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Moi, L. and Cabiddu, F. (2022), "Navigating a global pandemic crisis through marketing agility: evidence from Italian B2B firms", *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, Vol. 37 No. 10, pp. 2022-2035.

The publisher's version is available at:

<https://doi.org/10.1108/JBIM-01-2021-0034>

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Navigating a global pandemic crisis through marketing agility: evidence from Italian B2B firms

Abstract

Purpose. This study explores the impact of marketing agility on the business-to-business (B2B) firms' capacity to address unexpected events such as the **recent** Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, examining how they reshape their strategies during the different stages of a crisis.

Design/methodology/approach. This study follows a theory-building approach and performs an in-depth exploratory multiple-case study in the context of 16 Italian firms operating in the B2B sector.

Findings. The study develops an event-sequence-based framework and illustrates how agile marketing strategies empower B2B firms to cope with a crisis across three crucial moments: the event phase, the response management phase, and the investigation phase.

Originality. This paper contributes to a better understanding of marketing agility in the context of crisis management by showing the agile marketing strategies that B2B firms adopt during the different stages of a crisis. This work provides a useful foundation to assist managers in coping with market uncertainty. It suggests practical guidelines to make more informed strategic and operational marketing decisions, **increasing** a firm's capacity to act in today's fast-moving, complex times.

Keywords: Marketing agility; agile marketing strategies; COVID-19; crisis event sequence; business-to-business (B2B).

Paper type: Research Paper

“For some organizations, near-term survival is the only agenda item. Others are peering through the fog of uncertainty, thinking about how to position themselves once the crisis has passed and things return to normal. The question is, ‘What will normal look like?’ While no one can say how long the crisis will last, what we find on the other side will not look like the normal of recent years.”

Ian David,

*Managing Director of McKinsey & Company,
written in 2009, after the last global financial crisis.*

1. Introduction

A crisis epitomizes an unpredictable event that bears disruptive consequences for organizations (Bundy *et al.*, 2017), severely testing their performance as well as stakeholders’ expectancies (Coombs and Holladay, 2010). Hence, it is commonly designated as a particular circumstance during which “the normal order in a system is destabilized, which creates considerable uncertainty and requires rapid intervention” (Falkheimer and Heide, 2010; p. 514). When coping with crises, firms are compelled to remarkably transform their ordinary business and evaluate how to chart a new way forward to prevent negative outcomes, safeguard stakeholders’ expectancies and the viability of the organization (Bullough and Renko, 2013; Coombs and Holladay, 2010; Merigó *et al.*, 2016; Pearson and Clair 1998; van der Vegt *et al.*, 2015).

Crises are not linear and predictable events; rather, they involve a sequence of subevents over time that can have substantial negative consequences for firms if not managed appropriately (**Lai and Wong, 2020**). The field of crisis management reveals that different facets describe a typical crisis situation that we could summarize in three main phases: event, response and investigation (**Doern *et al.*, 2019**). The event phase refers to the nature, causes and consequences related to the outbreak of a crisis (Buchanan and Denyer, 2013). The response management phase involves the decisions made to limit crises’ disruptive effects (Buchanan and Denyer, 2013). Firms could minimize costs to reduce potential liquidity shortages (Eggers and Kraus, 2011; Smallbone *et al.*, 2012). Also, they could strengthen the relationship and collaboration with stakeholders (Doern, 2016; Mayr *et al.*, 2017), or invest in R&D to enhance knowledge and react more effectively to unpredictable circumstances (Battisti *et al.*, 2019; Osiyevskyy *et al.*, 2020). Finally, the investigation phase reflects what organizations have learned from a crisis, and identify new directions necessary to modify the organizational structure and better prepare for the future (Buchanan and Denyer, 2013). This may include reconfiguring business models, and implementing preventive action items to discourage future harmful situations (Doern, 2016; Le Nguyen and Kock, 2011; Morrish & Jones, 2020).

Scholars’ attention to crisis management has been gaining momentum over the past decades due to the deep impact of recent disasters that have marked the economy and society (Doern *et al.*, 2019). Crisis management refers to how organizations attempt to minimize the effects of harmful situations to return to a desirable state in the long term (Caponigro, 2000; Spillan and Hough, 2003; Williams *et al.*, 2017). The salience of this stream of research has considerably increased following the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic (**Chesbrough, 2020; Thakur and Hale, 2022; Wenzel *et al.*, 2020**). The lockdowns and restrictions imposed by governments worldwide during the last year have forced organizations from all sectors to urgently redeploy entire business models, roles, and relationships with industry players to create customer value in innovative ways, and align promptly resources and capabilities with the dynamics of ever-changing business scenarios (Baum and Hai, 2020; Kraus *et al.*, 2020; **Lai and Wong, 2020; Sharma *et al.*, 2020**).

The implications of the ongoing pandemic have been particularly challenging for business-to-business (B2B) companies’ marketing landscapes. Scholars have outlined how B2B organizations have been forced to remarkably rethink their relationships with their core customers (Heyden *et al.*, 2020; **Hu, 2022**), reassess their sales operations, and revise their communication practices (Cortez

and Johnston, 2020; Hartmann and Lussier, 2020; Kumar and Sharma, 2021), cementing omnichannel **engagement and real-time adaptations to customers** as the predominant path for B2B **value creation processes** (Alonso-Garcia *et al.*, 2021; Corsaro and Anzivino, 2021). Furthermore, new “design-thinking” patterns have enabled companies to approach customers so as to pivot into the new context with greater promptness and resiliency (Cankurtaran and Beverland, 2020).

In particular, recent B2B studies have underlined “that providers and customers must build greater agility and flexibility into solution offering” (Bond III *et al.*, 2020, p. 46) to address today’s market uncertainty (He and Harris, 2020; Hughes and Rajesh, 2021; Kalaignanam *et al.*, 2021). Embracing the agile marketing principle in the B2B settings means **ensuring** prompt action, efficient use of resources, and **anticipating** critical events (Cortez and Johnson, 2020).

While there is agreement that firms that successfully manage uncertainty need to employ agile marketing principles (Asseraf *et al.*, 2019; Hagen *et al.*, 2019; Moorman *et al.*, 2016; Zhou *et al.*, 2019), there is still scant knowledge on how marketing agility impacts B2B firms’ capacity to manage unexpected and adverse circumstances (Kumar and Sharma, 2021; Oehmen *et al.*, 2020; Markovic *et al.*, 2021; Pedersen *et al.*, 2020), during the different stages of a crisis: event, response management, and investigation (Buchanan and Denyer, 2013).

