering (Hollnagel et al., 2006), and economics (Gunasekaran et al., 2011; Iborra et al., 2020; Perrings, 2006) where considerable literature has devoted attention to the resilience of firms (e.g., Ambulkar et al., 2015; Dormady et al., 2019; Parker and Ameen, 2018).

Resilience has been approached from different points of view, with scholars developing three main conceptualizations of resilience, focusing on stability-, adaptability-, and process-perspective. For instance, the first analysis of resilience in terms of stability addressed the company's ability to maintain "reliable" functioning in hardship (Linnenluecke, 2017; Sutcliffe and Vogus, 2003; Williams et al., 2017). The concept extended to an adaptability viewpoint, referring to an organization's ability to "effectively absorb, develop situation-specific responses, and ultimately engage in transformative activities to capitalize on disruptive surprises that potentially threaten organization survival" (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011, p. 244). Furthermore, the concept of resilience has been identified as "the process by which an actor (i.e., individual,

organization, or community) builds and uses its capability endowments to interact with the environment in a way that positively adjusts and maintains functioning prior to, during, and following adversity" (Williams et al., 2017, p. 742).

This literature highlights two specific aspects of resilience: on the one hand, the capacity to withstand a setback and, on the other hand, the ability to recover from it (Mena et al., 2022). Accordingly, resilience is not only understood as the ability to recover from a crisis and return to a previous state but also as a way to seize new opportunities (Lengnick-Hall and Beck, 2003; Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011; Sutcliffe and Vogus, 2003), accentuating how harmful circumstances may become a "catalyst" to boost innovation and entrepreneurship, allowing for effective and profitable business growth (Pusceddu et al., 2021).

The overtime growth of scholarly attention to resilience brought new and up-to-date nuances (DesJardine et al., 2017; Doern et al., 2019; Tognazzo et al., 2016; Williams and Vorley, 2014; Williams et al., 2017). Acknowledging the significance of resilience, researchers have tried to identify specific elements and organizational mechanisms to sustain resilience in businesses (Bhamra et al., 2011, Linnenluecke, 2017, Williams et al., 2017) - addressing the connection between resilience and slack (Tognazzo et al., 2016), psychological resilience and business survival (Chhatwani et al., 2022), redundancy (Sheffi and Rice, 2005), and resilience through social and environmental practices (DesJardine et al., 2017). Thus, considering how different actors (e.g., individuals, firms, and communities) create and exploit resources before, during, and after unexpected circumstances (Hobfoll, 2001; Williams et al., 2017). Furthermore, previous studies have, for example, analyzed the Global Financial Crisis's effects on business survival, approaching organizational resilience in the face of external shocks (Duchek, 2019; Linnenluecke, 2017) while bringing to light four resilience characteristics (i.e., flexibility, velocity/reaction speed, access to timely information, and collaborations among supply chain members) to minimize or mitigate the effects of adverse events on profit, costs, and lead time/availability objectives (Juettner and Maklan, 2011). Also, scholars have underlined the crucial role of employees in fostering resilience (Coutu, 2002), claiming how employee intervention strategies may be used to improve resilience, for instance, by encouraging organizational members to identify and assess the practical consequence of personal setbacks within their working area, proposing practical solutions (Luthans et al., 2006). Finally, based on the ambidexterity criticality in combining the competing needs of exploration and exploitation within firms (Lubatkin et al., 2006), scholars have claimed

the “ambidexterity consistency” correlation to resilience, arguing that resilience is enhanced in complex environments when firms have successfully acquired the dynamic capability of exploration and/or exploitation (e.g., reliant on their previous success at investing in risky projects with uncertain, long-term returns or/and improving efficiency through well-known operations) (Moneva-Abadía et al., 2019).

Despite the significance of resilience and the substantial body of literature on resilience (Alexander, 2013; Linnenluecke, 2017; Sabatino, 2016; Sutcliffe and Vogus, 2003; Van der Vergt et al., 2015), research on the strategies organizations employ to be more resilient during a crisis is scarce (Parker and Ameen, 2018). Scholars have previously highlighted distinct points of view. For example, acknowledging the existence of three crisis phases, namely crisis prevention, response, and recovery (Elliott et al., 2005; Hills, 1998; Smith, 1990), making the first attempt to examine the types of strategies that firms may implement throughout the various stages of a crisis (Pusceddu et al., 2021, 2022). Other studies have provided a constrained, time-bounded overview of the literature on extreme events, organized around an “ideal type” event sequence with six phases: incubation period, incident and crisis management, investigation, organizational learning, and implementation (Buchanan and Denyer, 2013). As these three phases and strategies emerge from the research, it is interesting to study which strategies have resulted in higher success. Nevertheless, scholars have missed an opportunity to expand the emphasis on resilience and assess, through a specific study, how some industries manage to be resilient in a crisis context (i.e., what makes them more resilient) and, as a consequence, the relative efficient, strategies adopted that enabled them to be resilient.

3. Methodology

Since this is an empirically under-explored field of inquiry, a theory-building approach based on an exploratory, multiple-case study methodology was used (Eisenhardt, 1989; Miles and Huberman, 1984; Yin, 1994). This method is appropriate for exploratory research and allows cross-case comparison to generalize emerging findings (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007).

3.1. Theoretical sampling

This study adopted a purposeful sampling approach (Patton, 2002) to examine a highly representative case study and address the proposed research question (Silvermann,

2013; Yin, 1994). The present case study analysis entails collecting and comparing data from 15 cases in the Norwegian AEC industry (see Table 3). First, we selected this industry because AEC firms have successfully been resilient during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, they are primarily large-size firms focusing on building services and consultancy in Norway. Most of the selected companies are renowned *Aksjeselskaper* (i.e., "Limited Companies"), founded in the second half of the 90s with an increase in their operating revenues across the years when the pandemic hit. Secondly, this sector is an essential source of income for countries worldwide (King et al., 2021; Zamani et al., 2022). Moreover, there is a close relationship between GDP and total construction spending, with changes in the AEC industry impacting other businesses (Liu et al., 2018) and evidence of a strong relationship between activity in construction and economic growth (Liu et al., 2018). Thirdly, two authors of this paper have had special, long-term access to all project and strategy information at the middle and top management levels.

Table 3: Case description

Case description	Headquarter	NACE industry	Industries	Firm size (employees)	Year of foundation	Company form	Operating revenues 2021 (NOK)	Operating revenues 2020 (NOK)	Operating revenues 2019 (NOK)
Case-1	Lysaker (Norway), Trondheim (Norway)	71,121 Construction engineering consultancy	Building Services, Technical Consultants, Consultants	128	1999	AS	223 812	223 380	228 519
Case-2	Oslo (Norway)	43,223 Ventilation work	Ventilation services	1994	2015	AS	2 572 341	106 928	232 054
Case-3	Oslo (Norway)	71,129 Other technical consultancy activities	Technical Consultants, Consultants	1496	1997	BEDR	2 023 806	1 959 602	1 869 755
Case-4	Sandvika (Norway)	71,121 Construction engineering consultancy, 71,129 Other technical consultancy	Building Services, Technical Consultants, Consultants	3579	1991	AS	4 781 839	4 573 921	4 148 942
Case-5	Røyken (Norway)	23,990 Manufacture of non-metallic mineral products not mentioned elsewhere	Manufacturers, Mineral products, Mineral products - production	12	1990	AS	13 470	15 003	14 856
Case-6	Oslo (Norway)	71,112 Architectural services relating to buildings	Building Services, Architectural Services	278	1995	AS	399 562	427 933	354 515
Case-7	Lørenskog (Norway)	70,100 Head office services, 08.120 Extraction from gravel and sand roofs, and extraction of clay and kaolin	Head office services, Stone, Mining, and mining	18	2017	AS	600	37 929	31 729
Case-8	Kongsberg (Norway)	41.200 Construction of buildings, 42.110 Construction of roads and highways, 25.110	Building and construction suppliers, Road work and road safety,	2499	1986	AS	11 050 323	9 553 335	11 253 591

		Manufacture of metal structures and parts	Metals and metal products, Manufacturers, Metals and metal products – production						
Case-9	Oslo (Norway)	41,200 Construction of buildings, 42,130 Construction of bridges and tunnels, 42,220 Construction of facilities for electricity and telecommunications	Building and civil engineering, Electrical contractors	2830	2001	AS	14 094 046	16 245 506	15 927 756
Case-10	Lysaker (Norway)	41,200 Construction of buildings	Contractors, Building and construction suppliers	108	1963	AS	653 321	638 024	955 253
Case-11	Oslo (Norway)	94,991 Activities of other interest organizations not elsewhere specified or included	Member organizations	7	2004	FLI	12 196	10 415	9 183
Case-12	Oslo (Norway)	62.010 Programming services	Web design and programming	22	2020	AS	4 995	264	N/A
Case-13	Oslo (Norway)	71,121 Construction engineering consultancy, 71,122 Geological surveys, 71,129 Other technical consultancy	Building Services, Technical Consultants, Consultants	20	1973	ASA	75 389	58 003	55 545
Case-14	Sandvika (Norway)	71,121 Construction engineering consultancy	Building Services, Technical Consultants, Consultants	1287	1964	AS	1 591 839	1 537 661	1 410 041
Case-15	Oslo (Norway)	94,110 Business and employer organizations	Associations and unions - Employers' associations, Member organizations	259	1988	FLI	624 668	596 554	611 202

Legend: AS: “Aksjeselskap” ,i.e., Limited Company; ASA: “Allmennaksjeselskap” i.e., Public Limited Company; FLI “Forening/lag/innretning”, i.e., Association/club/organisation

3.2. Data collection

To enlighten and enhance the understanding of the strategies firms adopt to support resilience, data were collected through in-depth, face-to-face semi-structured interviews (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2009) to better "confronting theory with the empirical world" (Piekkari et al., 2009, p. 569). Furthermore, interviews allow for deeper conceptualization and attention to detail, as well as assisting with the finer intricacies of the issue under investigation, all of which benefit in discovering and sharing important material to meet the research question (Guest et al., 2017).

An interview protocol for the semi-structured interviews was followed to capture emerging themes in the analyzed research field (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). To ensure the clarity and understandability of questions, the protocol was tested with an executive not included in the sample (Yin 2009), using its feedback to refine the interview protocol (Van Teijlingen et al., 2021). Thus, 17 interviews with executives were conducted (Male 71% and Female 29%) in the Norwegian AEC sector in collaboration with the BI (Norwegian Business School) Centre for Construction Industry[2] (see Table 4). Executives mainly worked in the C-suite of various famous AEC companies. Participant ages ranged from 35 years to 67 years. The interviews documented each executive's story, yielding rich accounts on which to base theoretical debates (Doern, 2016).

The semi-structured interview protocol included 11 questions to investigate the resilience of companies in times of adversity (Fontana and Frey, 2000) (see Appendix 5). Hence, examples of guiding questions were as follows: How do you plan against potential destructive crisis effects? Did you re-configure your business model? What did you learn, if anything? The interviews took between 39 and 82 minutes and were conducted between April and August 2022. Following the interview analysis, emails with additional clarification questions were issued (Cabiddu et al., 2019). Every interview was recorded and transcribed (Bryman and Bell 2015; Seidman 2013). Thus, gathering data stopped after achieving theoretical saturation (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

[2] The Centre for Construction Industry conducts high-quality research that informs the construction sector (in a broad sense), governmental bodies, and society at large on the possibilities and difficulties that the industry faces today. The Center focuses primarily on process research in order to understand and realize changes in the industry, as well as how the sector is evolving into a sustainable and digital area.

Table 4: Summary of data sources

Case description	Executive	Role of the interviewee	Gender	Year of birth	Source	Interview date	Interview time-span
Case-1	EX-1a	Executive Vice President (Sustainability and Staff)	Male	1967	Semi-structured interview	2022, May 9th	53’12’’
	EX-1b	Project Director Sustainability	Male	1987	Semi-structured interview	2022, June 10th	60’54’’
Case-2	EX-2	Division Director Entreprise	Male	1966	Semi-structured interview	2022, May 6th	54’37’’
Case-3	EX-3a	Division Director - Senior Vice President Buildings	Female	1974	Semi-structured interview	2022, May 6th	57’20’’
	EX-3b	Technical Director	Male	1957	Semi-structured interview	2022, June 9th	53’42’’
Case 4	EX-4a	Vice President, Technology	Female	1971	Semi-structured interview	2022, April 27th	57’23’’
	EX-4b	Business Area Manager, Buildings	Male	1968	Semi-structured interview	2022, May 16th	47’41’’
Case-5	EX-5	Development Manager Officer/Architect	Male	1955	Semi-structured interview	2022, May 10th	61’07’’
Case-6	EX-6	Development Manager Officer, Civil Architect	Male	1965	Semi-structured interview	2022, May 10th	77’17’’
Case-7	EX-7	Managing Director	Male	1987	Semi-structured interview	2022, May 18th	82’50’’
Case-8	EX-8	Director of Strategy and Business Development	Male	1974	Semi-structured interview	2022, May 19th	60’46’’
Case-9	EX-9	Executive Vice President Building Norway	Male	1965	Semi-structured interview	2022, June 1st	39’16’’
Case-10	EX-10	Director of Strategy and Innovation	Male	1980	Semi-structured interview	2022, June 8th	59’29’’
Case-11	EX-11	Head of Development / Innovation Manager	Male	1969	Semi-structured interview	2022, June 8th	55’54’’
Case-12	EX-12	Owner / CEO	Female	1973	Semi-structured interview	2022, June 16th	39’13’’

Case-13	EX-13	CEO / Executive Vice President	Female	1962	Semi-structured interview	2022, August 24th	52’38’’
Case-14	EX-14	CEO	Female	1965	Semi-structured interview	2022, June 14th	45’17’’
Case-15	EX-15	Director of Corporate affairs, communication, and regions	Male	1973	Semi-structured interview	2022, June 23rd	58’40’’

3.3. Data analysis

Nvivo 11 software was used for data coding and analysis. Since this was a multiple-case study, both within- and between-case analyses have been conducted (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007). Thus, to explore why and how some firms are more resilient than others in a context of crisis, three coding stages were run, starting with the within-case analysis of each case, progressing from the specific to the general (Saldaña, 2015).

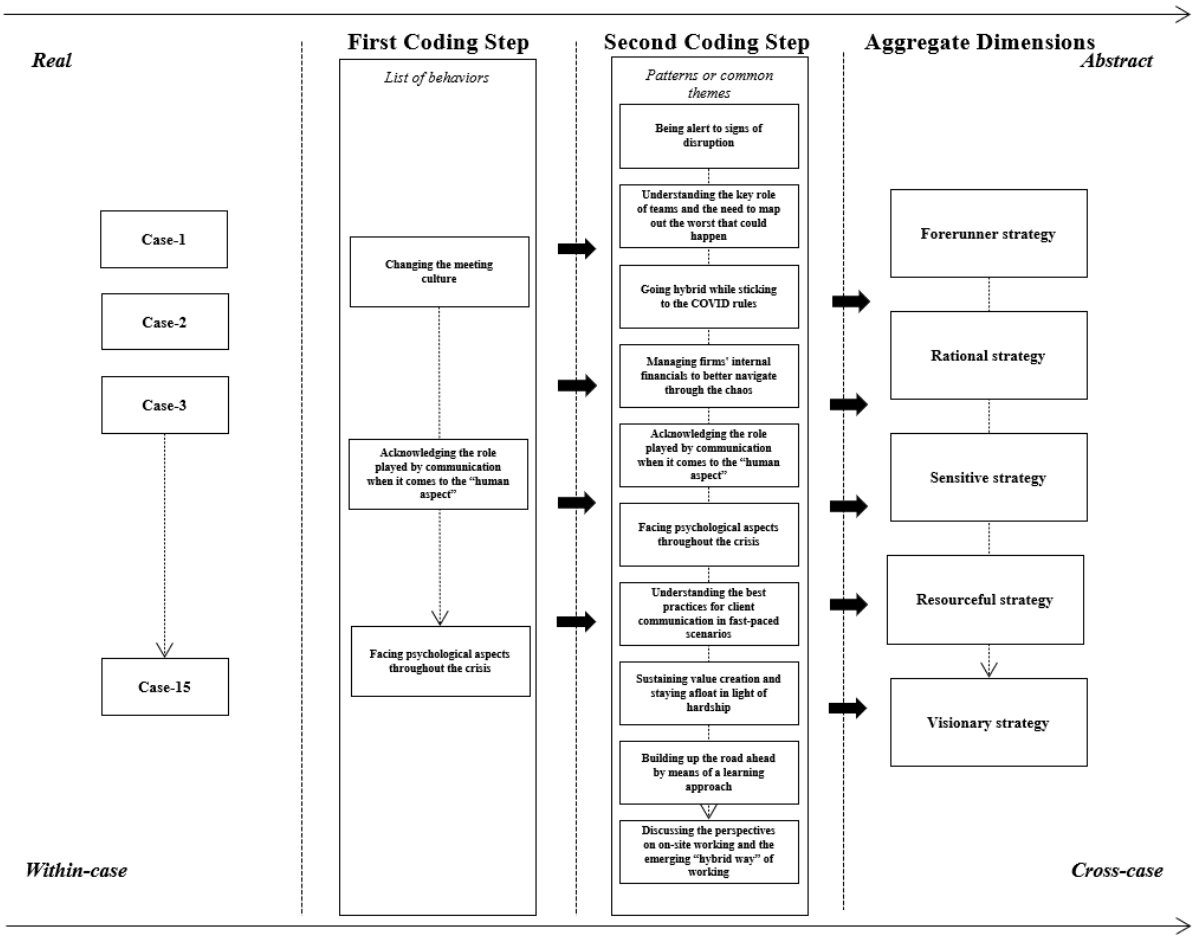
The first coding round started with analyzing the 15 cases/17 interviews and their characteristics. Thus, open codes based on the research topic and interview data were recognized by “categorizing and labeling direct statements” (e.g., changing the meeting culture, reflecting on the future way of working) (Patvardhan et al., 2015, p. 411).

In the second coding stage, the generalization process continued by collecting the previous set of codes and looking for coherent patterns, common meanings, and themes. In detail, the typology of firm behavior to describe the strategic responses to support businesses to be resilient throughout a crisis was recognized (e.g., “facing psychological aspects throughout the crisis”, “managing firms’ internal financials to better navigate through the chaos”).

The third coding step allowed recognition of aggregate themes, thereby providing within and across cases finer-grained distinctions (King, 2004) of the different strategies developed by executives to support business to be resilient (i.e., “forerunner strategy”, “rational strategy”, “sensitive strategy”, “resourceful strategy”, and “visionary strategy”) (see Figure 2).

Finally, data extracts are provided in the following section showing themes using participants’ words (Flowers et al., 2003), including “power quotes” and “proof quotes” (Pratt, 2009) (see Appendix 6).

Figure 2: Overview of the data analysis process



Source: adapted from Saldaña (2015)

4. Findings

This study empirically investigates why and how some firms are more resilient than others in a context of crisis, focusing on a unique and dynamic sector represented by the AEC industry. Empirical evidence from the various firms in the AEC industry reveals that executives' behaviors shaped strategies that each organization takes to address resilience during a crisis, for instance, the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, our findings show that executives have defined and deepened five strategic responses that supported businesses to remain resilient throughout a crisis: "forerunner strategy", "rational strategy", "sensitive strategy", "resourceful

strategy", and "visionary strategy". Thus, ten typologies of firm behaviors, intended as ten sub-strategies adopted by firms, are introduced throughout the empirical analysis, proposing a framework in the context of the AEC industry - demonstrating that, despite the overall commitment to resilience, there is significant variation in strategy execution across organizations involved in the AEC sector. In this sense, many strategies can determine resilience (see Table 5).

Table 5: Resilience strategies among the sample

Case description	Forerunner strategy	Rational strategy	Sensitive Strategy	Resourceful Strategy	Visionary strategy
Case-1		x	x	x	x
Case-2		x	x	x	
Case-3	x	x	x	x	x
Case 4	x	x	x	x	
Case-5		x	x		x
Case-6		x	x		x
Case-7	x	x	x	x	x
Case-8		x			
Case-9		x			x
Case-10		x			x
Case-11	x				x
Case-12		x	x		x
Case-13		x	x		x
Case-14	x			x	
Case-15	x	x	x	x	x

4.1. Forerunner strategy

Forerunner is a strategy implemented by executives who, with cunning and decision, could visualize the entire crisis scenario before it can manifest itself in the business operational context. In this way, in a witty and perspicacious way, they managed to be a step forward in the crisis, timely drawing up the steps to take to keep the firm afloat. Notably, they were highly determined and self-confident and found themselves ready when the crisis broke out. Mastering contingency planning and staying one step ahead, they altered the strategy in real-time rather than dragging behind - studying potential harmful eventualities and being prepared to adopt new patterns. Audacity and shrewdness were factors playing a crucial role. Increasing confidence in decisions enabled them to anticipate future scenarios and react quickly to shifting market conditions. They made difficult decisions using intuition and personal judgment with

sometimes negative consequences. For example, focusing on making offhand choices between family and leadership executives improved firms' capacity to avoid the crisis's unfavorable results. Thus, a successful strategy that led to the resilience of companies lay in the ability and sharpness to make choices of significant impact, sometimes setting aside the emotional side to strive for business continuity. Additionally, maximizing what executives had access to and making the most of others implied relying on teams and being open to external points of view. The findings reveal that executives adopted two main behaviors to increase business resilience regarding the forerunner strategy: "being alert to signs of disruption" and "understanding the key role of teams and the need to map out the worst that could happen".

4.1.1. Being alert to signs of disruption

During the COVID-19 crisis, planning for contingencies - looking to the long term and analyzing the optimal steps to ensure the brightest tomorrow - was fundamental. Preparing for and adjusting to the new normal without setting aside sales goals was a behavior implemented by executives in the sample. Over time, executives have been engaged in numerous - large and small - issues and crises throughout their careers - where crises reduced and eliminated the demand for particular products or services, impairing the business's capacity to generate or deliver its offers. Sometimes, the crisis resolved itself in a couple of days or weeks. However, crises also became a far more severe impediment within firms. If, on the one hand, local crises may affect one single firm, crises classified as global might affect whole sectors. For example, one executive explained how he possibly faced the worst crisis of his career in 2008 when the Global Financial Crisis struck. He felt his business was in jeopardy, forcing him to make critical decisions. However, having gone through more intense crises and recessions, executives were sure they would have been able to get through the pandemic too. They knew it would take a long time but were not as concerned as in 2008. Another executive said that being in the middle of a turnaround helped her company during the crisis. Despite this, they found themselves **making offhand decisions between family and leadership**: *"[…] I work in Oslo, but I live in Northern Norway. I live in Tromsø, two hours by plane from Oslo […] I called my wife and said: "I am not supposed to tell you this, but I'm asking you to sit in with me on this decision. I would like to stay. I think I need that in my job. I think the company needs me". I bought quick, ready-to-eat meals to sustain a few days if nobody could come to help me with shopping or food*

alone in my flat in Oslo. I think we worked around the clock. Only with a minimal number of sleep hours. Maybe two or three hours every night. On the same day, the crisis management group decided to follow the government's advice and demand to work from home and then started working with communication to ensure that people were informed internally and externally […]" (EX-15).

Some executives during the Coronavirus crisis were examples of **solid leadership who foresaw the crisis while remaining focused and committed to their vision**. In all this, no insurance would have covered such a catastrophe. Interestingly, three executives laid out the entire scenario back to the Coronavirus outbreak (e.g., a fully digital work system in motion even before everyone else would have thought about a pandemic hitting the world). Few people listened to one of them when in February 2020, he hypothesized that unusual pneumonia that outbroke in the central city of Wuhan, i.e., the COVID-19 pandemic, was coming to Norway too. Considered too "trigger-happy", he showed the desire, cunning, and capacity to stand up and say what to focus on, following its true north - without feeling like the ground was falling out beneath his company. Therefore, being prepped for unforeseen outcomes, since individuals are frequently unprepared and perform irrationally amid crises, was essential for authentic leaders in deciding what actions to take to keep the company afloat: *"[…] We had a very high focus on issue management and our ability to identify potential risks. Not because we were pre-warned or talking a lot with others, but because we were following the pandemic as it was swiping through Asia and then towards Europe. Then I decided, as responsible for our issue management, that it was time to set down a crisis response group according to plan. Some of my colleagues thought I was too trigger-happy and that this would not be a major problem […]"* (EX-15).

