FACTORS INFLUENCING THE CUSTOMER PURCHASE DECISION IN B2B MARKETS: A SURVEY

ÇAĞDAŞ ORAL

IŞIK ÜNİVERSİTESİ
NİSAN, 2021

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Işık Üniversitesi, Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, Executive MBA (İngilizce) Yüksek Lisans Programı

2021

Bu tez, Işık Üniversitesi, Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü'ne Yüksek Lisans (MA) derecesi için sunulmuştur.

IŞIK ÜNİVERSİTESİ

Nisan 2021

IŞIK ÜNİVERSİTESİ
SOSYAL BİLİMLER ENSTİTÜSÜ
EXECUTIVE MBA (İNGİLİZCE) YÜKSEK LİSANS PROGRAMI

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APPROVALS:

Doç. Dr. Aslı TUNCAY ÇELİKEL (Işık Üniversitesi)
(Tez Danışmanı)
Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Pınar AKSEKİ
(FALCIOĞLU)   (Işık Üniversitesi)
Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Seray Begüm
SAMUR TERAMAN   (İstanbul Kültür Üniversitesi)

APPROVE DATE: 03/05/2021

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ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to understand the factors influencing customer purchase decision in B2B markets. Particularly, the mechanisms ensuring the continuity of business relationship between two types of companies namely: the producers of the corrugated box companies and the business buyers will be researched. In this analysis, factors were both investigated in the literature and verified by the authors own expertise in the industrial packaging industry. Three main factors were put into consideration for influencing the customer purchase decision in B2B, namely price, corporation image, and salesperson's commitment and expertise. This exploratory research attempts to find evidence based on a survey analysis conducted on 129 respondents of corrugated box suppliers. The survey has been taking a place within the firms where their headquarters located in the Marmara Region of Turkey. These firms generally, produce and operate on Paper/Wood products, Metal, Electric and Electronic, Energy, Food, Automotive, Chemistry, Petroleum, Rubber and Plastic Industries. Propositions were developed and it was found that price, corporate image, and salesperson commitment are the most important factors that influence customer purchase decisions in B2B markets; besides COVID-19 pandemic is found as an moderating factor in this relationship. The findings demonstrate that salesperson commitment is especially an important factor to ensure the continuity of a business relationship between two companies.

Key words: B2B Market, Customer Purchase Decision, Salesperson's Commitment, Corrugated Box, Coronavirus (Covid-19)

KURUMSAL FİRMALAR ARASINDA MÜŞTERİLERİN SATIN ALMA KARARLARINI ETKİLEYEN FAKTÖRLER: ANKET UYGULAMASI

ÖZET

Bu tezin amacı, kurumsal firmalar (B2B) arasında müşterilerin satın alma kararlarını etkileyen faktörleri anlamaktır. Özellikle, üretici ve satın alanlar arasında devam eden işleyiş ve bu firmalar arasındaki iş ilişkileri araştırılacaktır. Bu analizde, endüstriyel paketleme sektöründeki etkenler literatür incelemesi ve yazarın kendi tecrübeleri kapsamında doğrulanmıştır. Kurumsal (B2B) müşterilerin satın alma kararlarını etkileyen üç ana etken olan fiyat, kurumsal imaj ve satış temsilcisinin sözünde durması (taahhüt), bilgisi ve işinde gösterdiği özen gibi faktörler incelemeye alınmıştır. Genel merkezleri Marmara bölgesinde yer alan, 129 oluklu mukavva tedarikçisi firma üzerine yapılan keşifsel nitelikteki bu araştırma ile sonuçlar ortaya koyulmaya çalışılmaktadır. Genel olarak bu firmalar, Kağıt ve Ağaç ürünleri, Metal, Elektrik ve Elektronik, Enerji, Gıda, Otomotiv, Kimya, Petrol, Kauçuk ve Plastik sektörlerinde üretim ve faaliyet gösteren firmalardır. Önermeler geliştirilerek kurumsal piyasada müşterilerin satın alma kararlarını en çok etkileyen faktörlerin fiyat, kurumsal imaj ve satış temsilcisinin taahhüdü olduğu ve COVID-19 pandemisinin bu ilişkiyi etkileyen aracı bir faktör olduğu tespit edilmiştir. Özellikle satış temsilcisinin sözünde durması, bilgisi, deneyimi ve işinde gösterdiği özen iki firma arasında süre gelen ilişkinin devam ettirilmesinde önemli bir faktör olarak görülmüştür.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kurumsal Firmalar, Müşteri Satınalma Kararı, Satış Temsilcisinin Taahüdü, Oluklu Mukavvadan Koli, Koronavirüs (Covid-19).