Indeed, the emphasis in prior research **mainly focus** on post-crisis response, **which** means that little is known about the strategic response of B2B firms during all the phases of a crisis (**Lai and Wong, 2020**). Only recently, few studies have focused their attention **on** the first few months of a crisis showing how entrepreneurs responded quickly by relying on existing internal resources and networks (Kuckertz *et al.*, 2020). **Others have shown how agility may affect organizational crisis preparedness, thus enhancing firm’s capacity to prevent, address and cope with crisis events (El Idrissi et al., 2022).**

This study aims to extend the debate on crisis management in the context of B2B firms by examining how marketing agility empowers B2B firms’ capacity to reshape their strategies during the different stages of unexpected events. To fill this gap, we developed an event sequence-based framework defining the main agile marketing strategies that B2B firms could enact during the different phases of a crisis: event, response management, and investigation (Buchanan and Denyer, 2013). The research question examined is: “How does marketing agility influence a firm’s ability to redefine its strategies during the different stages of a crisis?” This study adopts a theory-building approach based on an exploratory multiple-case study research design in the context of Italian firms operating in the B2B setting (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2009).

Regarding the research, this study extends the prior literature on marketing agility and crisis management by investigating how B2B firms could adopt agile marketing strategies to cope with a crisis across the stages of event, response management, and, finally, investigation. From a practical perspective, we offer managers a guide to understanding suitable strategies in different crucial moments of a crisis situation. The pandemic has made organizations rethink the ways of doing business, redefine strategic endeavors and discover new paths. We believe in providing significant guidance to B2B firms’ managers operating in uncertain times and helping them make quicker, more flexible, and more customer-responsive strategic and business decisions.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 offers the theoretical background; we review the literature on crisis management, focusing on B2B firms and the key aspects of marketing agility. Section 3 addresses the details of our research design, and Section 4 presents the findings of our analysis. Finally, Section 5 argues about our study’s theoretical and practical implications while discussing the limitation of the research and directions for future research. We end this paper with the conclusion (Section 6).

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Crisis management in B2B settings

Early studies on crisis management underline how B2B organizations, when addressing adverse circumstances, must considerably modify their marketing orientation, both internally, with employees, and externally, in the relationship with their customers to overcome the crisis (Brenčič *et al.*, 2012).

This change in their marketing orientation may imply, for instance, investing in e-marketing and social media or recruiting new marketing personnel (Rollins *et al.*, 2014), continuously reinventing business models and marketing strategies to adapt quickly as circumstances in the marketplace change (Kotler and Caslione, 2009). Scholars have also acknowledged the importance of improving B2B collaborations by leveraging trust and reliability and, above all, mindfulness, which helps B2B firms sense market signals to adjust relationships accordingly, thus enhancing their capacity to bounce back from the crisis (Zafari *et al.*, 2020).

Due to the unprecedented shocks caused by the recent pandemic Coronavirus, scholars have started to analyze the multiple ways through which the pandemic crisis impacted B2B marketing and sales operations (Cortez and Johnston, 2020; **Hu, 2022**; Kumar and Sharma, 2021; Pedersen *et al.*, 2020). B2B firms have considerably renewed themselves from a social, technological, and structural perspective to deal with issues they encounter in daily operations, work arrangements, or wellness (Kumar and Sharma, 2021). For instance, scholars have described how B2B firms have started taking care of people's physical and mental health (Cortez and Johnson, 2020; Hartmann and Lussier, 2020), provided leadership based on timely and decisive actions and decentralized power, exercised proactive strategic flexibility, and supplied support and morale enhancement (Cortez and Johnson, 2020). Moreover, authors have underlined how B2B firms have innovated how tasks are performed through a deep digital transformation (e.g., the use of digital channels and remote working) (Cortez and Johnson, 2020; Hartmann and Lussier, 2020), which has resulted in updating staff knowledge and skills (e.g., training on using various digital technologies) (Hartmann and Lussier, 2020; **Hu, 2022**). Another aspect concerns the importance of collaborations to improve resource management. Prior studies highlight how COVID-19 crisis has been an opportunity to innovate the relationships with external partners, e.g., business customers and competitors, to acquire external resources more efficiently to develop innovations (Markovic *et al.*, 2021).

However, given the novelty of the Coronavirus crisis and the rapid adjustment required for B2B firms by the continuous and uncertain evolution of the current economic situation, research has yet to provide adequate knowledge and guidance to better address the challenges they are facing. Researchers underscore the necessity to deepen the measures necessary to respond to a crisis that has already occurred and the ones needed to prevent or minimize the impact of new potential crises (Kumar and Sharma, 2021). Managers need to understand better how to manage an emergency as long as it evolves and shifts over time through an evolving perspective. Our study extends our understanding of crisis management in B2B settings by investigating how B2B firms manage a crisis as long as it evolves across the event, response management and investigation stages.

2.2. Marketing agility

In light of the recent events marked by the Coronavirus pandemic, it has been paramount for B2B companies to acquire more agility and flexibility to overcome the problems particularly affecting their marketing and sales operations (Cortez and Johnston, 2020).

In the marketing field, scholars commonly refer to agility as “the degree to which a firm is able to sense and respond quickly to customer-based opportunities for innovation and competitive action” (Roberts and Grover, 2012, p. 580). Marketing agility means being responsive to customers' needs and expectations, flexibly reconfiguring marketing objectives and resources accordingly, adapting to ever-changing market conditions at short notice, and fulfilling market needs more effectively (Asseraf *et al.*, 2019; Gomes *et al.*, 2020; Hagen *et al.*, 2019; Moi and Cabiddu, 2020; Zhou *et al.*, 2019).

The emerging concept of marketing agility has been recently conceptualized as “the extent to which an entity rapidly iterates between making sense of the market and executing marketing decisions to adapt to the market” (Kalaiganam *et al.*, 2021, p. 36). Agility enables market-driven changes thanks to marketing teams’ increasing speed and coordination in adjusting operations according to customer feedback (Hughes and Rajesh, 2021; Kalaiganam *et al.*, 2021; Lewnes, 2021), and thus creates greater customer value and competitive advantage (Matthyssens *et al.*, 2005).