4.1.2. Understanding the key role of teams and the need to map out the worst that could happen

Uncertainty and turmoil brought on by a crisis posed problems for leaders, teams, and the systems they rely on. The COVID-19 crisis appeared when they least expected it. Hence, one thing owners-managers were confident of was that they could not foresee everything. However, leaders took responsibility for and determined what they could control to create and alter new strategies and routines. Going into detail about how executives had the courage of their

convictions, they stressed how they made tough decisions with negative implications. They did it using intuition and personal judgment, realizing they could not handle the chaos dumping down on them alone and the importance of **relying on teams to ask for support**. Executives highlighted how their "to-do list" looked never-ending as if there was always something to be done in the business requiring their responsibility. One, for example, gathered a solid team and enlisted the assistance of the most outstanding individuals within and outside of the company (i.e., HR, CFO, Communications, and Crisis Management leaders) to help step up regardless if tasks could be way out of their job descriptions (i.e., passings authorities to employees or networks). Hence, an essential strategy was leveraging everything firms could access, getting the most out of others. Specifically, executives underlined how during the COVID-19 crisis and crises in general, it is all about knowing whom you can rely on and being willing to listen to different perspectives - also getting in touch with CEOs of competitor firms - while giving all the people a sense of purpose. Everyone wanted the firm to flourish and succeed. Thus, in the face of COVID-19, a winning approach involved bringing in the most excellent specialists to assist companies in getting through it, leaving behind, for example, hierarchies and personal conflicts. Beginning to move forward**, assigning a temporary task force to manage the fast-paced landscape** - consulting with everyone firms can benefit from and decide how to proceed - was a strategy adopted by different leaders who stepped up in the crisis: *"[...] The crisis leader group consisted of four with the following resources from our top management: human resources, CFO, Communications, and me as the leader of our crisis management group, i.e., we were four responsible for the top management group out of the total ten in the top management. We could stay ahead of the situation through the pandemic, which was probably the most important thing [...]"* (EX-15). A representation from the central business area within the company was typical participants. However, thoroughly vetting every single strategy against a rapidly changing global scenario was demanding. Specifically, in organizing their crisis leadership team, executives had to dig in and put their efforts into determining who inside the organization would be impacted and harmed by the crisis and the top management's role in leading teams through the challenging event. Hence, **mastering contingency planning** was critical during the pandemic, when times constantly changed. Executives have stressed the challenges of leading in a crisis, such as not having time to plan, analyze, and make decisions because of a lack of information - considering the crisis a reality they could not fully understand.

Remarkably, seeking the help of experts with the skills executives did not have (e.g., financial, quality, etc.) and pulling this broad team together to depend on did not preclude executives from being the team's leader - and act - while drawing on their experience. Hence, for example, just like a military, one executive highlighted how he went right to the front line. Mainly, the executive explained the importance of "always staying one step ahead" to increase confidence in his decisions, even anticipating government rules and regulations on COVID-19. Being bold in making decisions facilitated his ability to react more swiftly to shifting market conditions and **altering his strategy in real-time instead of following behind**: *"[...] Considering my background, I come from the Armed Forces of Norway. I have been an army officer for several years, leading crisis response in the army in the event of fatalities [...] If you go back to 2020, Norway's coastal cruise and shipping line Hurtigruten violated COVID regulations causing many infections around Tromsø [...] So instead of waiting till the government and everyone would have had to work from home, we decided to communicate on Friday that this would be the plan for the rest of August [...]"* (EX-15).

To emerge from the chaos, firms dramatically **accelerated the frequency of meetings** - so everyone was on the same page throughout the turmoil - assisting steadfast team commitment while moving forward: *[...] So, I have the role as Beredskapslede, like the head of emergency planning [...] So what we did at the end of February, or the middle was starting seeing that something. But of course, we didn't know what was going to happen. But, we started setting down two weekly meetings to discuss what was happening to us. But it wasn't very active and accurate about what would happen [...]* (EX-4a). Hence, the team aimed to watch the situation unfold and sketch out different scenarios while revising companies' goals until things settled down. Deciding the right path forward for their business, executives strived to look for updates, check news outlets, and aim for new information. Executives sought to reinstall the company's core values and mission, reminding everybody within the business to keep working for the same goal. In this sense, executives were conscious that hanging back was not a possible option, and the resilience they were building on would not happen overnight. Relying on sales was critical to stay afloat. Making the roster, every executive simultaneously worked on adjusting processes and systems - following up on their goals to ensure achievement. Moreover, they felt that fighting through the crisis might have taken longer and the possibility of staying with this problem for a while. Challenging the "status quo", executives pledged to provide evident

decision-making expertise acknowledged at all levels of the business. Grounded in their beliefs and principles, executives learned how to increase their self-awareness - continuing inventing despite uncertainty - and created a devoted team that could adapt to change. Effectively leading during the pandemic, they developed game-changing solutions to respond immediately and ensure business operations. Assuming responsibility before the crisis was essential to avoid potential unwanted outcomes. Because of how the business world was developing during the COVID-19 crisis, things did not always turn out as executives can expect them to. **Making plans for potential worst-case scenarios** (i.e., the possible outcomes, such as what would happen in a situation of a 30%, 50%, or 70% decrease in sales or an employee getting sick because of the virus) and see what are the most likely possibilities if things do not turn out the way executives want to was a fundamental concern and best approach to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic and general crises. Specifically, it allowed showing how firms might avoid unwanted harmful events. Depending on circumstances that suddenly changed (e.g., with firms caught off guard when COVID-19 hit with its disruptions), adaptability was a broad strategic competency assisting in finding answers to an issue or detecting emerging trends and the hallmark of adaptable managers. It frequently required more time to properly comprehend the issue, thoughtfully examine the possible outcomes, understand the best way to act, and get back to basics. When the crisis deepened, executives were confronted with a new reality, and their tactics had to adapt. Strategies previously in place needed to be devised from the bottom up: *"[…] In the strategic department, we generally analyze the market, the worst-case and different scenarios, and how to react if these scenarios come. I don't think these were implemented before. We started working on it during the crisis"* (EX-8).

4.2. Rational strategy

The rational strategy was the strategy implemented by executives who, logically and rationally, focused on smoothing out any possible inconvenience that the crisis may cause by aiming to recreate a usual business situation but still in a changing working environment - sometimes making drastic cuts in the business to cover potential absences and generate liquidity. For example, in the case of Norwegian AEC enterprises, one of the crucial considerations for remaining resilient during the crisis was to implement an effective strategy that allowed for a smooth transition to a hybrid approach to work. Setting up remote offices to

increase productivity and consciously arranging the firm's procedures and individual potential enabled team members to proactively adjust to change while aiming to maintain activities as usual as possible (e.g., keeping the same workplace setup at home and being as productive as feasible). Promoting each team member's personal and professional growth helped employees feel more engaged, leading to improved performance. Thus, the efficacy, cohesion, and inclusion of teams were fostered by technology innovation to facilitate and accelerate procedures. Moreover, executives looked at their available data to determine the activities that bring value, considering proper downsizing to rest control (e.g., reducing expenditure and laying off employees). Rational strategies adopted to support a firm's resilience can be divided into the following behavior: "going hybrid while sticking to the COVID rules" and "managing firms' internal financials to better navigate through the chaos".

4.2.1. Going hybrid while sticking to the COVID rules

It was to be expected that firms could confront difficulties during such an economic downturn. Maintaining high standards ensured that the team performed well through difficult circumstances. With policies preventing employees from using shared amenities - such as cafeteria, mensa, common areas, and meeting rooms - most team members were sent home with some suddenly finding themselves wearing masks six feet apart in the office space - and firms figuring out how to make that work. Firms strived to follow the rules and regulations of the World Health Organization, looking for those direct information related to the current health crisis. Hence, a primary focus was put on **safety** (e.g., team members were, for example, instructed to use face coverings to prevent anyone from becoming sick), **making it a trademark within organizations**, regardless of the implications on ongoing projects and services: *"[…] So I think everyone did their best in the construction sites to run as smoothly as possible. But we should be honest, and it's not easy to run a construction site with all those rules put on us with face masks and washing and cleaning. After all, it's a construction site, and it's not easy to wear safety glasses and a face mask. It makes it difficult to see"* (EX-10). Moreover, for newly onboarded workers, executives felt responsible for introducing them to the organization and assisting them in getting up to speed on their position right from the beginning - managing the anxiety and pressure when starting a new job. Starting off felt incredibly overwhelming. It was key to provide thorough and consistent explanations to every

question they could have and introduce the new recruit to the various persons in charge of every department within the organization. For instance, executives explained how new employees could experience some anxiety or feel slightly nervous when starting a new job. Moreover, throughout the pandemic, the scenario was radically more demanding. It required constant, in-presence training: *"[…] We started saying that just the young people should come to the office because they were newly employed. Specifically, we had ten new people starting in August 2020 and more in August 2021. So, they could not stay home; it would not have been fair. Also, the people who followed them up were here in the office. So I think we are usually about 100 and like 30 people were in the office more or less all the time […]"* (EX-1a).

Major strategy firms adopted to transition to hybrid successfully was **setting up remote offices to boost productivity**, purposely orchestrating the firm's processes and individual's potential - allowing them to be more proactively adaptive to change while trying to keep everything as usual as possible. Sharing the same environment with roommates or family, managing, perhaps homeschooling for kids while smart-working - and/or having other dependents to take care of - and Zoom calling was challenging as trying to keep the engagement up. However, somehow distractions broke down the walls and unleashed deep human connections (e.g., with kids entering the room and crawling while video-calling or a dog barking) and bringing their full selves. Moreover, executives stressed how engineers are somehow "smart minds" working with technology and quickly adapt: *[…] I think the main reason is the nature of our work, that we can sit at home and do it and that we can communicate and have the tools to develop the designs and things we need. So it's nature […]"* (EX-13). One of the major concerns was dealing with distractions, yard background noise, technology, and communication obstacles that would distract everyone. Striving for the same office setup while at home and being as productive as possible were key to navigating the crisis. Before the pandemic, team members were usually in the same room and could talk to each other. However, in the post-pandemic world, logistics was quite thorough. For instance, at-home solutions could not be as effective as those used at the office, taking time to balance both realms in this very different dynamic. For example, the first thing executives aimed to avoid was attempting to reproduce old habits in the new hybrid scenario. A few practices to move things forward consisted of leaving a chat message, creating long-form summaries and proposals to allow people to comment on them, and reacting asynchronously based on where team members were

currently located. Hence, changing the meeting culture, avoiding a shift from the standard daily working hours of meetings together in the boardroom to eight hours of Zoom meetings. Then, staying organized throughout constant change was essential with companies ensuring employees have in their remote office all the equipment they had in their company office (e.g., screens, noise-canceling headphones, and microphones), making them stronger and more fulfilled by overcoming adversity: *"[…] And also some people were saying I need a bigger screen because my laptop screen is too small. Usually, people work on at least two screens or a big widescreen. So, people were encouraged, if they didn't have screens, to bring them home. I also think some screens were sent home, and we paid for a taxi delivery. So that meant everyone was setting up their own office at home […]"* (EX-5).

Fostering each team member's personal and professional development had a significant impact guaranteeing they all had access to the newest equipment and software while investing in team training to keep the business creative and ahead. This made employees feel more connected and happier, achieving higher performance. For instance, investing in proper online and Zoom training to boost the skills the staff - and the firm - would benefit from. Hybrid working changed the organizational culture in a very positive way. Leveraging behaviors and capabilities, firms underlined their ability to implement remarkable feats in a short amount of time that they would never have thought possible, exploiting innovation in ways they had never done before, with exceptional improvement in company results due to the development of ground-breaking solutions: *"[…] Someone told me that if I had planned for digital communication, like using Teams or Zoom, it would have taken ten years. Because of COVID, it took two weeks […]"* (EX-6). Even though moving their workday from an office building to the quietest corner of their personal spaces (e.g., homes) was jarring initially, employees gradually managed to find their groove and started to like remote work. Most companies emphasized how culture has fared, transiting to a hybrid approach. This was due to their capacity to build successful habits, mindset, and skillset to work effectively. Thus, executives figured out the effectiveness, cohesiveness, and inclusiveness of teams they could trust, who operated even better in a remote and virtual environment than they had previously done. This was because of the deep management of technology to facilitate and speed up processes. Online meetings also helped employees know the individuals they usually worked with and still did not know personally - located in different countries worldwide - although they usually

exchanged emails and sometimes had meetings with them. Furthermore, some executives revealed how their hybrid working increased humanity within the business, feeling stronger connection and interaction while also being, at the same time, so far: *"[…] It's strange, but I've been learning we can staff up with people from anywhere in Norway and deliver. There was less cooperation before than now. We had videoconferencing systems. We could meet people on video as we had always known each other. Teams has been a new, different possibility."* (EX-4b).

4.2.2. Managing firms' internal financials to better navigate through the chaos

Executives devoted themselves to establishing how long cash would last by **consulting professionals** (e.g., financial advisors, lending associations, and banks) and determining the amount of liquidity within the company. In this sense, government assistance during the Coronavirus pandemic was worthwhile while dealing with national-scale uncertainty. This took, for example, the form of grants and loans designed to help companies get out of the crisis. However, one executive criticized this aspect: *"[…] Luckily, our industry maintained the highest activity level throughout COVID, and the Norwegian government funded many companies. We disagreed with their strategy because the construction industry had no problems. […] We thought the government should help the most affected industries. We wanted to save their support for another time; for example, now we're in a very different and more worrisome crisis than COVID turned out to be."* (EX-7).

Economies worldwide have been particularly affected due to the COVID-19 outbreak, with the outcomes of the crisis threatening companies' core businesses. Checking their bank statements to see how much money businesses currently had was crucial to identify which expenses to pause or eliminate - through cost-cutting strategies to safeguard the internal finances. Value creation involved identifying the efforts that had a positive return on investment. The executives were focused on activities that were able to create value for the customer, so they tried to **eliminate or reduce unimportant tasks that were non-essential to running the business** (i.e., monthly expenses such as insurance, payroll, rent, and current expenses) but still hitting firms' overall finances. Their objective was to see a payoff greater than expenses. Executives tackled the significant expenses. Managing funds and getting down to the core essentials - determining what was good to have and what was necessary - took a

fundamental role. For example, executives realized that while marketing expenses, social events, and travel for meetings are pleasant, they were not required during the COVID-19 crisis and economic downturns. They must be slashed (e.g., thoughtfully channeling these resources to others with potential for income within the same business): *"[…]during the start of the pandemic, we put some of the initiatives on hold because we didn't know how much money we would have […] we didn't travel. All of our resources were focused on getting projects […] So, we stopped spending on travel, food, and everything […]"* (EX-4a).

To avoid cash running out, businesses' automatic response and "knee-jerk reactions" was to **consider effective downsizing to rest control** - eliminate costs, decrease expenditure, and lay off staff. Hence, evaluating expenses was essential. Walking through how to face uncertain times, personnel cutbacks were an option to keeping cash in the business; paying attention, these reductions did not crash the company culture. Employees might be the most expensive aspect of a firm. Remarkably, some interviewees explained how in certain circumstances, this entails compensated leave, either temporarily or permanently (i.e., in Norwegian → "Permisjon") - making part-time layoffs rather than full-time ones. Thus, sending employees home was one reaction caused by the fear of having to shut down regular business activities: *"[…] we employed "permisjon" - you lay off temporarily. So I immediately did it with 10% of our staff to ensure we were resilient […]"* (EX-7). To save money and weather the tough times ahead, considering lowering hours or reducing salaries were great avenues to look into too. Furthermore, during uncertainty, cutting employees' payments, staff repurposing, and suggesting alternative work arrangements helped increase employees' awareness to look for other employment. Asserting workers to leave, interviewees took into account voluntary layoffs and early retirement buyouts, thus, eliminating or pausing retirement matching: *"We had a very high focus on our employees, especially those in a difficult situation due to changes in their work position. Many were given new opportunities in other companies or helped in other ways. I think we did very much to ensure that both the employees that didn't work anymore and all the others were doing well […]"* (EX-15). Conversely, executives had to carry out unpleasant conversations about employees not performing and dismissing them. Notably, when employees cannot do their typical responsibilities and routines, they might be unable to contribute meaningfully to the organization. Thus, the crisis was also seen as an opportunity to eliminate mediocrity within organizations: *"[…] There's less social work and less time spent on*

unproductive things. And it was also a great opportunity to eliminate people who didn't perform. We have a stringent law when it comes to laying people off. The crisis is always a good opportunity to clean up the organization because you can suddenly do stuff you're not allowed to" (EX-12).

Sometimes, temporary layoffs lasted very few days; for example, some executives said they took back the employees after ten days when they realized the business was stabilized. Some interviewees mentioned how freezing recruiting increased employee workloads. Thus, companies stressed the need to take back employees and hire new personnel rather than lay off personnel and cut costs. This was due to a considerable uptake in their business. Remarkably, this was essential to the success of that company: *"[…] The activity in construction kept increasing. We had an all-time high in activity levels in the first six months of 2020. So after three weeks, we had to take everyone we had laid off because the problem switched from fear of revenue reduction to a fear of productivity reduction that we couldn't deliver the promised products and services to the markets […]"* (EX-7). Thus, firms have gone through specific strategies to make recently hired employees understand companies' expectations and the skills they need to accomplish their job correctly and boost their self-esteem. A strong effort was put by firms into **making onboarding procedures more straightforward** to access information when working remotely quickly. Thus, onboarding has altered substantially due to the pandemic shifting to virtual onboarding. However, when virtual onboarding might have seemed the only option, one executive started recruitment within open-space areas. Moreover, she managed to start her business by contacting companies she has been working with despite the uncertainty. Remarkably, the consulting companies where she got the data scientists boldly decided to sell their employees at a lower rate, keeping them employed and still working with something interesting. These firms could have done "Permittering" but kept employees working at a lower hourly rate letting the executive benefit from the current trend: *[…] Instead of employing people and employees, I contacted my friends who had companies with data scientists and asked whether I could hire them because they were in other positions […]Because of the home office, they had more time in the beginning […] So I didn't pay the main experts since they also needed this conversation. There was a classic win-win situation. They benefited from me creating that arena; I needed it to get input […] I started to interview, but I had to do all the interviews outside, in parks, because of lockdowns in Norway […]"* (EX-12).

4.3. Sensitive strategy

Sensitive strategies are developed by executives who, through a solid empathic ability, identified in the team they led, trying to implement their sense of unease and frustration from an out-of-control situation such as the one caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Empathy and emotional intelligence were powerful assets for good performance in the fast-paced COVID-19 setting. Increasing empathy throughout the crisis, executives assessed how the situation has affected workers (i.e., what sorts of anxieties or fears the crisis may have caused them) and how the firm could help them feel comfortable and protected. This meant seeing through employees' eyes to comprehend their viewpoints. A positive approach, for example, was guaranteeing employees' acknowledgment through appreciation and gratitude in assisting the business through difficult moments. This vital strategy boosted proactiveness and loyalty - resulting in lower recruiting costs and onboarding training for the organization. The sensitive strategies adopted to support the business to be resilient can be summarized considering the following behaviors: "acknowledging the role played by communication when it comes to the "human aspect"" and "addressing psychological aspects throughout the crisis".

4.3.1. Acknowledging the role played by communication when it comes to the "human aspect"

As the crisis unfolded, companies needed to shift their plans. For instance, with reductions in work hours, part-time work to full-time employees, or temporary unpaid furlough, sometimes, it felt instinctive for executives to shelter team members from unfortunate news. Executives knew that although these discussions might not always be straightforward, team members would value the organization's openness and crystal clarity. It was vital to be completely honest with people, thus, acknowledging the uncertainty firms were experiencing. Executives underlined how the "human aspect" was their most important asset and what they hold most dear: *"It's all we have. We don't have anything else […]"* (EX-4a). They also emphasized that employees show loyalty to firms through the hard patches when executives **remain accountable and truthful towards employees (i.e., employee communication).** Hence, they put into evidence how they could not sit back in the comfortable environment of their offices and the necessity to be with "their people" since the organization's frontline

workers contribute meaningfully at any time and amid a crisis too. Thus, employee communication meant placing the employees at the core and connecting with them. Ensuring responding to emails frequently and introducing regular video meetings was a generally applied strategy, covering, for example, the safety measures firms were taking and updating on possible closings. Being brief, specific, and timely in outlining and communicating their overall decision process to employees was crucial. This implied making them understand the patterns leading to specific decisions, timelines, and responsibilities. However, it was vital to provide them with the required necessary information. Therefore, if the information the company would share would not benefit them, executives explained that it was not worth revealing. Moreover, when the bad news spread, especially those compromising wealth, ensuring the decision ratio was crucial for executives to feel that employees had fair treatment: *"[…] But we had a discussion; we told people that we would need to cut costs by 50 million NOK and have discussions with different units and talk about the future […]"* (EX-15). Hence, identifying the most-vulnerable employees to start a conversation with: *"We identified the most vulnerable employees one by one and talked one to one. So, young people that just started working with us, for example. The psychological stress was very high. We saw people react differently. Some were not affected, and others felt very depressed."* (EX-1a).

Nevertheless, when faced with challenging circumstances, when layoffs could appear to be the only choice, thoroughly **weighing each prospective choice's advantages and disadvantages - looking to alternative approaches to cost reductions** (e.g., chairing the work across locations and departments) was critical: *"[…] we also planned to chair the work between all the different departments, different geographical locations because it will be crazy, for instance, in Trondheim if they had too much to do and we will let people in Stavanger. It would not make sense to fire people in Stavanger if, in Trondheim, there is much to do. So we also plan how to share the workload. So we didn't have to let people go because this is one of the trademarks for our firm; we're a big company that wants to look after the employees […]"* (EX-5).

4.3.2. Psychological aspects throughout the crisis: challenges of executives and employees throughout the COVID-19 disruption

Things completely changed, with some executives looking back to live meetings, online, and "one-on-ones" in their office, feeling nostalgic. Testing their resilience - facing difficulties and challenges - firms created a constructive climate outside their comfort zones. This implied giving up some of their more "comfy habits" and quickly adopting some less comfortable ones to satisfy the expectations of everyone who had a stake in the current crisis and could be harmed (e.g., suppliers, clients, and employees). By removing unfavorable default settings, firms looked at how teams interacted. Thus, efficient teams took advantage of employees' skills and expertise to make better decisions. **Keeping a committed team under pressure** required sharing information with the team and knowing what was expected from them. Team members looked for leadership and guidance. Effectively communicating through regularly scheduled meetings was paramount, implying sharing accountability and working with a common purpose. Moreover, aware that the crisis could throw out all their plans - with everything falling apart and needing to stop or cancel projects - executives underlined how intuition and perseverance were the way to ensure business survival and step up to the crisis. Determining which tasks should be tackled immediately and which should be delegated was essential. In the heat of the moment, it was challenging to maintain the required perspective to make the best decision. In this sense, the interviewees saw "emotional neutrality" as a winning approach, leaving behind anxiety and fears to responsibly and proactively address the situation - recognizing the reality of facts and taking decisive action accordingly. Solution-focused executives concentrated on controlling their mentality during tough times and identifying specific problems: *"[...] that has to do with mentality [...] I learned that if you're prepared, you don't see a crisis as a crisis. You see it as a situation you must handle based on your preparation, which has been successful [...]"* (EX-5). Executives dealt with their fears and beliefs while determining how to craft and deliver their messaging and appropriately alter their overall strategies. For instance, uncertainty was unavoidable and, at the same time, uncomfortable in business; there were no clear plans companies could confidently move toward, causing highly stressful for entrepreneurs. Additionally, executives ensured they were calm and organized to face the uncertainty: *"I think the feedback I got from my organization was that I always seemed very calm. It was crucial for them, So I think I'm a person who is very*

calm when things are tough. I don't think I'm a person who gets scared. I stayed calm and told them it'd be okay […]" (EX-13). Executives made room for thoughtful solutions to clear their minds from concerns and feel more grounded. Furthermore, during the crisis, some executives stressed the importance of enough hours of sleep and regular exercise to help them perform at their best, and forging strategies to reach new international markets was put on hold: *"[…] I felt this claustrophobic feeling that my work was shrinking to a tiny place. So I needed to get out of the house. I saw that I needed it. I needed the exercise and just traveled to where I was using my bike to get on the exercise, but at least it's half an hour of daily cycling. I think people need different arenas in their life. If you feel stuck with one smaller, it fixes your thinking, and I didn't like it."* (EX-6).