TEŞEKKÜR

Ailem, sevgili eşim

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Oğlum Atlas'a…

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CHAPTER 1

1. INTRODUCTION

As a human being, we have to continuously make a decision. In our daily routine, humans' brain always tries to make the best choice from the alternatives they face within a day. As we do it in our personal life, people also do it in professional working life. These decisions have a bearing on our life. It is also affecting the company's future. Some of the decisions are vital, especially for the firms who make the important purchase decisions in B2B markets. So, which factors influencing customer purchase decision in B2B markets? Particularly, what mechanisms ensure the continuity of business relationship between two companies? Is it price, is it the corporate image or are these well-known factors simply myths? Should we consider a third factor such as salesperson? Does the salesperson's capability to convince the customer matter at least as much as price and corporate image do? Answering these questions, this thesis takes all of these three factors into consideration and attempts to find evidence based on a survey analysis. It particularly seeks evidence for the effect of price, corporate image, salesperson commitment on customer purchase decision and the continuity of existing business relationship. Moreover, it aims to discover whether one factor influence customer purchase decision more than the others. Since March of 2020, a drastic change happened that is affecting all the businesses depending on production, volume of selling and human behaviors. It is called Corona virus pandemic or as a common namely COVID-19. This thesis will also take into consideration COVID-19's affect into the business life and in particular purchasing decisions of the companies.

The literature on each factor and their individual effects on customer decisions is abundant. However, the studies that consider all three factors together is surprisingly scarce. Not so surprisingly, studies that cover the COVID-19 pandemic is even rarer. The goal of this thesis is especially to fill that gap in the literature. Spiro and Perreault, (1978) argue that persistence works. That is, salesperson's call frequency makes a difference in sales. Franke and Park (2006) contend that experience in selling and adaptive selling behavior lead to a better performance in sales. Karmarkar et al. (2015) assert that any decision germane to price is difficult and plays a crucial role for the purchase decision. Kotler et al. (2006) maintain that pricing is the only element that conduces to income. The benefits of having a positive strong corporate image are highlighted by many academics. Yoon et al (1993) and Brown (1995) gave quantitative facts about the advantages of a positive corporate image. A strong positive corporate image affects the purchasing habits of the customers.

According to these arguments and findings in the literature, this thesis argues that price, corporate image, and salesperson's commitment all affect the customer purchase decision separately. When the customer perceives the price quote as reasonable compared to the market, when the firm's image provides trust, and when the salesperson commits himself / herself into selling the product, the customers are more likely to purchase the product and this business relationship between the buyer and the supplier is more likely to sustain. Nonetheless, this study particularly contends that salesperson commitment has a more substantial influence over the continuity of a business relationship between two companies because it is the salesperson, not the company, that create alternative solutions to customers when they have problems. Salespeople may take initiative to produce solutions. Price especially matters when customers begin to consider establishing a new business relationship.

To support these arguments, this thesis conducts a survey analysis. The survey has been sent to 488 the customers of industrial packaging in the region of Marmara, Turkey. These customers work at various companies from various industries. Out of 488 customers, 129 responded to the survey. Results provide support for the arguments.

The next chapter will discuss the literature on the factors that influence customer purchase decision, focusing on price, salesperson commitment, and

corporate image. Literature review will be followed by the theory and propositions. Next, research and data collection methodology will be addressed. Later, results will be reported and discussed. This study will end with the final chapter, conclusion, which will summarize the findings and the contribution this thesis makes to our knowledge on customer purchase decision and business continuity in B2B markets.

CHAPTER 2

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, factors that influence the customer purchase decision in B2B markets will be explained in depth throughout a literature review. Particularly, general information about B2B markets will first be provided. Then, B2B continuity will be discussed followed by the importance of trust. Finally, each main factor that influences a customer purchase decision will be addressed.

2.1 General Information about B2B Markets

In essence, two types of business relationships exist. The first is business to customer (B2C), the second is business to business (B2B). The former applies to the companies that make their goods and services available for purchase to individuals as customers. The latter are the companies that make their goods and services available for purchase to other businesses exclusively. The distinction between the two types is the audience. While the business transaction is among companies in B2B, the transaction is between companies and customers in B2C. One potential benefit of B2B comparing to B2C is that B2B may result in purchases in higher volumes of goods, thereby lowering selling price for the buyer companies.

2.1.1 Continuity in B2B

Businesses fundamentally have two goals. It is evident that the first goal is to start a relationship. However, once a relationship is established, businesses aim to continue that relationship, which is the phenomenon this thesis attempt to explain. Several explanations exist in the literature. For instance, customers are not solely

interested in the core benefits of the purchase of a product. They are also concerned with the degree of customer service. Sun et al. (2014) call this "soft quality" (p. 81). Barry and Terry (2008) assert that this degree of customer service contains service efficacy and showing customers respect than delivering the product only. Anderson and Narus (1995) maintain that because customers seek complete solutions to their problems, customers' decision to buy a product is shaped by the supplier's offer. Accordingly, customers are more likely to continue a business relationship with a supplier if the components of the offer are diverse. Besides, Yi and La (2004) point out a causal relationship between customer satisfaction and repurchase intention and this relationship is affected by loyalty.

