



BI Norwegian Business School - campus Oslo

# GRA 19502

Master Thesis

Component of continuous assessment: Thesis Master of Science

Final master thesis – Counts 80% of total grade

Master thesis - High-quality connections in retail stores

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Start: 02.03.2018 09.00

Finish: 03.09.2018 12.00

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Considering our journey with regards to the present thesis, we would especially like to thank our supervisor, Arne Carlsen, for providing us with valuable guidance, support and assistance along the way. Not only has he shown his openness for guiding us, but he has also made us increase our knowledge for how we in a most appropriate manner should conduct our research, as well as give us the motivation to look at the study from different and interesting aspects.

Additionally, we would like to thank the organization that we have been cooperating with in order for us to observe and interview their employees to collect valuable and important data for our thesis. We would especially thank the employees who were willing to spend their time sharing their experiences and stories with us.

Lastly, we would also thank our mystery shoppers who voluntarily participated in our study, in order for us to get the opportunity to both look at the employees' and the customers' point of view in this thesis.

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## Abstract

Reflecting upon the gap in the literature regarding how high-quality connections between employees and customers in retail stores may look like, and how these potentially may affect organizational performance outcomes, the aim of this present thesis is to add insight into this particular field. Considering that we wanted to learn more about employees' and customers' specific thoughts and experiences regarding the employee-customer relationships, we have applied qualitative research methods and strategies in order to come up with five processes that looks at the small, but important actions that may determine how the connection between them further develops. These five processes are therefore drawn out of the semi-structured interviews we have conducted with both employees and customers (mystery shoppers). The five processes identified are as following: 1) interacting through product knowledge sharing, 2) help seeking/help giving, 3) interacting through fostering perspective taking, 4) adapting to personality and style, and 5) signal availability. Building our research and the presented processes on studies by prominent authors, we may argue that the present thesis supports and adds insight into these studies. Specifically, the present thesis describes both how these processes enable high-quality connections between employees and customers to be developed, and how they potentially contribute in creating customer experiences of high quality. Additionally, the processes presented also describe and look into how high-quality connections foster strong relationships- and how these connections may affect the overall organizational performance outcomes. In order to understand the role of how high-quality connections between employees and customers in retail stores better, we have also discussed implications for theory and practice.

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

In today's highly competitive market, it becomes increasingly important for organizations to recognize their customer's wants and needs, in order for the organizations to be able to improve their overall organizational performance outcomes. Research shows that the customers have become more powerful throughout the years. According to Evanschitzky, Sharma & Prykop (2012), successful firm performance is retrieved from customer satisfaction. Therefore, by taking today's situation into account, we may argue that it is critical for organizations to gain insight and knowledge into their customer segments - and thereby be able to recognize what actions that can be done to develop and foster strong employee-customer relationships. Research points to how high-quality connections may lead to positive performance outcomes. More specific, as Wang & Groth (2014) state, the key determinant of successful customer outcomes is the quality of the interaction between employees and customers. Hence, we argue that high-quality connections may be important with regards to developing loyal customer relationships.

Even though many prominent researchers have studied the field of high-quality connections, and how it might be related to performance, the field lacks research in different areas. One of the gaps especially lays in how high-quality connection between employee and a customer can be developed. Overall, the existence of qualitative studies on relationships towards customers are lacking. Due to this, we are interested in exploring this field, and make a contribution to the existing theory. Based on this, we have built our design mainly based on observations and semi-structured interviews.

Reflecting upon this, the present thesis aims to look at the importance of high-quality connections in employee-customer relationships, and further - how these connections might be developed and fostered. This, in order for the organization to be able to improve its performance.

### 1.2 Research Question

Due to the acknowledgement of the existing gap in extant literature regarding high-quality connection - more specifically, the high-quality connection between an employee and customer in retail stores, and how it can affect better

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performance outcomes, our thesis will explore the gap more closely by attempting to answer the following question:

*What does high-quality connections in retail sales look like, and how do they potentially affect performance?*

### **1.3 Thesis Outline**

Our thesis is built up in four parts. *The first part* involve the theoretical background of high-quality connection. In order to answer our research question in a best possible manner, we have explored the existing literature in the field in order to get an overview of what we already know, in addition to gain more knowledge as well as acquire better understanding. *The second part*, the methodological framework, presents our selected method to collect materials and data in order to answer the research question presented. More specifically, a presentation of our research approach and research design will be shown. *The third part* will present our findings of our study, as well as the analysis of the data that is collected. In this part, we will present five processes that are essential for building high-quality connection in the relationship between an employee and a customer, and explain how and why these are important. Lastly, *the fourth part* of our thesis, will present a discussion involving summary of our findings, how these can contribute to the existing theory, as well as suggestions of practical implications, and limitations and future research.

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## 2.0 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### 2.1 Introduction

In order to widen our understanding on how high-quality connection between individuals works, or more specifically, how high-quality connections between employees and customers can affect organizational performance outcomes, we have examined the existing organizational research within this field. By building on the previous research that we now will present, we hope that the present thesis may extend and contribute to the field of high-quality connections, and how it might affect performance and organizational outcomes.

Since one of the main purposes of our thesis is to understand the mechanisms that affect the quality of the connection between individuals, we have looked further into research that exemplifies specific methods that may increase the levels of the quality. For example, Dutton and Lee (2017) suggest four ways that can be positive in regard to the creation of high-quality connections in the workplace. For instance, they suggest that creating positive first impressions matter. Even though Dutton and Lee (2017) link this to the connection between colleagues in an organization, we believe that creating a positive first impression also matter in the connection between the employee and the customer. Because the employee in a store meets several unknown individuals during a day, we believe that the employee can affect the quality of the connection with the customer, and be essential to how the customer perceives the service, trustworthiness and the organization as a whole. As an example, we believe that employees who show interest in the customer and behave in an accommodating manner are likely to affect the customer's experience of the organization in a positive way. In order to gain a better presentation of the theory of high-quality connection and its influence on relationships, our theory part presents several existing literature in this field, and is divided into three parts;

*The first part* defines high-quality connection, and presents the concept more in depth. We want to present our understanding of the concept, and how this representation of high-quality connection can affect the relationship between an employee and a customer, and its organizational outcomes. Further, positive outcomes that are brought by high-quality connection will also be presented. This field have been examined and studied by many researchers, hence, many different outcomes have been suggested, as well as different ways on how to foster high-



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quality connection. *The second part* examines the actual relationship between employees and customers. *Lastly*, we want to connect the existing theory to our thesis, and explain why and how we want to build our thesis further in order to provide theoretical contribution to this field.

## 2.2 High-Quality Connections

### 2.2.1 Defining high-quality connections

An existence of a specific definition of high-quality connection in the literature is difficult to find. However, Dutton and Heaphy (2003) define high-quality connection between two individuals as “*whether the connective tissue between individuals is life-giving or life-depleting*” (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003, p. 236), and a connection as “*the dynamic, living tissue that exists between two people when there is some contact between them, involving mutual awareness and social interaction*” (p. 264). On the other hand, in low-quality connections, a tie exists, but the connective tissue is damaged. This means that people communicate, they interact and they may be involved in interdependent work - but the connection between the people involved is weak and damaging (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003, p.263).

According to Dutton and Heaphy (2003), three defining characteristics of high-quality connection exist. The first characteristic involves *higher emotional carrying capacity*. More specifically, high-quality connections have the capacity to survive the expression of more absolute emotion and more emotion of different variations. By feeling safe of displaying different emotions, we know that we are in an high-quality connection. The second characteristic *tensility* refers to the capacity of the connection to resist pressure and to function in variety of conditions. Additionally, the connection can change form (while still retaining its strength) in order to accommodate changes in the circumstances of either individual, or conflict and tensions in the joint conditions of the dyad (p.266). Lastly, the third characteristic of the tie, *the degree of connectivity* refers to the measure of a relationship’s generativity and openness to new ideas and influences, as well as its capacity to avert behaviors that will end generative processes.

Dutton and Heaphy (2016) suggest that people grow in connections with others. By taking the perspective of the organization’s customers, both the employees and the organization can make improvements in terms of safety,

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efficiency, and effectiveness. Linking this to our research, we are interested in increasing our understanding with regards to how the employees view their roles at work in relation to their customers.

### **2.2.2 High-quality connection outcomes**

Earlier research and studies show that the existence of positive outcomes caused by high-quality connections are many. Vinarski-Peretz and Carmeli (2011) found that positive relational experiences such as mutuality creates psychological state engagement, which further result into behavioral engagement. Mutuality can be referred as the state when people in a relationship are engaged and actively participating (Carmeli, Brueller, and Dutton, 2009, p.85). Putting it into a work context, it can be argued that positive workplace relationships have the power to influence individual's states, attitudes and behaviors (Dutton, 2003 as cited in Vinarski-Peretz and Carmeli, 2011). Additionally, positive workplace relationships also creates higher level of engagement at work, which further develops a sense of affective commitment, motivation, psychological availability and creative self-efficacy (Kahn, 2007, as cited in Vinarski-Peretz and Carmeli, 2011).

With regards to organizational performance outcomes, Shefer et al. (2017) suggest that when employees experience relationships characterized by a high level of regard with their co-workers, they are likely to develop a sense of vitality. This will in turn result in enhanced job performance and organizational citizenship behaviors (Shefer et al., 2017, p.1). Specifically, Shefer et al. (2017) focus their research on the concept of positive regard between individuals. Positive regard can in short be explained as the feeling of being known or respected by a person, or people (Carmeli, Brueller and Dutton, 2009). Reflecting upon Rogers' (1951) study, Shefer et al. (2017) suggest that experiencing positive regard signals a sense of acceptance by others who play a significant role in these people's lives which contributes to their sense of vitality and thereby facilitates behaviors and enhances outcomes (Shefer et al., 2017, p.2). Shefer et al. (2017) suggest that organizations seeking to improve employee citizenship behaviors and job performance, should focus their attention on understanding the power of positive regard and a strong relational work environment. In fact, Carmeli, Brueller and

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Dutton (2009) suggest that involving positive regard in a relationship might lead to a high-quality connection.

Further, Stephens et al. (2011) state that high-quality connections can be understood in terms of short-term, dyadic interactions at work. The high-quality connection between employees and customers can be argued to be short-termed. Moreover, the positivity of high-quality connection is known by how they feel for both persons involved, what high-quality connections do, and the beneficial outcomes they produce. Stephens et al. (2011) explain that the function of high-quality connections can be understood through how you think more clearly and act more competently after a particular conversation with a colleague before entering a meeting. From this, we see that the aspect of high-quality connections also can be explained from behavioral and emotional mechanisms. It should also be mentioned that Stephens et al. (2011) does not assume that the connection not necessarily has to be linked to previous bonds. Instead, the connection between the two individuals involved can be created in a situation, such as in employee-customer relationships. Even though the people involved don't have a prior history that connect them, the interaction they experience in the particular situation may have an important impact over time. This implies that a high-quality connection between an employee and a customer may have an enduring effect, and may be a explanatory mechanism regarding whether the customer is satisfied and wants to visit the store again or not. However, considering the quality of the connection, Stephens et al. (2011) suggest that the quality differences can be explained by the variance in how well-functioning the dyadic connection is at a particular point in time (Stephens et al., 2011, p. 2).

By linking their research to Ybarra et al.'s (2008) research, Stephens et al. (2011) suggest that high-quality connections improve individual functioning through affecting cognitive, physiological, and behavioral processes (Stephens et al., 2011, p. 3). High-quality connections can therefore be linked to both individual and organizational functioning. According to Ybarra et al. (2008), small amounts of interaction with others can improve both person's cognitive performance in terms of speed of processing and working memory performance. On a more organizational level, Blatt and Camden (2007) suggest that high-quality connections can be important in order to form attachments to work organizations or communities (as cited in Stephens et al., 2011, p. 3).

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Furthermore, building trust in a relationship is vital, especially in business relationships. Reflecting upon the importance of trust in a employee-customer relationship, we argue that the organization as a whole is likely to achieve better results and outcomes. If the customer experiences a high-quality connection with the employee, and feels that the relationship between them is sincere, we believe that the customer is likely to revisit the store. According to Jiang, Henneberg and Naudé (2011) trust has been perceived as a crucial concept in business relationships, and it is argued to be a critical factor to both build and maintain a relationship. According to Rousseau et al. (1998) trust is “*a psychological state compromising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another*” (as cited in Jiang, Henneberg and Naudé, 2011, p.320). Moreover, Jiang, Henneberg and Naudé’s (2011) findings show that trust leads to growth in reciprocation and support in relationships. The relationship can further mature through repeating successful exchanges of benefits between the two parties, which can be continued in the future. Cooperation within and across units can also be strengthened through high-quality connection, by developing effective coordination between interdependent parts of an organization, coordinate the transmission of a purpose, encourage dialogue and learning, and enhance an organization’s capacity to adapt and change (Dutton, 2003a, 2003b).

### **2.2.3 How high-quality can be fostered**

Dutton (2014) argues that high-quality connections at work provides the people with a sense of value and worth. In other words, high-quality connections are a potent means for creating and building meaning at work (Dutton, 2014, p. 9). However, as previous research show, and which further is supported by Dutton (2014); small actions can foster purpose. In order to get more insight into how high-quality connections between employees and customers affect performance, we believe that it is valuable to explore the field of how small actions can foster purpose. Dutton (2014) argues that there are three steps managers and leaders can take to foster high-quality connections and purpose in the organization. The first step is to believe it is possible. Linking this to our research, this can be looked at from the employees’ point of view. Considering that a customer visits the store for a short amount of time, we assume it is critical that the employees believe it is possible to create a high-quality connection with the customer. Believing in the

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possibility can therefore be argued to affect the behavior of the employees at work. In other words, being aware of one-self's behavior and act in a genuine and open way towards the customer. This stands in line with the second step suggested by Dutton (2014), which is to take small actions that encourage people to be psychologically present in virtual and in-persons meetings. However, the third and last step suggested by Dutton (2014) is focusing on cultivate cultures, rewards systems, and reporting structures that encourage respectful engagement, trust, and mutual help. This step is first and foremost related to the organizational structure. This means that having a supportive and encouraging culture within the organization can affect how the employees perform at work and in the interaction with their customers.