The success of teams depended so much on ***psychological safety***. Life was altered by the economic depression and hardship brought on by COVID-19. Suddenly, employees were forced to work remotely, sometimes in quarantine at home. Emotions were running high. Layoffs and furloughs were causing concern for employees. They could feel frustrated about being understaffed and overwhelmed. They could experience loneliness and isolation, feeling that the line between work and home was becoming increasingly blurred. Confusion and apprehension were common. Individual team members frequently reported feeling worn out in a remote and virtual environment and reached a point of exhaustion. Some employees missed being in an actual office, with colleagues dropping by to have a small chat: *"[…] Whenever we meet with an agenda, you go through the agenda, and then you maybe chat after the meeting about whatever pops into your mind. You follow the agenda and leave the meeting when you have a digital meeting. So you lose this informal communication […]"* (EX-1b). Therefore, an exception for people going to the office was made for team members struggling alone at home: *"[…] We saw that people living alone felt very lonely, and we said they should return to the office daily […]"* (EX-1a). Executives also worked on the "social aspect", getting creative in what firms delivered, for example, through virtual coffees, happy hours, and lunches - especially during the first months of the pandemic because of social distancing - to make employees feel comfortable and still feel the sense of community and company culture - chatting just like if they were in the building, communicate with colleagues and get to know one another: *"[…] [We sent them] a nice breakfast or lunch to team up and eat and see each other […]"* (EX-13). Focusing on communication was crucial for organizations to get their

team together. One strategy was sharing stories on the intranet to see teams' daily life during the days at home, including CEOs: *"[…] we had on our intranet; we encouraged them to send a picture of what your office looked like. I also did it showing where I had my presentations. So we were engaging to have an insight into your working life […]"* (EX-13). This also helped to take anxiety down. For the executives, uncertainty and loss of control were the significant issues employees faced during the COVID-19 crisis and recessions. What was ahead for employees and their families was unknown to them. They did not know if they would stay employed or whether their savings would be enough to cover everyday personal expenses. Hence, providing a phone line where people could obtain timely psychologic assistance - in some cases implemented already before the pandemic - was a proactive solution implemented by some executives. Specifically, empathy and emotional intelligence were powerful tools for high performance during this fast-paced scenario. Boosting empathy amid the crisis, executives considered how the circumstance had affected their employees (i.e., what kinds of worries or fears the crisis might have caused them) and what they could do for individuals to make them feel comfortable and safe. To provide the best possible assistance for employees, particularly amid the COVID-19 hardship, executives needed to look through employees' eyes to understand their perspectives fully. Notably, they knew employees would recall how firms handled them through complex and disruptive times. Taking an optimistic approach, executives helped them see the difficult time as temporary and limited - telling them the absolute truth to recognize problems and downsides. Identifying employees' stress levels - meeting their needs - was essential, for example, allowing their schedules to be flexible to get back full-time when the situation got better. Remarkably, struggling with family members who lived across the country and got respiratory problems or not having the chance to spend time with kids, firms showed the necessity to ask people how it was going and communicate with them in private, timely, and individual conversations, especially since everyone was in the firm was in this together. Furthermore, regarding job pathways, employees had more options than ever before. One of the most effective methods to maintain intense energy levels was appreciation and gratitude for their daily sacrifices. This ensured people's recognition through, for example, targeted presents during recurring holidays and special days, acknowledging their efforts in helping the organization get through the challenging period. The flip side of the coin was that happy and engaged employees were more productive and less inclined to leave their jobs,

meaning less recruiting expenses and onboarding training from the company side: *"[...] we sent packages of everything we thought people needed; we gave every employee free I-pads, and we sent them Christmas, Easter, and summer presents to see we care about and were concerned about their safety during the pandemic."* (EX-15).

4.4. Resourceful strategy

Resourceful strategies focus on profit and the efficient organization of the value chain impacted by the crisis to be safeguarded at all costs. Client communication was critical in this strategy, with clients evaluating organizations' actions even after the harmful situation. As a result, executives carefully and regularly followed up with clients to keep their messaging up. Furthermore, facing the "needs gap", they were prompted to look into new revenue sources, breaking old habits and developing new ones to grow and thrive. In this way, they sustained the firm while keeping ahead of the competition - maintaining corporate efficiency and helping it navigate distress. Hence, riding business opportunities, they embraced an "adaptive attitude" concentrating, for example, on offering new services and focusing on profitable niches. The resourceful strategy can be sorted into the following behaviors: "understanding the best practices for client communication" and "sustaining value creation and staying afloat in light of hardship".

4.4.1. Understanding the best practices for client communication in fast-paced scenarios

Clients suffered financially and emotionally during this economic downturn. Thus, they used greater caution while making financial decisions and determining what business they wanted to work with. Communicating out of crisis regarding client communication was seen as a duty. Executives recognized the need to make a statement (e.g., stating their awareness of the events taking place) and give themselves time to give off the perception that it was just business as usual. Remarkably, executives were sure that clients would assess firms' responses long after the crisis had passed, affecting the firm's reputation. Amid this tough time, clients wanted compassion, honesty, and openness. They wanted reassurance, making sure companies were concerned about their needs. **Maintaining the relationship with current clients** required endurance and preparation, showing them the organization was ready to continue serving them - willing to underpromise rather than overdeliver. A client could have asked for cancellation if

they had a debt with the business, for instance, when things start to get tough financially. Thus, firms felt forced to postpone their payments, renegotiating terms with their vendors and suppliers until the situation returned to normal. This behavior enabled building trust and instilled loyalty. Providing timely and accurate information was paramount to being honest and front with the clients. For instance, if companies have undergone layoffs and furloughs, clients must be informed that they might have to wait longer than usual because of a lack of employees - since it was a crisis where social distancing and home isolation were necessary or enforced. It could also be challenging for them to get specific products. Hence, it was essential to carefully and frequently follow up with clients to keep their messaging up-to-date, e.g., calling and emailing them to update them until problems were fixed - finding solutions that would get them through the challenging period: *"[...] So in the beginning, like in the pandemic, for instance, we told our customers that we were up and running and had no problems delivering their project despite working decentralized because we were sitting at home offices, we said they had nothing to be worried about since we had control so that it also ensured the customer to say that everything was okay and the work was going to be done. And also that we could take on more work if possible"* (EX-3a). Being out front was crucial for some interviewees who personally got in touch with the most critical clients to update them constantly: *"I sent personal letters to several customers, describing how we continued working through our organization systems. They could experience interruptions. They should contact me and work today through delays or interruptions from all sides, sustaining our system efficiency together during the pandemic [...]"* (EX-14). Anticipating how to help them and making tough decisions that would benefit everyone in the long term was also critical. Executives were confident that following this best practice would encourage clients to allow businesses to continue serving them. Finding ways to retain and attract new customers during the pandemic implied **building customer trust and sustaining meaningful service experiences**. This served as the cornerstone for creating enduring connections with clients. Furthermore, the immediacy and interaction of live video communication (and virtual coffees) was a one-of-a-kind option to communicate immediately and concisely interact with clients during the crisis. This included, for instance, displaying speeches or keynotes during conferences and removing monetary, logistical, and geographic obstacles, resulting in a stronger relationship with clients: *"[...]After*

the COVID, we had video meetings with our clients to figure out how this would affect our projects and how to handle it, maybe working remotely in the building sites […]" (EX-2a).

4.4.2. Sustaining value creation and staying afloat in light of hardship

Sometimes, executives told how it took one decade for their company to expand globally and how the pandemic sweeping the globe changed everything. Everyone knew that it was no longer business as usual. Executives got to pivot to rewrite the rules to move ahead. Unprecedented levels of uncertainty and economic instability have been brought on by COVID-19. As a result, there were restricted resources available. For instance, some companies were suffering from a lack of supply and demand. Furthermore, sometimes employees could not come to work because it was unsafe. The pandemic's numerous catastrophic repercussions of missing sales targets included company closures, job loss, and difficulty finding essential items. To promote continuous improvement, the winning approach underlined by executives was staying upbeat and avoiding criticism and complaint. Notably, some businesses **discovered inventive and creative ways to create value** for their clients, for example, focusing on profitable niches riding the business opportunities of the residential market and long-term governmental/public projects - keeping on business operations and striving to seize opportunities. From the data, it emerged that for most of the executives, it was "business-as-usual" and "everything went much better than expected". Hence, executives underlined feeling confident that during challenging times the government invests more money in infrastructure to get more busy activity. In this regard, it was fundamental to take time to evaluate the most appropriate strategy moving forward. One company focused on new building constructions during the pandemic switched to more service-related business. If one the one hand, state incentives, the unblocking of construction sites, together with de-bureaucratization, lowering of tax wedge, and investment plans for public housing helped sort the pandemic blow; on the other hand, many have been the capabilities adopted internally by AEC firms in Norwegian that enabled them to show outstanding resilience throughout the pandemic crisis. When the unfortunate and unplanned COVID-19 situation unfolded, executives experienced a needs gap, exploring new revenue streams - products and services. Thus, the change involved breaking old habits and forming new ones to grow and flourish. Reframing challenges as opportunities helped firms stay ahead through difficult times. Executives became drivers of change: *"We*

have built a more robust position in the hospital sector during the pandemic than before. It was a general goal for us to improve the position because of the focus on our type of services and installations in hospitals. We got support or increased demand from our clients. So our business in the hospital sector has increased significantly during the last two or three years" (EX-2).

Moreover, executives highlighted the need to **focus on ethics and values**. Executives knew their firms would be assessed for how they handled the crisis. Particularly in that time of distress, people banded together. As a result, one firm emphasized its ethical responsibility to communities: *"First and foremost, we were taking many precautions for ourselves. We contacted a liquor factory because it was impossible to find sanitizing gel. It was impossible to get a hold of. So we contacted a liquor factory and got them to produce the antibacterial fluid. And we also delivered it to the municipality, hospitals, and communities […]"* (EX-7).

4.5. Visionary strategy

Visionary strategies focus on proactively crafting a new approach to work through a marked predisposition to change - adapting to dangerous circumstances. Coming out of the crisis, it was vital to recognize that while one crisis might be behind, another could follow. The road ahead could be complicated, and the hurdles more numerous, raising awareness at all levels of management about the potential for challenging events. Recognizing that crises occur frequently and the organization cannot be entirely prepared, the primary strategy was to respond immediately. Providing adequate slack for unanticipated occurrences (for example, preparing for lack of resources that delays a critical project while identifying substitute partners) became vital, allowing the organization to succeed. Executives thought that giving freedom to everyone when it comes to where to work is critical, necessitating team members in the decision-making process to help them feel at ease with the new working environment. Thus, executives strive for employee loyalty, emphasizing no difference between working and meeting in the same place or over video chat. This strategy entails excellent coordination to complete the task efficiently and effectively while making the firm more deliberate. Additionally, executives highlighted a concerted effort to find innovative methods to alter physical environments within companies to step ahead of productivity difficulties. Thus the visionary strategies can be divided into the following behaviors: "building up the road ahead utilizing a learning approach" and "discussing the perspectives on on-site working and the emerging "hybrid way" of working".

4.5.1. Building up the road ahead by means of a learning approach

Re-evaluating their planning horizon, executives set up debriefings as standard procedure. By exploiting what they have learned from the past, they see this behavior as likely to enhance positive results and more accurate forecasting for future events. Through debrief meetings, executives got together to examine current performance, e.g., projects and initiatives, looking one or more weeks, months, or even years ahead to provide a complete perspective on the business situations. Executive believe that taking time to understand possible scenarios and being willing to settle into some new patterns is a winning behavior. Coming out of the crisis, executives were aware that if, on the one hand, one crisis is behind, on the other hand, another is likely to come in the future. The path ahead is complex, and obstacles can be broader, increasing awareness at all managerial levels regarding what crises companies might expect. Being authentically true to themselves, some interviewees were not hesitant to confess they had gone wrong, feeling vulnerable and overwhelmed. They highlighted the importance of apologizing and working to fix the culture. They were conscious, though, that they were doing the right thing for the right reasons. However, they showed pride in not losing sight of the value they stand for and what they want to achieve. For instance, some executives concurred that sometimes the larger picture needed to be better understood: *"What I do regret was laying people off in May 2020. We should have waited a little bit because then we wouldn't have done it. But we had to start at some point. And it looked like it would be a lot worse than it got. So I think I would have taken the same decision, but I do regret it. I still regret it. So maybe I've learned not to get scared to make big changes too early."* (EX-4a). Executives underlined their employees' significant mental and physical load due to the crisis. They realized they could not expect them to work "as usual" for an extended period after the crisis was over. Hence, allowing everyone room and time to get through the crisis together was fundamental: *"[...] but in 2021, we felt more affected by fatigue. You know, people are tired. It's so long. You're going through constant lockdowns. They seem to be over, but then they start again. You don't have contact with people who struggle at home and all this fatigue. So 2021 was more complex in terms of keeping things going."* (EX-3a). Acknowledging that unforeseen occurrences happen - and they do so rather frequently - and that companies cannot fully be prepared, the key strategy was promptly responding when they occur. Providing enough slack for unforeseen events (e.g.,

preparing for lack of supplies that slows the time to a crucial project) became fundamental, enabling the organization to foster agility and adaptability. Leveraging relationships during the crisis, for example, finding substitute partners, i.e., alternative suppliers, was a winning approach: *"We are, of course, looking over our supply chain […] I think we need to have more partners closely linked to us and have a good collaboration rather than constantly being out shopping for new suppliers. We need to find suppliers and partners that we can trust that will stand with us whether it's going good or bad […]"* (EX-15).

Eliminating multitasking while aiming for value creation and high-standard performance was pivotal. Top-down strategic planning processes where leaders and employees have two distinct roles (i.e., planning and acting) could be tricky. For instance, if, on the one hand, senior executives have a broader and more insightful overview of the challenges the firm face, on the other hand, they occasionally lack knowledge of the day-to-day reality of the organization. **Soliciting perspectives and thoughts from the whole organization** was essential. Gaining input from employees provided a crucial advantage in having a big picture of the potential challenges the company was facing. Offering mandatory training programs to employees was also seen as a successful strategy to fight against possible distress, empowering them to continually leverage their skills and effectively perform no matter how hard the situation the company was going through. This highlighted the employer branding theme underlining the importance of employees and the need to ensure their well-being on an ongoing basis: *"We often discuss if there will be a need for people in the future with all this technology, artificial intelligence. […] I'm willing to pay whatever it costs to get the right guy or girl into a position […] Elon Musk, Tesla CEO; what would he have done without its team? Amazon too. Individuals drive development because they are there […]"* (EX-6).

4.5.2. Discussing the perspectives on on-site working and the emerging "hybrid way" of working

The COVID-19 crisis has been distinguished by the fact that things did not remain stable. Getting back to "business as usual" sometimes did not work out that way. Whether it was a recession or a dip in the economy, for example, the Global Financial Crisis after 2008 and 2009, or the oil crisis of 2014, executives stressed how nothing has wholly returned to normal. Situations alter, before or after a crisis, with all leaders rising to challenges and adapting quickly

to win in new environments. If, on the one hand, working from home was an option for some firms and sectors, on the other hand, it was not a viable one for many others. Executives realized how tricky it could be to carry out some duties remotely and others on-site. Especially when task coordination is significant, i.e., in routine nature tasks, **on-site participation** (e.g., having discussions with colleagues and learning from seniors) was essential **to avoid low performance** - and a breakdown in focus and productivity. Team members have to be present also if they run specific roles. Moreover, excellent communication is the key to achieving firms' objectives quickly, with team members willing to share their thoughts and talk freely in a typical workplace. Thus, some interviewed executives were rushing to return to the workplace. Some tasks appeared to be better handled in person at the office than at home, i.e., important customer meetings and specific virtual presentations: *"[…] If people don't meet… the office is like a clubhouse, so if you don't meet physically, how can you know, have this feeling of a club like in sports. I mean, that's how we build relationships. And that's how you feel like you have a common goal and mission. […]"* (EX-6). Executives affirmed that when employees work in person, they can physically view them at their desks, taking note of how soon they do the assignment and return it to the executive - noticing when they are working or taking too-long lunch breaks: *"[…] If you hear all the reasons why hybrid is good, they [employees] will say "I, I, I", but the management thinks about a company. So we say "WE," and saying this, we need to have people together. This discussion is based on people being egoistic and selfish and not thinking about their work and what they create to get other people at work […]"* (EX-12).

The COVID-19 pandemic has permanently altered how team members work, and firms have learned the long-term viability of hybrid work models. Executives see how the organization's working processes will change, affecting the organization. Deciding how firms want everyone to work is a significant decision, implying involving team members in decision-making to make them feel comfortable with the new working future. Some firms showed to be prepping for a hybrid work environment. They believe the future will focus on companies going remote and embracing a hybrid model - figuring out the right balance on when to be together in person and why. In managing their way out of distress, hybrid working has been highlighted by interviewees, aiming to ensure that everyone within the organization is fully aware of the future of work. Executives need to know what it will be like after the crisis. Executives showed the need to help lean toward providing employees flexibility. Thus, executives strive for their

employees' devotion and necessities instead of merely complying - lifting everyone based on their choice of where to work. This is a different and disruptive experience where employees split their time between remote and in-person work. Teams are being reinvented, whether virtual or hybrid (remote and on-site). Keeping travel to a minimum or traveling less than usual is something companies would want to retain and, in some cases, gradually eliminate - doing business using Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and the various tools organizations have access to. In this sense, learning how to rebuild productivity when moving between different locations is critical. Executives saw a **flexible working alternative as an opportunity to get the best work out of the employees**, regardless of when or where they carry it out - highlighting how there is no difference between being in the same room or on a video chat when it comes to working and meetings. This was possible base on the overall company policy. This strategy implies strong coordination to get the work done efficiently and effectively - looking for equality or fairness among employees - and making the company more intentional. In this sense, the main challenge for executives is to make everyone feel heard - whether in the room or on the screen. People can decide when to come to the office and work from home based on personal choice, with "the ins and outs" working in the organization. Thus, executives and employees can decide what time of day, days of the week they work best, and their ideal work environment, rebooting the performing team's potential. With hybrid working, firms could, for example, efficiently avoid getting pulled into time-consuming, countless meetings and quickly setting up online meetings, thinking through what team members are better suited to do at home (e.g., drawing up press releases, preparing PowerPoint presentations) and what things are remote-friendly: *"[...] But after the pandemic, some people learned they work better from home. Maybe they have long travel or other practical things. So we have made arrangements now so some people can have flex office solutions and flexible seating here in the office, but they work mainly from home. And now, after the pandemic, we have the tools to ensure that we can do this without compromising the quality of our work [...]"* (EX-1b). The new working environment will likely see agile and strong virtual teams caring about each other's success. In reinventing or reimagining the new work world, physical distance implies a focus on outcomes instead of inputs where every member within the organization is accountable to one another. Leaders need to take charge in a hybrid workforce, keeping in mind the significance of a system where individuals can act responsibly with little control - engendering a high degree of respect and mutual trust among

compelling group members. Conversely, executives have to consider processes that might be removed to promote autonomy and adaptability to make up for less interaction in hybrid environments. Being remote provides a significant advantage to companies to redefine the number of people joining meetings, undoubtedly constrained in physical environments by the available space in the room and the logistics of including "nontraditional team members", coming from other locations where the company is located. However, in an unboundless, remote, and virtual world, firms may instantly have successful and interdependent global teams, whereas for a long o short period, striving to meet the marketplace's volatile demands. Interviewees showed how they finally felt involved in firms' operations via online meetings and how this created fertile ground to share new ideas and improve, thanks to team diversity. In this way, companies can sustain a workplace culture where every organizational member is inspired to behave boldly daily, ensuring everyone has a vision of their unique future.

In times of uncertainty, executives became even more aware that one of the foremost expensive items on their balance sheet is rent, which needs to be reduced. Thus, companies underlined a solid effort to **discover new ways to redesign physical spaces** within offices, staying one step ahead regarding productivity challenges. They realized they could do virtually what they thought they could have never done and still add value to the company. To save cash, executives see the chance of reducing costly office leases in the current world where hybrid is the new working trend, looking to how the future office place will look from the business's perspective, giving up to a co-working space. An exciting aspect is hoteling, with the company minimizing the office space by shifting team members to constantly changing locations with not all team members always in the same work environment. Other executives become true visionaries, imagining, for example, what the physical workspace will look like in 2030: *"We are doing a large project to see our 2030 situation in office space for our head office […] We're doing a process now on what the future office in 2030 will look like. And that's a question that needs to be investigated and approved. We have been doing a project on changing our assets and the pros and cons. Nevertheless, we'll do that in the framework trying to foresee the needs in 2030, but the decision came from much earlier, and we'll be much more flexible. We are trying to focus on imaging where we'll be in 2030"* (EX-15). Managing employees in different places simultaneously and making them feel connected and the organization might be complex, while some work remotely. For instance, if some employees could have struggled in a remote

work setting, they could suffer even more in a hybrid setting. This way, the physical workplace will still be essential to come together, convene, and innovate. During occasional meetings, team members can occasionally find themselves together in the office to share opinions and perspectives, e.g., during special meetings and projects. For example, confidently showing up weekly or monthly at the office to move things forward - combining remote and in-person working, doing team-building exercises, and brainstorming. Hence, company members - no matter where they are - might talk, for example, about weekly or seasonal objectives and how to achieve them. Executives proved the need to get input from the team members - encouraging timely, detailed, and individualized talks. This was possible, allowing people to ask questions, provide feedback to one another, and sustain meaningful dialogues, enabling them to be on the same page, maintaining productivity and the team focus for a specific period. In that case, the working option will be based on self-management and self-organization principles, truly joining together in new ways to solve issues and committing to work: *"Flexible spaces where only a few people would have fixed spaces. Offices and meeting places. It makes sense for co-working, collaboration, and projects. People are more flexible about where to be during the day and when they work. More open spaces and small rooms for video conferences and projects"* (EX-15).

5. Discussion

Despite the importance of resilience and the extensive body of literature on resilience (Alexander, 2013; Linnenluecke, 2017; Sabatino, 2016; Sutcliffe and Vogus, 2003; Van der Vergt et al., 2015), studies on the strategies firms use to be more resilient throughout a crisis are lacking (Parker and Ameen, 2018). Interestingly, scholars have previously highlighted various perspectives. For example, acknowledging the existence of three crisis phases, namely crisis prevention, response, and recovery (Elliott et al., 2005; Hills, 1998; Smith, 1990), making the first attempt to examine the types of strategies that firms may implement throughout the various stages of a crisis (Pusceddu et al., 2021, 2022). Nonetheless, scholars have passed up an opportunity to broaden the focus on resilience and examine, through a specific study, how some sectors manage to be resilient in a crisis context (i.e., what makes them more resilient) and, as a result, the relative efficient, strategies adopted that supported them to be resilient. By elaborating on prior resilience literature, this study makes several contributions to existing

research in meaningful ways. Furthermore, it provides a more solid theoretical basis to previous literature, thus presenting a framework that explains what kinds of strategies and behaviors firms employ in their existing settings to sustain resilience during crises (see Figure 3).