Criticizing the scarcity of studies on the ongoing relationship among businesses, Dwyer et al. (1987) build their framework for their business continuity arguments around cost-benefit nexus. They argue that the relationship perseveres if it benefits all actors. Inspired by this rationalistic approach, Rauyruen and Miller (2007) propound that business continuity is affected by trust, satisfaction, and service quality. They specifically assert that trust in the supplier, overall satisfaction, and perceived service quality has a positive relationship with purchase intentions. In this thesis, there are similar rationalistic arguments on business continuity and its relation to salesperson commitment, corporate image, and price. In the cost-benefit nexus, the importance of price is self-evident. However, salesperson commitment and corporate image require a more in-depth explanation since they are vital mechanisms that form trust among businesses. Hence, I will address the importance of trust in the next section.

2.1.2 Importance of Trust in B2B

According to the buyer's point of view, trust and reputation are crucial in B2B brands Cretu and Brodie (2007). Maintenance and post-sale assistance are the key elements that give an idea to the buyer in B2B brands' markets. If there is a question on the buyer's mind which is choosing the best option then brand becomes more and more important. In addition, with the help of the brand name or the company name people perceive that as a reducing stress factor and increase on their favorability (Backhaus et al., 2011). Buyers attach importance to brands and they prefer to work with firms that are interested in consistency, being trustworthy, delicate, pliable, and

having a piece of expert knowledge on their businesses. It is better to meet these B2B brand expectations because it is what the brand's qualification is. (Veloutsou & Taylor, 2012, p. 905).

The importance of trust in B2B customers is laid out in repeated rational actor games. In their famous book, McCarty and Meirowitz (2007) explained that Nash equilibria in repeated games can be different from single-shot games. In repeated games, as grim trigger strategy demonstrates, "any failure to cooperate leads to the noncooperative equilibrium an all future periods" (p. 253) because defection causes the loss of trust. Therefore, businesses that wish continuity of relationship should have more incentives to cooperate than to defect. Nevertheless, since cooperation is not rational if the other player plays defection, grim trigger equilibrium in the infinite Prisoner's Dilemma is not realistic. It is unlikely that players will not want to renegotiate once cooperation breaks down. Thus, the alternative nash equilibrium to grim trigger strategy is tit-for-tat strategy. That is, once a player plays cooperate in the first period, the rational behavior is to "play the action that the other player chose in the previous period" (ibid., 256).

The theoretical importance of trust has also been empirically tested by scholars. Rauyruen and Miller (2007) find that trust and supplier increase relationship quality. Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) show that trust is linked to brand performance. Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Aleman (2001) demonstrate that trust affects not only customer commitment but also the level of price tolerance. Simply put, trust is a vital mechanism for business continuity.

2.2 Factors Influence the Customer Purchase Decision

There exist several definitions for the procurement process. David Burt's book Proactive Procurement published in 1984 defines procurement as a systematic process of deciding and answering two W's and one H (i.e., what, when and how much to buy). In the position of completing the procurement process and assurance of the supply can be given with the quality and quantity of request on time occur a huge advantage against rivals. Aljian (1984) specify procurement action as a good timing and use of all components such as equipment, material or service with requested quality-quantity and reasonable price of a good supplier. Waters (2003:

228) describe of procurement is "responsible for acquiring all the materials needed by an organization".

The literature provides various explanations for the puzzle that influences the customer's purchase decisions. Gherasim and Gherasim (2020) state that customer perception, impression, and conduct are indispensable characteristics of consumer behaviors. Although I conceptualize these factors under three categories, namely salesperson commitment, corporate image, and price, scholars probe deeper. For instance, while Spiro and Perreault (1978) investigate the causes of sales call frequency, Tsiros et al. (2009) focus on sales commitment as an independent variable. Rachmawati et al. (2019) find that not only quality, location, and promotion but also price and corporate image influence customer purchase decision of residential property in Malaysia. Rahayu and Zanky (2018) argue that corporate image is not limited to an image of its products and services, but it is rather an image of the whole organization. Based on the assumption that quality and corporate image are intertwined, Cater and Cater (2010) propound that customer's knowledge about the product affects customer commitment and loyalty in the B2B market. Hustic and Gregurec (2015) do not underestimate such factors' influence on a customer purchase decision. However, the persuasion of customers mainly predicates on price.

2.2.1 Salesperson's Commitment

Selling performance is one of the essential components of marketing (Spiro and Perreault, 1978). According to Oliver and Anderson (1994), salesperson performance is described as an outcome of the sales activities of a salesperson. Since it is such essential business activity, the theory behind this thesis is shaped by sales and salesperson commitment. Salesperson commitment is the level of the salesperson's effort that contributes to the finances of the firm. It is an important variable since salesperson commitment changes depending on a salesperson's experience, ability to persuade, willingness to make a difference either for his/her company or the future of his/her career. However, regardless of the reason for the willingness, salespeople make an additive contribution to the sales. More importantly, as Wilson and Jantrania (1994) put, it is the people that make a relationship work or fail. Therefore, a salesperson is an essential variable in B2B markets.