Marketing agility has a multidimensional nature and combines numerous features. Some scholars have recognized sensemaking, iteration, speed, and marketing decisions as critical stepping stones of the concept: Sensemaking means responding to the unexpected developments of the marketplace (Kalaiganam *et al.*, 2021) by defining patterns (or trajectories) of priority actions to be followed based on how the environmental context may evolve (Hughes and Rajesh, 2021). Iteration entails continuously reframing marketing efforts through repeated “twists” to better fit the changing needs of the marketplace (Hughes and Rajesh, 2021; Kalaiganam *et al.*, 2021). Speed means rapidly adjusting marketing actions, thus altering a firm’s strategy to align it with customer needs (Kalaiganam *et al.*, 2021). Marketing decisions are made in the multiple areas in which marketing agility impacts, such as advertising spending or product development (Kalaiganam *et al.*, 2021). Deploying marketing agility also requires a flexible organizational structure that fosters cross-functional teams, knowledge sharing, and integration (Kalaiganam *et al.*, 2021; Moi and Cabiddu, 2020, 2021). Scholars have highlighted other important features: adaptability to changing conditions, collaborative and integrated working environments, the continual and fast pace of innovation, and the forecasting and monitoring of market needs (Moi and Cabiddu, 2020, 2021).

Despite the importance of this topic, further research is needed to address how embedding marketing agility may lead to more effective responses to a crisis such as the Coronavirus epidemic, especially in the B2B context. Since the capacity to recover from a challenging situation is strongly empowered by agility (Birkinshaw, 2020; **El Idrissi *et al.*, 2022**; Holbeche, 2018; Liu *et al.*, 2020; Rapaccini *et al.*, 2020), the purpose of this study is then to investigate the impact of marketing agility on the ability of B2B firms to address the pandemic crisis, to explore how they reshape their strategies during the different stages of a crisis.

3. Methodology

The present research develops a theory-building process based on a multiple-case study research design (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2009). This is a valid method for exploratory inquiries (Yin, 2009), as our aim was to gain an in-depth understanding and holistic empirical insights about marketing agility in the context of B2B firms’ strategies to the ongoing pandemic scenario. Additionally, multiple-case study analysis enables cross-case comparison, facilitates rich theory building, and improves the generalization of findings (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007).

3.1. Sample and data collection

For this study, we employed a theoretical sampling approach by seeking cases that “are likely to (...) extend the emergent theory” (Eisenhardt, 1989; p. 537). Notably, we selected the B2B sector because understanding the role of agile marketing responses in this context is crucial for the profound changes triggered by the coronavirus epidemic in established B2B practices, such as sales operations, communication, decision-making, work arrangements, and product delivery (Cortez and Johnston, 2020; Gavin *et al.*, 2020; Hartmann and Lussier, 2020; Pedersen *et al.*, 2020; Ritter and Pedersen, 2020).

Intending to obtain a differentiated base of growth and development patterns, as well as a more comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon investigated, we involved firms of different industries (e.g., services, IT) and very different sizes (i.e., small and medium firms *versus* large firms). Indeed,

getting insights by comparing small-and-medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) with larger firms is interesting to study this topic. SMEs are generally found to have a flexibility advantage compared to large companies, especially in times of uncertainty or economic downturn (Bartz and Winkler, 2016; Dewald and Bowen, 2010; Gunasekaran *et al.*, 2011). Conversely, major incumbents and larger firms are often slowest to adapt (Matthyssens *et al.*, 2005). We focused on the Italian context, which represents a compelling case study, as Italy was one of the first European countries where the government forced a total lockdown from the first moments of the pandemic¹.

We collected data through semi-structured interviews. The interviewees formed one unit of analysis and were representative of their respective firms (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2009). When available, we interviewed more than one informant per organization.

We followed a purposive sampling approach to select our key informants from each case company (Patton, 2002). They were chosen because they were highly knowledgeable in the topic of interest and “able and willing to communicate about it” (Kumar *et al.*, 1993, p. 1634). Involving respondents from different roles (e.g., managers, CEOs, founders) allowed us to triangulate empirical data, thus improving the validity and reliability of our results

The interview protocol involved questions to explore the main strategic decisions taken by B2B firms during the different stages of the pandemic crisis. We collect data focusing on the three crucial phases outlined by the crisis management literature, i.e., the event phase (in this study, the responses during the first month of lockdown), which focuses on the crucial moment of the crisis outbreak; the crisis response management phase (in this study, the reactions after the first month of lockdown), which focuses on the specific emergency management efforts, that is, how firms adjusted their operations to address the situation; and the investigation phase (in this study, the decisions planned for the next future), which is the “learning lessons” moment, as well as directions for change (Buchanan and Denyer, 2013). Choosing an event sequence-based approach is particularly useful for our analysis. Indeed, previous studies have focused mainly on investigating specific moments of crisis rather than analyzing the sequence in its entirety, hence neglecting to understand how a crisis may evolve (Buchanan and Denyer, 2013).

Examples of the guided interview questions are as follows: “*How did your company react to the lockdown?*”; “*Did you change the way you interact with customers?*”; “*In what way are you using technology to reshape working dynamics?*”; “*How do you expect your future?*” The interview protocol was pilot-tested with the company’s manager operating in the B2B sector and iteratively refined during data collection. The interviews were properly transcribed and coded through NVivo 10 software (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013). We stopped collecting data when additional data were unlikely to alter our interpretation and reached theoretical saturation (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

We conducted 18 interviews between April-September 2020 involving key informants of 16 B2B SMEs and large firms operating in Italy in different industries (e.g., telecommunication services, information technology, professional services) (see Table I)².

[Insert Table I here]

3.2. Data analysis and rigor

We analyzed data following both inductive and deductive approaches as a continuum. We used previous literature on crisis management and marketing agility to initially interpret and analyze the qualitative data (deductive approach). Secondly, we discovered patterns and derived novel theoretical concepts from these data (inductive approach) (Kennedy and

¹<https://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-news/coronavirus-timeline-tracking-critical-moments-covid-19-n1154341>

²We guaranteed anonymity to the organizations involved in the research to reduce social pressure and make sure that the data collected could not be traced back to the individual respondents (Coffelt, 2017; Krosnick and Presser, 2010).

Thornberg, 2018) to define the agile marketing strategies enacted by B2B firms across the event, response management, and investigation phase. The analysis proceeded through three rounds of coding. We started with the within-case analysis of each case, moving from the particular to the general (Saldaña, 2015).