First, this is one of the initial studies that capture the rich, nuanced, and significant experiences of a specific crisis from the executives' perspective regarding strategies to support the business to be resilient. Notably, previous literature has focused on strategies that can be analyzed at each crisis stage without referring specifically to those related to resilience (Pusceddu et al., 2021, 2022). Therefore, it seems unknown whether the companies considered by the previous literature (e.g., Pusceddu et al., 2021, 2022) were resilient through a purely theoretical approach. This work focused only on the strategies that promote resilience - intended as the ability to recover from a crisis and return to a previous state, taking advantage of new opportunities (Lengnick-Hall and Beck, 2003; Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011; Sutcliffe and Vogus, 2003) - going beyond a concept of strategy linked to mere survival. The findings illustrate five strategies that, with specific characteristics, are implemented: "forerunner strategy", "rational strategy", "sensitive strategy", "resourceful strategy", and "visionary strategy". For example, executives adopting a "forerunner strategy" showed an exceptional capacity for insight, perceiving the looming crisis and anticipating the actions when the latter seemed only an issue linked to the city of Wuhan. In contrast, sensitive strategies showed the need to address employees' most profound needs. It has also been noted that adopting more strategies has allowed companies to perform best - managing to be more resilient and effective than others.

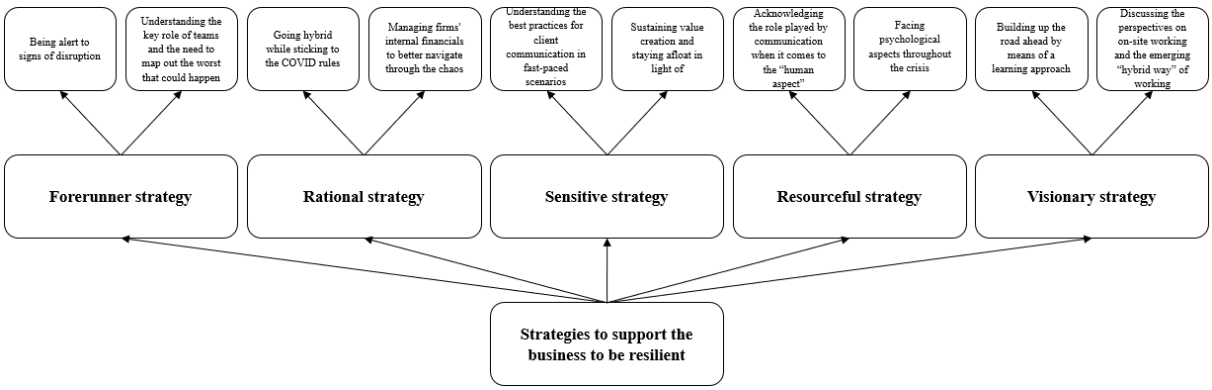
Second, a further contribution is the identification of ten behaviors adopted by the executives to support businesses to be resilient throughout a crisis, focusing on the intrinsic motivations that resulted in a specific strategy to support the business to be resilient during a crisis. These ten behaviors have been identified across the five strategies (i.e., by clustering the companies into the five strategies), with executives responding differently to support the firm's resilience. Therefore, this study illuminates the significance of implementing targeted behaviors to support businesses to be resilient when addressing crises. For instance, if, on the one hand, some behaviors have given rise to empathic actions, on the other hand, others have led to the management of internal finances or to the discovery of new perspectives beyond the physicality with which the way of working was conceived - with a shift and full incentive of the hybrid work. Hence, the empirical analysis also reveals that, despite an overall commitment to efficient

resilience behaviors, there is significant heterogeneity in behavior execution across organizations involved in the AEC sector.

Third, the present paper contributes to going beyond a purely linear (Elliott et al., 2005; Hills, 1998; Smith, 1990) and circular (Pusceddu et al., 2021, 2022) vision of the phases of the crisis, highlighting how in reality it is implausible to trace strategies based to a particular phase of the crisis, as previously indicated by the literature. Notably, although some executives focus more on resilience in some phases of the crisis, it is still difficult to fully distinguish these phases (e.g., it becomes challenging to establish whether we are facing, for example, a crisis response or a crisis recovery phase). From the data collected, it is clear that, in reality, the five strategies to support the business to be resilient are not always strictly linked to the crisis phase that can be seen from the outside but to the single executive's perception of a particular historical moment. While it is true that strategies can be identified - and appear more suitable - for a specific phase of the crisis, it is also true that executives may perceive the crisis phases differently. Thus, not all companies adopt the same strategies. In addition, the strategies to support the business to be resilient are sometimes adopted in all three phases of the crisis, some adopted by confident executives and not by others. In this way, the present study improves the previous literature by presenting a new conceptualization of resilience, underlining how, considering earlier studies (e.g., Pusceddu et al., 2022), some resilience strategies are not distinguishable for the three phases. For instance, this study demonstrates how the crisis prevention phase for the "forerunner strategy" did not begin with the announcement of the lockdown in Norway but in a time frame attributable to the outbreak of the pandemic in Wuhan. From that moment, executives realized they were in crisis, constantly feeling a step forward at each event. These strategies are related to executives' perceptions. Their perception could be different even though they are in the exact historical moment (e.g., an issue that can either be the pandemic or a general crisis), with executives' way of acting changing accordingly - e.g., those adopting a "forerunner strategy" behaving in crisis prevention as if it were in the center of an exploding crisis, thus, focused on responding given the difference in perceptions of the historical fact happening around them (e.g., executives adopting forerunner strategies were already in the response phase while those adopting visionary strategies were in the recovery phase). From the empirical qualitative evidence presented in the data, it emerged that some executives thought they were in a recovery phase after two weeks from the pandemic crisis,

inclined to believe it was all over - crafting recovery strategies, usually implemented in the final phase of the crisis. Hence, the recovery phase for some strategists appears concurrently with a phase generally considered a crisis response phase. Therefore, if during the crisis prevention phase, other executives might then have been influenced by a formative pre-crisis situation they experienced (i.e., they wait without acting on an event since it has not yet happened), in the crisis response and crisis recovery phases, executives may have different perceptions and therefore implement a strategy in different time frames of each other (e.g., a strategy that can be developed after a year or immediately). Then, elements found in executives employing "rational strategies", among which the adoption of a hybrid system leads back to the need to prepare for more difficult times, a new crisis, or a constantly changing context, in general, different from the current moment (e.g., an economic crisis or boom). These elements demonstrate even more strongly the limits of a model that highlights the circularity and the intersection of the prevention, response, and recovery crisis phases with business strategies.

Figure 3: The event framework of strategies to support businesses to be resilient in a time of crisis



5.1. Managerial implications

From a managerial perspective, this study tries to clarify to managers and practitioners the strategies to support a business to be resilient throughout the crisis.

This study, in particular, raises managers' and practitioners' understanding of effective strategies for dealing with fast-changing business circumstances in which unexpected and

undesirable occurrences might jeopardize organizational goals. Practitioners should understand the benefits of successfully developing a crisis-ready culture when a crisis strikes.

Notably, a crisis is a developing situation that changes over time. Consequently, it is critical to comprehend the significance of consistently applying cutting-edge methods to increase the resilience of firms and maintain company continuity. More crucially, these strategies will be constantly replicated throughout the organization's life.

More importantly, the framework conceptualized in this study provides critical, practical guidelines on what strategic actions need to be implemented, developed, and improved to support the business to be resilient amid crises. For instance, managers will have to implement strategies to prevent a possible crisis by planning the potential, worst-case scenarios (e.g., the likely effects, such as a 30%, 50%, or 70% drop in sales, or an employee being ill as a result of the virus). Thus, adopting an integrated, strategic crisis-action plan with speed and resourcefulness becomes paramount. Another crucial lesson managers may take away from this research is the need to foster technological innovation to enhance teams' efficacy, cohesiveness, and inclusion, which might operate even better in a remote and virtual "way of working". Finally, they will have to strive for employee loyalty - raising everyone based on their choice of where to work.

Thus, this study attempted to understand how firms may modify their strategies in a crisis. The study's findings may provide remarkable and valuable insights for managers and practitioners seeking to foster resilience in competitive and turbulent marketplaces by determining which strategies may be more appropriate based on the evolution of the crisis.

5.2. Limitations and future research

This study owns some limitations that future theoretical and empirical studies on this research topic may address.

One of the critical limitations of this research is the challenge of dealing with the "business elite" (e.g., CEOs, top executives, and boards of directors) (Ma et al., 2021). If, on the one hand, business elites are particularly appealing for managerial research due to their top businesses roles, and interviews are a crucial tool for gathering data on them, on the other hand, they are often particularly inclined to "knowledgeability, domination, and impression management" (Ma et al., 2021, p. 2). Future studies could, then, expand the sample, considering

the employees' perspectives and analyzing any difference in the firms' resilience strategies throughout the COVID-19 crisis.

Then, this study focused on a specific industry (i.e., the AEC industry). For instance, it would be necessary to extend the generalization of the findings by investigating this research topic in multiple research contexts. Since this study adopted a qualitative approach, future research could implement a thoughtful quantitative approach for the data collection, for example, selling out surveys to look at the difference in the resilience strategies based on executives' experience in terms of previous leading positions and academic background. Future research could then distinguish any difference in short and long-term resilience - save money today or invest tomorrow.

Furthermore, future research could focus on the fact that crises and resilience strategies might be related to (at least) two key debates: (1) why do firms differ in their "successful" strategies for coping with crises - in terms of capabilities and resource configuration including internal vs. collaborative efforts (2) how do strategies form and change, for instance, when crises happen, do companies use them as a source of autonomous and emergent strategies or fall back on existing strategies? Is there an interplay between emergent and deliberate strategies? Might deliberate strategies be flexible and adapted (strategic change) to incorporate new situations? Is this what resilience is about?

Moreover, future research avenues could test and validate the proposed framework, for example, comparing 2021 and 2022 operating revenues even if there is a leap to claim that this indicator of overall performance relates to their "successful" resilience strategies, i.e., the time lag before the effects are shown due to the nature of projects.

Finally, based on resilience as a way to seize new opportunities (Lengnick-Hall and Beck, 2003; Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011; Sutcliffe and Vogus, 2003), future research could investigate if crises, just like projects and new customers, might be the source of emergent strategies (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985; Mirabeau and Maguire, 2012).

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Paper 3

Do they see Eye to Eye? Managing Customer Experience in Phygital High-tech Retail

Keywords: Phygital customer experience; ordinary experience; extraordinary experience; physical store; agility; flexibility; single-case study

Do they see Eye to Eye? Managing Customer Experience in Phygital High-tech Retail

Abstract

This paper aims to empirically investigate the typologies of phygital (synaeresis of "physical" and "digital") customer experiences (CXs) that can arise in high-tech retail based on the intensity of consumers' responses and reactions to the stimuli triggered by firms. Moreover, it explores how firms attempt to shape the architecture of the phygital CXs. Notably, this article identifies the flexible and agile strategies that firms implement to enhance the several typologies of phygital CXs, intending to exploit physical and digital features better to respond to the differences in customers' needs, preferences, and preferences expectations. This study performs an in-depth exploratory single-case study based on semi-structured interviews with the customers, managers, and employees of the Webidoo Store. This study develops a framework illustrating the main typologies of ordinary ("hostile," "controversial", and "disappointing") and extraordinary ("passionate" and "explorative") CXs that can arise in phygital contexts. Also, it identifies some key flexible and agile strategies ("decompressive strategy," "mentoring strategy", "prompting strategy", and "entertaining strategy") that companies might follow to adjust their offerings and respond quickly to the different forms of phygital CXs to create a more compelling experience tailored to customers' needs, preferences, and expectations. Among the study's limitations are the single-case study methodology and a specific setting like the Italian one. As a result, future studies could broaden the study to include other research contexts and countries. The paper offers significant managerial insights based on the many forms of CX across ordinary and extraordinary CXs. Thus, it provides critical takeaways for businesses to meet customer demand. From this paper, managers and decision-makers can reflect on successful strategies they could use to affect the stimuli to which customers respond in an agile manner, thus enhancing phygital CXs.

Keywords: Phygital customer experience; ordinary experience; extraordinary experience; physical store; agility; flexibility; single-case study

1. Introduction

The customer experience (hereafter "CX") is a crucial marketing concept encompassing "customers' non-deliberate, spontaneous responses, and reactions to offering-related stimuli along the customer journey" (Becker and Jaakkola, 2020, p. 638). Literature acknowledges that, based on the intensity of consumers' responses and reactions to the stimuli within firms' controlled (e.g., sales channels) and non-controlled (e.g., customer reviews and press coverage) touchpoints, CX can range from ordinary to extraordinary (Becker and Jaakkola, 2020). In this regard, CX is a continuum where an ordinary CX corresponds to weaker customer responses and reactions, while an extraordinary CX triggers more robust customer responses and reactions (Brakus et al., 2009; Carú and Cova, 2003).

During the last decades, Digital Transformation - defined as the profound change in firms' business models, processes, products, and relationships due to the growing adoption of digital technologies (Cennamo et al., 2020; Verhoef et al., 2021) - has radically transformed CXs (Blázquez, 2014; Brynjolfsson and Mcafee, 2017; Lemon and Verhoef, 2016) and the role covered by the firms in the management of CX (Holmlund et al., 2020). Today, consumers utilize online and physical channels to complete transactions, switching from one channel to another as needed (Huré et al., 2017; Shen et al., 2018; Shi et al., 2020). Physical and virtual stores are therefore increasingly integrated to provide consumers a consistent CX regardless of the purchasing channel used (e.g., website, app, in-store) (Brynjolfsson et al., 2013; Cummins et al., 2016; Gao and Su, 2020; Goraya et al., 2020; Rigby, 2011). For instance, consumers can use their smartphones to check products before buying them in a physical store (Flavián et al., 2020) and browse for items in physical stores before purchasing and paying online (Gensler et al., 2017; Kuksov and Liao, 2018; Neslin et al., 2014). They can also buy online while picking up goods in the Store (Jara et al., 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic has particularly accelerated these processes (Kotoulas, 2020) so businesses and consumers can no longer separate physical from digital reality (Andreula, 2020; Mishra et al., 2021; Moravcikova and Kliestikova, 2017).

To this end, scholars highlight the rising importance of a *phygital* (synaeresis of "physical" and "digital") CX as a valuable solution that allows for creating more value for customers (Batat, 2019). Remarkably, the phygital CX represents "an omnichannel experience combining physical features and digital features in the same point of sale" (Belghiti et al., 2017, p. 65). It is "the most complete form of omnichannel experience in terms of omnichannel and

distribution offers, in that it is a physical and digital hybrid in one spatio-temporal context, the point of sale" (Belghiti et al., 2017, p. 66). Phygital CXs are transforming the function of physical stores in tandem with the growing expectations of "hyperconnected" consumers (Alexander and Cano, 2020; Alexander and Kent, 2016; Pusceddu, 2022; Verhoef et al., 2015). Physical stores are, in fact, "unique in allowing consumers to touch and feel the merchandise and provide instant gratification" (Brynjolfsson et al., 2013, p. 23). Phygital wide used in-store front-end innovations, such as augmented reality (Batat, 2019, 2021), virtual fitting rooms (Choi and Cho, 2012), tablets (Rigby et al., 2012), digital signals (Burke, 2009), QR codes (Piotrowicz and Cuthbertson, 2014), mobile apps (Shankar et al., 2016), and automatic checkouts (Renko and Druzijanic, 2014), allow consumers to become real active users during their buying experience (Moravcikova and Kliestikova, 2017). The growing use of digital technologies particularly enhances the firm's capacity to be agile (Del Giudice et al., 2021; Moi and Cabiddu, 2021; Reeves et al., 2015) and even more flexible to the continuous changes in consumer tastes, needs, and preferences (Doz and Kosonen, 2008; Ghezzi and Cavallo, 2020; Liu et al., 2020, Xing et al., 2020). Flexibility enables firms to adjust their offerings according to market changes and/or new market opportunities (Dreyer and Gronhaug, 2004; Phillips and Wright, 2009). Agility concerns the firm's ability to sense and respond to changing conditions rapidly to fulfill changes in customer needs more effectively (Hagen et al., 2019; Roberts and Grover, 2012; Zhou et al., 2019). Indeed, prior literature claims that digital transformation efforts promote organizational agility and flexibility, facilitating adaptation to changing external conditions to provide tailored CXs that better respond to customer expectations (Romero and Molina, 2011; Xie et al., 2016).

Despite research on CX in online (e.g., Bleier et al., 2019; Mclean et al., 2018; Rose et al., 2011, 2012) and offline contexts (e.g., Bustamante and Rubio, 2017; Khan and Rahman, 2016; Kim and Choi, 2016) is long-established, few studies have addressed CX in phygital contexts (Batat, 2019; Belghiti et al., 2017; Mishra et al., 2021). For example, some studies have focused on the tourism context and examined the impact of phygital on tourism experiences and tourism destination management (Akmermer, 2022). Other studies have faced how human interactions with experienced salespeople may add value to the phygital experience (Pangarkar et al., 2022). However, when arguing about phygital CXs, previous studies mainly refer to omnichannel CXs (Batat, 2019; Belghiti et al., 2017; Shi et al., 2020), suggesting only

the optimization of the CX and performance across channels (Verhoef et al., 2015) and not simultaneously at the same stage of the purchasing process. In contrast, a phygital CX represents "an omnichannel experience combining physical and digital features in the same point of sale" (Belghiti et al., 2017, p. 65). Thus, the omnichannel CX is only one of the dimensions that may contribute to characterizing a phygital CX (Alexander and Cano, 2019, 2020; Batat, 2019; Belghiti et al., 2017). Accordingly, we still have a narrow perspective of CX dimensions in a phygital context (e.g., website, app, in-store) (Brynjolfsson et al., 2013; Cummins et al., 2016; Gao and Su, 2020; Goraya et al., 2020; Rigby, 2011), making it necessary to advance knowledge on CX when dealing with a phygital landscape (Belghiti et al., 2017; Mishra et al., 2021).

Additionally, previous literature claims that CX can range from ordinary to extraordinary based on the intensity of consumers' responses and reactions to stimuli by firms (Becker and Jaakkola, 2020). However, from an empirical perspective, current research does not clarify the different typologies of ordinary and extraordinary CX in a phygital context. Previous studies focused their attention on specific combinations of online and physical channels (e.g., webrooming, showrooming, and "phygital map"), studying the influence on the CX in terms of perceptions and emotions associated with smart shopping (Flavián et al., 2020), or in terms of new interfaces and applications that combine digital multimedia content and digital multimedia devices (Nakazawa and Tokuda, 2007). Other studies focused on the theoretical underpinnings of conventional sales promotion and phygital as innovative instruments of contemporary marketing communication (Moravcikova and Kliestikova, 2017). Nevertheless, previous knowledge has not investigated the typologies of ordinary and extraordinary CXs within phygital stores.

Finally, most studies have addressed CX, focusing only on the customer perspective (e.g., Dawes and Rowley, 1998; Homburg et al., 2017; Huang, 2017; Misopoulos et al., 1998). There are still few studies that have analyzed the prominent role of companies in shaping the architecture of the phygital CX (Mele and Russo-Spena, 2022) and how they could be flexible and agile in exploiting physical and digital features to respond to consumers' needs and preferences, and, therefore, enhance CX.

To fill these gaps, this study aims to investigate 1) the typologies of phygital CXs that can arise according to the intensity of consumers' responses and reactions to stimuli triggered

by firms, and 2) the flexible and agile strategies defined by firms to affect the stimuli to which customers respond to enhance phygital CXs. The research question of this study is two-fold: (1) What kind of ordinary and extraordinary CXs take place in a phygital context?; (2) What flexible and agile strategies can firms use to affect phygital CXs? To this end, the study performs an in-depth exploratory single-case study research design (Eisenhardt, 1989), focusing on the case of Webidoo Store, the first phygital, tech-experience Store in Europe.

This study contributes to CX literature, pointing out three types of ordinary phygital CXs ("hostile experience," "controversial experience," and "disappointing experience") and two types of extraordinary phygital CXs ("passionate experience" and "explorative experience") depending on the intensity of consumers' responses and reactions to stimuli. Moreover, it shows how firms seek to affect the stimuli to which customers respond in a phygital context by adopting four flexible and agile strategies: ("decompressive strategy," "mentoring strategy", "prompting strategy", "and entertaining strategy"). While "decompressive strategy," "mentoring strategy", and "prompting strategy" are mainly used by firms to push consumers who experienced ordinary CXs to live extraordinary ones, "entertaining strategy" is instead implemented by firms to upgrade the extraordinary CXs further. From a managerial perspective, this study may help managers better address the subjectivity and contextuality related to phygital CX. They should learn how to exploit physical and digital features to influence customers' stimuli and adapt the phygital experience to satisfy consumers' needs based on the distinct types of CXs (i.e., ordinary and extraordinary).

The study is structured as follows. In section 2, I provide an overview of the prior literature about ordinary and extraordinary CX, and phygital CX; in section 3, I describe the methodology adopted in this study; in section 4, I present the study's results and conceptualize the theoretical framework; in section 5, I end with the discussion, as well as the limitations of this study and some suggestions for future research.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Customer experience: extraordinary versus ordinary

According to the extant literature, "customer experience ranges from ordinary to extraordinary, representing the intensity of customer responses to stimuli" (Becker and Jaakkola, 2020, p. 638). Remarkably, whereas extraordinary experiences are "uncommon,

infrequent, and go beyond the realm of everyday life" (Bhattacharjee and Mogilner, 2014, p. 2), ordinary experiences are characterized by an opposite conception. In this regard, CX is a continuum where ordinary CX corresponds to weaker customer responses and reactions, while extraordinary CX triggers "out-of-the-box" customer responses and reactions (Brakus et al., 2009; Carú and Cova, 2003). Extraordinary CXs are stronger, more desirable, intense, and enjoyable (Arnould and Price, 1993; Brakus et al., 2009; Caprariello and Reis, 2013; Carú and Cova, 2003, Zaubermann et al., 2009). Thus, they are seen to catch consumers' attention and endure in their memory more effectively (Bhattacharjee and Mogilner, 2014). However, the distinction between ordinary and extraordinary CXs can offer more nuanced interpretations from a practical perspective (Bhattacharjee and Mogilner, 2014). Sometimes, it could be more convenient to have ordinary, weak or mitigated reactions by customers when dealing with certain touchpoints, such as laundry service that the client does not have to worry about or a dental examination that decreases excitement and dread (Becker and Jaakkola, 2020). Moreover, ordinary experiences can become extraordinary due to their intense negativity (Becker and Jaakkola, 2020). Hence, ordinary experiences should be given deliberate attention to not detract from intended extraordinary ones (Duerden et al., 2018).

Over the last few years, the topic of CX has been radically transformed following the proliferation of the internet, mobile, and social networking technology which has intensified consumer interaction and empowerment (Brynjolfsson et al., 2013; Chou et al., 2016; Rigby, 2011; Shen et al., 2018). The underlying nature of digital tools concerning ubiquitous technologies (Okazaki and Mendez, 2013) (i.e., "ATAWADAC" - anytime, anywhere, any device, any content) has significantly affected how businesses reach and understand their customers (Shanahan et al., 2019; Shareef et al., 2018; Sheth, 2020), providing firms with a wealth of information about consumers' expectations and needs (Bradlow et al., 2017). Therefore, the increase in competition and fast commoditization of products are primary motivators for businesses to explore the potential of digital technology (Hansen and Sia, 2015), delivering engaging and unique experiences in online contexts.