There are numerous studies on the causes and the effects of a salesperson and his/ her performance. Franke and Park (2006) find that salesperson adaptive selling behavior and selling experience conduce to higher sales performance. On the contrary, Valenzuela et al. (2013) find no empirical evidence for the relationship of customer loyalty with salesperson adaptive selling behavior and selling experience. Nevertheless, they conclude that salespeople who want to build a long-term relationship with high-value customers are more likely to perform better. Their findings also suggest that the effect of salesperson customer lifetime value orientation on salesperson performance draws a convex (first) and concave (second) function.

Moreover, Spiro and Perreault, (1978) report empirical findings on the relationship between "characteristics of the market, the customer and the salesperson-customer interaction" (p.1) and a salesperson's call frequency, which this thesis intends to use as one of the measures for salesperson commitment. O'Hern and Kahle (2013) indicate that customers demand more experienced salesperson. Jaramillo et al. (2013) add that highly demanding customers lead salespeople to extend their menu of problem-solving capabilities. Lussier et al. (2017) work on an interesting research question. They seek an answer to the question of whether salesperson humor has an effect on performance in business relationships. Their survey results indicate that salesperson humor has a positive impact on salesperson creativity and customer trust, which then improves sales performance. Salesperson's creativity is a proof for identifying new problems and also for engendering new solutions to these new problems (Wan and Netemeyer, 2004). In other words, creativity translates into better problem-solving, which then leads to better salespeople's performance (Agnihotri et al., 2014; Groza et al., 2016).

2.2.2 Effects of COVID-19

Weitz (1981) maintains that salespeople's successful perform depends on their capabilities to adjust and adapt selling behaviors to new selling situations. As of March 2020, we have a new situational factor. This factor impacts not only the volume of sales but also salesperson, which is COVID-19. For instance, Luu (2021) states that as soon as the pandemic began, the crisis threatened job security and

impacted the salesforce in B2B markets. The pandemic is not alone the cause of the problems. The precautions governments had to take against the pandemic has even led to further disruption such as "supply chain breakdowns, inventory shortages, serious supply and demands shifts, product delivery issues, cancellations of crucial events and meetings, and new work arrangements" (p. 18).

Similarly, Meyer et al. (2021) argue that business expectations have dramatically shifted. After the pandemic, companies that have experienced supply chain disruptions expect to alleviate near-term selling prices. Furthermore, they demonstrate that companies anticipate lowering their one-year-ahead inflation expectations. In these disruptive and catastrophic times, Epler and Leach (2021: 114) assert that a salesperson's capability to "utilize available resources effectively by assessing available resources and working to reconfigure them in order to meet new challenges and creates opportunities." The authors call this bricolage and bricolage is supported by "salesperson's ability and confidence to creatively experiment" (p. 117). Moreover, according to Hartmann and Lussier (2020), resilience of a salesperson in times of a crisis is crucial for organizational resilience and sales performance.

The impact of COVID-19 is not limited to salespeople' performance. The pandemic has an effect on price as well. Due to the uncertainties the pandemic has generated, firms over purchased raw material to avoid troubles with raw material supply. In parallel, individual customers are inclined to overconsume the products (Gunessee and Subramanian, 2020). As a result, Meyer et al. (2021) also find that firms expected to lower their prices due to demand shock. To the contrary, Farias and Araujo (2020) demonstrate prices of essential products have gone upwards.

2.2.3 Corporate Image

Rahayu and Zanky (2018) state that "corporate image is a set of associations perceived by consumers to companies that make a product or service. Moreover, Rahmiati et al. (2017) state that, products and services can be delivered directly to end-users from the manufacturers' warehouse and it is a kind of direct shortcut without any other middle wholesaler. Corporate image is one of the primary components of a company's growth path. The corporate image has been trying to analyze for customers' purchase decisions which are valued over quality,

performance, responsibility, and attractiveness with the purchase decision. In this fashion, the corporate image has major importance over the influence of customers' purchase decisions in the market. The corporate image is generally considered constructed of perceptions and impressions which is built at the public mindset and it also contains the company's ability to meet the demand of regarding public. Thus, this feature is also one of the components that design and affect the company's growth path. The objective of the image is to convey a clear and comprehensive understanding of the firm to attract customers.

The measurement is based on four aspects that underlay creating a corporate image or corporate reputation. Quality refers to the company's sustainable ability to create the same feature of production/service. Performance shows that company to be able to grow and to have sustainable development with good management. Responsibility reflects an awareness of the company's environment and surrounding with social responsibility in business operation. Attractiveness, it refers the atmosphere of working condition with qualified and skillful employees. These independent variables measure the level of the corporate image of a company to see how strong the influence of corporate image in determining customer purchase decisions.

Scholars have studied the importance of corporate image. For instance, Yoon et al (1993) and Brown (1995) provide empirical evidence for the advantages of a positive corporate image. A strong positive corporate image influences customers' purchasing habit. Nguyen and LeBlanc (2001) are supporting that having a strong corporate image positively affects customer loyalty. Dolphin (2004) suggests that this strong relationship and customer loyalty allows companies to charge premiums for their customers. According to Walsh et al. (2006), positive strong corporate image can increase trust to the company by the people.