In the first coding stage, we deeply analyzed the individual characteristics of the 16 cases (within-case analysis) (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). We looked for descriptive and interpretative codes about the actions and practices undertaken by firms to handle the pandemic crisis. Notably, we examined systematic strategies and explored their influence on the firm's operational processes. **The outcome of this first stage of coding was a list of first-order concepts based on both "in vivo" and constructed codes as enacted in the cases (e.g., "adopting flexible organizational structures", "reducing the risk of infection", "establishing strengthened relationships among employees") (Miles & Huberman, 1984).**

In a second round, we checked whether the first-order concepts could be grouped into a set of cohesive patterns and meanings across cases (cross-case analysis) (Boyatzis, 1998; Eisenhardt, 1989), allowing us to view the data at a higher level of abstraction and creating key second-order themes (e.g., "providing a constant and updated communication with customers", "testing flexible marketing practices", "investing in more specialized competencies"). Also, we looked for similarities and differences between SMEs and large firms (cross-case analysis) (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007), and grouped the data based on common and dissimilar themes.

Finally, we classified the identified second-order themes into overarching dimensions, i.e., the different stages of the pandemic crisis, capturing the most relevant and constituent elements to understand the main marketing strategies adopted according to each stage: event, response management, and investigation phase (Buchanan and Denyer, 2013) (see some examples of all process in Figure I).

[Insert Figure I here]

At each stage of coding, we checked the codes' robustness by running a coding comparison query. We addressed the inconsistencies until the kappa coefficient value was above 0.75 (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013).

In carrying out this research, we applied the qualitative criteria of 1) credibility, 2) transferability, 3) dependability, and 4) confirmability (Lincoln and Guba, 2013; Shah and Corley, 2006). Namely, for *credibility* (i.e., the trustworthiness of the researchers' interpretation), we kept the respondents informed about research purposes and conducted several peer debriefings to clarify our interpretation. For *transferability* (i.e., the in-depth contextualization of information), we interviewed strategic respondents and took detailed notes about emerging concepts to discern similarities and differences across responses. For *dependability* (i.e., the reliability of the research process), we protected respondents' confidentiality; furthermore, the two coauthors analyzed and coded data simultaneously and independently. Finally, for *confirmability* (i.e., provide in-depth evidence of the phenomenon), we accurately transcribed interviews and extensively supported research findings by reporting respondents' quotes to ensure alignment with the original data.

4. Findings

Like all the other sectors, our analysis revealed that even companies operating in the B2B setting were not "immune" to the lockdown and restriction effects following governmental decisions to stop the free movement of people and resources due to the Coronavirus outbreak. While it is true that for some firms that already operated in a digital context (e.g., IT), the "rules of the game" did not change considerably, most of them had to cope with unexpected and severe slowdowns in their business:

“[we faced a] *total block of the activities at the beginning; the request of some operating customers (authorized supply chains) gave us the possibility to resume the activity partially*” (Case-8, Manager). The sudden changes caused by COVID-19 severely tested organizations, forcing them to shut down all organizational operations or temporarily close some areas of activity. However, in the majority of cases, we found how B2B organizations tried to rebuild a new normal or change their *status quo* to accomplish new business objectives, keeping an active and dynamic learning attitude. By choosing to stop “undergoing” the challenges brought by COVID-19, B2B firms fostered then an internal process of innovation of their marketing strategies, trying to be an active part of the change.

The results of our research are summarized in the event sequence-based framework (see Figure II) that offers a visual representation of the different agile marketing strategies put in place during the evolution of the pandemic crisis by large and SME firms operating in the B2B context.

[Insert Figure II here]

4.1. The event phase: Respond to the unexpected event in the marketplace in a timely fashion

Our study reveals that B2B firms have adopted different agile marketing strategies in each stage of the pandemic crisis. Our analysis first tried to understand how B2B managers reacted to the sudden and drastic lockdowns imposed by the Italian government and what decisions they promptly made to handle the new business scenario during the event phase (i.e., the first lockdown month).

More specifically, our results showed that during the first stage of the coronavirus outbreak, the imperative for firms was to define a set of priority adjustments in their capabilities and resources to maneuver business based on the evolving condition. Companies first put in place a range of initiatives aimed at reconfiguring their marketing resources toward a digital context to respond and adapt to the new, unexpected scenario effectively and in a timely fashion. Namely, we observed that, in the event phase, companies employed mainly the following agile marketing strategies: 1.1 protecting customers and safeguarding their safety needs; 1.2 ensuring the continuity of the core business activities through digitalization; 1.3 defending the revenue generation process; 1.4 providing a constant and updated communication with customers.

Since the first moments of the pandemic outbreak, both SMEs and larger firms have exhibited an extraordinary sensitivity to market signals, as well as highly focused attention on primarily protecting and securing people’s health. In line with the legislative decrees that were simultaneously issued by the government, companies reacted promptly to the new epidemic scenario by providing clear guidelines and rigid protocols to keep all customers safe and reduce the risk of infection (Case-7, Manager; Case-12, Manager; Case-14, CEO and Founder). This intervention also implied the rapid shift of all business activities to the online context. Organizations switched to *smart working* not merely to ease and make work more flexible but as a survival condition to meet customers’ needs without violating the new organizational setting imposed by the lockdown and keep in touch with customers safely (Case-12, Manager).

Particularly, large companies undertook a significant investment in the digital transformation of business operations to enhance their responsiveness to market demand. They started implementing a deep digitalization process of both individual and teamwork in smart modes to ensure the continuity of the core business operations, with an intensified adoption of advanced digital technologies aimed at simplifying tasks and interaction with customers (e.g., Zoom meetings, Teams, and remote calls have replaced meetings in physical spaces) (Case-4, Manager; Case-12, Manager). These are some different examples provided by our informants: “*The company has extended smart working to all employees including the call center. Previously, smart working was only [fixed] once a week*” (Case-3, Manager); “*Try to continue to have relationships with our customers remotely through Smart working*” (Case-9, Manager); “*From the first infections, given that the risk of having come*

into contact with a potential positive person was reported, all people were put into continuous smart working, and the offices were closed” (Case-12, Manager).