Although previous literature was able to recognize the importance of integrating digital technologies into contemporary CX (e.g., Flavián et al., 2020; Moravcikova and Kliestikova, 2017; Nakazawa and Tokuda, 2007), less attention has been paid to how the simultaneous use

of physical and digital features impact CX, especially concerning the specific features that could characterize ordinary and extraordinary CXs taking place within phygital stores.

2.2.Managerial stimuli affecting phygital customer experience

Even though scholars have long used the terms phygital and omnichannel interchangeably (Alexander and Cano, 2019, 2020; Hyun et al., 2022), phygital is a relatively new concept that stands for creating captivating experiences in hybrid environments by fluidly navigating consumers across digital and physical venues (Belghiti et al., 2017). In the literature, few studies have analyzed the specific strategies used by firms to compete in a phygital context (Batat, 2022). They have shown how managers strive to deliver exclusivity to the consumer by making the buying process smooth, personalized, and tailored, providing channel choice flexibility facilitated by phygital settings (Pangarkar et al., 2022). In this sense, other studies have underlined how the increasing adoption of digital technology is mainly linked to a firm's agility improvement (Moi and Cabiddu, 2021). For instance, recent research has shed light on some strategies that firms adopt to ensure that customers can confidently visit the store and utilize technology (e.g., WhatsApp, websites, and e-commerce) to complete purchases, as well as new-age innovations such as home shopping (Pangarkar et al., 2022). Additionally, other studies focus specifically on how managers are improving and extending the adoption of Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) technologies to provide new and better phygital experiences for customers throughout their journey (Akmermer, 2022), participating in both the digital and physical worlds at the same time and in the exact location (Belghiti et al., 2017). This stream of research also illustrates how these different technologies might supplement each other (Hoyer et al., 2020), thereby enhancing the value of the customer journey along with firms' capacity to react rapidly and more flexibly to shifting customer desires and preferences (Gligor et al., 2013; Lu et al., 2011; Overby et al., 2006; Shef and Rice, 2005). Indeed, past research suggests that, by using a client-centric approach, businesses may create customized CXs that better meet customer expectations (Romero and Molina, 2011; Xie et al., 2016). Firms, in turn, can further enhance this value through digital analytics to collect more data and get further information on consumption habits (Gupta et al., 2020). Furthermore, a greater alignment between customer value and the firm's strategic needs enables managers to better sustain the company's long-term viability and growth by increasing the value of products or

services and/or their delivery to customers (Keiningham et al., 2020). Hence, whether positive or poor, consumers' impressions of the new CXs resulting from business model innovation will influence a firm's success or failure (Keiningham et al., 2020). Implementing and balancing human and digital touchpoints by constantly and carefully integrating the new-age technologies into existing practices in a customer-centric way can be critical for firms in their attempt to maximize customer satisfaction and loyalty (Baxendale et al., 2015) for a smoother and richer phygital CX that considers all age-related differences in consumers' expectations and demands (Bhattacharjee and Mogilner, 2014).

However, few studies provide evidence on how firms might be able to control the responses and reactions of customers during their experience and how "they can seek to affect the stimuli to which customers respond" (Becker and Jaakkola, 2020, p. 641). Their theorizing focuses on how firms must actively build memorable CXs to suit better consumers' demands (Pine and Gilmor, 1998), implementing effective tactics to manage and affect the phygital experience. Therefore, identifying methods to develop and manage interactions with customers (Patrício et al., 2008), monitoring and responding to the stimuli that are under the firm's control (Becker and Jaakkola, 2020) becomes paramount to triggering the strong, intended extraordinary CX (Zomerdijk and Voss, 2010). In summary, prior research has either focused on the concept of CX in a phygital context or on the role of the firm in building memorable CXs. However, the concept of phygital appears ambiguous, requiring further investigation of the variety of phygital CXs that can occur empirically. In addition, it is necessary to deepen the specific agile and flexible strategies taken by firms in their attempt to affect the stimuli to which customers respond based on the different types of ordinary and extraordinary CX. This would generate more effective and better CXs both from a consumer and a managerial perspective.

3. Methodology

I address the research questions with a qualitative single-case study (Miles and Huberman, 1984; Yin, 1994). Inductive qualitative research is particularly appropriate when developing a theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). Indeed, this method is preferred to get in-depth empirical insights and build a robust theoretical inference about under-explored phenomena (Dyer Jr and Wilkins, 1991; Eisenhardt, 1989). Furthermore, adopting a single-case study approach contributes to creating a closer connection with empirical

data (Eisenhardt, 1989), enriching new research streams for which existing theory appears inadequate (Eisenhardt, 1989).

3.1. Case selection and data collection

To conduct this study, I adopted a purposeful sampling approach (Patton, 2014) and selected an organization that relies heavily on phygital peculiarities in its relationship with customers and for which CX plays a critical role. With this goal in mind, I identified Webidoo Store as a noteworthy case for the present study. Webidoo Store represents the first-ever tech-experience phygital store in Europe. Thus, the Store is divided into seven main macro areas. Specifically, it showcases electronics, smart mobility, smart home, gaming, sport and fitness, video and audio, and lifestyle and leisure products, offering customers new ones, thanks to a careful selection of the latest innovative digital trends coming from the Asian and US markets. The company leverages the idea of a place that is both real and virtual and aspires to serve as a hub for promoting innovation and previews where online and offline experiences are combined. Unlike traditional physical stores, Webidoo Store does not offer all products in-store. For example, customers can use digital tools like digital displays and QR codes to visit the exhibition space and test the products. Hence, they can access the virtual *Webidoo.store* to book products and try them at home by paying fees based on the duration of the trial and then decide whether to use them for a limited time or buy them directly, receiving a discount from the final price[3]. This is a successful concept that has rapidly gained popularity as a venue for technology-related events and a hub for the business-to-business sector's digital transformation. Webidoo closed 2021 with a turnover of 9 million compared to 5.7 million a year earlier.

To better "confront theory with the empirical world" (Piekkari et al., 2009, p. 569), I carried out fifty-four semi-structured interviews with consumers and eight semi-structured interviews with managers and employees (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). Data were collected at the Webidoo Store based in Milan. The interviews with customers were conducted in December 2021, lasting twenty minutes on average. The interviews with managers and employees were carried out in February 2022 and lasted approximately one hour.

[3] This system is known as the "Try & Buy" formula, which is similar to e-commerce, but with the added benefit of being able to view and touch products before purchasing them.

The interview protocol for customers included questions to investigate their overall evaluation of the in-store experience (Fontana and Frey 2000) (e.g., How did you get information about the products? What was your first impression after you entered the Webidoo Store? Have you framed QR codes? How did you feel using QR codes?) (see Appendix 7). Conversely, the questions for managers and employees aimed at exploring the agile and flexible strategies used by the firm to affect the stimuli to which customers respond in a phygital context (e.g., What are the specific needs/problems that Webidoo Store tries to answer? What kind of experience do you expect to offer your customers?) (see Appendix 8). All interviews were recorded and transcribed (Bryman and Bell 2015; Seidman 2013). We stopped collecting data when we reached theoretical saturation (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

Appendices 9 and 10 summarize the detailed information on the data collected.

3.2. Data analysis and rigor

Data coding and analysis were conducted through NVivo 11 software (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013). An abductive process was implemented throughout the data analysis, combining a deductive and inductive procedure. If, on the one hand, a deductive approach guided the work with a focus on the ordinary and extraordinary CX addressed by previous scholars, on the other hand, the inductive approach gave us the possibility to discover the different typologies of ordinary and extraordinary experience characterizing a phygital context (e.g., “passionate experience”, “explorative experience”) (Kennedy and Thornberg, 2018), as well as the strategies used by the firm to affect customer stimuli.

I run three coding stages (Saldaña, 2015). To answer the first research question, I initially examined in-depth the interview data and identified interpretative codes describing the customers’ responses and reactions (Becker and Jaakkola, 2020). Data were abstracted following a concept-driven coding process (Gibbs, 2007). Each author independently categorized and labeled direct statements (Patvardhan et al., 2015), creating a provisional list of codes (e.g., profound aversion to the phygital experience; the need for informative writings for the quick perception of the product; playful-educational experience lived with the whole family) (Miles and Huberman, 1984).

Secondly, I employed a conventional iterative process based on associated and organized common/less common themes (Hycner, 1985) to identify and classify the CX dimensions in a

phygital context. Then, I examined similarities and differences between first-order concepts, "synthesizing and clustering first-order codes into higher-order themes" (Patvardhan et al., 2015, p. 411), aiming for data relationships (Corbin and Strauss, 1990). From the categorization process, the following categories of experience emerged: "hostile", "adverse", "controversial", "disappointing", "passionate", and "explorative" (see Appendix 11).

Finally, the identified categories were classified according to the definitions of ordinary experience—intended as "common, frequent, and within the realm of everyday life" (Bhattacharjee and Mogilner, 2014, p. 2) and weak in intensity (Carú and Cova, 2003)—and the definition of extraordinary experience - conceived as a rare, unusual situation, occurring outside the realm of everyday life (Bhattacharjee and Mogilner, 2014). At this juncture, the weaker the customer responses and reactions, the more ordinary the experience, and vice versa (Carú and Cova 2003).

A similar approach was followed to discover the flexible and agile strategies that the firm used to affect the stimuli to which customers respond in a phygital context based on the different types of ordinary and extraordinary CXs. Even in this case, I run three rounds of coding. Initially, I looked for descriptive codes about what kind of behaviors have been implemented by the Webidoo Store to deal with the different typologies of CXs. The outcome of this first coding stage was a list of first-order concepts that emerged from the analysis of each interview with managers and employees (e.g., incentivize activities outside the Store, introduce the sale of small products with direct purchase in the Store) (Miles and Huberman, 1984).

In the second coding stage, I checked whether the first-order concepts could be grouped into cohesive patterns of strategies. Four main types of strategies related to their intent to answer customers' requests were identified: "decompressive strategy", "mentoring strategy", "prompting strategy", and "entertaining strategy".

Finally, the strategies were related to the typologies of CX to which they impact (e.g., "decompressive strategy" was linked to the "hostile experience"). Appendix 12 provides some exemplary quotes of the overall data analysis process.

4. Findings

In addressing the first research question, "What kind of ordinary and extraordinary CXs take place in a phygital context?", this analysis provides insights into the different typologies

of ordinary and extraordinary CX when dealing with phygital contexts. In addition, I have answered the second research question, "What flexible and agile strategies can firms use to affect phygital CXs" showing that, based on the type of experience, there are four main strategies implemented by the firm's management to affect the stimuli to which customers respond according to the different typologies of CXs (i.e., ordinary and extraordinary).

4.1. Ordinary experience

This empirical analysis reveals that the phygital experience within the Store is not perceived in the same way by all customers. Therefore, the typologies of phygital ordinary CX can be broken down into "hostile experience", "controversial experience", and "disappointing experience".

Among the 17% of consumers with ordinary experiences, 33% (60+ years) showed intense hostility and opposition to phygital innovations implemented by the Store (e.g., QR codes, Try & Buy). In the **hostile experience**, in particular, customers manifest an **adverse attitude to the novelty of the phygital experience**. Sometimes against modernity at all costs, these respondents are part of a generation accustomed to "essentiality" and have little interest and familiarity with modern technologies (both innovative products and phygital technologies). This fact is often related to their "sense of pragmatism". They are consumers who love buying in local corner shops and still appreciate "touch" products to evaluate the benefit of their purchase closely. Using only phygital tools makes them unable to understand the real value of the products, causing living an unusual, distorted, and negative experience. Furthermore, they consider the digital transformation and phygital CXs dangerous for small neighborhood shops: *"[...] I aspire to a certain philosophy: the defense of neighborhood shops. I want these shops to keep on existing: where you enter, you chat, they know you, they advise you. Although these "things" are very convenient, I find them socially dangerous too. Here, an entire "commercial humus" is going to be destroyed which, in my opinion, should necessarily be helped and maintained [...]"* (Interview 45). They are refractory to innovations and changes in general. Moreover, not having control over new technologies, they are wary of being ripped off, feeling out of place after entering the Store: *"No! No, [I wouldn't recommend this experience] because I wouldn't even talk about these "things" here ... [these experiences] are not even a topic with*

people I know. That is, I don't even know how ... I don't quite understand if the theme is the electronic or something else ... ["digitization, everything" adds his wife] I don't understand. I don't understand it well! [...]" (Interview 17).

Differently, the **controversial experience** means that the experience is related to a **constructive critique linked to the physical and digital elements' correlation improvement**. Sometimes, the phygital experience requires a basic technological background. Consumers can feel disoriented without a more in-depth explanation alongside QR codes to understand the meaning of the digital products exposed in the Store. Therefore, when exploring a product autonomously, they feel confused and do not fully understand what is around them, wrongly guessing what the products inside the Store are: *"So... I felt unable to go further because there is no written explanation […] so, I decided to leave!"* (Interview 21). In this case, to embrace the necessities expressed by all types of targets, physical elements (e.g., in-store assistance) effectively integrate phygital tools. This would better address the confusion dictated by the little familiarity with phygital experiences. As the following quote exemplifies: *"[...] Of course, you just need to scan the QR code, and you can get information, but when someone enters like this, with curiosity, just because it is taking a walk, it expects, taking a tour, to be able to find information here - a bit like if somebody entered a museum […] If someone enters a museum, it walks by and wants to understand with two messages, with two "things" that address it. If there is no [information], it just walks by it [the product] and goes. This is it, in my opinion [...]"* (Interview 18). It is interesting to notice that people initially living a controversial experience have changed their minds after being instructed during phygital innovations. One interviewee, for example, completely changed his previous opinion after coming back to the Store accompanied by a person with expertise in digital technologies to be guided during the phygital experience: *"[…] It's wonderful for someone my age. However, it is a very long step further. I had to bring my son to understand the product I wanted. I knew I was not up to understanding certain things [...]"* (Interview 3).

Finally, 33% of respondents living ordinary experiences revealed a **disappointing experience**, with high **disillusionment between expectations and reality concerning the phygital CX** within the Store because of their high expectations. Notably, technology has

“democratized” knowledge, empowering consumers at the expense of firms. With constantly rising expectations towards businesses, customers now have more access to pricing, product, and quality information. Their experience begins even before they ever set foot inside the Store. Therefore, this particular target of consumers, already familiar with digital technologies, is dissatisfied with both the products displayed and the phygital tools used in the Store. These consumers expect newer, more complete, and more sophisticated experiences and find themselves disappointed and embittered once they come in and find nothing new they did not already know. As pointed out by the following quote: *“No, I mean, it’s not that ... I wouldn’t advise against it, and I wouldn’t recommend it either. I mean, if you take a walk and want to have a look, of course… I am certainly not going to tell someone “ah I saw that store go and see it!”, because I repeat: as a store it resembles many others”* (Interview 26).

4.2. Extraordinary experience

Elaborating upon the data analysis results, the typologies of CX in phygital contexts, while referring to extraordinary experiences, can be divided into “passionate experience” and “explorative experience”.

Among the interviewees in the sample with extraordinary experience (i.e., 83%), I observed people with expertise in digital technologies which moved autonomously within the Store. Notably, 58% of consumers lived a **passionate experience** appreciating the Store’s phygital features and maximizing their CX because of their advanced pre-existing knowledge. Attention to future developments becomes a fundamental element in phygital experiences, and consumers are aware that the experience they live in now will be part of their everyday life. They show themselves **open to change and are interested in going beyond the lived experience, trying to capture the most convenient aspects of phygital tools that can allow them to discover products improving their daily life**. Accustomed to living a life constantly in a hurry, these customers find themselves more at ease in being autonomous with poor contact with the staff, having already collected the necessary information in advance and preferring everything at their fingertips through the Store’s digital tools, as the following quotes exemplify: *“I did not ask for information since the QR-codes already provide digital information. I like to be independent in evaluating things and ask if I need to. I liked that the*

staff didn't come to ask if I needed help" (Interview 9); *"[I got information] by scanning the QR codes. There was no need to ask the staff. I appreciate being independent using QR codes because it allows me to spend time on the items that interest me most and jump from one to the other without dragging a person who is there for sale"* (Interview 33).

Furthermore, this analysis has shown the **explorative experience**, characterized by **curiosity and enthusiasm aroused by the novelties of the phygital CX**. For these customers, feeling surrounded by phygital tools like QR codes and cutting-edge technological products makes the CX a moment of conviviality to be lived with family and friends or even an escape to enjoy alone. The aim is to see, experience, and discover something new and never seen before: *"I saw the Store passing by on the street […] I entered for my grandchildren, and I must say that this is heaven for them. It's everything so amazing here!"* (Interview 47). Their curiosity for the phygital also arose after watching videos and impactful descriptions by famous bloggers with an unbridled passion for technology, who invited them to visit the Store. Hence, the phygital CX is lived first-hand to search for gifts or to look around: *"[…] In his videos, Andrea Galeazzi said there were all these advanced technologies. He also recorded a video here on the in-Store technologies and useful Christmas gifts we could buy […]"* (Interview 36).

4.3. Management of phygital CX through flexible and agile strategies

In this empirical analysis, I also explored the flexible and agile strategies adopted by Webidoo Store to try to affect the stimuli to which customers respond. Depending on the several forms of CX identified in the previous paragraph (i.e., extraordinary and ordinary), I then observed the strategies followed by Webidoo Store to seek, on the one hand, to adjust CX based on these forms of CX, and, on the other hand, to quickly respond to the different forms of CX to create a more compelling experience tailored to customers' needs, preferences and expectations. The firm deploys some strategies to push consumers who experienced ordinary CXs to live extraordinary CXs, notably: "decompressive strategy", "mentoring strategy", and "prompting strategy". Conversely, the firm adopts the "entertaining strategy" to upgrade and further enrich the extraordinary CXs lived by the consumer.

The data analysis reveals that managers and employees of Webidoo Store acknowledge the limits of a phygital experience. Thus, one of the biggest challenges has been underestimating

how radical the phygital CX can sometimes be. For instance, when customers live a **hostile experience**, they feel somewhat "uncomfortable" and are averse to innovation. Thus, Webidoo Store deals with the inconvenient situation by swiftly and competitively responding to consumers feeling opposition or dislike: *"[…] it's a customer who must be left in a moment that is called a decompression moment, let's say a moment in which he understands, perceives where it is and takes place as the cat does in the new home, and subsequently, it will be him, her or them to seek your field of vision […]"* (Interview A). The specific approach adopted by the sales staff and C-suite often found in the Store is the following. First, there is a "wait-and-see" phase, in which the customer enters the Store and is free to move around, sometimes stopping at the entrance to figure out where he/she is. Immediately after, there is the second phase of exploration, where the staff explains the concept of the tech-experience Store to customers. Finally, the "ambassadors" (i.e., the Store's shop assistants) inquire about the consumer's interests to create a tailor-made CX, with the possibility of seeing what is changing in the world through the innovative technologies exposed in the Store. As one Webidoo Store's manager states: *"[The shop assistant] has to be an ambassador, a technology enthusiast, an innovation enthusiast who transfers this passion to the customer [...] The beauty I always tell them is that they don't have to sell. They have to help the customer have the best experience [...]"* (Interview B). Through meticulous investigation and observation to understand the points that could destabilize the planned phygital experience, the sales forces tend to **relieve or reduce customer pressure by shifting from plan-ahead ways of serving customers toward a value-driven, customer-centric approach** that adapts to customer needs and preferences. I have defined this way to affect the stimuli to which customers respond **decompressive strategy**. The firm tries to adapt and adjust the phygital experience (usually lived in a highly automated way) through the accompaniment of hostile consumers by people who work inside the Store. They follow the consumer during the experience to communicate the value of the specific technological products exhibited in the Store and their usefulness in satisfying the consumer's potential or latent needs. Therefore, in addition to being flexible as the experience is adapted to these different conditions embedded in consumers' attitudes, they quickly perceive what is happening. In a highly responsive way, they try to find a solution represented by the human element (i.e., the involvement of people who work in the Store) who intervene to enhance the value of the phygital CX.

Managers feel that improving the CX is a mandate. However, predicting all the moving pieces during the phygital CX can be tricky despite planning everything out. Indeed, providing an outstanding CX necessitates thoughtfulness and the capacity to look at every interaction from the consumer's point of view, for example, taking care of less experienced consumers with little digital literacy. These consumers still cannot effectively perceive the experience by using only QR codes, strongly needing captions alongside the product. In this case, to turn their good intentions into action and identify opportunities, managers aim to take the phygital CX to the next level (e.g., creating a recognizable path through panels during the phygital experience). Notably, the company should keep marking out the value proposition offered while fostering consumer awareness of phygital. Webidoo Managers understand the importance of considering and choreographing flexible and agile strategies based on consumers' demands, never losing sight of their struggles when understanding the phygital CX. For instance, managers can implement a change by selling small products that can be bought directly within the Store. In this way, they also satisfy the needs of many consumers still attached to compulsive purchases. Moreover, another change implemented included a short caption or additional digital devices alongside the QR codes for particular products. Thus, the adoption of the KSP (key selling point)[4] engages the consumer on a more emotional level, allowing it to be intrigued by the QR code but at the same time have an overview of what it is looking at, what it is trying, and touching, as the following quote exemplifies: *"[...] we put some writings around, we divided the various sectors and then, next to the product, for example, the ice cream machine, we wrote "Do you want to try an ice cream?" [...] to give some of the inputs that lead people to understand what it is, stimulate the curiosity of customers a little [...]"* (Interview G). In this case, the firm pursues a **mentoring strategy**, **implementing "along the way" learning moments in the customer journey**, for example, creating a coherent and mapped path within the Store. Consumers who live the **controversial experience** do not know how phygital works and therefore fail to appreciate the overall value of the phygital experience. Thus, Webidoo Store continually develops practices to adapt and embrace change rather than rigid steps. For

[4] Key points for the sale and characteristics of the product. KSP tells the product through an emotional hooking customer become familiar with. Consumers become intrigued by the QR code but at the same time they already have an overview of what they are looking at, experiencing, testing and touching.

instance, to overcome this problem, the firm tries to find solutions that, on the one hand, adapt to the specific need of these people and, on the other hand, promptly solve any critical issues like little understanding of what is being observed. Managers do this by inserting elements explaining the product or technology to stimulate consumer interest. The written explanation increases the knowledge of what that innovation means, its usefulness, and its value. This strategy is also sound when dealing with people who live a **hostile experience**. Thus, even people who are initially adverse because they consider phygital dangerous or not very tangible can access additional information to understand the phygital experience better.

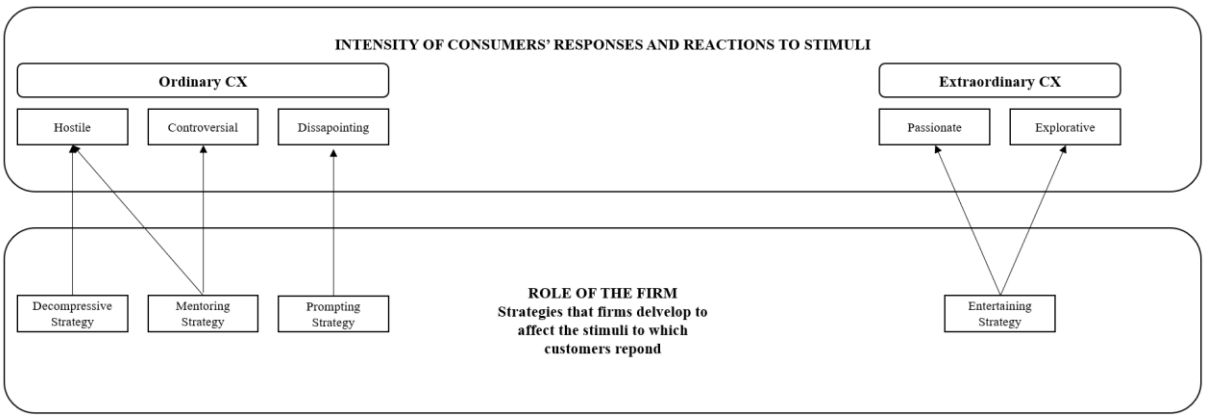
Managers often have to understand how to adapt the phygital experience to the expectations of **disappointed** customers, who expect more and are somewhat dissatisfied. Consumers' expectations dictate the chances of success of each business. Managers are aware of the possibility of facing consumers with advanced digital knowledge. They underline the importance of face-to-face conversations. People with advanced digital knowledge provide continuous feedback, getting a pulse on their satisfaction and the areas where the firm is not keeping up with expectations. Therefore, meeting with this consumer is an opportunity for dialogue and exchanging ideas. In this case, managers do not aspire to communicate to consumers the novelty of the product itself but offer them the possibility of verifying its effective functioning through the Try & Buy: *"[…] In Webidoo Store, we want the customer to know the products, testing them […] Our mission must be to encourage people to understand what technology is through our products which may not be the latest coolest ones on this planet, but in the meantime, we allow consumers to test and try them […]"* (Interview E). Enhancing the phygital CX of disappointed consumers might be helpful to adopt a **prompting strategy**, **spurring consumer-pulled improvements via real-time feedback**. The company seeks to implement ongoing innovations in the experience led by the consumers who, thanks to their experience and knowledge of technology, can tell the company which aspects to improve. There is a moment of sharing and dialogue in which the company is open to consumer feedback to adapt the offer according to their expectations. The dialogue element is therefore inserted as an integration into the experience. Real-time feedback quickly picks up and responds to what consumers want.