### **2.3 The Relationship Between Employees and Customers**

Relationship quality is a key strategy, and an important issue when addressing the relational dynamics. A high quality relationship is especially important for conditions where customers face considerable uncertainty stemming from such factors as intangibility, complexity and lack of service familiarity (Sanchez-Franco and Rondan-Cataluna, 2010).

According to Grandey & Diamond (2010), service personalization and relationship strength are two contextual service delivery features that are important in the emotional labor literature and service literature (as cited in Wang & Groth, 2014). Weak relationships between employees and customers might lead to customers inclined to process emotions at face value. Hence, more accurate observations in terms of emotional display of the employee will be more visible, which might further lead to lower service satisfaction. Accordingly, Wang & Groth's study (2014) also found that suppressed negative emotions could result in lower service satisfaction in personalized service. Thus, the importance of a personalized and a strong relationship is essential for service satisfaction.

Further, existing literature state that there is a significant relationship between employee satisfaction and customer satisfaction (Evanschitzky, Sharma & Prykop, 2012). More specifically, in Evanschitzky, Sharma & Prykop's (2012) study, they found that adaptive selling and employee satisfaction had positive impacts on customer satisfaction. Adapting selling can be explained as "*the ability to better understand the customer's needs, desires, and expectations*" (p.501). Linking this to our study, we may argue that employees who sincerely engage in

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understanding their customers' needs and wants may represent a critical factor regarding customer satisfaction. Further, employee satisfaction influence higher customer satisfaction by interacting with employees that are satisfied with their current state. In addition to this, research findings have also found that overall employee satisfaction increases customer satisfaction independent of the interaction of the customer and the employee (Evanschitzky, Sharma & Prykop, 2012, p. 501). Along with this, service quality, product quality and value-for-money also have important impact on positive customer satisfaction. Drawing on this, we see that there are various components and factors that might influence how both employees and customers look at the quality of connection with each other. However, in order to gain more insight and knowledge into the field of high-quality connections between employees and customers, we may argue that the aspects of experienced trust and satisfaction for both parts should thoroughly be taken into consideration.

#### **2.4 Connecting the Theory to Our Thesis**

With regards to our thesis, it is vital to acknowledge the importance of the customer's perception of being known or respected by the employees, as well as both parts should be mutually engaged and actively participating in the purchasing process in order to obtain crucial factors such as engagement, affective commitment and innovative work behaviors. These factors can be argued to have a positive influence on obtaining better organizational performance outcomes, as well as create a strong tie so that the customer wants to come back.

When it comes to how high-quality connections can be fostered, we build on earlier research and argue that small actions matters. More specific, seen from the employees' point of view, this might mean being more aware of the possibility that one can create a high-quality connection with the customer, no matter if the customer only visits the store for a short amount of time. As shown, in order to build and foster high-quality connections, both the employee and the customer plays mutual critical roles. However, since our present research focuses on how high-quality connections can affect organizational performance outcomes, we may argue that the employees, especially, should continuously maintain a focus on meeting their customers with engagement and openness for interaction. In other words, by focusing on the small actions, the employees can play important roles in order for the organization to improve its overall performance outcomes.

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Drawing on the research presented and linking this to our thesis, we believe that organizations focusing on positive regard and the importance of high-quality interactions among employees and customers will affect the organizational performance in terms of higher customer satisfaction, trust and the likelihood of coming back. As earlier mentioned, the topic has already been researched on, however, we want to build further on the theory that exist, and draw the thesis deeper into the high-quality connection between employees and customers in retail stores.

The customers can provide us with valuable data on how they view the importance of the connection with the employees. By doing this, we believe that both employees and customers can enrich our view of how people grow and develop in connections with others.

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## 3.0 METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Introduction

Considering the nature of qualitative research, it is important to acknowledge that as a research strategy, qualitative research emphasizes words rather than numbers. Specifically, a qualitative research strategy can be inductivist, constructionist, and interpretivist (Bryman and Bell, 2015, p. 392). Reflecting upon the aim of the present thesis and the main preoccupations and features of qualitative researchers, we argue that it is critical for us as researchers to manage to see through the eyes of the research participants. This means that both the employees and the customers should get the opportunity to feel that they can tell us anything that they want to and feel safe in the interview context. Therefore, we want to make sure that the participants don't get restricted by the questions - but instead feel that they can elaborate and share experiences their own way. This way, it will be easier for us to see through the eyes of the participants - and thereby gain insight and knowledge into the processes linked to high quality connections between employees and customers. Moreover, we believe it is important to emphasize description and context. As Bryman and Bell (2015) suggest, social properties are outcomes of the interactions between individuals (p.392).

Relating this to high quality connections between employees and customers, this might mean that it is the wide and detailed descriptions of the processes and the context the participants emphasize that will provide us with valuable information. In other words, by continuously focusing on the processes, we believe we will be able to reflect the participants' point of view and thereby be able to understand the aspect of high-quality connections on a deeper level, and see how high-quality connections may affect performance outcomes in an organization. Due to the interest of wanting the participants to share as much of their experiences and thoughts as possible without getting disturbed, our research design will be semi-structured - which also means that it opens up for flexibility. By applying this research strategy, the concepts and theory will derive from the research process.

### 3.2 Inductive Design

Given our interest in elaborating theory on high-quality connection between employees and customers, we have chosen to conduct an inductive, qualitative



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study applying grounded theory approaches. By linking their research to Creswell's (1998) study and Strauss and Corbin's (1990) study, Harrison and Rouse (2014) suggest that inductive, qualitative research is appropriate when the research question focuses on developing theory, especially theory about process (as cited in Harrison and Rouse, 2014, p.1261).

According to Bryman and Bell (2015), with an inductive stance, theory is the outcome of research. Specifically, this means that the process of induction involves drawing generalizable inferences out of observations (Bryman and Bell, 2015, p. 25). Since we have chosen to collect our data by doing semi-structured interviews with both employees and customers, it will be these interviews as well as observations of the employees in stores that will set the ground for our research findings. In other words, by applying an inductive research strategy, data are collected to build theory rather than to test it, and therefore, the data collected form the basis from which generalizable inferences are drawn (Bryman and Bell, 2015, p. 581). Building on this, we may describe our research strategy as iterative, which means that we will be tracking back and forth between theory and data. By going back to existing theory during the research process, we may argue that this enables us to make sense of the data better and more thoroughly. However, even though we emphasize an inductive research strategy, one should take into consideration that research rarely is entirely inductive (Bryman and Bell, 2015, p.581). With that said, by applying grounded theory approaches, the data collection, analysis, and the theory applied in the present thesis, will stand in close relationship to another.

### **3.3 Research Design and Data Collection**

As earlier mentioned, an inductive design will be utilized, due to its purpose to build and elaborate theory. Hence, our research design is built based on the interest of seeking source of information to make theoretical claims, by providing evidence of what high-quality connection between employees and customers looks like, and how it can provide better performance outcomes in retail stores.

#### *Sample and procedure*

In our master thesis, a *purposeful sample* approach will be utilized. By using this approach, this study will obtain the possibility of selecting information-rich cases for study in depth (Patton, 1990). According to Patton (1990), “an

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*intensity sample consist of information-rich cases that manifest the phenomenon of interest intensely*” (p.234). We selected our case organization for our thesis based on our *indication* of our selected retail store’s competence of performing a successful purchase process. Employees from the selected retail stores are known to not only go through several purchase processes during a day, but also perform many successful ones. In addition to this, we also selected our case organization based on *convenience sampling*. Even though this method is argued to be the least desirable method to use, because this method neither is being purposeful nor strategic (Patton, 1990), we would still base our sample on this. The reason for this is due to our interest of using mystery shoppers in our thesis, in order to achieve more realistic and wider information. In order to do so, we needed to have a case organization within the Oslo area. Hence, it was more convenient for us to find mystery shoppers that were willing to participate in our thesis if the case organization was within the Oslo area. According to Jacob et al. (2018), a mystery shopper is “*a person that is put in contact with an organization to evaluate the quality of service provided by the latter*” (p. 166). There are favorable reasons why to use mystery shoppers. For instance, by using mystery shoppers, we can make it possible to get an insight on how customer service is provided, as well as an evaluation of the quality of the service offered can be done (Jacob et al., 2018).

Further, we also chose to examine three retail stores to gather information in order to *maximize the variation*. Patton (1990) states that “*any common patterns that emerge from great variation are of particular interest and value in capturing the core experiences and central, shared dimensions of a setting or phenomenon*” (p.235). Due to our focus on collecting informational and rich data, we performed two different methods; semi-structured interviews and observations. Further, our method design is divided in three parts. In the first part, we observed the three case retail stores in order to gain wider information on how a normal purchase process is performed, as well as what the employees do that might be extremely good. In the second part, we conducted nine semi-structured interviews with the top three best selling employees from each three stores. Through these interviews, a better insight of how a good seller perceive a successful purchase process. In the third phase, we wanted to know more of how a successful purchase process looks like from a customer’s point of view. Hence, we conducted five interviews with mystery shoppers that had acted like customers towards the nine top three best selling employees that were previously interviewed.

We believe that this combination with both semi-structured interviews (see appendix 1 and 2 for interview-guides) and observations will give us increased quality and reliability of the data gathering process, due to the opportunity to ask questions that are important to ask in interviews, ask about things that we have observed, as well as getting better information about the empirical context from observing (Martela, 2012).

**TABLE 1: TYPES OF QUESTIONS ASKED**

Question themes	Specifics (employee-interviewees)	Specifics (customer-interviewees)
<b>Question 1</b> <i>Interviewee's background</i>	Warm up phase. Introduction of ourselves, information about the purpose the study, and confidentiality. Questions related to interviewee's personal and professional background.	
<b>Question 2</b> <i>Successful purchase processes</i>	Open-ended questions related to specific successful purchase processes that the interviewees have been involved in. Follow-up questions are included (e.g., what happened, what was your contribution to this success?)	
<b>Question 3</b> <i>The relation between an employee and a customer</i>	Questions about the relation in the successful purchase process (e.g., can you tell us more about the relation you had with the customer/employee?). Follow-up questions are included (e.g., what would you say is the difference between a good seller and an extraordinary seller?)	
<b>Question 4</b> <i>Sources of job engagement and meaning</i>	Questions related to work episodes and aspects that give the employees with feel of engagement and satisfaction (e.g., when did you last feel very motivated and engaged at work?)	-
<b>Question 5</b> <i>Imagined and desired futures</i>	Questions about imagined scenarios and futures (e.g., imagine that you met one of the retail store's most important customer/best employee: what do you think would change in order to achieve even better interaction and purchase process compared to what you are currently doing now/have experienced until now?)	
<b>Question 6</b> <i>Summary</i>	A short summary and sharing interpretations in order to confirm if our understanding is correctly before asking if there is anything else to add.	

**TABLE 2: RESEARCH DESIGN**

<b>Part 1:</b> Observations of the three retail stores' purchase processes
<b>Part 2:</b> Semi-structured interviews with nine of the employees from the retail stores
<b>Part 3:</b> Semi-structured interviews with five of the mystery shoppers

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### **3.4 Case Organization**

We have selected three retail stores to base our thesis on. The three retail stores are owned by one company. This company has become one of Europe's leading suppliers in fashion and lifestyle brands. The company consists of many clothing stores from different brands, however, the three clothing stores that we conduct our data from are the three most popular retail stores in Oslo from this company. We think of these three retail stores as good sites for our empirical research due to its high focus on customer service, their good reputation of it, and their ability to build good relations with customers that often come back based on it.

The three retail stores are targeting female customers, and provide products such as clothes, jewellery, belts, scarves and bags. They focus on creating and offering great fashion styles with high-quality to attractive prices to their customers.

### **3.5 Participants**

Our thesis consisted of 14 participants in total, where nine of these consisted of employee-participants (employees from the three case retail stores), and five consisted of customer-participants (mystery shoppers). The employee-participants were selected based on their good performance. More specifically, the managers from the three retail stores selected their top three best sellers in each store to participate in our thesis. All of our participants were female. This because the retail stores only consist of female employees, and the stores are only targeting female customers, hence, our mystery shoppers also only consist of females. All of the employee-participants mainly had the same responsibilities and roles in the stores, however, three of the employees have wider knowledge range in terms of administrative tasks due to their long-term employment or a different role prior to what they have now. The age range was from 20-27 years within the employee-participants, whereas the age range within the customer-participants were from 21-25 years. Four of the customer-participants were students with different study background: organizational psychology, marketing, economy, and teacher, whereas one of the customer-participants was working in sales.

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### 3.6 Data Analysis

The choice of our analytical approach is based on the explorative as well as theory elaboration focus of this master thesis, which concerns how to achieve best usage of the data that we have collected, mainly through our interviews with the participants. Based on this, our analytical approach to the data collection is based on grounded theorizing. The renewed branch of grounded theorizing (Charmaz 2006; Suddaby 2006; Aarestad 2015) is constantly comparing and repeating shuttling between empirical data and theory, because it is seen as key to build theoretical categories (p.91). According to Suddaby (2006), the use of grounded theory should also be used in a way that is “*logically consistent with key assumptions about social reality and how that reality is known*” (p.634). This means that we are encouraging and allowing our participants to try to stay true to themselves and the reality during our interviews, by allowing them to speak their own voices (Van Maanen, 1979). By doing so, we will achieve a more realistic picture of the situations, as well as richer and more informative data. According to Glaser & Strauss (1967), this approach is most suitable for research that has a goal to “*elicit fresh understandings about the patterned relationship between social actors*” (p.1). We can argue that our thesis aims to achieve the presented theories above by understanding the patterned relationship between the customers and the employees, as well as trying to capture the social reality and how that reality is known. We transcribed all of our interviews in order to code our data collection.