In case of SMEs, we observed that they strengthened the use of the digital tools they had at disposal (e.g., social media, electronic invoices): “[we] *move[d] everything that could be moved online: Webinar instead of physical events, online lessons instead of classroom lessons” (Case-14, CEO and founder).* In line with this aspect, SMEs have also adjusted the proposed online contents to foster a valuable and more personalized communication according to the situation underway: *“we remodeled both public (social) and personal communication with each customer. In particular, the social contents have been revised moving from the focus of the methodology to the focus on values. As regards direct contacts with customers, we sent a general email and contacted most of them by telephone, with greater listening and human presence” (Case-16, Founder).*

During the initial stage of the pandemic, another important aspect that firms were careful of was related to the costs and revenue generation process.

Notably, our findings revealed how SMEs deployed an array of “retrenchment” interventions to safeguard the company from closure, for instance, to reduce costs and to prioritize profiting business areas (especially digital marketing activities) (Case-13, Manager). Also, they prepared more formalized contingency plans aimed at addressing the situation of crisis: *We realized a contingency plan (analysis of cash flows; cut of non-fundamental costs; planning of the outflows, and review of the revenues)” (Case-11, Manager).*

Even larger firms intervened from an economic perspective, especially to preserve their profits. Unlike SMEs, large companies have tried to provide financial support to customers who were in difficulty through *“detailed evaluation on customer robustness, granting of extra currency where possible (...) shifting marketing and commercial budgets from offline customers to online customers” (Case-5, Manager).*

Finally, our empirical study has revealed firms’ attention to maintaining continuous and updated communication with customers, maintaining an “active” relationship with customers, and promptly satisfying their needs and requests. Thus, both SMEs and large firms kept managing internal work and team relationships for business continuity. Above all, they engaged in taking care of the relationships with their customers (Case-9, Manager; Case-16, Founder). They started adopting new solutions or reviewed previous marketing plans to strengthen their responsiveness to changing customer needs and expectations. Therefore, they promptly intervened by adopting streamlined processes to always keep in touch with customers (Case-11, Manager), and ensured a constant updating on how to continue their business safely: *“We have decided to increase the consistency of the relationship with our partners (...) to provide them with all the information and support they need” (Case-2, Manager).*

4.2. The response management phase: Enhance brand reputation and flexibility

Once the companies established the priorities to be followed during the initial stage of the pandemic, they started to implement more incisive and resilient plans embracing novel short-term solutions to continue generating profit under different supply and demand conditions (Case-8, Manager). In other words, they worked hard to prepare people and stakeholders for a new “reality”, experimenting with new forms of working and interacting. Companies enacted the following agile marketing strategies in various ways: 2.1 implementing brand reputation actions; 2.2 testing flexible marketing practices; and 2.3 fostering employees’ close collaboration.

An important insight that emerges from our findings concerns the actions implemented by both SMEs and large firms regarding their brand reputation.

Aware of the corporate reputation risks that the pandemic could generate, large firms took the opportunity to better align their reason and purpose with their real and tangible behaviors, for instance, by continuing to pay employees while the company's doors were closed, or using digital tools to nurture an active relationship with employees despite social distancing (Case-12, Manager). At the same, SMEs strengthened their closeness to customers. Particularly, they started using social media to quickly pivot creative messages as circumstances change. Firms attempted to extensively take care of brand awareness and preserve brand image and loyalty to retain current customers and attract new ones. They engaged in creating an empathetic relationship with customers through listening, continuous advice, positivity, and call-to-action, looking for closer contact with them. This is clearly explained by one of our informants: *"Concerning the previous situation, the difference is to work much more on brand awareness (strengthening the brand image and the brand loyalty) and human contact with the customer (more direct communication, information, positivity, and call-to-action), enhancing both customer experience and marketing retention, as this is a period during which the acquisition processes have obviously slowed down"*, (Case-11, Manager).

We also observed that large firms had improved their flexibility process. The increasing use of new tools and practices and the emergence of online business environments have affected the redesign of the internal working dynamics of large organizations. Our findings reveal that such firms are discovering and testing new ways of working based on more flexible practices, which favor reacting to the marketplace's changing needs and quickly making improvements based on the shifts that are taking place in the marketplace. Indeed, teams are required to respond with greater speed to fast-changing circumstances, modifying marketing planning, design, and execution as new information emerges from the marketplace. Therefore, firms are adopting new forms of communication (more "fact-based" and analytical) and working procedures that optimize resources and time, considerably improving the firm's efficiency: *"We have invented new forms of digital collaborations, and optimized the times (i.e., time-boxed call) of the activities.... (We will keep) surely all the practices, for the efficiency of time, including a greater inclination to smart working which I believe is an awareness also acquired by our customers"* (Case-12, Manager). For instance, through the *"set up of daily stand-up meetings of 10-30 minutes depending on the project"* and by enhancing *"the reporting of our work, recording daily the start and end times of the activities"* (Case-12, Manager). Therefore, transversal teams focused on the same project to find a prompt solution when an unexpected problem occurs. By performing in this way, they can use up-to-date information to adjust plans more quickly at a constant pace, thereby aligning with changing customer requirements more effectively. Technology plays a central role, as it enables constant updating of tasks and enhances the cross-functional sharing and updating of information and knowledge. In essence, there is greater speed in offering solutions that fulfill customer needs and more optimization of work/decision-making processes through digital tools. The cross-case analysis performed in this study reveals that, in the B2B context, those organizations that deployed flexible marketing practices in addressing customer requests and needs (e.g., daily stand-up meetings, fact-based and analytical communication) have been even more able to successfully adapt to changing conditions, adjusting marketing plans more quickly at a constant pace.

Related to this aspect, both SMEs and large firms especially invested in encouraging employees' close collaboration. Our data reveal that firms are trying to instill hope while maintaining realism and keeping employees or teammates motivated, focused, and reassured. Despite social distancing, they are building collaborative working environments, for instance, by creating social gatherings to reconcile relationships between workers: *"We planned a weekly virtual aperitif on Zoom to meet all 200 colleagues in the Business area, and a smaller one at the*

end of the week” (Case-12, Manager). Apart from definitely offering significant opportunities to mitigate the lockdown effects and the restrictions related to the coronavirus, all organizations agree that they will maintain such new working practices as much as possible even after the pandemic. This is primarily due to the current uncertain circumstances that will probably last for a long time but also because many procedures have been sharply optimized (*“The company must change to be a company of skills and services [...]moving to more sustainable models at psychological, social and environmental levels. Workplaces should become meeting places”* Case-16, Manager).