2.2.4 Price

According to the Kotler and Armstrong (2004: 314), "price is the sum of all the values that consumers exchange for the benefits of having or using the product or service." The sale is directly and deeply regarding pricing which are also eventually the main activities of each company. Companies must consider that the price is an element that is at all times relevant to their customers. The price is included in all

units of the company. Selling a product or service is not the only key factor. It designs the image of companies. It is also important that the price differentiates companies from each other in terms of quality and other features since customers can take the price as a reference for buying the product. The price must also be reasonable and compatible with the company's long-term strategies and goals. Proper pricing motto will always affect the business activities positively (Hustic and Gregurec, 2015). Price is the most sensitive element of the market mix and the only "element that produces income" (Kotler et al., 2006: 665). It directly affects income, which is ultimately converted into profit – the main reason to establish a company. So, pricing-related decisions usually are difficult and a key factor for the purchase decision (Karmarkar et al. 2015). Price is also a fact and a conclusion of a large number of market and social-economical elements and each company is unique by its position in the market. Therefore, pricing policies and strategies are all different from each other in terms of the company's policy, long-term aim and depend on the company image (Hustic and Gregurec, 2015).

There are two basic strategies to set pricing policies especially if the product is new to the market. The first strategy is that the company scans the market and customer needs or sensitivity. Second, firms penetrate deeper into the market. The penetration strategy aims to pick a satisfying percentage from the market and to gain as many shares of the market as possible. The price goals, on the other hand, maybe various depending on the characteristics, features, and vision of a company. The survival of the company is, of course, the main goal. Some of the other goals are current profit maximization, maximize market share and product quality leadership. It is essential to set quantifiable goals because quantification enables the firm to monitor and measure achievements (Hustic and Gregurec, 2015). The pricing and goals must be compatible.

CHAPTER 3

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This thesis's central question is which mechanisms affect the customer purchase decision in B2B markets. It aims to detect specific factors that might lead to the continuity of business relationships. Therefore, a survey will be conducted on employees working at companies from various sectors (FMCG (fast-moving consumer goods), automotive, steel, furniture, petro chemistry, etc.) to detect and understand these factors (salesperson's commitment, corporate image, or price). The survey participants will be the procurement departments among the customers of Olmuksan International Paper Company. This company is chosen due to data availability. Based on the descriptive statistics collected from the survey, for some purchase decisions, salesperson commitment may appear to influence customer purchase decisions in B2B markets more than both corporate image and product price.

3.1 Main Research Questions

- Which factors influence the customer purchase decision in B2B markets?
- What sort of mechanisms affects buying decisions in B2B markets?
- How do companies attract their customers in B2B Markets?

3.2 Propositions

This thesis assumes that a relationship between two companies already exists, and this assumption has certain implications for the propositions. For instance, it is argued that firms will continue a business relationship should they have committed salespeople whose sales performance is high. Several explanations exist for such an

argument. First, a salesperson is the face of the company. Sales employees generate trust and a deeper connection with the buyer company. It is, of course, rational to prefer a product that costs less if the product quality is similar or if the quality is irrelevant for the buyer. Nevertheless, it is usually the sales employee who informs the customer about the price and his/her company's corporate image. In the absence of a salesperson, the information about the price can only be obtained through a marketing survey. Since a marketing survey must be conducted by the buying company, it adds additional material and temporal cost when the procurer wishes to buy a new product. Therefore, intercompany communication through sales employees decreases these costs.

More importantly, it is not the company that generates alternative solutions to customer problems. It is usually sales employees who take the initiative to produce solutions with the approval of their managers. Alternative solution generation is essential because it ensures the continuation of cooperation. Furthermore, corporations are not human. Hence, they are entities without emotions. However, the procurer and the sales employee can build a friendship, which then might increase the sales volume. The first proposition is:

Proposition 1: Firms tend to continue a business relationship with companies if they have committed sales employees who perform higher sales performance.

Nonetheless, the effects of salesperson commitment on business continuity have gotten substantially more complicated since March 2020. That is, COVID-19 pandemic has changed not only our daily lives but also the business as we know. Due to the precautions against COVID-19 and social distancing, the salespeople were forced get creative to communicate with customers. COVID-19 is unlikely to have any direct causal effect on business continuity. However, COVID-19 and business continuity should be highly correlated because the pandemic has influenced salesperson commitment. Thus, the pandemic plays the role of an moderating variable in the model of this thesis. Another reason why pandemic is not likely to be an independent variable is pandemic's invariance. Pandemic occurs once in one or two centuries. Due to the invariance, it is significantly difficult to measure a pandemic as an independent variable. To account for the pandemic effect, the next proposition is as follows.

Proposition 1a: Frequent communication is carried out via telephone during the pandemic between salesperson and customers in comparison with the communication before pandemic.

Proposition 1b: Frequent communication is carried out via face-to-face meetings before the pandemic between salesperson and customers in comparison with the communication during the pandemic.