Providing an excellent phygital CX means building up enriching and memorable moments to improve and sustain high satisfaction levels, adapting the customer journey to create phygital CXs that constantly excite customers. Keeping clients pleased necessitates dedication as well as creativity, for example, through ongoing improvement of the website, with an idea of virtual reality in which, through the online channel, consumers can feel as if they were shopping inside the Store. The ability to independently place orders for products online is an absolute godsend to customers with minimal time to commit to the business, which necessitates constant upgrades. Through an approach that extensively embraces change, managers constantly strive to astound consumers who live **passionate** and **explorative experiences**. Thus, managers are keen to describe the Store as a "playground" for innovation lovers: *"[…] It's a playground for those who love innovation […] But there you touch it, and above all, you don't worry that when you enter, there is someone who wants to sell you. You come in to have an experience, to take a path, to see and hear innovation, and every month you enter, you find something new, and this is also very nice […]"* (Interview B). The firm may also attempt to promote events in which influencers and digital specialists accompany the phygital CX into Webidoo Store: *"[…] being phygital also means being flexible […] we are trying to organize events to let people try Unistellar - the digital telescope - […] having a night tour where you could sign up, for example, on Valentine's Day, and look at the stars under a starry sky […]"* (Interview E). Thus, an **entertaining strategy** drives managers to always look ahead in a dynamic context, such as the phygital one. This strategy is about **leveraging fun to entertain consumers while upgrading the phygital CX**. The passionate and explorative consumers have an extremely positive and open attitude towards the phygital experience. They are not averse, hostile, or insecure. What is unknown is for them something to discover and know ("explorative" CX) or something they recognize to be helpful to improve their lives in the future ("passionate" CX). In this case, the firm wants to maintain this spirit and desire by stimulating consumers more and more, including creative elements that will further enrich their experience. The firm then adapts the offer to quickly sense and respond to their "thirst" for discovery.

The findings of this study have been synthesized in the following framework (see Figure 4). On the one hand, the framework illustrates the three types of ordinary phygital CXs ("hostile

experience," "controversial experience", and "disappointing experience") and the two types of extraordinary phygital CXs ("passionate experience" and "explorative experience") based on the intensity of consumers' responses and reactions to stimuli. On the other hand, it identifies four flexible and agile strategies that can be adopted to adjust to these forms of CX and quickly respond to the different forms of CX to create a more compelling experience tailored to customers' needs, preferences, and expectations: "decompressive strategy", "mentoring strategy", "prompting strategy", and "entertaining strategy".

Figure 4: The phygital CX: ordinary versus extraordinary CX, and the role of the firm



5. Discussion

Drawing on the conceptual framework for customer experience developed by Becker and Jaakkola (2020), I develop a new framework that leverages the rich context provided by the emerging role of phygital context to examine the interplay between the different typologies of CXs and the influences of managerial strategies to affect the stimuli to which customers respond to enhance phygital CXs.

Consistent with existing studies, this research demonstrates that CX can range from ordinary to extraordinary based on the intensity of consumers' responses and reactions to stimuli by firms (Becker and Jaakkola, 2020). However, the present study contributes to the literature by explaining the different typologies of ordinary and extraordinary CX in a phygital context. Moreover, previous studies have underlined that ordinary experiences are "common, frequent, and within the realm of everyday life" (Bhattacharjee and Mogilner, 2014, p. 2), hence weaker and worst for customers compared to extraordinary ones (Brakus et al., 2009; Carú and

Cova, 2003; Zaubermann et al., 2009). By extending prior research, this study shows that, in a phygital context, ordinary experiences are not necessarily related to weak experiences, where customers are poorly involved in their buying experience. Indeed, an ordinary CX in a phygital setting is often associated with an inadequate understanding of the phygital contexts (e.g., products, services, tools), which makes the overall experience unclear. This evidence, therefore, questions literature that has purely focused on an ordinary experience as a common and frequent experience (Bhattacharjee and Mogilner, 2014), clashing with the findings that see ordinary experience in a phygital context as a completely new experience, almost dangerous and at times misunderstood. Moreover, ordinary experiences can be recurrent and not new for specific targets of consumers experts in the latest phygital trends, necessitating constant incentives and motivation to maintain high customer interest throughout his journey. In this sense, this study extends previous literature (Bhattacharjee and Mogilner, 2014; Brakus et al., 2009; Carú and Cova, 2003), highlighting how these ordinary experiences in a phygital context are among the most complex, given the consumers' confidence to know every single aspect of phygital with a little predisposition to further learning.

Furthermore, prior literature conceptualizes extraordinary CX as "intense, positive, intrinsically enjoyable" (Arnould and Price, 1993, p. 25) that "capture people's attention and endure in memories, affording happiness at any stage of life" (Bhattacharjee and Mogilner, 2014, p. 13). Scholars assume them to be both unusual and inherently superior to ordinary experiences (Zaubermann et al., 2009). By extending previous studies (Bhattacharjee and Mogilner, 2014; Brakus et al., 2009; Carú and Cova, 2003), this work shows how extraordinary experiences can be traced back to great familiarity with phygital experiences. The findings demonstrate that consumers that show solid digital knowledge in the phygital field are likely to live the phygital experience grasping each function of phygital tools. Furthermore, explorative experiences lived by consumers - who might not be used to phygital and digital technologies - reverberate in extraordinary CXs due to the ability to get involved. This happens through a positive predisposition to learning and knowledge, i.e., a proactive attitude towards the phygital CX.

This article also contributes to extending prior knowledge by identifying the specific agile and flexible strategies through which firms try to affect the stimuli to which customers respond

depending on the different forms of CX (ordinary and extraordinary). According to the literature, managers react quickly and flexibly to changing consumer needs and preferences throughout the CX (Gligor et al., 2013; Lu et al., 2011; Overby et al., 2006; Shef and Rice, 2005). In this regard, previous studies have argued about how managers strive to deliver exclusivity to the consumer by making the buying process smooth, personalized, and tailored by using multiple tools (e.g., websites, e-commerce) to complete purchases, as well as new-age innovations such as home shopping, providing channel choice flexibility in phygital settings (Pangarkar et al., 2022). Recent studies also highlight the use of Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) technologies to provide new and better phygital experiences for customers throughout their journey (Akmermer, 2022). By improving prior literature, this study shows how a firm's management can better adjust ordinary and extraordinary CXs in phygital settings. In particular, following strategies such as "decompressive strategy," "mentoring strategy" and "prompting strategy", the firm intends to push consumers who experienced ordinary CXs to live extraordinary CXs. Conversely, the firm aims to upgrade the intended CXs based on the extraordinary CXs lived by consumers employing an "entertaining strategy." Moreover, by extending previous research, this work highlights the importance of pursuing and implementing up-to-date and revised strategies to address such a particular and challenging experience as the phygital one. Interestingly, a phygital CX is an experience that must be sustained actively and constantly, with a watchful eye toward the latest innovation trends. Therefore, it is a continuous work of reviewing and adapting the KPIs (Key Performance Indicators), underlining the need to focus on the whole market segment than just focusing on customers' high experience in phygital settings.

5.1. Managerial implications

The present study provides significant managerial insights. Although organizations can offer the same experience to every customer, the latter will not experience the same because CX depends on their related contextual factors, e.g., mood, past experiences, or knowledge (Becker and Jaakkola, 2020). Hence, given the CX's subjectivity and contextuality, business managers and owners should focus on controlled stimuli and touchpoints to trigger the intended CX. In this regard, the framework conceptualized in the present work showcase practical guidelines on the typologies of CX in phygital contexts throughout the intensity of customer

responses and reactions to stimuli, i.e., ordinary to extraordinary, and valuable takeaways on how management can leverage physical and digital features to respond to the requirements of customers in an agile and flexible way, focusing on the various kinds of CX (i.e., ordinary and extraordinary) and create more effective CXs. Specifically, managers and practitioners must concentrate on CX's ordinary and extraordinary typologies in phygital contexts to engage every consumer in his/her customer journey, implementing targeted moves to boost extraordinary CXs. Being agile and flexible, in this sense, will be fundamental to guide the consumer who lives an ordinary experience CX towards an extraordinary one. Amplifying the extraordinary CX will still be paramount to consumers who already enjoyed this type of CX, striving to offer them an ever more unique and captivating CX.

5.2. Limitations and future research

This study owns some limitations that may be addressed by future research. First, it employs a single-case study research design. Future studies could investigate this topic in other research contexts, e.g., fashion or grocery stores. Also, this study focused on the Italian context. Extending the research to other countries would help enrich existing knowledge.

Moreover, the qualitative analysis employed by a single-case study does not ensure the generalization of the findings. Thus, an important avenue for future research could be testing the proposed framework on a larger sample through a quantitative method. For instance, it would be interesting to carry out a survey that measures the difference in the CXs based on consumer knowledge of technology and digital.

Also, what emerged from this study is a manifestation of contrasting, distorted, and somehow adverse reactions to stimuli from consumers living ordinary CXs, leading them to "hostile," "controversial", and "disappointing" CXs. On the other side, extraordinary CXs have aroused positive feelings in consumers, resulting in "passionate" and "exploratory" CXs. Future studies could identify and examine additional types of ordinary and extraordinary CXs in a phygital setting.

Finally, this study has examined phygital CX through the reality of a phygital store based on Try & Buy. Future studies could focus on other phygital tools that have revolutionized the CX, such as artificial intelligence systems based on machine learning, where consumers receive

the bill directly on the smartphone, without any checks, and without scanning QR or bar codes on any cash desk.

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Conclusion and final remarks

The overall objective of the present dissertation was to investigate how organizations respond in the face of crises deeply.

Hence, the specific aim of Paper 1 has been to develop a systematic literature review (SLR) framework (Denyer et al., 2008; Macpherson et al., 2015; Tranfield et al., 2003) examining the kind of strategies that may be implemented by SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises) throughout the different stages of unexpected events. Papers 2 and 3 aimed to further extend and deepen the theoretical and empirical knowledge on business strategy modification and implementation by empirically investigating this topic in a broader research context. Notably, Paper 2 aimed to examine firms' strategies to support resilience throughout the crisis from the perspective of executives. Finally, Paper 3 had the objective of empirically investigating the typologies of phygital (interplay between the words "physical" and "digital") customer experiences (CXs) that can arise in high-tech retail based on the intensity of consumers' responses and reactions to stimuli triggered by firms.

The originality of this thesis has been to advance scholarly attention toward business strategies in the current landscape triggered by frequent and disrupting crises. Thus, the overarching contributions of this work considerably extend the literature on business strategies both from a theoretical and empirical perspective in several ways.

Paper 1 has summarized how SMEs react in times of crisis, illustrating core themes in previous research concerning the phases of crisis prevention, response, and recovery (Elliott et al., 2005; Hills, 1998; Smith, 1990).

Thanks to an SLR, the outcomes of this study advance a circular event framework and illustrate the leading business strategies implemented by SMEs in different moments of unpredicted circumstances. Thus, the intention is to put the basis for further empirical exploration and analysis in crisis management and business strategies. Since the relevance of

crisis management is evident both in research and practice in numerous fields (Doern et al., 2019) but remains still under-explored for SMEs (e.g., Herbane, 2010; Kraus et al., 2013), this work contributed to extending prior research by proposing a framework that highlights the circularity of the crisis prevention, response, and recovery phases. Interestingly, it points out how since all strategic responses are based on previous experience, the same experience can lead to several strategic responses during the crisis' various phases.

Paper 2 performed an initial empirical investigation on strategies that firms can develop to become resilient in the face of crises through a multiple-case study - looking at a high representative context, that is, the Norwegian architecture, engineering, and construction (AEC) industry, during the most recent COVID-19 crisis. This industry has incredibly prospered during the pandemic crisis. What I investigated was why and what strategies it has implemented. To do this, data and interviews were collected in collaboration with the BI - Norwegian Business School - Centre for Construction Industry[5]. Interestingly, prior research argues about the significance of resilience (Alexander, 2013; Linnenluecke, 2017; Sabatino, 2016; Sutcliffe and Vogus, 2003; Van der Vergt et al., 2015) but does not properly explain the strategies firms adopt to be more resilient throughout the crisis (Parker and Ameen, 2018). Specifically, previous scholars have highlighted different perspectives, for instance, acknowledging the existence of three crisis phases, i.e., crisis prevention, response, and recovery (Elliott et al., 2005; Hills, 1998; Smith, 1990), making a first attempt to examining throughout the different stages of a crisis, the kind of strategies that firms may implement (Pusceddu et al., 2021, 2022). Hence, the analysis conducted with this second study based on an in-depth exploratory multiple-case study (Eisenhardt, 1989; Miles and Huberman, 1984; Yin, 1994), contributed to extending prior literature by identifying five typologies of resilience strategies to describe ten behaviors that could support businesses to be resilient throughout a crisis. The findings illustrate each of the five strategies, i.e., "forerunner strategy", "rational strategy", "sensitive strategy", "resourceful strategy", and "visionary strategy".

[5] The Centre for Construction Industry conducts high-quality research that informs the construction sector (in a broad sense), governmental bodies, and society at large on the possibilities and difficulties that the industry faces today. The Center focuses primarily on process research in order to understand and realize changes in the industry, as well as how the sector is evolving into a sustainable and digital area.

Paper 3, has further extended the body of knowledge of business strategies during a context of uncertainty in organizations. Thus, through a single-case study research design in retail, the critical role of phygital customer experiences has been examined. Since prior research, for example, acknowledges the growing importance of phygital CX, research on this topic is still in its infancy (Batat, 2019; Belghiti et al., 2017; Mishra et al., 2021), but does not properly shed light on the differences between ordinary and extraordinary CX in a phygital setting and how enterprises may be flexible and agile to exploit physical and digital elements to adapt to customers' demands and preferences - therefore improving CXs - the contributions of this study are crucial. Aware of how phygital was an emerging trend, I immersed myself in a new and stimulating learning path of augmented reality, virtual reality, and many other constantly evolving aspects (showrooming, webrooming, click & collect etc.). In this sense, one of the main challenges was analyzing coherent and adequate literature and identifying with a "tech-addicted researcher". What emerged is how the literature has considered phygital in some cases in the form of omnichannel, with a certain reluctance to tackle the subject for what it is: an unprecedented (and probably no return) digital transformation. Thanks to the analysis performed with this third study based on a single-case study research design (Eisenhardt, 1989), the proposed framework outlines both the typologies of phygital CXs that can arise according to the intensity of consumers' responses and reactions to stimuli triggered by firms and the agile and flexible strategies that firms use to affect the stimuli to which customers respond to enhance phygital CXs. Hence, this work contributed to extending prior literature by addressing the subjectivity and contextuality related to phygital CX. Moreover, it addressed how to exploit physical and digital features to influence customers' stimuli and how businesses can adapt to satisfy consumers' needs based on the different types of CXs (i.e., ordinary and extraordinary).

Overall, the implications of the present thesis from a managerial perspective are crucial. Crisis management has become paramount for organizations because of recent crises' high frequency and impact. Hence, managers and practitioners constantly seek new, more effective business strategies to cope with ever-changing business scenarios.

The present thesis has extensively offered new insights and opportunities for firms seeking to redefine and improve their business strategies in evolving business contexts characterized by the high uncertainty of crises.

The findings of the studies presented in this dissertation suggest that managers and practitioners should recognize the importance of implementing up-to-date business strategies. Thus, the present thesis could help them craft a crisis-ready culture to thrive when unexpected events, such as crises, jeopardize business operations.

In summary, the outcomes of this work provided significant managerial insights into efficient crisis management strategies, especially considering the current challenging times due to the COVID-19 pandemic. More specifically, this research increases managers' and practitioners' awareness of how crises are evolving circumstances and crisis management, an ongoing process that must be carried out throughout the company's life. Moreover, the thesis provided critical, practical guidelines on what strategic actions need to be implemented, developed, and improved to support the business to be resilient amid crises - by determining which strategies may be more appropriate based on the evolution of the crisis. Finally, the present thesis showcased practical guidelines on the typologies of CX in phygital contexts throughout the intensity of customer responses and reactions to stimuli, i.e., ordinary to extraordinary, and valuable takeaways on how management can leverage physical and digital features to respond to the requirements of customers in an agile and flexible way, focusing on the various kinds of CX (i.e., ordinary and extraordinary) and create more effective CXs. Specifically, managers and practitioners must focus on CX's ordinary and extraordinary typologies in phygital contexts to engage every consumer in his/her customer journey, implementing targeted moves to boost extraordinary CXs.

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Appendix 1: Summarized SLR Process

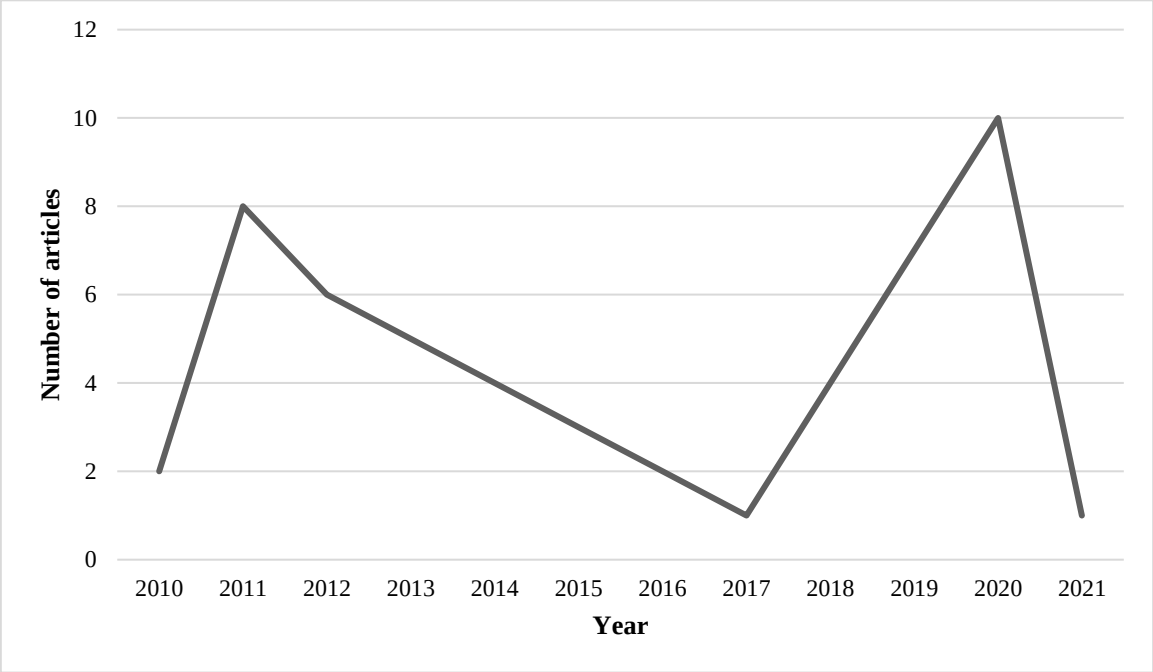
Filter	Description	WoS	Scopus	Total
Step 1	Articles with selected keywords After merging the results from the different databases and deleting duplicate articles	833	824	1657 1379
Step 2	After reading the titles and abstracts, eliminating the non-relevant articles			89
Step 3	After having excluded papers not available in full-text After reading the full articles and eliminating the non-relevant articles			75 39
Step 4	Hand searching and citation tracking			14
	Final Sample			53

Source: Personal elaboration based on Calabrò et al. (2018)

Appendix 2: List of Journals used in the SLR, journal ranking, and articles per Journal

#	Journal title	Article count	JCR IF 2021	%
1	International Journal of Production Research	6	8,568	11.32
2	Entrepreneurship & Regional Development	4	5,149	7.55
3	International Small Business Journal	4	5.473	7.55
4	Journal of Business Research	4	7,550	7.55
5	Journal of Small Business Management	4	4,544	7.55
6	International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research	3	4,412	5.66
7	Industrial Marketing Management	2	6,960	3.77
8	International Journal of Decision Sciences, Risk and Management	2	-	3.77
9	International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction	2	4,320	3.77
10	Journal of Small Business & Entrepreneurship	2	-	3.77
11	Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences	2	-	3.77
12	Small Business Economics	2	8,164	3.77
13	Applied Economics & Business Research	1	-	1.89
14	Business Research Quarterly	1	5,475	1.89
15	Employee Relations	1	2,248	1.89
16	International Journal of Business Excellence	1	-	1.89
17	International Journal of Economic Behavior	1	-	1.89
18	International Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Administration	1	-	1.89
19	International Journal of Learning and Intellectual Capital	1	-	1.89
20	International Journal of Learning and Change	1	-	1.89
21	International Journal of Production Economics	1	7,885	1.89
22	Journal of Business Venturing Insight	1	-	1.89
23	Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management	1	4,391	1.89
24	Journal of General Management	1	-	1.89
25	Journal of Small Business Strategy	1	-	1.89
26	Long Range Planning	1	8,802	1.89
27	Research in Globalization	1	-	1.89
28	Review of Managerial Science	1	7,127	1.89
	Total	53		100

Appendix 3: Distribution of articles over the years (2010-2020)



Appendix 4: Summary of data

Authors / Year	Relationship examined	Methodology	Findings
Adekola & Clelland (2020)	Business resilience, community resilience, and natural hazards	Qualitative study	Companies play advisory and advocacy roles, make financial and material contributions to local community resilience programs, and contribute to the rapid community recovery through different corporate social responsibility activities.
Alberti, Ferrario, & Pizzurno (2018)	Resilience, SME, knowledge, resources, competitiveness, and resource-based view of the firm	Quantitative study	Not investigated or specified.
Antonioli & Montresor (2021)	Innovation persistence, manufacturing, crisis, policy, and strategies	Quantitative study	The persistence of innovation is limited to process innovation and to a radical form of innovation.
Asgary, Anjum, & Azimi (2012)	Small businesses, disaster recovery, and business continuity	Quantitative study	Providing minimal government and non-governmental funding enhances SME disaster recovery's speed, efficiency, and sustainability.
Ates & Bititci (2011)	Organizational resilience, SME, change process, and manufacturing	Qualitative study	SMEs' sustainability and resilience can be strengthened by (1) embracing organizational and people dimensions and operational aspects of change management, and (2) paying attention to long-term planning and external communication to drive change proactively.
Bamiatzi & Kirchmaier (2014)	Declining industries, divergence, over-performers, small firms, and strategy	Mixed-methods study	An adverse environment does not inherently hinder firm growth, and it is possible to invoke individual company-specific strategies to resolve unpredictable market conditions.
Battisti, Beynon, Pickernell, & Deakins (2019)	SMEs, Fuzzy clustering, NCaRBS, Learning, Global financial crisis, and cognition	Quantitative study	Not investigated or specified.
Battisti, Deakins, & Perry (2013)	Strategic behavior, rural SMEs, and urban SMEs	Quantitative study	Not investigated or specified.
Bourletidis & Triantafyllopoulos (2014)	Crisis, SMEs, and commerce	Qualitative study	The strategic management of crisis creates a new culture and understanding for SMEs, providing a wide range of tools and conceptual frameworks to aid crisis anticipation.
Branicki, Sullivan-Taylor, & Livschitz (2018)	SME, entrepreneurship, organizational resilience, and entrepreneurial resilience	Qualitative study	Entrepreneurial resilience provides a basis for SME resilience that differs considerably from best practices in larger companies.
Cassia, De Massis, & Pizzurno (2012)	Family business, family firms, new product development, innovation,	Qualitative study	The long-term orientation of family firms vs. non-family firms plays a crucial role in implementing new product development projects with long-term thrust.

	and strategic entrepreneurship		
Cioppi, Musso, Pencarelli, & Savelli (2014)	Strategy, economic crisis, SMEs, and firm's performance.	Qualitative study	Not investigated or specified.
Demmer, Vickery, & Calantone (2011)	SMEs, resilience, manufacturing performance, and enterprise renewal	Qualitative study	Not investigated or specified.
Dias, Manuel, Dutschke, Pereira, & Pereira (2020)	Dynamic capabilities, economic crises, SMEs, entrepreneurship, innovation capacity, partnerships, and knowledge accumulation	Quantitative study	SMEs are more objective and effective in using their resources and skills throughout the crisis.
Doern (2016)	Crises, crisis management, riot, and small businesses	Qualitative study	Whether small businesses tend to be resilient or vulnerable depends on experience, mindset, and resources.
Dolz, Iborra, & Safón (2019)	Survival, SME, top management team, family ownership, and organizational ambidexterity	Quantitative study	Not investigated or specified.
Edvardsson & Teitsdóttir (2015)	Outsourcing, financial crisis, SMEs, service companies, HRM, and IT	Quantitative study	Not investigated or specified.
Eggers & Kraus (2011)	Entrepreneurial orientation, customer orientation, entrepreneurial marketing orientation, and crisis	Qualitative study	The interplay between the customer and the entrepreneurial orientation constitutes the entrepreneurial marketing discipline.
Giannacourou, Kantaraki, & Christopoulou (2015)	Economic crisis, SMEs, and perceived uncertainty	Qualitative study	Not investigated or specified.
Gunasekaran, Rai, & Griffin (2011)	SMEs, resilience, competitiveness, globalization, and technology	Qualitative study	Not investigated or specified.
Ha, Childs, Kim, & Fairhurst (2020)	Natural disaster, small business, wildfire, business preparedness, and business recovery	Qualitative study	Not investigated or specified.
Herbane (2010)	Business continuity management, business reliance, crisis management, and small business	Qualitative study	Owner-managers can frame threats in two ways – a 'growth vulnerability paradox' and the 'risk elastic' – while their understanding of crisis is conceptualized using a chronological approach to define three main areas: crisis threat, crisis response, and crisis impact.
Herbane (2019)	Organizational resilience. social capital, SMEs, business continuity, and entrepreneurship	Quantitative study	Variations in formalization practices reflect differences in firm location, personal networks, the effect of external crisis events, and entrepreneurs' approaches towards crisis prevention.
Hong, Huang, & Li (2012)	Crisis management and SMEs	Qualitative study	Not investigated or specified.