4.3. The investigation phase: What’s next? Rebuild the next normal through new tools, new competencies and new strategic directions

We end our analysis by exploring how organizations expect to address the future based on what they have been experiencing last year. Managers are deeply aware that they need to considerably adjust their operations to prevent collapse and navigate through a new normal. The following aspects comprehensively define what will be the imperatives to succeed in the next future: 3.1 investing in more specialized competencies; 3.2 shifting from in-person interaction to remote sales; and 3.3 building a personalized customer support.

Large organizations agree with the fact that there will undoubtedly be a new tomorrow and, hence, a new reality, for which they *“will have to be good at identifying its characteristics and adjust accordingly”* (Case-2, Manager). Despite recognizing the difficulties that will probably occur, such as inflections and drops in consumption (Case-8, Manager), firms must learn to frame market trends more sharply and react in an agile way to the needs of customers. Thus, it would be essential to provide organizations with highly specialized competencies to foresee market dynamics or threats and exploit business opportunities.

Another aspect concerns accelerating the go-to-market based on evolving market conditions. Large organizations are opening up toward a wave of deep changes throughout the B2B sector. Not only radical transformation in the ways of working for many companies (Case-3, Manager), but more importantly *“the market will change 100%; consumer behavior will change; customer strategy will change, and therefore consequently it will also change the strategic management of the company”* (Case-8, Manager). Hence, based on the lessons learned from the COVID-19 experience, B2B companies are planning to accelerate end-to-end digitization efforts. This will imply, for instance, greater digitization of buying/selling processes shifting from in-person interaction to remote sales. That is, *“It will surely have an impact. I imagine that once returned to ‘normality’ we will learn from the positive aspects collected during this period, and we will try to maximize pro future (...) if we would realize that to manage a work process to which in the past we dedicated resources that involved the periodic physical movement of several people on the national territory, in the future these processes could be managed remotely. Clearly, these processes will not be replaced entirely, but simply updated with obvious advantages on costs and times which, for example, will allow other activities to be carried out in the time gained”* (Case-9, Manager). Processes will be simplified and speeded up so that new marketing models will be implemented, *“increasing the scalability of the commercial proposition, and opening up even more to foreign collaborations”* (Case-12, Manager).

As concerns SMEs, they will work on building a personalized customer support given the necessity they showed to be recognized as individual with specific needs. The crisis will undoubtedly put at risk the retention of actual and potential customers (*“In our market a “deterioration” in the quality of customers with an essential risk of insolvency and long payment times and low working capital”* Case 13, Manager). For this reason, more profound efforts by organizations in trying to maintain and sustain the level of support for customers will be necessary. Accordingly, SMEs will improve their focus on a greater personalization of offerings, thanks to the opportunities offered by

new digital technologies: “*In this regard, we are trying to send to customers timely communications tied to their key moments*” (Case-16, Founder). As such, they will focus on delivering in all their sales channels what buyers value most: personalization.

5. Discussion

Despite the importance of marketing agility to successfully manage market uncertainty (Asseraf *et al.*, 2019; Hagen *et al.*, 2019; Moorman *et al.*, 2016; Zhou *et al.*, 2019), little research has been conducted on how agile marketing strategies impact B2B firms’ capacity to address adverse circumstances (Kumar and Sharma, 2021; Pedersen *et al.*, 2020), across the different stages of a crisis: event, response management, and investigation (Buchanan and Denyer, 2013). **In the following sections, we will present the contributions of this study in more detail.**

5.1. Theoretical contributions

This study contributes to extending prior literature by examining marketing agility in the context of crisis management. Indeed, scholars have suitably highlighted the crucial changes that COVID-19 has brought to B2B companies’ marketing landscape (e.g., Cortez and Johnston, 2020; Hartmann and Lussier, 2020; Heyden *et al.*, 2020; **Hu, 2022**). Although recent studies have argued about the relevance of marketing agility to thrive under uncertainty (e.g., Bond III *et al.*, 2020; Cortez and Johnston, 2020; He and Harris, 2020; Hughes and Rajesh; 2021; Kalaignanam *et al.*, 2021), the uniqueness and novelty of an unexpected event, such as the recent epidemic Coronavirus, requires new theorization about how business activities could embed agility in their marketing strategies to respond to today’s turbulent business scenarios, including guidance and adequate knowledge to build more resilient responses to the challenges they are facing (Kumar and Sharma, 2021; Markovic *et al.*, 2021; Oehmen *et al.*, 2020; Pedersen *et al.*, 2020).

The present work **extends** prior research by explaining how incorporating marketing agility to respond to unforeseen events such as the ongoing pandemic crisis may help B2B organizations innovate their *status quo* and rebuild a more robust and solid competitive advantage to cope with the new normality we are experiencing today. Notably, our study explains how integrating marketing agility has been concretized by B2B firms in an evolving manner across the three stages of the pandemic. We showed that, based on the specific stage of the pandemic in which companies were at (event phase, crisis response management phase, investigation phase), firms had to adapt their marketing strategies to evolving circumstances. By extending prior literature, this article advances a three-stage event sequence-based framework elucidating the main agile marketing strategies undertaken to progressively react to the pandemic scenario in the B2B context.

More specifically, the previous research on marketing agility has shown that responding to unforeseen situations in the marketplace requires firms to prioritize actions to address the evolutionary context (Hughes and Rajesh; 2021; Kalaignanam *et al.*, 2021). In particular, organizations need to rapidly adjust their strategy to align it to changing customer needs (Kalaignanam *et al.*, 2021). By extending prior literature, our study showed that what the literature defines as sensemaking activity (Kalaignanam *et al.*, 2021) has helped organizations during the event phase of the epidemic to offer prompt responses to adapt to the new, unexpected scenario effectively. Our framework highlights that both SMEs and large firms primarily focus on guaranteeing their customers’ protection and safety needs and constant and updated communication with them to strengthen responsiveness to changes in customer needs and expectations. Therefore, they needed to shift work and tasks to the online context to ensure the continuity of the core business activities. Related to this aspect, SMEs have had to strengthen the use of digital tools for valuable communication and adjust information/contents according to the situation underway. At the same time, large firms are deeply invested in a digital transformation process of business operations.

The first phase of the pandemic has also been characterized by some retrenchment interventions aimed at safeguarding profits, such as contingency plans to reduce costs or prioritizing most profiting business areas (especially online marketing activities), or planning initiatives to defend revenue generation process.