Corporate image and price are also effective factors. Perhaps, they are even more effective than the salesperson, however, only under certain circumstances. For instance, the effect of the corporate image should be strong if the product is in high demand or is not a niche. Corporate image cannot build an emotional attachment to the product as much as a salesperson can. However, the corporate image can still inject trust into customers' minds in B2B markets. National and international certifications on product quality indeed generate a positive perception about the seller. Alternatively, the company size, in terms of its employee numbers, and the complexity of the price quote approval process can also add to customer perception in B2B markets and, by extension, the corporate image. As a result, it is expected that firms to continue their business relationships with companies should the buyer company is perceived to have a stronger corporate image. Hence, the second proposition is as follows:

Proposition 2: Firms tend to continue their business relationship with companies that are perceived to have a stronger corporate image.

All rational business actors aim to maximize their profit. Thus, companies regularly conduct market research. However, the goal is not to find the best price but to detect the fairest price for particular product quality. In other words, firms prefer to purchase a product at an affordable price that is a true representative of its worth, i.e., quality. Finding the best price creates an additional material gain for the buyer company. As a consequence, price is not only a vital factor for customer purchase decisions but also a fundamental one.

Proposition 3: Firms tend to continue their business relationships with companies if their products cost less than rival firms.

In sum, corporate image and price indeed affect the customer purchase decision. Nonetheless, it is particularly argue that salesperson commitment is often a better predictor of the customer purchase decision. This argument is based on the role of a salesperson in B2B markets. Sales employees establish a deep connection

with the procurer through communication. Therefore, salesperson commitment should have a greater impact on customer purchase decisions than corporate image and price.

3.3 Conceptual Model

In this part, a proposed conceptual model is illustrated.

Figure 3.3 Model for Factors that Influence Customer Purchase Decision
In B2B Markets
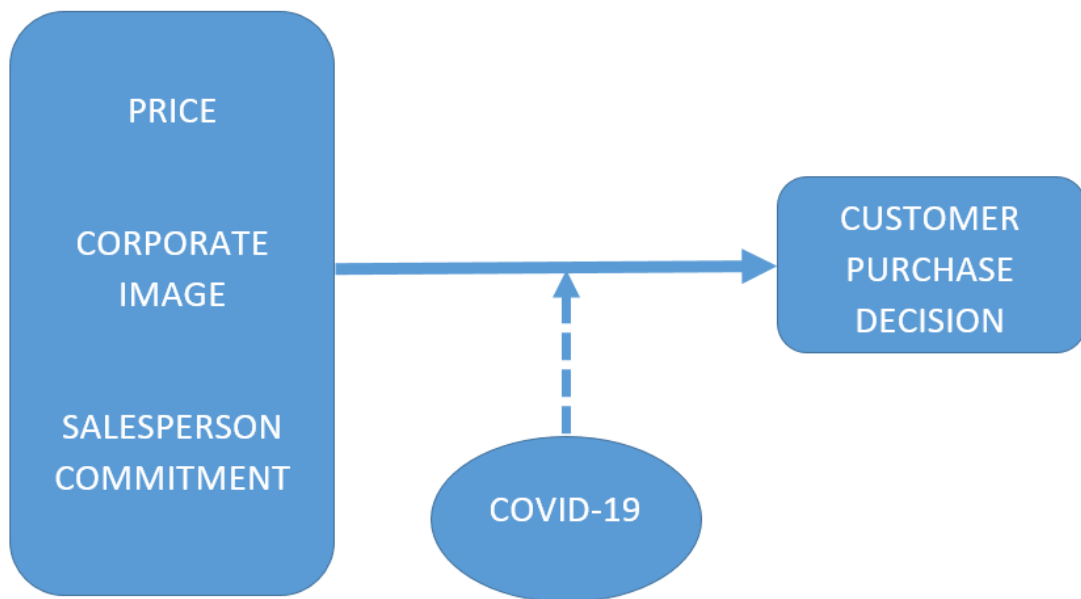
The dependent variable is the continuity of the business relationship. To measure the dependent variable, a question is asked each survey respondent how long they have been working with their supplier and categorize period customers' business relationship. Independent variables are salesperson commitment, corporate

image, and price. The salesperson's commitment is measured by the frequency of customer calls and meetings in a month. The questions asked to measure sales commitment are how often calling and visit customer representatives in a month. While the price is self-explanatory. Company size, product quality, and certifications of the supplier measure corporate image.

3.4 Data Collection Methodology & Sample

For the aim of this thesis, a quantitative descriptive survey was carried out in a poll. We used survey for data collection and construct survey questions predicated on the arguments and findings of the literature.

3.4.1 Population and Sample

Survey has been sent to 488 people in the Marmara region of the Turkey; out of which 129 has answered the questions and returned back the completed survey.

3.4.2 Survey Design

The survey implementation is a questionnaire that has been generated in Google Surveys, an application for online surveys. A Google survey has been sent to various B2B customers via online communication tools after their permission is granted to be included in this study. The respondents of this survey analysis consist of procurement agents of companies that make corrugated box purchases from a global company. This survey focuses on the corrugated box industry due to data availability and the fact nearly all industries need to establish a business relationship with a corrugated box supplier. Almost any company that produces something needs a corrugated box. Everybody needs packaging for two reasons. Packing is crucial either for the protection of the products or keeping products together during the shipment. Although the goal of using industrial boxes is transportation, firms can benefit from it by using industrial boxes as an advert tool. Companies can order boxes with their logos on them. Because industrial packaging has a demand in various and numerous industries, corrugated box producers have come up with different production techniques.