We coded our data collection into first- and second order concepts, which we divided into two stages. The first stage involves *developing the first-order concepts*. Put it simple, Van Maanen (1979) explains first-order concept as “facts”. In order to develop first-order concepts, we began with open coding. According to Corbin & Strauss (2008), open coding is “*designed to break open the data to consider all possible meanings*” (as cited in Harrison & Rouse, 2015, p.383). In order to develop and discover categories that was related to high-quality connections, we emphasized on verbatim statements and paragraphs from different episodes or stories. We first coded separately, and then met up to compare and discuss our coding, which were then coded into first-order concepts (see Appendix 3). The second stage involves discovering the second-order concepts. Second-order concepts are the “theories” an analyst uses to organize and explain the facts (Van Maanen, 1979, p.549). In this stage, we went from open coding to axial coding. Axial coding concerns “understanding how our first-order

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categories fit together to suggest more abstract, theoretical categories” (Harrison & Rouse, 2015, p.383). In this process, we are aiming to connect the concepts that we found through open coding through the process of comparing and contrasting. In order to do so, we compared codes from high-quality connection interactions, as well as across contexts, more specifically, in all of our three retail stores, in order to widen our understanding of how high-quality connection works in different contexts. In other words, we compared and examined our first-order concepts across the three retail stores where similarities in each stores were found. This allowed us to find five second-order concepts, which in this master thesis is referred to as processes (Appendix 3).

### **3.7 Ethical considerations**

Considering the research method we have applied to our thesis and how we have chosen to conduct the data needed to answer the research question in a most appropriate manner, we will now present some ethical considerations that we have emphasized. Taking into account that we decided to focus on qualitative research methods and strategy, we were looking for participants who could enrich our understanding and knowledge regarding the various processes and the relationship between employees and customers in retail stores. Even though we wanted to conduct semi-structured interviews with the three top sellers in each clothing store, participation in the study was voluntary. Furthermore, we ensured all the participants that everything that they would tell us would be confidential, and that their identity would be hidden. Therefore, before we conducted the interviews – both with the employees and the customers (mystery shoppers), all the participants agreed to our consent. Additionally, we informed the participants that the audiotaped records would be deleted after they were transcribed, and that the transcribed interviews not would be used for other purposes than for the present master thesis. In order to ensure the participants’ identity and sharing of data, we ensured anonymity, and therefore we have avoided using the retail stores’ names , as well as both the employees and the mystery shopper’s names.

## 4.0 FINDINGS

**TABLE 3: FIVE MAIN PROCESSES**

Process	Description	Example quote
<b>Interacting through product knowledge sharing</b>	The process of interacting through product knowledge sharing refers to an interaction between an employee and a customer based on information through knowledge sharing about the products. The product knowledge sharing is a one-way structure from the employee to the customer. In short, product knowledge is referred to the knowledge the employee has on their own products that are useful for the customer to know.	Quote from an employee: <i>"When you inform the customer about the clothes, it is important to know the material - a good seller might know a few materials (...) An extraordinary seller will know how to answer all of these questions, which will make the customer feel safer to you.</i>
<b>Help seeking/help giving</b>	The process of help seeking/help giving refers to a relational process between an employee and a customer. Specifically, the process can be understood in terms of settings where the customer seeks help from the employee and in situations where the employee provides the customer with help. In other words, this is a process where the participating parties ask and answer each other's questions.	Quote from a customer: <i>"Since I took the first step in seeking help from the employee, she knew right away that I wanted her help - and then she gave me all of her attention. (...) I would say that both me as a customer and the employee contributed to make the purchasing process successful"</i>
<b>Interacting through fostering perspective taking</b>	The process of interacting through fostering perspective taking refers to the ability imagine another person's thoughts or feelings, or more specifically, the employee's ability to look at a situation from the customer's point of view. The employee needs to show the customers that they truly understand their "problems", and be able to solve it through showing compassion, understanding and creating social bonds.	Quote from an employee: <i>"...she kind of gave me some hints and clues by saying that she had been in a very bad period (...) And I think that for me as a seller, that is my chance to show the customers that I care for them and actually see the customer."</i>
<b>Adapting to personality and style</b>	The process of adapting to personality and style in this thesis refers to the ability to understand and help the customer in a best possible way based on her personality and/or style. There are many different customers with different needs and style, and some customers need more understanding than others, in terms of their insecurities, body shape or special styles.	Quote from an employee: <i>"we always have pants that fit everybody, and I know that trying on different pants is very cumbersome, however, when you first are willing to try, then we will always find the perfect choice for you".</i>
<b>Signal availability</b>	The process of signal availability refers to employee's ability of communicating openness and willingness to interact with the customer. Since <i>interaction</i> represents a key component regarding the relationship between the employee and the customer, signal availability can be argued to play.	Quote from an employee <i>"Well, I tend to place myself into the shoes of the customer. I know myself that if I am the customer in a store and the employee doesn't say "hello" to me, it does something with the mood and the overall customer</i>

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#### **4.1 Process 1: Interacting Through Product Knowledge Sharing**

This process *interacting through product knowledge sharing* involves employees sharing their knowledge and give information about their products to the customers. The information that are given involves the clothes itself, and general tips and guidance that are useful for the customers. More specifically, the employees suggest best possible ways on how to use the products and how to acquire the best maintenance of the products. Product knowledge in this thesis is referred to the knowledge the employee has on their own products that are useful for the customer to know. This knowledge is mainly referred to; how products are used in best possible ways, and how to maintain it in order to receive highest quality use. We can argue that the employees and the customers are interacting and communicating with each other through sharing and receiving knowledge from one another. By doing so, the employees get the possibility to expose their expertise to customers, which will make the customer feel safer and perceive the employees as more trustworthy. When the customer feel safer in relation with the employee, the customer will become more willing to pay attention to what the employee have to say, and interact more in the conversation. Hence, knowledge sharing allows the two parts to easier build communication, trust, loyalty and obtain better interaction, which further can lead to high-quality connection.

##### **4.1.1 An employee's story about a successful product knowledge sharing**

Most of the employees being interviewed stated that having product knowledge was one of the most important asset in order to go from being a good seller to becoming an extraordinary seller. When a seller shares useful information, or are able to answer questions from customers in a pleasant way, the customers will appreciate and gain higher trust in the employees. There are a lot of ways to show expertise in this field, however, we believe that one of the most important knowledge for employees in retail stores to have is knowledge on how the customer can use the products as well as maintain it. One of the employees we interviewed told us about an experience involving this particular situation:

A customer was seeking help, and I could see that she was a little bigger. Luckily I had just been through a course learning about which patterns were suitable as well as not suitable for which body shapes. I could tell right away that the customer was a little round,



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so I stayed away from patterns that I knew would make her feel bigger, but rather pick out alternatives that I knew would be suitable for her forms, and I could tell that it made her feel really good. At first, she seemed to pick up on my knowledge, as I stayed away from specific patterns and colours. After some successful try-ons I explained and advised her on what she should stay away from in order to avoid patterns and colors that could make her look bigger, as well as which colours and patterns that would make her forms look flattery. She was very thankful and pleased, and thanked me for my great help and advice. She even asked me when I was working so she could come back and get more of my advice. That made me really happy, and made me feel like my knowledge and what I had learn really helped me to make this customer satisfied.

From this story, one can interpret that the employee's expertise made the customer very satisfied. The employee gained the customer's trust by showing her that she knew what she was doing, and proved it by giving her continuously successful try-ons. Through trust building, we can argue that there is a connection between perceived expertise and high-quality connection. Showing expertise is building trust (Newell et al., 2016), which further lead to mutual trust, which leads to high-quality connection. Palmatier et al. (2006) found that an employee's expertise had both significant and positive influence on customer-focused relational mediators including trust (Newell et al., 2016, p.164). Additionally, we can also argue that reciprocity is present in the relationship, or more specifically, a direct reciprocity. A direct reciprocity refers to "*an exchange or transfer of resources between two people. A provides a resource to B and, at some later time, B provides a resource to A*". These resources can for instance be information, ideas, advice, help or assistance (Baker, 2012, p.414). The employee represents A, and the customer B. The employee provides a resource to B, namely information, advices, help and assistance, whereas B later on provides resource back to the employee in terms of money and appreciation. Reflecting upon this, one can argue that the story above presents expertise which lead to trust building and further a high-quality connection. The customer was very happy and satisfied with with the employee's great advices, and wanted to come back for more advices, *specifically* from this

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employee. This shows that the employee managed to create a special bond with the customer through simply showing expertise and knowledge.

#### **4.1.2 An employee's explanation on why and how product knowledge sharing is important**

Most of the employees that we interviewed mentioned that knowing their own products was one of the most important qualities in a seller. By not knowing what to say or answer when receiving a question from a customer could ruin the trust or the interest in the seller. When interest is lost, building a high-quality connection could be difficult. Therefore, being able to share product knowledge could be important to develop a high-quality connection, as shown in this explanation:

I think it is very important to be aware of how to speak to the customer in order to become an extraordinary seller, versus just a good seller. An extraordinary seller can find a way to communicate with the customer, because then the conversation will be much easier. For instance, when you tell the customer something about a piece of clothing, you should be able to know the material. A good seller could know a little bit about the material, however, they do not necessarily know what would happen if they wash it normally instead of washing it in a special way, or what happens if they are ironing it, or even if they are drying it - stuff like that. If you can't answer questions like these from customers, the trust from the customer will disappear. An extraordinary seller should know how the clothings should be maintained, knows what happens, and that different clothings should be washed in different ways. The customer will feel more safe and gain more trust in you if you have knowledge like that. And that might actually make the customers wanting to buy more, without them even knowing, just because they feel trust and know that the employee knows what she is doing and talking about. Often by the check-out, we always ask customers if they know how to wash the clothes, just to make sure that they can maintain the clothes in a best possible way.

Sometimes the customers say yes - but even If they already knew, I feel that it still is important to make sure.

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In this explanation, the employee displays the importance of expertise and product knowledge sharing in every purchase processes. The story does not only apply to customers that ask for tips and guidance, but also for customers that didn't think of the importance of the knowledge. By being positively surprised by the interesting and important tips and facts received from the employees, we can argue that the customer will gain a lot more trust and interest in a seller. Similarly, to the story above, trust also plays an important role here. The employee emphasizes how having knowledge can lead to trust. When a seller hesitates or does not know how to answer a question, the customer might lower their trust in the seller- and a high-quality connection would be more difficult to achieve. According to Mishra and Mishra (2012), leaders can demonstrate trustworthiness in different ways; reliability, openness, competence and compassion. In this situation, one can argue that competence is relatable here. In Mishra and Mishra's (2012) article, they explain competence as leaders who have followers that depend on their competence to solve problems and help them to find a solution. Further, they explain that followers are more likely to respond to leaders that have knowledge and abilities necessary to hone their talents and strengths (p.456). Linking this to this process, one can argue that the leader represents the employee, whereas the followers represent the customers. Hence, it is indeed important for employees to have competence to solve the customer's problem, and help them to find a solution, which in this case is to find the customer the perfect outfit, or a piece of clothing. It is important that the customers feel that they can depend on the employee, and this can be built through product knowledge sharing.

#### **4.1.3 A customer's story about a successful product knowledge sharing**

Expertise is also appreciated from a customer's perspective. Hence, we can argue that visible expertise is important. What we mean by visible expertise is that the tips and guidance that the employee provides is accurate and contains quality. Another important and successful way to expose expertise or share product knowledge is through guidance relating to how your customers should maintain the products - this is especially important in retail-stores because clothes often gets ruin in washing machine or dryers. A customer-participant told us her experience relating to this with an employee from one of the retail stores:

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I was visiting one of the stores, and I was looking for two jackets and one top. I was purposely choosing two jackets that was hanging high in order to get her attention. She was really nice. She gave me a size that she thought would fit me, so I tried on the jacket outside the fitting room in order for her to see me. She asked me right away how I thought the jacket was, and I told her that everything was good. I was curious if the jacket was quilted, so I asked her and got an answer right away - it was not. Then I asked her how it should be washed, because my experience with jackets like these would end up ruined after washing them. She said that there should be no problem washing it, but that I should be careful washing it over 40 degrees. She further mentioned that I should use a washing bag in order to minimize damages, as well as being careful when hanging it right after a wash. After the jacket, I also tried on a long shirt that I thought was pretty cool, however, I recognized that the materials in it would leave a whole lot of wrinkles after wash. Because of that, I asked the employee how I should wash this. She said that she personally used to steam it, and actually gave me a lot of great tips. She said that If I didn't have a steamer at home, I could also try to just hang it up on a hanger when showering, because then it will steam itself while I'm showering. I thought that it was a very good idea, and she gave me this great tips without me needing to directly asking follow-up questions such as: "but what should I do then, and how should I do it?", and I really appreciated that. We ended up chatting for a while and throughout our conversation, I lost the feeling of a normal employee-customer vibe, but rather a "friend" vibe. I can say that I got a lot of great tips and learned more than I expected when I left the store.

The customer-participant that we interviewed here received a lot of useful and relevant information about the product. We can safely say that the employee showed expertise and shared a lot of product knowledge with the customer - more than necessary. By doing so, the customer and the employee get the chance to exchange a lot of information which makes the conversation flow more naturally

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and fluently. Sometimes it is hard for employees and customers to achieve a “natural” conversation if they are not used to talking to strangers. However, by building the conversation up with product knowledge sharing could help the employee and the customer to be more relaxed and get the “friend” vibes, instead of the strict customer-employee relationship. Further, in accordance with the findings above, by showing expertise and share product knowledge, the customer also gained more trust in the employee as the tips and guidance that she gave was useful and necessary. When the employee shared product knowledge without the customer needing to ask for it, it can be perceived as the employee really knew what she was talking about. Similarly to the story above, the customer also knew that she could depend on the employee, because of the employee’s “performance expectations” through giving great answers and advices (Misha and Misha, 2011). As a result, the customer-participant gained higher trust, which further may lead to a high-quality connection.