Iborra, Safón, & Dolz (2019)	Resilience, organizational ambidexterity, strategic consistency, and SME	Quantitative study	Not investigated or specified.
Ismail, Poolton, & Sharifi (2011)	Resilience, agility, and strategic planning	Mixed-methods study	With the addition of a multi-strategy assessment tool, SMEs will prioritize their capabilities to achieve a degree of 'strategic readiness'.
Johansen (2020)	SMEs, manufacturing, Corona pandemic, globalization, and regionalization	Qualitative study	Not investigated or specified.
Kottika et al. (2020)	Market orientation, entrepreneurial orientation, personality traits, SMEs, and economic crisis	Quantitative study	The right approach to survival is: (a) the entrepreneurs' personality traits and skills that affect the market and entrepreneurial orientations of SMEs, (b) the adoption of such orientations that keep impacting the firms' performance, and finally (c) the implementation of strategies to reaching higher quality standards for goods and services, combined with tactics relevant to downsizing, marketing actions, extroversion, and financial management.
Kraus, Rigtering, Hughes, & Hosman (2012)	Entrepreneurial orientation, economic crisis, proactiveness, innovativeness. risk-taking, growth, and SME performance	Quantitative study	Proactive firm behavior positively contributes to SME performance during the economic crisis.
Lado, Duque, & Alvarez Bassi (2013)	Contemporary marketing practices, market orientation (MO), business performance, marketing practices, crisis, and MSMEs	Quantitative study	Not investigated or specified.
Laskovaia, Marino, Shirokova, & Wales (2019)	Effectuation, causation. entrepreneurial orientation, firm performance, and economic crisis	Quantitative study	EO plays a crucial moderating role, shaping the relationships between managers' decision-making logic and financial performance.
Le Nguyen & Kock (2011)	Chaos theory, crisis, SMEs, innovation, and flexibility	Qualitative study	Not investigated or specified.
Macpherson, Herbane, & Jones (2015)	Small firms, practice, crisis, resources, dynamic capabilities, and routines	Qualitative study	The combination of coping mechanisms, the extension of networks, and the reprisal of previously successful solutions support resource accretion and the subsequent expanded solution space where entrepreneurs begin embedding new capabilities.
Madrid-Guijarro, García-Pérez-de-Lema, & Van Auken (2013)	Product, process, management, innovation, manufacturing, SMEs, and economic downturn	Quantitative study	Not investigated or specified.

Mayr & Lixl (2019)	Informal restructuring, reorganization, and SME	Qualitative study	Crises are predominantly caused internally in SMEs, and successful restructuring frequently requires both banks' and entrepreneurs' engagement.
Mayr, Mitter, & Aichmayr (2017)	Bankruptcy, failure, SMEs, crisis, and repositioning	Quantitative study	The turnaround's pivotal factor is repositioning, characterized by a unique selling proposition combined with innovation, change, and integration into networks.
Mendoza, Lau, & Castillejos (2018)	Aggregate shocks, crisis resilience, and SME	Qualitative study	Not investigated or specified.
Moneva-Abadía, Gallardo-Vázquez, & Sánchez-Hernández (2019)	Corporate social responsibility, competitive success, economic crisis, and SMEs	Quantitative study	Socially responsible strategies are a decisive factor in the success of companies in times of economic downturn.
Morrish & Jones (2020)	Entrepreneurial marketing, business disaster, recovery, opportunity-seeking, resource-leveraging, value-creation, and risk	Qualitative study	Not investigated or specified.
Naidoo (2010)	Innovation, market orientation, and SMEs	Quantitative study	Not investigated or specified.
Ogawa & Tanaka (2013)	Global financial crisis, bank-bank relationship, customer-supplier relationship, demand shock, supply shock, and financial shock	Quantitative study	Not investigated or specified.
Osiyevskyy, Shirokova, & Paavo (2020)	Exploration, exploitation, performance variability, and crisis severity	Quantitative study	Not investigated or specified.
Pal, Andersson, & Torstensson (2012)	Resilience, strategic crisis planning, growth, SMEs; business continuity planning, crisis management, and textile and clothing	Qualitative study	Not investigated or specified.
Pal, Torstensson, & Mattila (2014)	Resilience, crisis, SME, Textile and clothing	Quantitative study	Not investigated or specified.
Pal, Westerlind, & Torstensson (2013)	Crisis strategic planning, resilience, SMEs, strategies, growth, and business continuity management	Multi-method, multi-point of view approach	Not investigated or specified.
Parker & Ameen (2018)	Resilience disruption, resource	Quantitative study	The firm's capacity to reconfigure its resources makes it possible to become

	reconfiguration, risk management, and emerging economy		more robust. Disruption impact does not moderate this relationship.
Shafi, Liu, & Ren (2020)	COVID-19, MSMEs, crisis, policy recommendations, business survival	Qualitative study	Not investigated or specified.
Smallbone, Deakins, Battisti, & Kitching (2012)	Small firms, adaptive behavior, and economic crisis	Quantitative study	Not investigated or specified.
Thorgren & Williams (2020)	Shock, crisis, entrepreneurship, COVID-19	Mixed methods study	Not investigated or specified.
Thun, Drüke, & Hoenig (2011)	Supply chain risk management, SME, reactive and preventive instruments	Quantitative study	SMEs rely primarily on reactive resources that absorb risks through the development of redundancies instead of preventing risks.
Tognazzo, Gubitta, & Favaron (2016)	SMEs profitability, SMEs growth, crisis, and organizational slack	Quantitative study	Small firms must maintain high profitability levels to achieve sound growth during recessions like their larger counterparts. Potential financial slack is vital in driving profitability during crisis times, although it is not related to higher growth. Investing in R&D does not impact small firms' ability to be profitable and grow during recessions.
Tsilika, Kakouris, Apostolopoulos, & Dermatis (2020)	Entrepreneurship, resourceless environment, entrepreneurial bricolage, SMEs, and crisis	Qualitative study	Not investigated or specified.
Vargo & Seville (2011)	Resilience, organizations, strategic planning, crisis management, and SMEs	Qualitative study	Not investigated or specified.

Appendix 5: Semi-structured interview protocol

A. **Name, Surname**
B. **What is your role within the company? What are your main tasks or activities?**

1. **How do you plan against potential destructive crisis effects?**

   1.1. Have you ever experienced an intense crisis before the pandemic?
   1.2. Before the pandemic, did you implement specific plans to prevent unwanted crisis effects (e.g., long-track strategic planning records, setting up crisis management plans, and investing in equipment infrastructures)?
   1.3. Did you take out insurance to protect the company from financial losses?
   1.4. Among the strategies you used, were there socially responsible strategies (e.g., recycling and reducing emissions and waste, saving energy to achieve greater efficiency, introducing alternative energy sources, using, purchasing, or producing organic items)? Did it help?

2. **What about your financial resources to prevent unexpected risks?**

   2.1. Did you ensure that the company had adequate financial resources to safeguard business management?
   2.2. Were there any projects you put aside because you considered them too risky?
   2.3. Have you been proactive in promoting and anticipating changes in clients?
   2.4. Were there demand trends you anticipated?
   2.5. Did you promote innovative services to existing consumers and look for new international markets for trading activities to evolve positively and grow in the wake of a crisis?

3. **Did you have a good network before the crisis that could have helped you?**

3.1. Did you find outside help to create an open business environment through meaningful complementary alliances building - with loyal customers, suppliers, employees, and competitors?

4. What have been your cost minimization and cash flow protection strategies

4.1. What are your business priorities in identifying spending to pause or cut back to protect cash flow, cover potential absences, and generate liquidity?

4.2. Did you interrupt personnel recruitment? Did you reduce or cut down employees' wages and emoluments? If yes, how did you transparently communicate with organizational members to make them understand the rationale of the business decision?

4.3. According to the established law, did you think about flexible furlough schemes (i.e., temporary leave without pay and working hours reduction)?

4.4. Did you seek to reduce loss-making and risky investments to focus on more profitable ones? What have been your most profitable assets where you could have thought to allocate financial resources?

4.5. Did you have enough cash reserves? Did the local government help you financially?

5. What have been your revenue generation strategies during the crisis?

5.1. How did the needs of your clients change?

5.2. What have been your innovation investments? How did you adapt your products? How did you stimulate demand and renew supply to stay on your customers' minds and be at the forefront of responding to the crisis?

5.3. Did you reposition your offer to go into new markets?

5.4. Did you outsource?

5.5. Did you budget funds for external marketing communication channels - such as social media, website, catalogs, and public relations?

5.6. What is your opinion about communicating to consumers and staff in light of the crisis?

6. **What about the relationship with your stakeholders?**

   6.1. During the heightened state of the crisis, did you mobilize practical resources, strengthen or build the relationship with the stakeholders - suppliers, clients, community, organizational members, and other businesses - and ask for support?
   6.2. If yes, did it help?

7. **Did you leverage the existing assets, knowledge, and competencies (exploitation) or try to develop new ones (exploration)?**

   7.1. To ensure minimal disruption overall, did you leverage the existing assets, knowledge, and competencies (exploitation) or try to develop the new ones (exploration)?

8. **Did you re-configure your business model?**

   8.1. Did you spot opportunities to do things differently? Did you take risks?
   8.2. Did you try to invest in side businesses? How did it go?
   8.3. Did you review your business model to reach out to your target customer segments and deliver your value proposition?
   8.4. What did you learn during this crisis? Is there something you regret you did not do to prevent some harmful consequences?

9. **Did you re-establish the stakeholder and employee relationships?**

   9.1. What about the relationship with your stakeholders (i.e., community, suppliers, customers, and employees)? Did you re-establish stakeholder relationships and rely on their support? Did it help?
   9.2. Did you invest in the human aspect and retain old employees? Did you look to recovery plans for rehiring, establishing personnel funds, and training personnel in disaster response?

10. Why do you think the AEC industry did not suffer from the COVID-19 crisis?

11. What secret made it possible for your firm to thrive despite the chaos?

Appendix 6: Supporting data extracts

Aggregate dimensions	Second-order codes	First-order codes	Rapresentative quotations
FORERUNNER STRATEGY	**Preparing for the time ahead**	**Making offhand decisions between family and leadership**	"[…] My family is in Tromsø, but my office is in Oslo, so I work in Oslo at the weekend and see my family weekly. My CEO told me. He had been called personally by the prime minister saying that this afternoon, he would have closed down the country with a lockdown in effect from that afternoon. […] My CEO called me and told me what the Prime Minister had said: "Christian, you are responsible for the crisis, but you're also responsible for your family" […] I decided to stayed in Oslo when I went over to the nearest grocery store and bought what I needed to survive if I were in a situation where I had to have to stay in my apartment without the ability to go to a store […]" (EX-15)
		Showing solid leadership to foresee the crisis while remaining focused and committed to the own vision	"The pandemic has been a systemic risk for a long time. We all knew for a long time that pandemics were one of the main societal risks. The pandemic was not a surprise in a dynamic country […] We were prepared for the immediate actions and to work offline. That's been a major preparation, considering efficiency and working (i.e., distributed working digitally and online and making all systems resilient). We didn't have any IT systems that required presence in the office. Many of these things within electronics were still going smoothly for a long time. And that made us more robust." (EX-14).
	Understanding the key role of teams and the need to map out the worst that could happen	**Relying on teams to ask for support: assigning a temporary task force to manage the fast-paced landscape**	"[…] We decided to create a new task force, CORONA, that was primarily implemented to deal with this crisis. So I think we had risk awareness in our business and a preparedness plan. We had a team that helped us to act quickly when things happened. This crisis now is different because we know that something will happen. We just don't know when […]" (EX-3a)
		Mastering contingency planning: alter business strategies in real-time instead of following behind	"[…] We closed down and canceled some more extensive arrangements that were meant to take place before the 17th because it was so much uncertainty, and we got a bit of criticism for it, saying we were hysterical. Looking back on it, we were right. And I must say that part of this is my experience from working. We had a project in Liberia when Ebola broke out. And I think up till then; I had always assumed that the World Health Organization, you sit and wait for them to decide to say […] So we learned from that situation in Liberia that we had to decide to take our people home, even before it was announced as a

			pandemic, and the liability that we take on is, of course, a breach of contract […]" (EX-13); "[…] when most people were still on holiday in early august 2020, the Coastal Cruiser/Hurtigruten Roald Amundsen came to Tromsø with a high number of COVID-19 sick passengers and staff. We assembled our crisis management group before the weekend and assessed that this could start a new national peak. We already enforced new office work rules on Friday and communicated them to all employees the same day […]" (EX-15)
		Accelerating the frequency of meetings	"[…] We had our first task force meetings every morning because I was in the task force. So we started in the morning with the task force meetings for half an hour. Then I had a meeting with my management team, half an hour every morning. So we knew what we would do and informed my managers, and during the day, it was done. So it was very agile and action-minded […]" (EX-3a:); "[…] we tried to leverage our existing competencies in setting up meetings or daily reviews so that you could ask anyone with the same type of responsibility for help or advice […]" (EX-7)
		Making plans for potential worst-case scenarios	"[…] Once we closed down and started to estimate what would have been the worst-case scenario and how many people we might have to lay off, it was a bleak scenario […]" (EX-4a); "It's so unsure now. I am afraid the turnover can fall, and in this way, we need to reduce costs in the business. It's the worst case" (EX-8); "[…] Of course, we started with a very detailed cash flow analysis and ran out of the four scenarios. So what's the worst scenario? And what if the run-of-the-mill scenario…? So we had very, very good control of that […]" (EX-13)
RATIONAL STRATEGY	**Going hybrid while sticking to the COVID rules**	**Making safety a trademark within organizations**	"Yes. So obviously, we understood that you know by the regulations from the government that you were not supposed to meet at work. We realized that this would be problematic" (EX-5); "[…] So we had to limit the amount of time spent together, we only used one person per machine or station while we traditionally do perhaps two shifts or we switch and a lot of cleaning. So all our employees had to clean their desks and machines every day, which takes half an hour out of production. So we had production problems" (EX-7); "There was a change in the flexibility, so we had to supply materials in other hours of the day, and their needs changed in terms they had to have flexibility in terms of when and where they would buy the product. So that was something that changed and was something we had to facilitate" (EX-7)

		Setting up remote offices to boost productivity	"[…] It's been to stretch ourselves with home office and different processes and build up our organization to answer the client's needs […]" (EX-4b); "We made some extra efforts to increase our digital competence. So it was a significant shift towards using video conference, Teams, Zoom, or technical issues instead of physical meetings. Yeah, that was a significant change for us and still is on a higher level than before the crisis" (EX-2); "[…] we had a bit of a steep learning curve in terms of working on digital meetings. But, as I said, our companies or everyone working at companies, I mean, 65% of the employees in our companies have master's degrees in engineering. So they're pretty much digital heads. They are used to finding new solutions to problems. As a very high-competent business, they quickly adapted to the new situation and learned to use Teams effectively. But there was a turning point in digital meetings being the acceptable norm. That wasn't the case before, digital meetings were just an exception that you did if you had to, not because you plan to, but that's turned around […]" (EX-11)
		Fostering each team member's personal and professional development	"I think we learned a lot about digital meetings […] So our colleagues in Trondheim said they felt integrated into the company for the first time because all meetings were on equal terms […]" (EX-1a); "I learned that skilled people in our company are all over Norway because of my base in Sandvika, where I'm in my office. I've worked with people in Stavanger quite a bit on some projects, and I've been traveling to Stavanger quite a bit, and I know that there are good people there, like in Trondheim, in other cities, it doesn't matter where they are […]" (EX-4b)
	Managing firms' internal financials to better navigate through the chaos	**Consulting professionals while seeking government assistance**	"[…] Of course, we get some financial help from the government, such as all other companies that received financial help from the government, but that was more things handed by most companies in Norway that asked for help. I don't think we were very active in asking for help" (EX-3b); "Yes. The government helped us a lot. I think all businesses in Norway got a lot of help from it. Such "permisjon". Most of the support from the government was not necessarily actually, but in the middle of it, we didn't know it, but if you look back now, we could have managed it without its support. We got more paid when the employees got sick, like with COVID, or needed to stay home because of the quarantine, and it was not a cost reduction. The government paid the employees,

			not us. The government started new projects to keep businesses running" (EX-8)
		Eliminating or reducing unimportant tasks that are non-essential to running the business	"A lot of it went by itself because there were no travels, and there were few costs when running our offices […] no social activities […] So our primary focus is to maintain our services to the fullest quality and ensure we get paid for them […]" (EX-3a); "[…] Maybe we spent on social media because some of our events are for students. And then, when you can't go tonight to Trondheim to meet the engineering students and spend 500.000 NOK for it […]" (EX-4a)
		Considering effective downsizing to rest control – staff layoffs	"It's very different. It's different from person to person. Some started the role of an early pensioner; they planned to go anyway. Others found other jobs and worked for companies; some stayed for a while, then left, and some left very quickly. We didn't have to fire anyone, but 25 people quit working for us through different processes" (EX-15)
		Making onboarding procedures more straightforward	"[…] So they had a decision whether to let people give resignations or to sell almost for cost price to me. So something to do, although they didn't have money, at least they could keep their employees. So then I was able to get consultants instead of employees, reducing my risk […] So I got the management people from different real estate companies coming into my startup on Teams, and I joined and had a huge benefit from their knowledge and knowledge sharing […] So I had lower risk related to the cost base and had a lower cost base because I was working for free, and I only paid some consultants, and the main experts contributed on their company time because they had time available […]" (EX-12)
SENSITIVE STRATEGY	**Acknowledging the role played by communication when it comes to the "human aspect"**	**Remaining accountable and truthful towards employees (i.e., employee communication).**	"Well, they were following all the news, but we have regular newsletters sent out from the management to all the employees and giving them updates on the situation for GK and our business […]" (EX-2); "We were very, very open with our employees that this was a crisis […] And we need to prepare, but it might be long term it's not a sprint. It might be a marathon. So we were very open about how we considered this. As a management, we have only two goals: to protect health and workspaces; we don't want to lose anymore. Because what people start thinking about when these things happen, we will have to let people go, and we said that we would not let anyone go. […] They were so flexible and worked hard. And we managed to keep you know short-term operation on a very high level" (EX-3a)

		Weighing each prospective choice's advantages and disadvantages - looking to alternative approaches to cost reductions	"[…] It was the people who were laid off, and it came from the management line. So from HR, we have this house where everyone daily puts in what; how many hours have you built? And normally, we don't follow that up on an individual basis, but from March to June 2020, we started following this up, and also, they had to say what do you expect that you have to do in the next two weeks, five weeks, two months. And when we can see that there were units where there were quite a lot of people with too little work, and we couldn't get in work, then it became a discussion" (EX-4a); "[…] We have like district departments, so if they have too little to do and another office in Norway hat too much to do, we will talk to each other and say, " Well, can you help us with this? So your people can work on our project […]" (EX-5)
	Facing psychological aspects throughout the crisis: challenges of executives and employees throughout the COVID-19 disruption	**Keeping a committed team under pressure**	"When it comes to the company, work-life is like this [I did not feel the pandemic as a threat]. When it comes to personal achievement, for instance, my children growing up not being able to go to school and take a party of a friend's party and have a natural human development was a crisis for me. [The Covid-19 issue was] Stuff at work, things that I could handle" (EX-12)
		Addressing Psychological safety	"Yes. I think it was challenging because I like face to face part of working and then sitting remotely in my home office and trying to keep a certain momentum that I have to do all the initiatives myself, when I am a kind of introvert person, to be the one that made things happen to take the initiative. That was a bit personally challenging for me because it's very easy to lock down mentally" (EX-3b); "[…] We also implemented psychological phones so everyone could call and have someone to talk to […]" (EX-7); "[…] We did a lot of communication, frequent meetings, and management follow-ups to ensure that all managers had frequent contact with the employees. We did a high number of digital social gatherings. We made sure that we had the company's health system, that people could talk to a psychologist or a doctor if they needed to, so that was put into our effort and for free to talk to a psychologist. They could have done that at our expense. […]" (EX-15)
RESOURCEFUL STRATEGY	**Understanding the best practices for client communication in fast-paced scenarios**	**Maintaining the relationship with current customers**	"We communicated that we were still alive and keeping on 100% going in the early phase, and nothing changed […]" (EX-1a); "[…] We contacted customers about our big projects because some are confidential. So if you're working on a defense project or the government quarter, these confidential projects you have to work in protected areas. You cannot take your computer and work with it

			from home […] So having contact with them, starting planning about where to put people in case it happened, but it went well […]" (EX-3a); "[…] It was demanding since we communicated a lot to customers. We used different digital tools from text messages to try to reach them where we could to update them every day and week on how the production was going; if there were any signs of trouble, we made sure that we were in contact fast and tried to establish communication on how we could solve any type of supplying issue […]" (EX-7)
		Building customer trust and sustaining meaningful service experiences	"[…] From this, we got the possibility of creating a sustainability week in 2021. That was the first time we did that. I was leading up this sustainability week where we had one webinar at nine o'clock at 11 o'clock and two o'clock every day. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday. So, 13 or 14 webinars for the transportation-related business. I think we had around 5000 listeners or viewers this week internally and externally, or clients and internal people […]" (EX-4b).
	Sustaining value creation and staying afloat in light of hardship	**Discovering inventive and creative ways to create value**	"[…] During COVID, we were afraid that many private projects would shut down. So we were trying to position ourselves more into public projects because we understood that the Norwegian government would have put more money into infrastructure projects, probably also some public building projects […]" (EX-1b); "Yeah, we anticipated that our public clients would like to invest in securing that the buildings' technical installation was running correctly to prevent further problems with COVID-19. I can give you an example. We rebuilt a private hospital, from standard bedrooms in the hospital to pressure barriers between the rooms so that they could use the rooms for infected patients. Furthermore, the public booked the services from this private hospital" (EX-2); "[…] For example, we were quite confident that the Norwegian government would put in economical packages, not for our part of the business, the consulting part, but because the building industry is big and employs many people […]" (EX-4a)
		Focusing on ethics and values	"[…] We delivered it to our employees, municipalities, hospitals, and other caretakers. It was much fear as well. So even though the country or the government said that everyone could have to work from home, our leaders were focused on being outside at a safe distance and making sure that every employee was okay […]" (EX-7)