However, we can characterize corrugated box production with three main types, namely single wall, double wall, and triple wall. One may summarize these

three different product types with the weight of boxes. For instance, while single wall boxes are produced for lightweight products, triple wall boxes are produced especially for heavy-weight products. All these types are made with paper, which makes up 85% of box production cost. Moreover, these three main types can be divided into various subcategories using different paperweights. Food, paper/wood products, and electric/electronic industries mainly prefer single wall boxes. Chemical, petroleum, rubber, and plastic, agricultural, health, and textile industries generally use a double wall. Besides these industries, energy, automotive, and metal industries are known to purchase triple wall boxes.

The respondents begin the survey with questions that inform about their background information. These background questions ask the respondents about their age, gender, and education level. The respondents can answer their age as 20 to 30, 31 to 40, 41 to 50, 51 to 65, and above. While gender options are unambiguous, the education level can range from high school to PhD. The next three questions also aim to get to know the respondents. However, the former three questions are personal, and the latter are professional. Questions from 4 to 6 ask the department respondents work in their company, the industry his/her company operates, and her professional experience level at that department. For the Question 4, the respondent may answer as procurement agent, sales/marketing, company owner or else. If a question allows the option "else," it indicates that the respondent may provide an answer that is not available in the survey. For the Question 5, the survey participants choose whether they have been working less than a year, one or two years, three to five years, six to ten years or ten and more years at their department.

Question 6 allows the respondents to choose an industry for the company in which he/she works, which are paper/wood products, glass/concrete, electricity/electronics, energy, food, construction, chemicals, petroleum, rubber/plastic, media/communication/printing, automotive, health/social services, sports and recreation, agriculture and fishery, textile and garment industry, commerce (sales and marketing), and else. The following question measures the participant's familiarity with the product. To be specific, Question 7 asks how often the respondent purchases corrugated boxes.

Questions from 8 through 20 attempt to collect evidence for the propositions. Questions 8 to 11 seek evidence for the proposition regarding the effect of salesperson before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The original plan for this

question was to ask how often customers 'meet' with their sales representatives. Nevertheless, at the time this survey analysis was conducted, the world had been suffering from COVID-19. For these four questions, the independent variable is still salesperson, but COVID-19 is a moderating variable. Questions 8 and 9 ask the respondents how often they have contacted their salespersons over the phone before and after the pandemic. Questions 10 and 11 direct a similar question. They ask how often the survey participants have met with their salesperson face-to-face before and during the pandemic.

The following questions 12 and 13 seek evidence for the proposition regarding the corporate image. Question 12 intends to measure the respondent's perception about the quality of the product. It particularly asks the participant to define the product quality he/she purchases on a scale of five. 1 is assigned for "very low" quality and 5 is assigned for "very high" quality. Question 13 continues in accordance with customer perception of the product. It asks whether internationally recognized quality certificates of the companies from which the survey participants make a purchase affect the participant's decision to buy a product.

Question 14 asks the respondents to make a comparison between the price they are given by the salesperson and the price in the market in general based on the best of their knowledge of the market. This question will provide evidence for the proposition regarding price. Questions from 15 to 17 seek support for the proposition on the effect of salesperson. Question 16 directs the question whether the respondent prefers to send an email to salesperson's personal address, instead of the company's generic contact email address to request a quote. The goal of this question is to understand if customers prefer a candid relationship with a person before they establish a business relationship with a company. Salesperson's personal approach to the customer is not the only component of the salesperson impact on the customer purchase decision. A customer may value salesperson's expertise more than salesperson's sincerity. Hence, the following question, question number seventeen, is concerned with the effect of the salesperson's expertise in his/her field. Particularly, it asks "Do you think that your purchase decision is affected by the salesperson's expertise on the product you intend to purchase?"

Questions 18 and 19 take a different approach. They directly ask the respondents what is more important for them to build and continue a business relationship. Question 15 inquires the causes of the necessity to search for a new