#### **4.1.4 The role of high-quality connection in interacting through knowledge sharing**

Sergeeva and Andreeva (2016) explain knowledge sharing as “*interpersonal interactions involving communicating as well as receiving knowledge from others*” (p.1). In this case, the knowledge sharing was from the employee to the customer. By sharing useful knowledge to the customers, the employees will be perceived as an expert in the field. Expertise can be defined as “*the relevant skill, knowledge and competency possessed by an individual or organization*” (Newell et al., 2016, p.161). As earlier mentioned, Mishra and Mishra (2012) state that when leaders are perceived as reliable, open, competent, and compassion, the employees will view them as more trustworthy. In this process, competence is the most accurate characteristic an employee should have when interacting through product knowledge sharing. When employees focus on their strengths, or more specifically, shares product knowledge, customers will more likely respond to the employee (Mishra and Mishra, 2012). Reflecting upon this, we argue that when customers view the employees as more competent when interacting through knowledge sharing, they might also view them as more trustworthy. When trust is built in a relationship, a high-quality connection can also be built.

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## **4.2 Process 2: Help seeking/help giving**

In an employee-customer relationship, the process of *help seeking/giving* refers to a relational process. Specifically, the process can be understood in terms of situations where the customer seeks help from the employee and when the employee helps the customer. In other words, this is a process where the participating parties ask and answer each other's questions. When the customers in a clothing store seek help from employees with knowledge about the various products and share their personal experiences regarding the products, the customers are likely to feel that they gain new and useful knowledge – and that they thereby can build trustful relationships with the employees helping them. Taking the customer's perspective, one can argue that it is highly valuable to be provided with help when needed, and not at least – that the customer feels that the employee behaves in a sincere and honest way. A climate, as described here, opens up for the two participating parts to understand each other's viewpoints, as well as both the customer and the employee experience a climate where one can express personal thoughts and opinions. This is also supported by Grant (2013), who argues that asking for advice may encourage greater cooperation and information sharing (p. 150). The outcome of this process may therefore be that the employee feels more valuable at work since he/she experiences that the customer appreciates the help they are provided with. As Grant (2013) suggests, seeking advice is a softly way of committing to someone. From the customer's point of view, the process of help seeking and help giving may increase his/hers feeling of being seen and heard - and that the relationship with the employee is sincere and trustful. This way, the customer may leave the store satisfied and with a good customer experience. The process of help seeking/giving can therefore be argued to be important in developing trustful relationships and ultimately – a high quality connection between the employee and the customer.

### **4.2.1 An employee's story: The power of help giving**

*“It is often the customer experience generated by the employees that makes the customer feel that they come first. Sometimes referred to as a ‘customer third’ environment, there is a need for the individual employee to be engaged, satisfied and in tune with their value to customers.”* (Chidley and Pritchard, 2014, p. 294).

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The process of help seeking/help giving can in many ways be linked to the role of the employees. Daily, the employees working in retail stores are in contact with a lot of customers. Not only do the employees meet many people during a workday, but since they work with sales, they also need to consider how they most successfully should approach their potential customers and how to provide them with help and assistance in a best possible manner. When we conducted semi-structured interviews with the employees, we asked if they could tell us about a successful purchasing process they had been involved in. Following is an excerpt from the interview with one of the employees, where she reflects upon this question by describing an experience she had at work with one customer:

One time there was a lady coming by the store. She just wanted to look at the products by herself. She didn't want any kind of help or assistance from us. In other words, she just wanted to look – nothing more. I said “hi” to her when she came into the store. I asked her if she needed any help, but she didn't. However, she used quite a long time looking at the products. Then I just walked towards her and tried to have a kind of a pep-talk with her – telling her about the new products that had arrived. For example, I asked her if she had been looking at this jacket that we had in the store. At this time, I started to feel a connection with the customer. She started to open up a bit more, felt more comfortable, and I felt that I got...a piece of her trust. She told me about her needs, what kind of clothes she prefers, what kind of trousers she feels most comfortable in – for example, what type of fit she likes. I would say that we started to connect with each other, and as a result, she ended up buying quite a lot. Therefore, I think that instead of giving up the customers when they tell you that they “just want to look” – you should keep following up on them, without being pushy.”

What this excerpt illustrates, is that in a situation like this - where it from an employee's point of view may seem easiest to let the customer be, the employee may actually be able to turn the situation around and make a good customer experience. By taking the initiative of establishing contact and showing openness

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for providing the customer with help, the employee managed to create a positive connection with the customer that was beneficial for them both. As the finding shows, the act of giving help and asking questions resulted in a situation where the customer got provided with help targeted to her own preferences and desires. Additionally, since the employee began to tell the customer about the new clothing items that had arrived, knowledge was shared - which may be seen as a key driver in the process of help giving, as described by the employee. Even though the customer in this case did not try to seek help from the employee, she got access to new information and knowledge that made her want to know more about the clothes. From this, we see that taking the initiative of providing help specifically targeted to the customer, the process of help giving and help seeking opened up for a climate where the customer got more responsive regarding the help she was given. We may further link this to Grant (2013) who reflects upon the importance of asking thoughtful questions and listening with patience. Considering that the employee asked questions that caught the customer's attention, and at the same time managed to listen closely to the customer's wants - we may argue that a connection of high-quality between the employee and the customer developed, which may not have happened if the employee didn't try to establish contact with the customer. In fact, Mirivel (2014) explains that by listening to each other, it can actually bring people closer together, which is also presented as a positive communication behavior. Hence, it is important to always listen closely to the customer, because by doing so, the customer and the employee can develop a dialogue which involves richness (Mirivel, 2014).

Reflecting upon Chidley and Pritchard's (2014) statement, that the customer experience often is generated by the employees - and that this is what makes the customers feel they come first, we may argue that the employees represent a critical factor with regards to whether a high-quality connection with the customers can be developed and fostered. Taking the employee's story above into consideration, we may argue that in this particular situation, it was the employee who took the first step in establishing contact with the customer, which further resulted in a successful purchasing process. This can be linked to Grant's (2013) study, where he suggests that givers today enable a more powerful form of reciprocity, compared to the older forms of reciprocity, give and take. Specifically, today's form of reciprocity focuses more on adding value instead of trading value. As Grant (2013) suggests, "*you should be willing to do something*

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*that will take you five minutes or less for anybody”* (Grant, 2013, p. 55). We may argue that this stands in line with the employee’s story above, where we see that instead of trying to get something in return from the customer, the employee showed a form of sincerity in the way she tried to add value to the customer experience. Not only can this be linked to the aspect of building high-quality connections, but we may also link this to organizational productivity. When employees manage to give more than they take, and furthermore manage to create a trustful relationship with the customer, we suggest that this may have a positive effect on the organizational performance outcomes - considering that loyal customers often are more likely to come back and spend more money.

According to Dutton and Heaphy (2016), people grow in connections with others. With this in mind, they argue that by taking the perspective of their customers, both the employees and the organization can make improvements in terms of safety, efficiency, and effectiveness. Taking the employee’s experience into account, we may therefore argue that since she decided to get in contact with the customer by showing her openness to provide the customer with help, the connection between them grew and the customer might have felt safer and more comfortable. In a climate where the customer feels safe, it is often easier for high-quality connections to be developed. Therefore, and in this regard, one may argue that the process of help seeking and help giving can be looked upon as a key driver for creating trustful relationships and high-quality connections between the employee and the customer. This may further be linked to Stephens et. al’s (2011) research, which suggests that high-quality connections can be understood in terms of short-term, dyadic interactions. Since a meeting between an employee and a customer in a clothing store often is short-termed, we may link this to the employee’s descriptions above. Instead of letting go of the customer who didn’t seem to want any help, the employee grabbed the moment. In a short amount of time the employee managed to establish contact with the customer, and from her point of view, she also felt that the customer started to open up and shared a piece of her trust. This stands in line with Stephens et al.’s (2011) argument, that no matter if the people involved have a prior history that connects them or not, the interaction they experience of the particular situation may play an important role for them over time. Therefore, we may argue that since the employee managed to show a willingness to help the customer in a way that made the customer feel seen

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and safe in the situation, a high-quality connection between the employee and the customer may have an enduring effect over time.

#### **4.2.2 A customer's story: The power of help seeking**

Even though it lies in the role of the employee working in a retail store to provide the customer with help and assistance, the process of help seeking and help giving is a relational process that relates as much to the customer as to the employee.

However, since it is first and foremost the employee who provides its customers with help and guidance, we will now look at the process of help seeking/help giving from a customer's point of view. Seen from a customer's side, one may argue that in order to seek help from an employee, it is of high importance to feel comfortable asking questions - and in this regard, feel that the employee behaves in a sincere and honest way. This applies to both situations where the customer seeks help from the employee, and in situations where it is the employee who asks whether the customer wants help.

In the semi-structured interviews we conducted with the customers (mystery shoppers), we asked how they personally think a successful purchasing process may look like, and in what way the customers themselves can contribute in order to make the process successful. Following is an excerpt from the interview with one of the customers, where she reflects upon how a successful purchasing process may look like.

What I contribute with in order for the purchasing process to be successful... I tell the employee what kind of clothes and style I prefer. Since the employee can't read my thoughts, I think it is important trying to collaborate with the employee. That's the only way the employee can understand the customer's wants and needs, I think. Therefore, I explain and describe what kind of clothes I am looking for – and whether I am looking for clothes to everyday use, or if I want clothes that I can wear in a party or so. Then it will be easier for the employee to get to know me and my preferences, and they successfully manage to find alternatives to me that I can choose from. This way it is more likely that the purchasing process will be successful, I think. When the employee know my preferences regarding fit and style, they often manage to find

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various clothing items that I like – which further may increase the likelihood that I buy it.

The customer's thoughts and reflections regarding how a successful purchasing process may look like, illustrates and strengthens the theory that the process of help seeking and help giving is a relational process where both the employee and the customer have to contribute in order for them to experience a successful purchasing process - and ultimately develop a high-quality connection.

Mirivel (2014) states that “asking questions allows for one to “discover the unknown” (p.36). It is important for both the employees and customers to ask questions. He suggests that asking questions have several positive outcomes, for instance, asking questions is a source for learning about the other person, as well as it practices positive communication. There are different ways of asking questions, such as open-ended questions versus close-ended questions. It seems that the employees are focusing on open-ended questions, in order to avoid being easily rejected by one-answer responses (e.g., how can I help you today, what a lovely jacket you're wearing, what kind of style would you say that you have), whereas for customers, close-ended questions are more acceptable to ask (e.g., I am looking for a pink jacket - do you have it here?).

Considering help seeking/help giving as a relational process, we may therefore argue that in order to develop a high-quality connection, it is of high importance that both the employee and the customer contribute in the help seeking/help giving process.

#### **4.2.3 A customer's story: The power of help seeking II**

Bearing in mind that the help seeking/help giving process involves contribution from both the employee and the customer - in the interviews with the customers, we asked the customers how they felt about being the ones seeking contact and help from the employee. In the excerpt below, one of the customers we interviewed describes her experience of her visit in one of the clothing stores. In this situation, no employee said hi to her when she walked into the store. Therefore, she took the first step in seeking help from the employee.

I did not feel that it was unpleasant to seek help from the employee. With that said, it should be mentioned that I am not a

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person who easily gets shy in settings like that. I remember that when I first walked into the store, it was quite hard to get in contact with the employee working there. She seemed to be busy doing other stuff in the store. However, when she went back to the cashier, I walked towards to her, with the aim of getting help from her. The first step in establishing contact with her was a bit challenging, I think. However, when I first had started the conversation with her, everything were just fine and nothing felt unpleasant anymore. Since I took the first step in seeking help from the employee, she knew right away that I wanted her help – and then she gave me all of her attention. Taking this situation into consideration, I would say that both me as a customer and the employee contributed to make the purchasing process successful. Personally, I think I contributed in the process by establishing contact with the employee and by telling her what kind of clothes I was looking for. In addition to this, I expressed my thoughts and opinions about the clothing items she showed me. Even though we had some disagreements regarding which colors and styles that could fit me, I think of it as a good experience where both of us could share our personal thoughts and opinions. This enabled us to understand each other better. While I contributed by telling her about my wants, she could better understand my preferences and thereby help me in a better way. I appreciated that.

According to Edmondson (1999), it is a necessary condition that the help seeker feels safe in order for him/her to seek help and ask questions. What the customer's story above tells us, is that in a environment where the customer felt safe and comfortable, she took the step in getting the targeted help that she wanted. By seeking help from the employee, the customer got access to new information and viewpoints that she otherwise may not would have taken into consideration. However, since she also shared her own opinions regarding what kind of clothes she preferred, we may argue that it got easier for both the customer and the employee to build a connection where positive regard and mutuality existed. Carmeli, Brueller, and Dutton (2009) suggest that positive regard exists when people in high-quality connections experience a feeling of being known or

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respected by the person or people. Mutuality, on the other hand, refers to the state when people in a relationship are engaged and actively participating (Carmeli, Brueller, and Dutton, 2009, p.85). Considering the aspect of mutuality, and positive regard - which can be understood in terms of the degree of how the people involved experience a sense of being known, we can see this in relation to the excerpts from the interviews above where the customers describe the importance of seeing the employee-customer relationship as a two-way process in which both parties have to contribute. We may therefore argue that in a relation where both parties contribute to the process, both the employee and the customer are more likely to feel mutuality and experience a high extent of positive regard, which further can be argued to have a positive strengthening effect regarding the connection between them.