Furthermore, when arguing about marketing agility, earlier studies have also discussed the need for continuous and repeated iterations to better fit the marketplace's changing needs, which may impact multiple areas of marketing activities (Hughes and Rajesh, 2021; Kalaignanam *et al.*, 2021). By improving prior literature, this study suggests that the iteration process during the pandemic helped organizations mainly during the second phase of the crisis. Our model shows that after the first lockdown month, companies mostly oriented themselves toward a renewal of their performance by adopting new marketing tools and practices to better align with the new scenario and thereby enhance their resiliency. Large organizations that deployed more flexible marketing practices in addressing customer requests and needs (e.g., daily stand-up meetings, fact-based and analytical communication) were even able to successfully adapt to changing conditions more quickly at a constant pace, considerably optimizing their work and decision-making processes. Also, both SMEs and large firms started to implement more incisive brand reputation repair strategies. Indeed, aware of the corporate reputation risks that could follow a crisis, they have attempted to extensively take care of brand awareness and preserve brand image and loyalty.

Furthermore, prior literature has highlighted that deploying marketing agility requires nimble organizational structures based on cross-functional, collaborative teams and the easy sharing of knowledge throughout the organization (Kalaignanam *et al.*, 2021; Moi and Cabiddu, 2020). The cross-case analysis performed in this study revealed that, in the second phase, both SMEs and large firms fostered a working environment based on close collaboration among employees to keep people motivated and reassured.

Finally, when analyzing agility in the marketing domain, prior scholars have argued about a firm's ability to innovate marketing plans constantly and quickly and perceive trends in the marketplace to proactively/reactively respond accordingly for greater customer satisfaction (Moi and Cabiddu, 2020). By extending the previous studies, we propose that such aspects are the main prerequisites to address the investigation phase. Based on the lessons learned from previous experience, firms could plan their next moves to better handle future scenarios through a radical transformation of their marketing strategies. Learning to adjust rapidly to new configurations of the marketplace through digital and innovative marketing strategies and a greater focus on sustaining customers' needs are some of the main imperatives for success in the future. To accomplish these tasks, large organizations should be committed to investing in more specialized competencies, and shifting from in-person interaction to remote sale to favor better management of operations and greater promptness in detecting new strategic opportunities and adjusting to the market's new configurations. SMEs should also be involved in reshaping and differentiating offerings to add more value to solution offerings and build a personalized support to customers, leveraging the opportunities offered by digitalization.

5.2. Practical implications

This study clarifies to managers what decisions they could take to be more successful at different stages in addressing a crisis. Indeed, the event sequence-based framework conceptualized in this study offers important insights into what strategic and operational actions toward marketing agility have been implemented by B2B firms of different size during the progressive phases of the pandemic.

Relying on their capabilities/resources to undertake actions such as meeting the protection and safety needs of customers, ensuring the continuity of core business activities through digital tools, defending the revenue generation process, and maintaining continuous communication with

customers have been the main marketing strategies adopted by B2B companies in the first stage of the pandemic. Only after these essential steps are taken can companies start thinking about a “new normal” and focus on more incisive actions regarding brand reputation, flexible working practices, and employees’ close collaboration. Based on past experience, firms are then ready to discover new paths to redesign their future, such as investing in more specialized competencies, shifting from in-person interaction to remote sales, and building personalized customer support.

The results of this study provide concrete, practical contributions to managers, showing how agile marketing strategies effectively allow marketing teams to react quickly to unexpected changes. Our findings indicate to managers that marketing agility has an important, explicit impact on the workforce and business-level performance. Adopting agile marketing does not imply simply cutting budgets to reduce spending in unproductive areas but also reallocating savings to fruitful resources or activities such as technologies and digital transformation. Adopting a more agile operating model requires managers to develop technology capabilities that can read and interpret the evolution of consumer intent in the different stages of the crisis and then feed them back into the marketing function to learn what works and what does not. Rather than seeing agile marketing as a peripheral attribute of the organization, managers have to understand its centrality and importance in improving productivity and service quality.

Indeed, managers have to conceive of agile marketing as an imperative in situations of high uncertainty, such as the beginning of a crisis. They must accept ambiguity as a normal situation that enables experimenting with new solutions characterized by small adjustments and information collected at a reasonable cost to proceed to a solution set. Thus, implementing agile marketing as a new mechanism and tool to react to a crisis requires getting better at testing and faster at responding.

In summary, this work could help assess what strategic decisions might be more suitable at different stages in addressing a pandemic crisis and, hence, learn how to be more agile, reactive, flexible, and prepared in dealing with ever-changing environmental scenarios. Managers and practitioners could consult the proposed framework for evaluating how their organization manages a crisis and then plan how to move strategic efforts forward.

Although the study’s findings have confirmed the substantive positive effect of agile marketing in the B2B context, there might also be disadvantages to adopting this model, such as overinvestment of time, emotional exhaustion, and the likelihood of increased likelihood of employee dependency on technological support.

5.3. Limitations and future research

We acknowledge that this study is subject to some limitations, which raise important areas for future research. This work represents the first attempt to comprehend how firms performing in the B2B sector have been redesigning their marketing strategies and business practices to address the pandemic’s challenges by embedding marketing agility. Although important insights were gained from interviewing the key respondents of each company (e.g., managers, founders) about the strategies put in motion during this unique era, the qualitative and exploratory nature of this work requires further research to improve the generalization of the results obtained. Thus, we invite future studies to extend data collection to further improve the insights obtained concerning this phenomenon. It would be interesting to investigate other industries beyond the selected ones. Additionally, it would be interesting to deepen this topic in the business-to-consumer (B2C) setting.

Such research will also require additional contributions from a theoretical and practical point of view. Therefore, we encourage future studies to develop and test a theoretical framework representing a model for understanding marketing agility after COVID-19. Future research might consider further questions that extend and validate the approach presented here. For example, how does marketing agility affect how organizations cope with different crisis scenarios? Researchers

could consider three main potential scenarios: the worst scenario could imply preparing for a “new quarantined living”; alternatively, it could occur in a “restricted living” scenario, with a partial return to normality with some restrictions from a social perspective; and finally, a scenario of “new normality,” with the lessons learned by past experience.