VISIONARY STRATEGY	**Building up the road ahead by means of a learning approach**	**Re-evaluating the planning horizon**	"[…] I regret I laid off 10% of the staff. That was a big decision, and it created some fear. I don't know if I regret it. I think I would do it again because we couldn't know that the revenue was not too much affected […]" (EX-7); "[…] We have a cocktail of different factors playing out simultaneously, or more or less at the same time, we have the post-pandemic challenges. There's still a bit of a pandemic in some countries in the world. We have a challenge in shortages of some materials, like semiconductors, wood, steel, and other raw materials. We have the war in Ukraine in Russia, and we don't know how that will affect us. We have seen high energy prices and raw materials rushing within shortages. We also have the inflation that's ì present right now. And the interest rates are climbing all us every quarter. So there is a mix of forces in the market that we can't predict, and we cannot understand how they will affect each other. We had inflation and high rates before, but these different factors are now playing together. I think there's uncertainty right now. We don't know how they will play out when played together. So we are always positive in our business, but we are a bit reluctant and curious about how this will impact the market going forward […]" (EX-10).
		Soliciting perspectives and thoughts from the whole organization	"[…] And I'm sure there will be an even higher demand for good people when this happens, but you must identify the good people […] it's hard since good people cost money, but I'm not afraid of that cost. I think it's the structural cost killing companies […] since one of the criteria will always be how can they improve our work? [...] Hiring people is not easy. In our company, we are old and experienced management, but we are also close to starting a process where future management will be hired. It's not easy to find the right individuals and how to build a group that can work together. It depends on your culture, and it's challenging" (EX-6)
	Discussing the perspectives on on-site working and the emerging "hybrid way" of working	**Favoring on-site participation to avoid low performance**	"[…] And we have, we are sharing information about a big project with 1000s of different tasks going on. And with kind of sharing who will do that and I can do that. There's a sign that the color here must be related depending on what we did in that place. Everything is connected in a design company, like an architect's office. So we have to talk to each other in one way or another, and it's better to do that, you know, physically when you're sitting together […]" (EX-5); "[…] We have said that people… I think I've been clear that we were a company who believed that meeting in the office is a very important part of

			working life. […] One of the things I’ve been very clear on is that we need our seniors to come back to the office because the nature of our business is such that a lot of learning takes place with seniors teaching or mentoring juniors […]”; (EX-13); “Recovering, one of our challenges has been getting everybody back to the office because some employees find it very, very comfy to stay home. So we’ve been quite clear that we want you all back […]” (EX-13);
		Considering a flexible working alternative as an opportunity to get the best work out of the employees	“The consequence is we have more structure in sustainability. We have more people that we know can deliver services that clients need. […] Since people are on a digital platform, they don’t travel. Many things go faster. I think a lot of projects are on a high-speed track now. And that could be bad since you don’t have to step back and see this is right, good. Do we have the right skill set with us in the project? You just go ahead and deliver the project and are done with it” (EX-4b); “[…] Now, we will still see that digital meetings are kind of the norm. Suppose you want the physical meeting you more or less have to ask for only special, extensive meetings or demanding topics, innovative discussions. In that case, that’s when you prefer physical meetings. Teams is pretty much the norm in terms of project meetings” (EX-11)
		Discovering new ways to redesign physical spaces	“[…] In these places, you can hire a place for a concise period, so it’s like an Office Hotel because if you have an office hotel, this does not apply to our company. However, some companies work with the internet. They cooperate with Australia, they have the day we have the night so maybe working during the night is something you would like okay if you had an office hotel, you could buy hours during the night time to sit not at home, but we video calling to cooperate with the Australian […]” (EX-6).

Appendix 7: Semi-structured interview protocol (Consumers)

A. Gender, nationality, age. degree, occupation, visit alone in the Store or not

1. How did you get to know this store?
2. Is this the first time you have entered?
3. Why did you come in? What attracted you to enter? Are you satisfied with the products you have seen because the product satisfies your ...? Do you have a passion for technology, or did you come in out of curiosity?
4. What was your first impact on seeing this store?
5. Compared to traditional stores, what struck you particularly in Webidoo Store?
6. Have you ever been to similar stores that combine physical and digital? (For example, which ones?)
7. What innovations have you tried inside?
8. Have you decided to buy a product or do you prefer to rent it? Why?
9. How important is it for you to see, to physically test digital innovation? And have the possibility to rent it, before buying it?
10. How did you get information about the products? Have you framed QR codes? What do you think of being autonomous through QR codes?
11. Have your expectations on visiting this store been met? If no, what did you what you expect and did not find?)
12. Would you do such an experience again? How come?
13. Would you recommend similar shopping experiences?
14. From 1 to 5, how do you rate this experience?

Appendix 8: Semi-structured interview protocol (Managers and employees)

A. Name, Surname

B. How long have you been working in Webidoo?

C. What is your role within the company? What are your main tasks or activities?

1. Could you tell me how the idea of the Webidoo Store was born?
2. What phygital tools does Webidoo Store use to maintain its competitive edge?
3. What types of customers does Webidoo Store target? In your opinion, what are the specific needs/problems that Webiddo Store tries to answer?
4. What kind of experience do you expect to offer your customers (e.g., innovative, emotional)? Why?
5. In defining the CX, do you take care of the various touchpoints (e.g., website, social channels.)? How do you try to improve the customer journey?
6. In your opinion, what is the role of the sales staff in characterizing the type of experience lived by the customer in your store? Are there other elements affecting CX?
7. In defining the CX, do you consider the contingent situation that the customer is experiencing (e.g., pandemic)?
8. Has the type of experience your customers sought changed during the pandemic? What were they looking for in their CX, and how did you try to adapt your offer?
9. What kind of activities has Webidoo Store put in place to deal with the unexpected situation? How have you dealt with these changes?
10. What are Webidoo Store's main competitors? How does your company distinguish itself from other competitors in terms of customer experience? Compared to your competitors, how have you tried to maintain your competitive advantage?
11. In this first opening period, how was the customer's response? Can you tell us some particular episode that characterized your customers' visit to the store?
12. Are you planning to create more phygital stores?
13. Are there any other phygital innovations that your company would like to implement in the future?

Appendix 9: Summary of data (Consumers)

General information										**CX typologies in phygital contexts**
Interview	**Interview Date**	**Gender**	**Nationality**	**Age range**	**Educational qualification**	**Profession**	**Accompanied**	**First time in the Store**	**It got to know the Store through**	**Type of experience**
Interview 1	2021, December 17th	Male	Italian	20/29	Degree	Student	Friend	Yes	Youtube	XP
Interview 2		Male	Italian	30/39	Middle School diploma	Bartender	Father	Yes	Word of mouth	XP
Interview 3		Male	Italian	70/79	Middle School diploma	Retired	Son	No	Walking around and advertising	OC
Interview 4		Male	Italian	20/29	Diploma	Employee		Yes	Driving	XP
Interview 5		Female	Italian	40/49	Degree	Employee	Children (2)	Yes	Walking around	XE
Interview 6		Female	Italian	60/69	Degree	Freelance		Yes	Walking around	XP
Interview 7		Female	Italian	50/59	Diploma	Housewife	Daughter	Yes	Proximity from home	XE
Interview 8	2021, December 18th	Male	Italian	20/29	Degree	Employee (developer)	Couple	Yes	Youtube	XP
Interview 9		Male	Italian	40/49	Diploma	Commercial Director		Yes	Proximity from home, word of mouth	XP
Interview 10		Male	Italian	50/59	Degree	Business consultant	Friends (2)	Yes	Newspaper	XP
Interview 11		Female	Italian	40/49	Diploma	Bank employee	Couple + children (2)	Yes	Walking around	XP

Interview 12		Female	Italian	30/39	PhD	Freelance	Couple	Yes	Walking around	XP
Interview 13		Male	Italian	30/39	Degree	Entrepreneur	Couple	Yes	Word of mouth	XP
Interview 14		Male	Italian	60/69	Degree	Doctor	Couple	No	Proximity from home	XE
Interview 15		Female	Italian	30/39	Degree	Employee	Couple	Yes	Word of mouth	XE
Interview 16		Male	Italian	30/39	Degree	Manager	Couple	Yes	Walking around	XE
Interview 17		Male	Italian	60/69	Degree	Business agent	Couple	Yes	Walking around	OH
Interview 18		Female	Italian	60/69	Degree	Self-manager in a chemical company	Couple	Yes	Walking around	OC
Interview 19		Female	Italian	40/49	Diploma	Tertiary sector employee	Couple	Yes	Walking around	XE
Interview 20		Female	Italian	40/49	PhD	Lawyer	Couple	Yes	Word of mouth	XE
Interview 21		Male	Italian	50/59	Degree	Entrepreneur	Couple	Yes	Walking around	OC
Interview 22		Male	Italian	60/69	Diploma	Retired	Couple	Yes	Walking around	OH
Interview 23		Male	Italian	30/39	Degree	Entrepreneur	Couple	Yes	Walking around	XE
Interview 24		Female	Italian	Under 20	Middle School diploma	Student	Friend	Yes	Stopped by a promoter	XP
Interview 25		Female	Italian	40/49	Degree	Employee	Couple and children (2)	Yes	Stopped by a promoter	XE
Interview 26		Male	Italian	40/49	Degree	Doctor	Son	Yes	Walking around	OD
Interview 27		Female	Italian	50/59	Diploma	Freelance	Friend	Yes	Walking around	XE
Interview 28		Male	Italian	20/29	Degree	Student	Friends (3)	Yes	Stopped by a promoter	XP

Interview 29		Female	Italian	40/49	Degree	Financial advisor		No	Webidoo investor	XP
Interview 30		Female	Italian	70/79	Degree	Teacher	Grandchildren + grandchildren' s friends (5)	No	Word of mouth	XE
Interview 31		Male	Italian	50/59	Degree	Trader	Son	Yes	Walking around	XP
Interview 32	2021, December 19th	Female	Italian	70/79	Degree	Lawyer in a law firm	Couple	Yes	Driving	XP
Interview 33		Male	Italian	30/39	Degree	Asset protection manager		Yes	Proximity from home	XP
Interview 34		Female	Italian	40/49	Degree	Communication consultant		Yes	Walking around	XP
Interview 35		Female	Romanian	30/39	Degree	Social health worker in a hospital		Yes	Walking around	XP
Interview 36		Female	Italian	20/29	Degree	Consultant	Couple	Yes	Youtube	XE
Interview 37		Male	Italian	20/29	Degree	Biometric engineer	Couple	Yes	Youtube	XP
Interview 38		Female	Italian	20/29	Diploma	Communication expert	Couple	Yes	Word of mouth	XE
Interview 39		Female	Italian	Under 20	Middle School diploma	Student	Friends (2)	Yes	Walking around	XP
Interview 40		Male	Italian	Under 20	Middle School diploma	Student	Friends (2)	Yes	Walking around	XP
Interview 41		Male	Italian	Under 20	Middle School diploma	Student	Friends (2)	Yes	Walking around	XP
Interview 42		Male	Italian	50/59	Degree	Lawyer in an international law firm	Couple	Yes	Street advertising	XE
Interview 43		Female	Italian	40/49	Master	Lawyer in an international law firm	Couple	Yes	Street advertising	XE
Interview 44		Female	Italian	50/59	Degree	Lawyer		Yes	Walking around	OD

Interview 45		Male	Italian	70/79	Degree	Journalist		Yes	Walking around	OH
Interview 46		Male	Italian	50/59	Diploma	Retired	Couple	Yes	Walking around	XP
Interview 47		Female	Italian	50/59	Diploma	Employee in administrative and accounting services company	Friend	No	Word of mouth	XE
Interview 48		Female	Ukrainian	40/49	Degree	Employee in administrative and accounting services company	Friend	No	Online through research on particular products	XE
Interview 49		Male	Spanish	60/69	Degree	Economist		Yes	Walking around	XE
Interview 50		Male	Italian	40/49	Degree	Entrepreneur		Yes	Word of mouth	OD
Interview 51		Male	Italian	50/59	Degree	Physiotherapist	Friend	Yes	Proximity from home	XE
Interview 52		Male	Italian	50/59	Diploma	Employee	Friend	Yes	Proximity from home	XP
Interview 53	2021, December 20th	Male	Brazilian	20/29	Diploma	Warehouse manager		Yes	Youtube	XP
Interview 54		Male	Italian	20/29	Diploma	Warehouseman		Yes	Youtube	XP

Legend: O: Ordinary; X: Extraodinary; H: Hostile; C: Controversial; D: Disappointing; P: Passionate; E: Explorative

Appendix 10: Summary of data (Firm)

Source	**Interview Date**	**Position**	**Interview time span (minutes)**
Interview A	2022, January 25th	Retail manager	56’39’’
Interview B	2022, January 27th	Co-founder, Chairman & CEO	56’16’’
Interview C	2022, January 31st	HR Manager	35’28’’
Interview D	2022, February 1st	Channel Business Manager	58’06’’
Interview E	2022, February 1st	Executive Assistant	75’46’’
Interview F	2022, February 2nd	Jr. Project Manager	58’11’’
Interview G	2022, February 3rd	General Manager	42’33’’
Interview H	2022, February 5th	Specialist Recruitment Manager	61’37’’

Appendix 11: Data analysis process (code examples) - Consumers

Context cluster	Theoretical framework	Consumers' representative quotations	Meaning
ORDINARY EXPERIENCE	Hostile experience: adverse attitude to the novelty of the phygital experience	"I didn't ask the employees because the employees mostly don't come to you ... they are there ... they look at the cell phone like all young people, and therefore it doesn't seem to me either that they try to stimulate awareness of the purchase" (Interview 17); "I am basically curious, and therefore, I wanted to see if there could be something of my interest among all these "things" [i.e., the phygital techologies] that will tend to be numerous. I must say that I could not even find one of my interest. Nothing, I have not found anything that interests me and can satisfy me [...]" (Interview 22)	The phygital CX is not understood; it is seen as an experience without utility.
	Controversial experience: "constructively critical" linked to the physical and digital store correlation improvement	"I find it very nice [being autonomous]. I would have still appreciated having three lines, no more anyway, explaining the usefulness and what it is. Then maybe one wants to deepen and ... I see a lot of products. There are some writings in English ... I did not understand what it was, and I had no time or desire to see straight scanning the QR codes. If next to the QR codes, three lines had explained the usefulness of the product [it would have been better] … maybe this is just my opinion, a young person will find it differently" (Interview 18)	Consumers are critical regarding the lived experience. For instance, the QR code formula confuses those who cannot go beyond the experience without an additional explanation in written form. They also view the experience as a dangerous threat to non-phygital commercial realities.
	Disappointing experience: disillusionment between expectations and reality concerning the phygital CX within the Store	"Yes, I mean, it's nice. I have not found anything new that I did not already know […] I enjoy traveling to the US and Japan, where phygital technologies are widespread. However, I noticed in the last couple of years that many stores are slowly introducing phygital elements in Milan. For me, this is really anything new […]" (Interview 26)	Consumers have such advanced technological knowledge that they do not see any added value in the experience.
EXTRAORDINARY EXPERIENCE	Passionate experience: advanced knowledge of the phygital CX	"[I think it is] very very nice [being autonomous]. I'm fine with both a shop with and without clerks. Autonomy is convenient for me so I can have a look more freely without being interrupted during my visit" (Interview 1); "[...] [Being autonomous with QR codes makes me] freer. At Media World, if you go to Viale Certosa, you need to wait an hour to be served by someone, and here you see it [the product], scan [the QR codes], see product details, prices, and everything" (Interview 53)	These consumers are accustomed to phygital consumption experiences and have a "sapiens level" linked to technology and digitalization.

	Explorative experience: curiosity and enthusiasm aroused by the novelties of the phygital experience	"Yes, of course, [I would repeat the experience] I like novelty, and I think it is time for me to start being more technological too" (Interview 48); "I have already recommended it. Many guys like me have the same passion or desire to discover new things. I told it to a friend of mine, and he told me he had never seen a place like this. He will go there when he can and wants to see something because he also likes technology" (Interview 19)	Curiosity and enthusiasm drive these consumers to enter the Store, positively surprised by its attractive reality. Leaving their comfort zone sometimes gives them new reflections on the need to look out for technology.

Appendix 12: Data analysis process (code examples) - Firm

Context cluster	Theoretical framework	Employees' and Managers' representative quotations	Meaning
ORDINARY EXPERIENCE	Decompressing users via close in-store assistance	"[...] What we need to work on is what I call *the cat theory*. When a cat enters a new environment, it is super hostile and scared, then slowly approaches, starts to eat, gets caressed, purrs, and becomes your friend [...] You need to be in the user's field of vision and not immediately go to him and ask: "How can I help you?" […] It's useless because he did not look for you [...] "(Interview A) "[…] Consumers see many colors, shapes, and images. It can feel confusing. It will be his instinct to guide him to go to the car, to go to the hydroponic greenhouse, to go towards gaming. However, at some point, in a state of confusion and disorientation, as soon as it finds some reference points, it creates a path and then understands where the smart mobility is, where the strange things of new craftsmanship are. It go ahead, and then he independently recognizes that logical path. So today a phygital shop, a phygital activity must be recognizable, and that's what happens in that shop [,,,]" (Interview A)	The salespeople offer advice, support, and guidance to customers who have lived a hostile CX to help them in their learning process in a phygital context.
	Educating users through digital training	"[...] The QR Code is a double-edged sword because, on the one hand, it allows you to ride the trending topic of the moment - the digital part in expressing prices and exposing the KSP (key selling point_punti sales key/product characteristics) of a product. On the other hand, the less aware user is disoriented, and out of shame, it does not ask and is a customer that you could also lose [...] In a country for old people like Italy, these are things that need time and also require constructive criticism to better shape an outstanding customer journey [...]" (Interview A) "[…] before there was also a problem that being an online QR code, there is not much line in here, and many customers could not enter the platform, so you can also give them WiFi and help them if they want to enter the platform using our pc or our tablet […]" (Interview D) "[…] We try to adapt to everyone a little. We started only with the QR code, but then, seeing that we also had many people, even young people, who had a dead cell phone or they were doing something else with the cell phone	To address controversial CXs, the company aims to take the phygital CX to the next level, implementing "along the way" learning moments in the customer journey.

		[…] we believe that the physical part will never go away […] for example, in a restaurant we still ask for the paper menu […]" (Interview H)	
	Spurring user-pulled improvements via real-time feedbacks	"[...] They can be computer science students, retired people who have been engineers, technicians, people who work in large-scale distribution who want to show their technical background [...] I call them opportunity users because they allow us to talk and exchange ideas [...]" (Interview A) "There are consumers who come to the Store and think they know every product but always find something they might not have seen before […] It can happen they enter and are not amazed […] digital runs, so we have to keep up […]" (Interview H)	Managers deal with customers who have had a disappointing experience sustaining meaningful dialogue and exchanging ideas. Furthermore, they aim to communicate the possibility of verifying products' effective functioning through the Try & Buy.
EXTRAORDINARY EXPERIENCE	Entertaining strategy: leveraging fun to entertain consumers while upgrading the phygital CX	"[…] I think that the future is not having a warehouse, I think that the future is not just leaving the shop with the product in hand. Maybe try the product and order it online, and it will be delivered the next day, the same day, 5 days later, it doesn't matter. I mean, I don't think they run around with 70 bags; maybe it's even more convenient to do so […]" (Interview B) "[…] you immerse yourself in the technology. Some enter and have fun like children, and sometimes for some, it's a playground for adults, a technological playground. So it creates those emotions of fun, the emotion of learning, of seeing new things […]" (Interview B) "[…]10 cyclists arrived and stayed for an hour and a half. They went to the fitness zone, started playing with *Pakman*, and tried *Oculus.* Some of them were food bloggers, used the coffee machine and made and published *stories*, giving visibility to the Store on their social channels […]" (Interview F) "[…] a family entered, and each one showed the products they liked to the other family members […] they asked our colleagues in Store if some of our products did something magic, or they asked some strange questions, yes, very familiar situations […]" (Interview H) "[…] you can find out of the ordinary tools […] you see how the future is going to look like because what you can find here now at the Webidoo Store is likely to be part of our lives in maybe 100 years! […]" (Interview H)	Managers guide consumers with a passionate, evocative, reflective, and explorative experience toward the latest innovations in the field of technology and digital. They aim to show them how the world will change in the "phygital era", astonishing them.

Academic studies during Ph.D. thesis work

Publications

1. **Pusceddu, G.,** Moi, L., & Cabiddu F. (2022). The intersection between SMEs' business strategies and the phases of unexpected events: a systematic review of the literature. SINERGIE Italian Journal of Management, vol. 40, n. 2, pp. 63-86. ISSN: 0393-5108. DOI: 10.7433/s118.2022.04.
2. Cabiddu, F., Moi, L., & **Pusceddu, G**. (2023). Customer engagement in tourism industry at the time of Covid-19, in Customer Engagement in Tourism Marketing: Current Issues and Challenges (provisory title), Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd. (Forthcoming).
3. **Pusceddu, G**., Moi, L., & Cabiddu, F. (2023). Managing the different stages of unexpected events: an exploratory analysis of tourist family businesses. Piccola Impresa-Small Business. (Forthcoming).
4. **Pusceddu, G**., Moi, L., & Cabiddu, F. (2023). Do they see eye to eye? Managing customer experience in phygital high-tech retail, Management Decision special issue, A strategic perspective on flexibility, agility and adaptability in the digital era. (Forthcoming)

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1. **Pusceddu, G.,** Moi, L., & Cabiddu, F. (2021). The intersection between SMEs' business strategies and crisis phases: a systematic literature review. In Referred Electronic Conference Proceedings "Sinergie-SIMA 2021" Conference, 2021, June 10th-11th Palermo (Italy). ISBN: 97888943937-7-4. DOI:

10.7433/SRECP.FP.2021.01. **BEST PAPER AWARD - selected for SINERGIE - Italian Journal of Management publication**.

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Research activity in progress

1. **Pusceddu, G**., Cabiddu, F., & Lombardo, S. (2022). Strategies to support businesses to be resilient: the case of the Norwegian AEC industry.
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