#### **4.2.3 The role of high-quality connection in help seeking/help giving**

Reflecting upon the process of help seeking and help giving we now have presented, we will turn the focus to the role of high-quality connections in help seeking and help giving. According to Hargadon and Sutton (1997), “ideas from one group might solve the problems of another, but only if connections between existing solutions and problems can be made across the boundaries between them” (Hargadon and Sutton, 1997, p. 716). With regards to our research, this implies that employees who help and gives guidance to their customers throughout the purchasing process may fulfil the customers’ needs. However, in order to solve the problems of the customer and contribute to a good customer experience, we may argue that it is of high importance that the employee is capable of meeting the customer’s personal preferences. In order to do so, the employee should ask specific questions directed to the customer’s wants and needs. As Grant (2013) suggests, *asking questions is a form of powerless communication that gives adopt naturally*. Further, he argues that asking questions work well in situations when the audience is sceptical of your influence (Grant, 2013, p. 139). We may therefore argue that when a customer visits a retail store, he/she may be sceptical to the employee - being conscious that the employee may just want to sell as much as possible without really caring about the customer’s needs. In this regard we believe that asking questions may lower the customer’s guard and instead enable a connection where the customer feels that the help given by the employee is sincere and valuable.

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However, in retail stores, one can argue that it is critical that the customers get the help and support they want from the employees. This can be linked to Grant's (2013) theory about givers and takers. He suggests that there exist two types of people at work. While "takers" can be defined as people who put their own interests ahead of others' needs and like to get more than they give, "givers", on the other hand, prefer to give more than they get. This description stands in line with our findings, as suggested both from the point of view of the employees and of the customers, that in order to experience a successful purchasing process and to foster a high-quality connection - the employee should bear the characteristics of a giver. Considering the setting and the different customers an employee interacts with during a day, the employee may shift from one reciprocity style to another. However, linking our research to Grant's (2013) studies, our findings suggest that in order for high-quality connections to be developed and fostered, being able to put the focus on the customer and by showing an openness for sharing of knowledge, the process of help seeking/help giving may enable high-quality connections.

Even though one may think that it is the employee's role to be the one asking the customer if he/she wants help, this is not always the case. Therefore, and in support of the theories presented, we may argue that in order for the customer to ask questions and seek help, safety represents a sufficient condition for the connection between the employee and the customer to develop and grow in a positive direction. Moreover, we found that the customers lean towards the characteristics of "matchers". As Grant (2013) suggests, matchers strive to balance giving and getting. If you're a matcher, your relationships are governed by even exchanges of favors (Grant, 2013, p. 5). Linking this to our findings, we may argue that in order for the customer to open up and share own experiences and preferences, it is of high importance that the employee shares her expertise and opinions too. In addition, when both the employee and the customer actively engages in the process, mutuality exists - which further may have a positive effect on the connection between them.

Reflecting upon this, we may argue that the process of help seeking/help giving also plays a major role regarding whether the customer is satisfied and wants to come back to the store later. This can therefore be linked to the organization's overall goal, which often is to improve the organization's overall performance outcomes. Since the employees and the customers can be argued to

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be two of the organization's most important assets, it is critical that the employees establish high-quality connections with the customers. Ultimately, the customers will then want to revisit the store, which can be said to produce positive outcomes both for the customer itself, but also for the employee and the organization overall.

### **4.3 Process 3: Interacting Through Fostering Perspective Taking**

#### **4.3.1 An employee's story: The customer who almost lost hope**

One of the hardest situations that an employee might experience is when a customer is very insecure, or have almost "lost their hopes" in finding what they are looking for. Often, when customers already are in the state of mind "I will not find what I'm looking for today", they will more likely shut down good tips and guidance from sellers. It is therefore harder for sellers to change their minds, or satisfy them. In order to turn this around, and actually obtain a satisfied customer - vital assets could be employed. In this particular situation, showing compassion, caring and perspective taking was the case. One of the employees that we interviewed experienced this, and told us what happened and what she did in order to change the customer's mind:

Yeah, it was about a customer looking for a pair of pants. She had been in many stores that day, but she didn't find any pants that was suitable for her particular body shape. She told me that she had a "hanging" butt, and that she was too big. She felt that she was too big to fit in anything in the market right now. When I heard this, I told her: "*we always have pants that fit everybody, and I know that trying on many different pants is very cumbersome, however, when you first are willing to try, then we can get closer to find you the perfect choice*". She wanted pants with soft or very stretchy materials, so I tried to find and give her the pants that she described. It was a little challenging because when I gave her suggestions, she often said "no, I'm too big", so it is very important to not insult the customers, by showing that you agree with her, but instead show her that there are always alternatives or solution to the problem. Therefore, it is very important to listen to

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the customer, and show her your understanding, and that you will find a solution for her. After a few pants fittings, I came up with an idea - I had a skirt in mind that would fit perfect for her body shape, which also had the stretch and softness that she had described. I suggested that she could try on the skirt, which she was willing to. She ended up loving the skirt, and even ended up buying the same skirt in many other different colors. She was very satisfied and thanked me for giving her great advice and help. I felt that we managed to create a bond, even though it was just through solving a minor problem that she had. (...) In our relationship, I felt safety. And comfortable. I felt that she was more comfortable as the purchase process developed. At first, she was a little bit shy, but when I gave her clothes to try on, and always made sure she was OK, by asking questions like “are you OK?”, “did everything fit well?”, I felt that she opened up by answering me, and maybe just the start of the feeling of a conversation made her loosen up a little bit. Even though the clothes that I gave her didn’t always fit, I felt that she opened more and more up, and started to trust me by simply starting to ask me questions such as “what do you think, do you think It was too tight?”. So I felt she got more comfortable and safe with me. That’s why I think it is very important to listen to the customer and adapt to what she is actually looking for.

This employee’s experience illustrates how the practice of perspective taking implies higher trust in the employee by displaying understanding and showing compassion, which leads to a more cooperate relationship. In the episode presented above, one can tell that a collaborative relationship between the employee and the customer was present. The employee showed understanding through being patient and actually listening to what the customer was looking for, as well as take her insecurities about her weight in consideration, instead of only focusing on selling a product. It is obvious that the customer almost lost hope when experiencing failure after failure in past stores.

Perspective taking refers to the process of “imagining another person’s thoughts or feeling from that person’s point of view” (Davis, 1996; Mead, 1934 as cited in Williams, 2012, p.462). Perspective taking does not only require



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discretionary cognitive and emotional effort, but also actions such as kindness, compassion and understanding (Williams, 2012). Perspective taking is also connected to *tensility* and *connectivity* (Williams, 2012), which is defined by Dutton and Heaphy (2003) as three of the characteristics of a high-quality relationship. For example, when it comes to tensility, communication and compassionate action might allow the relationship to tolerate higher levels of strain in comparison to relationships that do not involve perspective taking. Linking this to the story above, one can argue that the strain can be referred to the customer's lost hope, as well as negative mind when entering the store. However, due to the employee's capacity to withstand strain, we can argue that she managed to foster perspective taking, which further lead to a high-quality relationship. Further, when it comes to *connectivity*, one can argue that people who are able to engage in perspective taking are more likely to signal openness to new ideas and influences due to their wish to understand how situations are from other people's point of view (Williams, 2012). The employee was open to new ideas through finding alternative suggestions in order to make the customer satisfied. She also understood the situation very quickly, and looked at the situation from the customer's point of view. Both the customer and the employee contributed to the solution by having open discussions and dialogue. The customer showed this through her willingness to try on different outfits, had clear communication on what she was looking for, and honest feedback on the clothes given, and the employee showed it through her willingness to listen to what the customer was looking for and understanding of her insecurities.

Moreover, the story can be interpreted as the customer lost hope. Mishra and Mishra (2012) state that in order for leaders to develop lasting positive changes and a culture of trust within organizations, they need to create and sustain hope. Hope is defined as "an activating force that enables people, even when faced with the most overwhelming obstacles, to envision a promising future and to set and pursue goals" (Helland & Winston, 2005 as cited in Mishra & Mishra, 2012, p.456). They further state that when leaders are more compassionate, they will be more able to create and sustain hope among their followers, and empower them as well. Such hope and empowerment are critical to creating and sustaining lasting and positive change and a trust-based culture (p.459). Hence, reviving the customer's hope in order to develop trust with the customer which further leads to a better connection, is important. Similar to this, it is also important to focus on

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inspiring the customers. The employee succeeded in inspiring the customer by showing her better alternatives, which inspired her to wear other clothings that she might not have been purchasing otherwise. The employee positively influenced the customer by inspiring her, which further lead to creating positive communication in their relationship (Mirivel, 2014).

Additionally, the employee can be argued to care for her customers, which could further lead to mutual trust and empathy. In many ways, the story that has been recently told involves high-quality connection. According to Dutton (2015), in order to create a culture that fosters high-quality connection, organizations should hire people who care about connecting with other individuals. Additionally, they should also be sensitive to building relationships. This implies that the importance of an employee's ability to care about their customers as well as genuinely wants to build relationships with their customers is very high in order to build high-quality connections. Showing support is also important. According to Mirivel (2014), showing support actually have a positive link to positive communication. When we encourage other people, we are also helping them to achieve greater potentials. For instance, the employee above showed great support to the customer, which allowed her to not give up on her search. The employee encouraged the customer to not give up by saying: "*we always have pants that fit everybody, and I know that trying on many different pants is very cumbersome, however, when you first are willing to try, then we can get closer to find you the perfect choice*".

In addition to this, Nembhard and Edmondson (2012) state that if relationships within a group are characterized by trust and respect, individuals are likely to experience greater psychological safety (p.498). Being able to create a safe environment is very important in situations like these. As the story above displays, the employee succeeded in making the customer developing a sense of *psychological safety*, through being patient, careful, showing compassion and understanding. Psychological safety is described as "the general belief that one is comfortable with oneself - being open, authentic, and direct - in a particular setting or role" (Nembhard and Edmondson, 2012, p.491). Nembhard and Edmondson (2012) state in their article that when psychological safety is present, it is easier to develop a collaborative relationship. In an employee-customer relationship, it is important to have this kind of a relationship. Additionally, they also suggest that high-quality relationships positively influence psychological

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safety. Reflecting upon this, we can argue that psychological safety is connected to high-quality connection.

#### **4.3.2: Employee's story: The customer with poor self-image**

Extreme cases such as this one is obviously not needed for having the opportunity to develop a high-quality connection. As exemplified in previous story, a high-quality connection can still be developed during minor problems or cases.

However, the point is no matter the size of a problem, the probability of developing a high-quality connection is still present. In this story, an employee expedites a customer with considerable issues. The employee managed the purchase process brilliantly by adapting to the situation and looking at it from the customer's point of view:

There was a customer, I think she had suffered from eating disorder. She had a very poor self-image. You could kind of see it even though she didn't directly tell me, but she kind of gave me some hints and clues by saying that she had been in a very bad period and that she had not been out shopping for a very long time. And I think that for me as a seller, that is my chance to show the customers that I care for them and actually see the customer. And just like for her, she was very insecure and did not know what kind of clothes or style that would fit her. She did not even have a clue on what she liked or not - not even colours. She did not have any opinions on anything. And in her situation, she did not buy a lot of clothes or ending up paying a big amount of money, however, the clothes and products that she actually bought - I think she was very satisfied and pleasant with them. She has visited the store many times after this episode and told us that she always comes here because all of the employees in this store are always so nice and helpful. So I think that by kind of showing her that we understand, and are very careful on how to approach her, made her feeling well which resulted her in wanting to visit the store again. (...) I think the reason for my full

understanding and my ability to adapt to other people is based on my experience in playing in theatre for many years, which makes me able to maybe go into other people's roles. It sounds very superficial, but I think that I see people, that I... I am not very "up and down", and "everywhere" if there is an insecure customer in the store, such as the one we talked about. Then I'm very calm, like you don't show her a clothing for 2000 norwegian kroner. You have to start very careful, you don't start with clothes that are "over the top", or say "this is what you need to buy right now because you are still young" and stuff like that, but you may show products or things that are more basic, and you should definitely use your time with the customer. In this particular case, it was easier for me to do so because there were not many customers at that time, so it was easier for me to give her my full attention. But I think that the reason for this successful story is because she felt understood, that I truly cared for her, and that we were nice to her.

As we know by now, high-quality connection includes mutuality (e.g., mutual empathy, mutual trust), and positive regard, and care can be argued to also be present in high-quality connections. The employee and the customer in this story showed all of these signs. For instance, the customer showed trust by opening up and carefully letting the employee know about her past, as well as trusting the employee to help her. The employee on the other hand trusted the customer by believing and accepting the customer's story to be true.

Giving compliments is important in order to develop positive communication, because a person's identity is shaped through Symbolic Interactionism (Mirivel, 2014). Hence, by giving each other compliment can actually contribute to shape a person's identity in a positive way. The customer above can be interpreted as a person who have "lost" her identity, due to her insecurities. Mirivel (2014) explains that "positive communication affects who we are and who we become (p.58). Reflecting upon this, it can be argued that giving compliments is important. In addition to this, the customer also showed a

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vulnerable side by sharing a sensitive detail about her past. Similar to giving compliments, Mirivel also argue that disclosure has a positive impact on positive communication behavior. The reason for this is due to the allowance of intimacy which further develops closer bonds between the involved parties.

We can also argue that the existence of some degree of emotional carrying capacity was present. Dutton and Heaphy (2003) state that high-quality connections have “*the capacity to withstand the expression of more absolute emotion and more emotion of carrying kinds*” (p.266). In other words, by feeling safe when displaying different emotions in a relationship, one can tell that they are in a high-quality one. The customer showed emotions including sadness, vulnerability, trust, shame, shyness fear and joy, whereas the employee showed emotions that included kindness, trust and calmness. All of these emotions was present during *one* purchase process, which also happened to be a successful one. Reflecting upon this, one can argue that their capacity of emotional carrying is higher than normal relationships. In addition to this, being able to be able to express positive emotions is also important. Sekerka et al. (2012) state that positive emotions is associated with enhanced attention to others, as well as reduces distinctions between the self and other (p.169). By *broadening* this awareness could further build enduring personal resources, which could emerge into several different forms, such as social resource, meaning being able to have high-quality friendships and strong social support network.