6. Conclusions

Our event-sequence-based framework, derived from a multiple-case study research design, offers a view of how agile marketing strategies empower B2B firms’ ability to cope with a crisis. The core of our research approach to crisis management strategies is that they evolve over time and are primarily derived from the distinction across three crucial moments: the event phase, the response management phase, and the investigation phase. Our study contributes toward increasing the level of attention B2B organizations of different size (SMEs and large companies) operating across different industries should devote to embed marketing agility to enhance their capacity to respond to unexpected events, and redefine their positioning to progressively react to the different stages of a crisis as the recent pandemic Coronavirus. By distinguishing the different phases of a crisis, our findings unveil the multiple ways each strategy best suits each moment of the pandemic. Managers may use the identified strategies of our integrative model to guide their assessments of the actions needed to encourage resilience at each stage. Initially, a focus on safeguarding customers and providing constant and updated communication to them are imperative for both SMEs and large B2B firms. To ensure the continuity of the core activities, they also have to strengthen the use of digital tools into business operations and implement interventions to safeguard profits and defend revenues. Later stages of a crisis might be aimed at strengthening brand reputation and collaboration among employees for SMEs and large firms. Large organizations are also involved in testing flexible marketing practices to optimize time and resources in adapting to customer requests and needs. Finally, firms need to prepare themselves better to address the future. This should imply investing in more specialized competencies for large organizations, and shifting from in-person interaction to remote sales. At the same time, SMEs should be engaged in building personalized support for customers. In summary, our research could therefore help managers orient their behavior, thereby improving the effectiveness of their performance in business contexts in which making strategic and operational marketing decisions may be a challenge.

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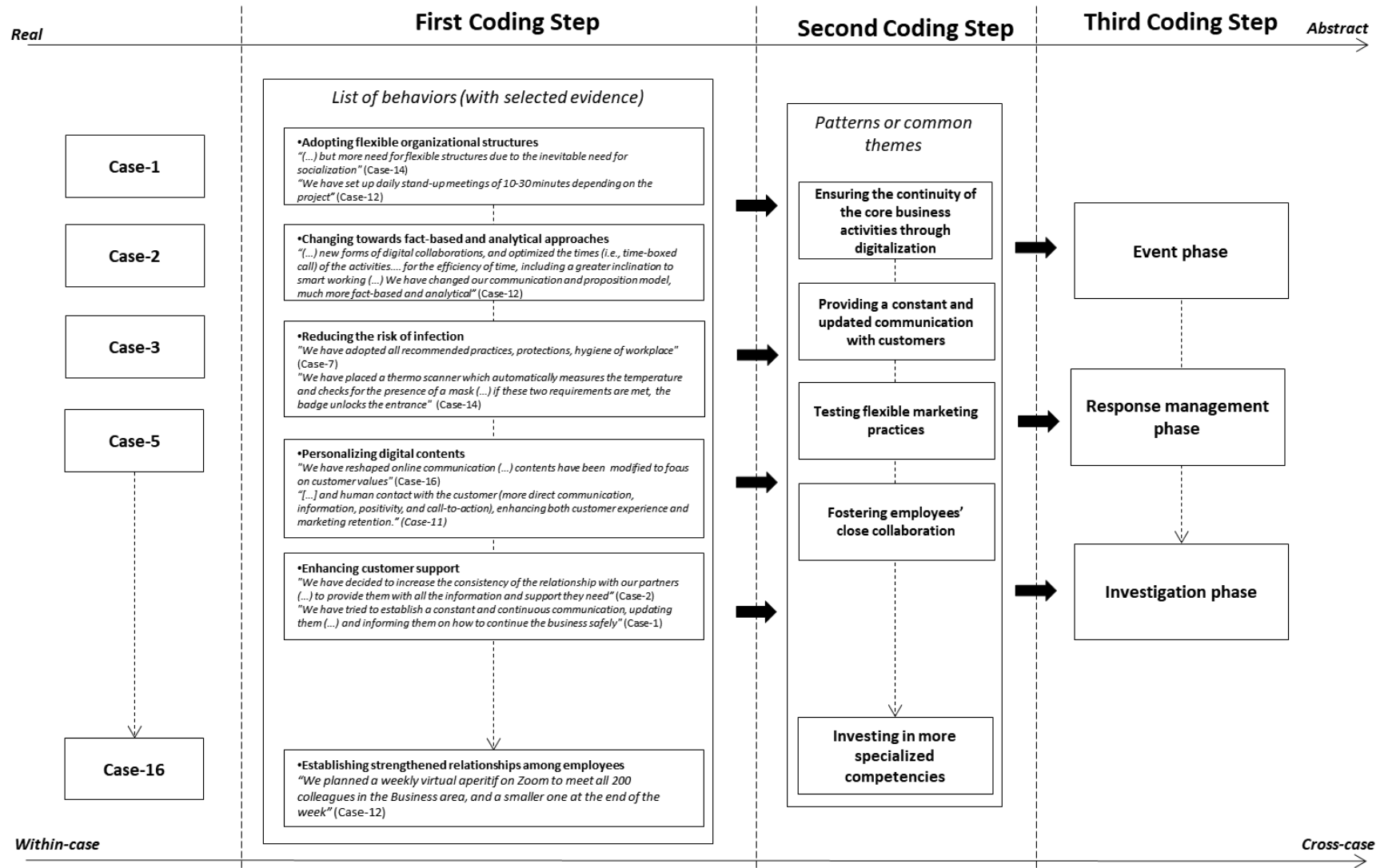
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Table I: Summary of case studies

Case study	Sector	N° of interviewee	Role	Company size
Case-1	Services	1	Manager	>250
Case-2	Services	1	Manager	>250
Case-3	Services	1	Manager	>250
Case-4	IT	1	Manager	>250
Case-5	ICT	1	Manager	<50
Case-6	ICT	1	CEO	<50
Case-7	Services	1	Manager	<10
Case-8	ICT	1	Manager	>250
Case-9	Services	1	Manager	>250
Case-10	IT	1	Owner	<50
Case-11	Services	1	Manager	<50
Case-12	Services	3	Manager	>250
Case-13	Services	1	Manager	<50
Case-14	Services	1	CEO and Founder	<10
Case-15	Services	1	Owner	<10
Case-16	Services	1	Founder	<50

Figure I: Overview of the data analysis process



Source: adapted from (Saldaña, 2015).

Figure II: Event sequence-based framework of agile marketing strategies to COVID-19 in the B2B sector