Further, the employee used perspective taking by viewing the situation from the customer’s point of view. More specifically, from the employee’s quote “*I think the reason for my full understanding and my ability to adapt to other people is based on my experience in playing in theatre for many years, which makes me able to maybe go into other people’s roles*”, we can argue that she focused on perspective taking, as well as actions such as kindness, compassion and understanding. According to many researchers, perspective taking is connected to high-quality connection in many ways. Fussell and Krauss (1992) argue that perspective taking promotes interpersonal understanding, Galinsky et al. (2005) state that it strengthens social bonds, Blumer (1969) further state that perspective taking fosters emotionally positive interactions, whereas Batson et al. (1995) suggest that it motivates compassionate actions (as cited in Williams, 2012, p.469). Lastly, Williams (2008) states that perspective taking promotes

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trustworthy behavior. All of the mentioned processes mentioned above are connected to high-quality connection (as cited in Williams, 2012).

### **4.3.3 The role of high-quality connections in interacting through fostering perspective taking**

So far we have presented how interacting through showing compassion and perspective taking might be beneficial for retail stores, and more interestingly, how this is connected to high-quality connections. We found evidence that by showing compassion and act through perspective taking can develop high-quality connection. There are many ways of how this is connected. The employees in the stories above showed actions of perspective taking through interpersonal understanding, creating social bond and compassion. Perspective taking has a variety of positive interpersonal outcomes. As earlier mentioned, it promotes interpersonal understanding, strengthens social bonds, fosters emotionally positive interactions, motivates compassionate actions, and promotes trustworthy behaviors, which can be argued to be present in the relationships that were presented above. Additionally, promoting psychological safety and create trust between the customer and the employee are also important actions to promote a high-quality relationship. Lastly, perspective taking is also connected to tensility and connectivity (Williams, 2012), which is defined by Dutton and Heaphy (2003) as three of the characteristics of a high-quality relationship. For example, when it comes to tensility, communication and compassionate action might allow the relationship to tolerate higher levels of strain in comparison to relationships that do not involve perspective taking. Further, when it comes to connectivity, one can argue that people who are able to engage in perspective taking are more likely to signal openness to new ideas and influences due to their wish to understand how situations are from other people's point of view (Williams, 2012).

### **4.4 Process 4: Adapting to Personality and Style**

The process of adapting to personality and style in this thesis refers to the ability to understand and help the customer in a best possible way based on her personality and/or style. There are many different customers with different needs and style, and some customers need more understanding than others, in terms of their insecurities, body shape or special styles. Hence, being able to adapt to this as well as show understanding is very important when you are working as a seller.

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Being able to adapt to personality and style might lead to a sense of safety or trust in the relationship between the employee and customer. This allows the employee to develop a high-quality connection with the customer more easily.

#### **4.4.1 Employee's story: Adapting by mirroring**

There are many different ways of adapting to the customer based on personality and style. Another adapting method approach that could lead to higher connection achievement is through adapting by mirroring. Adapting by mirroring can be explained as adapting to the customer based on similarities between the customer and the employee. This can for instance be based on their looks, interests or styles. It is a known bias to hire candidates that are similar to oneself. Baskett (1973) found in his study that similarity and competency effects would contribute to higher probability of a recommendation for hiring. This shows that people tend to like others similar to oneself. Hence, by adapting to a customer based on personality and style in terms of similarities could develop into a high-quality relationship. A relationship like this could result into a sense of *positive regard*. The customer can develop the feeling of being known because of their similarities. One of the employees we interviewed stated that she often used this technique with customers because she felt that they had something in common, and could develop their relationship based on that. She told us one of the episodes she used this technique:

The process itself was very simple. I listened to the customer's need, and what she wanted and what she was looking for. And by doing so, I could get to know her better, which would make it easier for me to find the products she was looking for. I felt that I could allow myself to compare myself to her, because she was a little bit chubby - just like me. And when you base your suggestions on how you are, and how the customer is, it makes me feel that I am able to develop a better relationship and connection with the customer, as well as it allows me to give a little bit more of myself, and allows me to actually recommend the clothes that I could wear myself, and my style and things like that. (...) For example, that day I recommended the outfit that I was wearing that day. I remember telling her "we both have the same body shape, so

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I really think that this outfit would look great on you, because it does on me”. She seemed to agree and really like my suggestions, so I would say that she was very satisfied. (...) The voucher ended up on 6380 norwegian kroner, which was the highest voucher the store had achieved at that time. That is what I call a successful journey. I feel that by comparing myself to my customers, I get a closer bond to them than I might do with other customers. Often a connection end up so good with a customer that we become BFFs, and almost ending up walking hand-in-hand around the store.

In the employee’s story, we can argue that there are some signs of a high-quality relationship. As earlier mentioned, adapting by mirroring could result into positive regard. In this story, one can tell that positive regard was present. Carmeli, Brueller and Dutton (2009) suggest that positive regard exists when people in high-quality connections experience a feeling of being known or respected by the person or people. When the employee compare herself to the customer, and communicate by saying “*we both have the same body shape, so I really think that this outfit would look great on you, because it does on me*”, the customer can get the feeling of being known as well as respected in terms of not being treated differently in a negative way because of her weight or body shape. Even though the employee and the customer didn’t have a prior story, the interaction that they experienced may have an important impact over time (Stephen et al, 2011). In a retail store like this, there could be other similarities to use, such as finding common interests (e.g., loving a common place to travel or having the same taste in music) or style in fashion. Some of the employees we interviewed have stated that they like to ask questions in order to find out what the customer’s purpose is, as well as asking non-related sales questions, in order to adapt to the customer’s situations and find out more things about the customer that they otherwise would not have known. By doing so, they are able to find out if they can “mirror” the customer or not.

#### **4.4.2 An employee’s story: Adaption is important on “every level”**

It is important for employees to be able to adapt to the customers no matter what situation they might be in - especially when it comes to personality and style. It can either be adapting by mirroring as the story above, or more “normal”



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situations that would more likely happen during a work day. For instance, when it comes personality, it is important to not be too energetic or highly talkative if the customer has the introversion trait. When it comes to style, it is for instance important to not suggest colorful clothings or tight skirts to an elderly customer who is more comfortable with neutral clothes. An employee told us a story involving this:

When I am thinking about what I contribute with in order for the customer to experience a good and successful purchasing process, I am thinking about communication. What works for me, is to find the balance with the customer, in terms of how they behave and what signals they might send. For example, if you have a customer that seems to be enclosed and quiet, you should behave in a way that makes them feel welcomed and safe. However, if you have a customer that seems to be more open, you'll get a sense that it is okay to talk a bit more – and then the communication tends to flow more natural and easier. The conversation just flows natural, I would say. I remember I had this customer that I felt a good connection with. She behaved in a open way that made me also opening up more to her. At the same time that I was showing her some of the different tops in the store, I experienced this natural communication with her. For example, she told me that she was going on a vacation. Since I had been to the same place before, I told her about the good restaurants that I had been to and so on. She told me that she was going there with some friends, and yeah. Then it is nice to have some new clothes and outfits, you know. Situations like this one happens now and then. You just have to try to adapt to the customer in some kind of way, I think. Since I also saw that the customer had the same shape and size as me, I think that we both could agree on what kind of colors and patterns that looked good and which ones that did not. Therefore, I tried to show her clothing items that I sincerely believed she would feel comfortable wearing. I think that this made her feel more respected and seen as a customer, and further - that this gave her a good customer-experience.

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This story involves the evidence of adapting to the customer's personality could turn into a successful purchase story. The story mentions that if the customer is more quiet and enclosed, the employee should also be on the customer's "level" in order to make them feel welcomed and safe. However, when she met a customer which were more open, she would also be more open, which lead to a good connection between them. She also adapted to the customer's style by suggesting clothes with colours and patterns that they both agreed would look good on them. By being able to adapt to others, one can argue that they are also able to being aware of others, meaning that they can make a quick impression on how the customer might be in order to adapt. For instance, Stephens et al. (2012) state that people can make quick judgements of whether other people are warm, accepting, supportive based on observing their nonverbal behaviors. Further, these impressions are contributing to shaping the option of who to connect with and further increase the chance of selecting someone who is able and willing to be mutually engaged. Reflecting upon this, we can argue that the employee is successfully making an impression in order to adapt to the customer in a way that made them both connect which further made them mutually engaged. In fact, Stephen et al. (2012) state that being other-awareness foster the formation of higher-quality connections. Moreover, felt mutuality, which is a lot similar to mutually engagement, is mainly based on the sense that both the employee and the customer are engaged and actively participating, can also be argued to be present in the relationship (Dutton and Heaphy, 2003, p.267). Pullman and Gross (2004) stated that satisfying customers is what companies are struggling to achieve, however, pleasurable interactions is what makes them loyal. It is therefore important for employees to focus on the connection and the interaction with the customer by adapting to their needs on every level.

#### **4.4.3 An employee's story: Communicate on the customer's level**

When it comes to adapting to a customer's personality and style, it is also important to adapt to them in terms of their communication style. This may be argued to connect to the customer's personality, based on their way of communication preference. For instance, some customers might prefer communication styles through keeping it simple, by simply getting advice and guidance through a "standard" purchase process, whereas others would like to communicate through a less "standard" purchase process, which involves more of

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a personal vibe to the communication. It is hard to develop a high-quality connection if the communication level contrast between the employee and the customer is too high. In the presented excerpt below, an employee explains how she manages situations like these:

Essentially the customer was mine, so I did most of the communication. I think what works for me is to find a balance with the customer. Find out “where” the customer is. If you have a customer that is very enclosed, it is very important to not joke too much or something like that, but rather “hold your cards short and good” and find out “okay, this customer is open”, which means that I can communicate and talk more. By doing this, I feel that the conversation gets more natural. It floats by itself. Because while you talk, you can for instance show the customer tops, and they are willing to try or willing take it home with them. In this way you can get a better connection with the customer while you communicate with her on “her level”.

This example from the employee shows that adapting to a customer by understanding her communication level is also important in order to develop high-quality connection. The first step should be to read the customer’s body language or facial expressions so that an observation of the customer can be made. Further, after greeting the customer, the employee can make an first impression of the customer, and adapt to these in order to be able to communicate on her level. By doing so, the employee might be able to develop a better connection with the customer. For instance, if a customer appreciates humour, the employee could make more jokes, and involve more humour in the conversations. According to Cooper and Sosik (2012) humour leads to cooperation in service encounters. In fact, even in a bargaining situation, humor could give the involved parties a shared experience, which further cause them to connect, and benefit for more permanent relationships (Cooper and Sosik, 2012). Humor can redefine a situation, which could replace negative emotion with positive emotions. Hence, by communicating on the customer’s level through humor, one can achieve a higher quality connection. This adapting style can be argued to have similarities with adapting by mirroring, in a sense that both want to adapt by being similar to the customer.

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Hence, by having the similar communication style with the customer, we can also argue that positive regard could also be developed here. The customer could get the feeling of being known and respected, because of the similar communication style. Thus, a high-quality connection could be argued to be developed through adapting by communicating on the customer's level.

#### **4.4.4 The role of high-quality connections in adapting by understanding the customer's needs**

There are several ways to achieve high-quality connection through adapting to personality and style. For instance, by adapting to the customer's personality and style through mirroring, the employee could create positive regard, because of the achievement of feeling known and/or respected. When a customer get a sense of similarities with the employee, she could get the feeling of a connection between them, which further could lead to positive regard. This also concerns adapting by communicating on the customer's level, because of the found similarities in these kind of relationships too. Further, impressions of others and other-awareness are also important contributions to a high-quality connection by using adaption. Impressions and other-awareness could help and contribute to the employee's actions towards the customers, by being aware of how to adapt to the customers. By adapting to the customer's personality and style successfully, the employee and the customer could create a mutually engaged as well as felt mutual relationship.

#### **4.5 Process 5: Signal Availability**

The process of signal availability refers to employee's ability of communicating openness and willingness to interact with the customer. Since *interaction* represents a key component regarding the relationship between the employee and the customer, "signal availability" can be argued to play a major role in how the connection between the two parties develops. In the present thesis, we understand "availability" in terms of how committable and operable the employee is in connection with the customer. Specifically, ability can be defined as a way of signaling presence. In this context, being at hand, being ready, and being capable of being used can be seen as key components (Dutton, 2003, p. 28). One can argue that the employee's ability to signal availability may determine the quality of the

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connection with the customer - and that it plays a major role regarding the overall customer experience.

#### **4.5.1 A customer's story: The importance of being greeted to**

Seen from a customer's point of view, one can argue that the process "signal availability" represents a key to whether the purchasing process will be successful or not. Considering the employee's role in the clothing stores, which is to help and guide the customer throughout the whole purchasing process, the customer may expect the employee to behave in particular ways that are linked to service orientation and availability. Even though customers' expectations to employees differ in many and various ways, there is one specific act that shows up to be highly valued by customers - and that is the feeling of being seen and being greeted to by the employees. Following is an excerpt from an interview we conducted with one of the customers:

When I go shopping, I now and then experience that the employees don't say hi or seem to notice me being there. Personally, I don't think it is challenging to ask the employees to help me – but of course, I prefer that the staff says hi, welcomes me or ask if I want any help. However, considering customers who are more shy and don't want to bother the employees.. Especially if the employee doesn't say "hi" to the customer, the customer may be ending up just looking at the products in the store without getting any help. What will happen next may then be that they leave the store with a bad customer experience and don't want to revisit the store.. Looking back to the day I was a mystery shopper, I remember that the employee didn't say hi to me when I walked into the store in the first place. However, when I asked for help, it all turned to a really good experience. She seemed sincere, and I got a feeling that she really wanted to help me. So, even though I was the one asking for help, this was a good experience that differs from many other experiences that I have had as a customer before. You know, cases in which the employees don't seem to be available or interested in helping me at all."

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Reflecting upon the customer's story above, we see that being greeted to by the employee may make a difference regarding both the overall customer experience and how the purchasing process proceeds. As the customer we interviewed above describes, different customers may have different expectations to the employees. However, being greeted to by the employee can be argued to be one act that customers often expect from the employees. This can be linked to the theory of *respectful engagement*. According to Dutton (2003), respectful engagement means "being present to others, affirming them, and communicating and listening in a way that manifests regard and an appreciation of the other's worth" (Dutton, 2003, p. 22). Therefore, we may argue that being greeted to represents one key aspect regarding the employee's ability to signal availability and commitment to the customer. Even though greeting can be said to be a small act, it represents an important act of respectful engagement, where the employee signals that he/she is there for the customer - and that is all that matters in the moment. These signals get picked up by the customer, and it may therefore play a critical factor in order to build a more trustworthy and loyal relationship with the employee - which next may affect the organizational performance outcomes in positive ways. In fact, Mirivel (2014) explain that greeting is a form of positive communication due to its welcoming act, through inviting people into one's life which make room for connection to take place.

According to earlier research, greeting is one of the basic functions of communication and triggers positive conversations. Taking this, and the argument that "a warm, genuine, and sincere greeting can cause even a stranger to open up, break down defensive walls, and be comfortable" into consideration, we may suggest that that this supports our findings (RetailWiseUsa, 2018). In order to establish contact with one another, one of the two parties has to take the initiative of greeting the other person. This counts the same for both the employee and the customer. However, considering the employee's role at work, which is to provide the customer with service and support, we may argue that it is especially important that the employee is aware of what difference this gesture may have for the employee-customer relationship, considering this as a way of conveying presence and showing respectful engagement.

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#### 4.5.2 An employee's story: Signal availability through presence and openness

Relating the process "signal availability" to the employee's role, one may argue that having the ability to be present and available for the customer represents a key factor in order for the purchasing process to result in success. As Dutton (2003) suggests, being present means "*creating a sense of being open and subject to being changed through the connection with another person*" (p. 27).

Reflecting upon the fact that it is the employee who guides the customer through the purchasing process, in our interviews we asked the employees if they could tell about a successful purchasing process they had been involved in - and more specifically, what they contributed with in order for the process to be successful. Below is an excerpt from an interview we had with one of the top sellers, where she reflects upon one experience she had with one customer and what she contributed with herself.

When you're in contact with a customer, I would say that it is highly valuable to spend your time wisely on the customer - and showing that you really are there for them. I remember one episode when I had a customer who seemed to be quite shy and insecure. Even though it didn't seem that she wanted any help in the start, I wanted her to know that she had my full attention. It should however be mentioned that the store wasn't crowded with customers during her visit there. Therefore it was easier for me to put my focus on her, instead of being in contact with many customers at once. That doesn't work for me. However, I think that my presence and openness towards her can be said to be one of the main reasons why this purchasing process was successful. You know, that she got a feeling of being seen and taken care of. I think this is something that enables me to fulfil the customer's needs better.

What this excerpt above illustrates is that in order to signal availability and show that you're sincere in the interaction with the customer, one may argue that is important that the employee manages to fulfill the customer's needs through spending time with the customer and by giving the customer all of the employee's

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own attention. In general, *availability* can be defined as a “characteristic of a resource that is committable, operable, or usable upon demand to perform its designated or required function. It is the aggregate of the resource’s accessibility, reliability, maintainability, serviceability, and securability” (Businessdictionary, 2018). Since one customer’s needs often differs from another, it may be highly valuable that the employee spends the time wisely. This in order to understand the needs of the customer better. Taking the employee-customer relationship above into consideration, we see that the employee didn’t seem to rush the purchasing process. Instead she focused on how she in a best possible manner could fulfill the needs of the customer. By applying Hennig-Thurau and Klee’s (1997) definition, Castellanos-Verdugo et al. (2009) define relationship-quality (RQ) as the “degree of appropriateness of a relationship to fulfil the needs of the customer” (p. 253). Moreover, they suggest that from the customer’s perspective RQ is achieved through the employee’s ability to reduce the perceived uncertainty. Reflecting upon this in relation to what the employee interviewed above describes, we see a clear link between relationship quality and the employee’s ability to reduce the perceived uncertainty.

#### **4.5.3 Two stories: Signal availability through greetings and the importance of it**

When reflecting upon how employees signal availability, we may argue that there isn’t one single answer to this. However, considering the interviews we have conducted and what both the employees and the customers told us, we see that the aspect of being greeted to is repeated by both the groups of employees and customers. Therefore, in this present thesis we emphasize especially the importance of being greeted to. Below, one of the employees describes her experience of being both an employee and the importance of being able to see the whole situation from a customer’s standpoint.

I can’t say that I am highly motivated every day at work, but what I think explains why I often manage to deliver good results is the contact I have with the customers, I think. When I am at work, no customer leaves the store without being greeted to – of that I am sure. Honestly, I think I see the customers. I would never overlook a



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customer. Even though I have a lot of tasks to do and there are many customers in the store, I make sure that everyone has been greeted to. For example, if I say “hi” to the customer and she doesn’t notice it, then I step up the game and say “hi” once more. The second time I usually say “hi” even louder, just to make sure that she turns around and greets me in return. You know, I don’t give up on a customer that easy. Now you may wonder why I do this? Well, I tend to place myself in the shoes of the customer. I know myself that if I am the customer in a store and the employee doesn’t say “hello” to me, it does something with the mood and the overall customer experience – I would say. To be honest, I often experience that I don’t want to go shopping there, don’t want to support their business. Of course, there may also be customers that mainly want to look by themselves without being disturbed. However, I think that the small act of saying “hi” can’t bother much. Therefore, I think that greeting the customers at all times leads to more positive outcomes than the opposite. It takes so little of my effort. Even though I may be standing unwrapping new items that have arrived, I would never be too busy to lift my head up to say “hi”. From my point of view, greeting the customers, and not at least see the customers... That’s two very important factors in sales, I would say. So, back to the days when I am not highly motivated – I think that the contact I have with the customers are valuable both for me, the customers – and the company.”

As we see from the excerpt above, the aspect of being greeted to may relate as much to the employee as to the customer. In other words, it can be looked upon as a two-way process where both the employee’s and the customer’s experiences matter. Taking the employee’s descriptions and story above into consideration, we see that by being aware of greeting the customers, the employee manage to signal availability. One may think that the small act of saying “hi” to the customer is

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quite obvious, or that it doesn't really make a difference regarding if the purchasing process is successful or not. However, in order to get more in-depth insight into the importance of being greeted to, we would now like to share one of the customer's thoughts and experiences about this topic.

When I went into the store, I saw that she was alone at work. Since there were no other employees there at the time when I was visiting the store, I understood that she had a lot to do. However, there is especially one thing that I noticed. She said "hi" to me. Twice actually. At first I felt that she was just being too nice. She didn't ask me if I wanted any help once I got in, but she let me look a bit for myself. Because she already had said "hi" to me, I didn't feel that it was unpleasant to seek her attention again in order to get help and guidance from her.. And when I asked if she could help me find the various clothing items I was looking for, she didn't hesitate to help me. She seemed honest and open when providing me with help. I have to admit that I felt sorry for her, because I saw that she had a lot of things to do. There were many customers in the store, and I noticed that she helped all of them. She was not only good in her job because of her breadth of knowledge and competencies related to clothes – she took care of all the customers by spending her time on them, and by making sure that she had greeted all of the store's visitors.”

According to Kaplan and Kaplan (1993) , “energy” can be understood as *directed attention*. Moreover, Kaplan (1993) suggests that directed attention refers to an individual's capacity to focus his or her attention (In Spreitzer et al., 2012, p. 157). More specific, directed attention can be understood in terms of how people regulate their attention. By linking our research findings to this theory, we suggest that an individual's energy represents a factor regarding the ability to signal availability and focus his or her attention. From the customer's descriptions in the excerpt above, we may argue that the employee managed to direct her attention in a way that was appreciated by the customer. Even though she was alone at work, the customer felt that the employee saw and took care of all the customers. As the customer above mentioned, even though the employee at first said “hi” to her

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without asking if she wanted any help or assistance - she felt seen, and in other words, she felt that the employee was available for her. From this, we may therefore argue that by greeting the customers, the employee conveys presence, which further may enable a high-quality connection to be developed.

#### **4.5.4 The importance of “Signal Availability” in relation to high-quality connections**

From our findings, we see that in order to fulfil the needs of the customer, it is highly appreciated that the employee greets the customers. By greeting the customers, the employee takes the initiative to establish contact with them. We see this as a way of *conveying presence*, which is suggested by Dutton (2003) as a strategy for using respectful engagement to build high-quality connections. Not only does the employee show that he or she is open for interacting with the customer, but it may also reduce the customer’s perceived uncertainty of the employee and of the situation in general. With this in mind, we can see the importance of signal availability in relation to high-quality connections.

In their research, Heaphy and Dutton (2008) investigate the link between positive social interactions and the human body at work. Specifically, they propose pathways through which the physiology of positive social interactions builds human capacity and pathways through which organizations shape the physiology of employees (Heaphy and Dutton, 2008, p. 137). As their findings show, people’s subjective experience of their connections with others has immediate, enduring, and consequential effects on their bodies (Heaphy and Dutton, 2008, p.138). Reflecting upon this, we argue that these effects may determine the employee’s ability to signal availability. However, our findings provide further evidence to this area. For example, considering the employee’s descriptions – that even though she doesn’t feel highly motivated at work every day, the connections she develops with the customers make her deliver good results for the organization. In other words, developing high-quality connections with the customers may improve an employee’s performance and the level of engagement at work. Heaphy and Dutton (2008) describe engagement as “a form of intentional participation and involvement in a work role”. Further, they argue that people experience moments of engagement or disengagement in their work roles throughout each day (Heaphy and Dutton, 2008, p. 151). Taking both Heaphy and Dutton’s (2008) findings into account, that positive social interactions have both

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immediate and enduring effects on physiological functioning, and our findings which have shown that positive social interactions may be the factor why employees perform well even though they're not highly motivated – our evidence support Heaphy and Dutton's (2008) argument. They look to Epel et al.'s (1998) studies, and suggest that positive social interactions “builds up a foundation for engagement, supporting the body's ability to expend effort, adapt to changing circumstances, and utilize energy efficiently”. Specifically, the research suggests that when people experience positive social interactions at work, they have a stronger physiological foundation for the effort needed to engage in their role (In Heaphy and Dutton, 2008, p. 151). Reflecting upon this, we see that “signal availability” plays a major role both for the employees and the customers with regards to how the connection, and not at least - how the *quality* of the connection between them develops.

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## 5.0 DISCUSSION

By applying qualitative research methods and design, the findings presented in this thesis illustrate how high-quality connections in retail stores may look like, and how they potentially affect organizational performance. Based on the semi-structured interviews we have conducted with the three top sellers from each of three clothing stores we have investigated, and from the interviews with the five mystery shoppers (the customers) - we have identified five processes in which both the employees and the customers are mutually represented. As we believe that the two parties play equally important roles in order for a high-quality connection to be developed and fostered, we have focused our research on what both the employees and the customers contribute with in the purchasing process and in the interaction with one another. With that said, we will now look further into the various outcomes of high-quality connections in retail stores, and how these can be linked to the five processes presented.

From the first process called “interacting through product knowledge sharing”, we found evidence that when customers view the employees as more competent when interacting through knowledge sharing, they might also view them as more trustworthy. When trust is built in a relationship, a high-quality connection can therefore also be built. However, in order for the employees to share their knowledge with their customers, it is critical that the managers provide the employees with appropriate and useful knowledge regarding the store’s various products and the use of them. As the theory in this thesis suggests, competence and knowledge can be linked to high-quality connections. Reflecting upon the fact that customers may view competent and highly knowledgeable employees as more trustworthy, we may further draw a link to the aspect of customer loyalty. When the customers feel that they can trust the employees, they may also develop a loyal bond to the employees and to the retail store. Considering Chidley and Pritchard’s (2014) statement, that loyalty is a result of customer satisfaction, we suggest that when the employees communicate and share valuable information and knowledge that is appreciated by their customers, it is more likely that the customers get a good customer experience, views the employees as more trustworthy - which further may lead to a loyal and high-quality relationship to the employees and to the organization overall.

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From the second process “help seeking/help giving” we found that in order to experience a successful purchasing process and ultimately develop a high-quality connection, both the employee’s and the customer’s way of interacting with each other determine the quality of the connection. Even though one may think that it is the role of the employee to provide the customer with help, the findings suggest that on the background of help seeking/help giving as a relational process, the customer’s way of interacting with the employee also determines whether a high-quality connection can be developed and fostered. With regards to this process, we may therefore argue that it is of high importance that both parts show an openness for interacting with each other. However, considering the employees as the more knowledgeable and competent in the relation, it is of high importance that especially the employees contribute in establishing contact with the customer. By asking specific questions to the customer, the employee is more likely to understand the customer’s preferences - which further may fulfil the customer’s needs. In other words, the process of help giving can therefore be understood in terms of discovering and fulfilling the customer’s needs. Linking this to Chidley and Pritchard’s (2014) argument, that *satisfaction* largely is influenced by the value of services provided to customers, we suggest that the help the customers are provided with by the employees may lead to satisfaction. With more satisfied customers, the organization’s overall performance may also be improved. In other words, high-quality connections between employees and customers can be argued to affect the organization’s result in positive ways.

Considering the third process “interacting through fostering perspective taking”, we found that by showing compassion and act through perspective taking, high-quality connections can be developed. Bearing in mind that perspective taking promotes interpersonal understanding, strengthens social bonds, fosters emotionally positive interactions, motivates compassionate actions, and promotes trustworthy behaviors - we see that both the aspect of showing compassion and perspective taking are closely linked to each other, as well as it provides insight into how high-quality connections in retail stores may look like. Moreover, the findings from this process also shows that promoting psychological safety and trust between the customer and the employee are important actions that promote high-quality connections too. However, taking into account that this process involves interpersonal understanding, interacting through fostering perspective taking cannot be learned in the same way as employees can improve

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their competence and knowledge regarding the retail store's products. Even though the employee's ability to take the customer's perspective may vary from one employee to another, we believe that if the managers provide the employees with training in service-orientation, the employees may develop their personal skills and be more aware of the importance of listening to the customers in order to understand their point of views and preferences better. Since value is created by satisfied, loyal and productive employees, we suggest that managers should provide their employees with the training and material needed in order for them to utilize their working capacity to the fullest (Chidley and Pritchard, 2014, p.294).

Moving on to the fourth process "adapting to personality and style", we found that felt mutuality/mutual engagement, positive regard, other-awareness and impressions of others made the ground bases with regards to how high-quality connections between employees and customers can be developed. We found evidence that other-awareness and impressions of others could lead to the awareness of how to adapt to their customers, which further lead to mutual engagement and felt mutuality. We also found evidence of *positive regard* based on the employee and the customer's experience of the feeling of being known or respected by each other. These actions has been found to support high-quality connections. Similar to the third process, we see that also this process relates to interpersonal understanding. From this we see that the employee's ability to adapt to the customer plays a major role regarding the customer's experience and how high-quality connections with the customer may be enabled and fostered. In order for high-quality connections to be developed in retail stores, we argue that also the employee's satisfaction is important to take into account. According to Chidley and Pritchard (2014), employee satisfaction results from high-quality support and policies that enable employees to deliver results to customers (Chidley and Pritchard, 2014, p. 294). Specifically, we argue that if the employees get provided with high-quality support and motivation from their managers - as well as they feel that they get the feeling of being respected by them, it might be easier for the employees to adapt and respect their customers in a similar way. This leads us over to the last process, where both the interpersonal understanding and the employee's customer orientation comes into play.

The fifth and last process "signal availability" shows that in order to fulfill the needs of the customer, it is highly valued that the employee greets the customers. Greeting the customers represents a way of establishing contact, as

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well as it can be linked to showing openness and presence towards the customers. Additionally, the evidence shows that signal availability and openness may reduce the customer's perceived uncertainty related to the employee and the overall purchasing process. From the employee's perspective, on the other hand, developing high-quality connections with the customers can be argued to improve an employee's performance and his or her's level of engagement at work.

It is clear that the way one communicates is very important. Mirivel (2014) presents seven behaviors that include positive communication, namely "greetings, asking, complimenting, disclosing, encouraging, listening and inspiring (p.7). Many of our found processes involve these behaviors (signal availability: greetings; help-giving/help-seeking: asking, listening; interacting through fostering perspective taking: complimenting, disclosure, encouraging, inspiring). Hence, we can argue that the found processes - especially signal availability, help-giving/help-giving and interacting through fostering perspective taking, actually contribute to create positive communication, which along with other important influences could further lead to high-quality connections.

Reflecting upon the findings from our research, we see that there are various pathways to how high-quality connections may be developed and fostered, and how they may look like in retail stores. However, we may argue that in all of the five processes we have presented, high-quality connections play a central role. In the same way as we have looked at the connection between employees and customers as relational and reciprocal, we also view the connection between the five processes and high-quality connections as such. Specifically, we see that each of the processes enables high-quality connections to be developed, as well they contribute in creating high-quality customer experiences. However, we have also seen that high-quality connections between employees and customers foster strong relationships, and furthermore - how these connections positively may affect both the employees' and the organization's overall performance.

### **5.1 Theoretical Contributions**

The aim of this thesis has been to get a better insight and wider understanding of the high-quality connections in retail sales, or more specifically - the high-quality connection between employees and customers. The existence of high-quality connection theories is broad (e.g., Dutton and Heaphy, 2003; Carmeli, Brueller, and Dutton, 2009; Shefer et al., 2011), however, there are lacks of research linked



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to high-quality connections in retail sales, or more specifically, the connection between customers and employees, and how this could potentially lead to better outcomes for retail stores.

This thesis can be argued to contribute to the *positive organizational scholarship* through deepening our understanding of positive relationships. There are many ways to foster high-quality connections, however, the connection might be approached and fostered differently from a workplace and in retail sales. For instance, in a workplace, the benefits or advantages in developing high-quality connection are present. A high-quality connection could be fostered more easily if the employees have a past, or if they are working with each other in a longer period of time. However, in a retail sale, these benefits are not present. The high-quality connection should happen quickly, as well as efficiently. As Stephens et al. (2011) suggested, high-quality connections can be understood in terms of short-term, dyadic interactions at work. Hence, by understanding the dynamics in how a high-quality connection can be fostered between an employee and a customer in retail sales, these findings can be argued to contribute to a broader way to understand what high-quality connection look like in retail sales.

The contribution also applies to the *high-quality connection literature*. We identified five practices that can be argued to contribute to the existing high-quality connection theory. The understanding of how high-quality connections are fostered in retail sales has deepened. The high-quality connection can be built through exercising the five practices that we identified. Reflecting upon this, we can argue that we have found other possible ways to foster high-quality connections - especially in short-term relationships.

## **5.2 Limitations and Future Research**

Reflecting upon our aim with the present thesis, which was to provide more insight into the importance of high-quality connections in employee-customer relationships in retail stores, we will now look into the limitations of the research. Taken into consideration that the study is based on qualitative research methods and design, we acknowledge this as one of the main limitations. By applying qualitative research methods, we have emphasized words rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data (Bryman and Bell, 2015, p.392). As our research mainly is based on in total 14 interviews with employees and customers (mystery shoppers), the findings may seem too subjective and

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narrow. More specific, one limitation may therefore be that we have discovered and emphasized five processes in the employee-customer relationships that may not necessary be true in other retail stores, or as important for other researchers studying this topic. Moreover, considering the relative small sample we have conducted, it will be difficult to replicate and generalize the findings to other studies and settings. According to Bryman and Bell (2015) “it is almost impossible to conduct a true replication since there are hardly any standard procedures to be followed” (Bryman and Bell, 2015, p. 414). Taken into account that we have focused the research on semi-structured interviews and observations, we may therefore argue that the study lacks standard procedures and structure to be replicated. Additionally, because the scope of the findings is restricted - and because we have interviewed only females and no males, one cannot generalize the findings to other settings. In other words, our sample consisting of 14 individuals is too small to be representative to other settings. Having these limitations in mind, we may therefore argue that future research is needed in order to gain a deeper insight into the importance of high-quality connections between employees and customers in retail stores, and with regards to the five main processes we have presented and emphasized in our findings. With more research on this field, we believe that one can gain more knowledge regarding how high-quality connections in retail stores may look like, and how this may affect an organization’s overall performance.

### **5.3 Practical Implications**

Considering Chidley and Pritchard’s (2014) argument that “*one of the key drivers for growth is created by employees*” in relation to the findings in the present thesis, we will now present the practical implications for organizations aiming for improved performance outcomes. First, seen from the organization’s perspective, we may argue that the managers should provide the employees with necessary and valuable *product knowledge*. When the employees have knowledge about their products, it will be easier for them to fulfill the needs of their customers – which further may lead to more satisfied customers and better sales. Additionally, interacting through knowledge sharing can affect the relationship between the employees and the customers positively. Second, building on the aspect of knowledge sharing – when the employees *provide the customers with help* and guidance throughout the purchasing process, high-quality connections may be

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developed. Therefore, we suggest that the managers should arrange and encourage their employees to attend training courses so they better learn how to approach their customers, and how to provide them with service and help of high quality in a best possible manner. As a result, the customers may leave the retail store with a good customer experience and a feeling of being seen. Third, when in contact with the customers, the employees should focus all their attention on the customer. Specifically, this may involve *active listening*, *showing compassion*, and *act through perspective-taking*. Fourth, by *adapting to the customers personality and style*, a mutually engaged relationship may be developed between the two parts. Fifth, and with regards to the aspect of *signal availability*, the employees should be aware of the importance of greeting the customers. Even though this may seem a small action, it may be a determining factor with regards to the overall customer experience. In sum, we see that the five processes presented complement each other, and further that these processes together make up the customer experience. In other words, they may determine whether a high-quality connection between the employee and the customer can be developed and fostered. Even though some of the processes are inter-relational, meaning that both the employee's and the customer's way of interacting with each other in terms of whether a high-quality connection may be developed, we believe that managers who encourage the employees to attend various courses – both with regards to learning more about the store's products and regarding service orientation, the quality of the connection between the employees and the customers may increase. Ultimately, high-quality connections may be developed and fostered – which further may affect the overall organizational performance in a positive way.

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## 6.0 CONCLUSION

In this thesis, we have examined the relationship and connection between employees and customers in retail stores. As a result, we have widened our understanding on what high-quality connection looks like in these relationships, as well as how these can be built. We found that high-quality connection can be built in retail sales through five practices.

By using these, the traditional “employee-customer” relationship can be avoided, and a high-quality connection can be built despite of the time limit a retail sale usually have. Our findings suggest that when employees exercise these practices, the possibility of fostering a high-quality connection with customers becomes more easily. Hence, this thesis can be argued to reveal what high-quality connection looks like in retail sales, how these can be fostered, and how it can result into better outcomes.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1 Interview guide for employees

Question themes	Specifics	Purpose
Phase 1: Initiation and warm up	Warm up questions (5 min) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduction of us</li> <li>• Purpose of study</li> <li>• Inform about the confidentiality</li> <li>• Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and your professional background?</li> <li>• What is your role and responsibilities at the retail store?</li> </ul>	Warming up: build report, background information, and small talk
Phase 2: Eliciting extended storytelling	Eliciting extended storytelling (20 min) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can you tell a story of a successful purchase process that you have been involved in?                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What happened?</li> <li>○ What was your contribution to this success?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Can you tell a story about an episode where a customer was extremely satisfied with the purchase? (Can you give examples in this purchase process where something was especially positive, challenging, or surprising?)                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What happened?</li> <li>○ What was your contribution to this success?</li> <li>○ Did you do anything different in this purchase process compared to other processes?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• In the same purchase process: Can you tell us more about the relation you had with the customer? -                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Regarding the relation with your customer during the purchase process, can you give examples on something that you found especially rewarding or challenging?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	Seek stories involving successful purchase processes  Seek stories about breakthroughs, successful employee-customer interaction  What role does HCQ have in the employee-customer interaction?
Phase 3: Directed questions, comparative	Directed questions, comparative (20 min) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do you think is the difference between a customer that you have a good connection with, compared to a customer that you have an extraordinary connection with?</li> <li>• What would you say is the difference between a good seller and an extraordinary seller?</li> <li>• When did you last feel very motivated and engaged at work?</li> <li>• Imagine that you met one of the retail store's most important customer: What would you change in order to achieve even better interaction and purchase process compared to what you are currently doing now?</li> </ul>	Look for characteristics of HCQ
Phase 4: Closure and sharing	Summary (10 min) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recap findings</li> <li>• Share interpretations, and understand it correctly</li> <li>• Is there anything you would like to add?</li> </ul>	Wrap up:  Insure we understood everything correctly, summary

Aarestad, M., & Brøndbo, M. T. (2013). *The power of high-quality connections in knowledge work.*

**Appendix 2 Interview guide for customers**

Question themes	Specifics	Purpose
Phase 1: Initiation and warm up	Warm up questions (5 min) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduction of us</li> <li>• Purpose of study</li> <li>• Inform about the confidentiality</li> <li>• Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and your background?</li> <li>• How often do you get guidance or assistance when shopping?</li> </ul>	Warming up: build report, background information, and small talk
Phase 2: Eliciting extended storytelling	Eliciting extended storytelling (20 min) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can you tell a story of a successful purchase process that you have been involved in?                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What happened?</li> <li>○ What was your contribution to this success?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Can you tell us about your experience at B.young/ICHI? (Can you tell us about something that you found especially positive, challenging or surprising?)                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What happened?</li> <li>○ What was your contribution to the positive outcome?</li> <li>○ Did the employee do anything different in this purchase process compared to other employees you have been involved with?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• In the same purchase process: Can you tell us more about the relation you had with the employee?                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Regarding the relation with your employee during the purchase process, can you give examples on something that you found especially rewarding or challenging?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	Seek stories involving successful purchase processes  Seek successful employee-customer interaction examples from B.young/ICHI's purchase process  What role does HQC have in the employee-customer interaction?
Phase 3: Directed questions, comparative	Directed questions, comparative (20 min) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do you think is the difference between a good employee-customer interaction, compared to an extraordinary employee-customer interaction?</li> <li>• What would you say is the difference between a good seller and an extraordinary seller?</li> <li>• Imagine that you met B.young/ICHI's best employee: What do you think would change in order to achieve even better interaction and purchase process compared to what you have been experienced until now?</li> </ul>	Look for characteristics of HCQ
Phase 4: Closure and sharing	Summary (10 min) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recap findings</li> <li>• Share interpretations, and understand it correctly</li> <li>• Is there anything you would like to add?</li> </ul>	Wrap up:  Insure we understood everything correctly, summary

*Aarestad, M., & Brøndbo, M. T. (2013). The power of high-quality connections in knowledge work.*

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**Appendix 3** *Data coding: first- and second-order concepts*

<b>FIRST-ORDER CONCEPTS</b>	<b>SECOND-ORDER CONCEPTS</b>
Impression of expertise Guidance and tips Trustworthy Competence Knowledge	Interacting through product knowledge sharing
Feedback Finding a balance between too pushy and too absent Openness Helpfulness Building a safe environment	Help-seeking/help-giving
Caring Understanding Listening to the customer Compassion	Interacting through fostering perspective taking
Pay attention to interests Understanding the circumstances Find something in common	Adapting to personality and style
Positive energy Greetings Attention to the customers Spend time with the customers Being available	Signal availability