supplier. The question is specifically "Why would you begin a search for an alternate supplier?" The answers are "to work with a more institutional company," "due to dissatisfaction with the salesperson," and "for alternative price quote," respectively. Question 19 asks a similar question to verify the findings in the previous question. It asks about what criteria respondents perceive as important when they consider establishing a new business relationship. The answers are similar with Question 15, "to benefit more from the salesperson," "alternative price and quality," "the company's corporateness/institutionalism." Finally, Question 20 asks how many suppliers do you work with from different sectors? The goal of this question is to quantify how large and corporative the company in which a respondent is employed is.
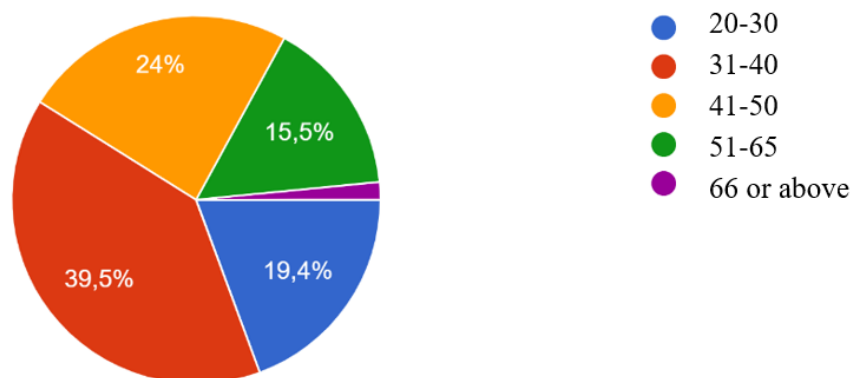
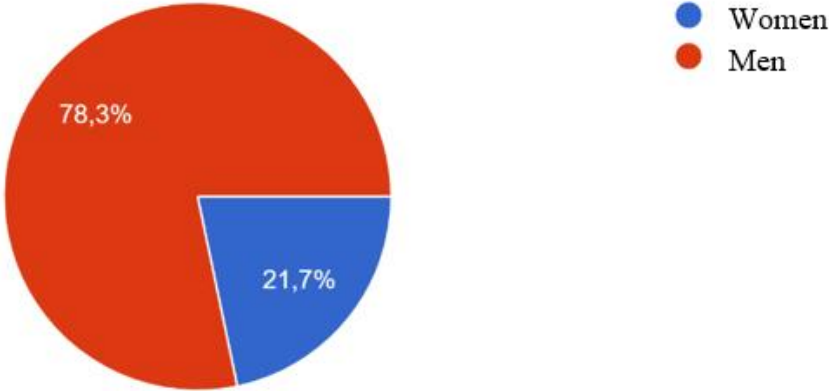# CHAPTER 4

4. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

In this chapter, findings of the research will be shown and a discussion will be made. The majority of the respondents are aged between 31 to 40 with 39.5%. The second most frequent age group is 41-50 with 24%. The third largest age group is 20-30 with 19.4%. The statistics on age demonstrate that more than half of the respondents have significant experience in their careers. Statistics on gender show that an overwhelming majority of the survey participants are men with 78.3% while only 21.7% is women. The highest level of education the great majority of the respondents has received his/her bachelor's degree. 23.3% are high school graduates and 13.2% have master's degree.

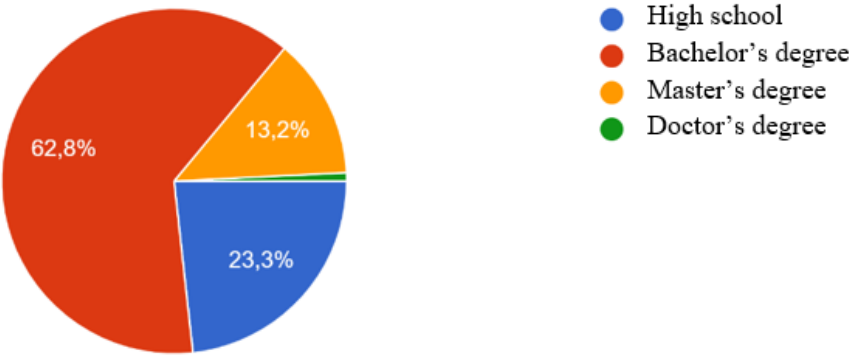**Figure 4.1 Descriptive Statistics on Survey Participants**

1- What is your age range?

2- What is your gender?

- ● Women
- ● Men

78,3%

21,7%

3- What is your level of education?

- ● High school
- ● Bachelor's degree
- ● Master's degree
- ● Doctor's degree

62,8%

13,2%

23,3%

Almost half of the respondents 46,5% work in the procurement department in their companies. A quarter of the participants 25,6% owner of the company. 12.4% defines himself/herself as a salesperson.[1] The rest ranges from graphical design to finance, from quality control to research and development. Interestingly, approximately 46,5% have been working at their department for ten or more years.

[1] In industrial packaging industry, it is not unusual that salespeople also make procurements.

This finding indicates that respondents are not only experienced in their careers but also in what they do every day. Experience is important because it adds support for the reliability of the results. The industries the respondents are employed also vary. 30.2% work in paper/wood products, 14% work in food industry, 10,9% work in chemistry/petroleum/rubber and plastic industries and 9.3% are in automotive. The rest is in glass/concrete, electronics and electricity, food, construction, chemicals and petroleum etc. 37.2% of the respondents answer to the question how often they purchase packaging products that their company needs as weekly, whereas 32.6% as monthly. 17,1% Quarterly and 13,2% semi-annually answers are almost divided equally, showing that a great majority of the survey participants are frequently in need of packaging products.

Figure 4.2 Descriptive Statistics on Survey Participants' Company, Industry and Decisions
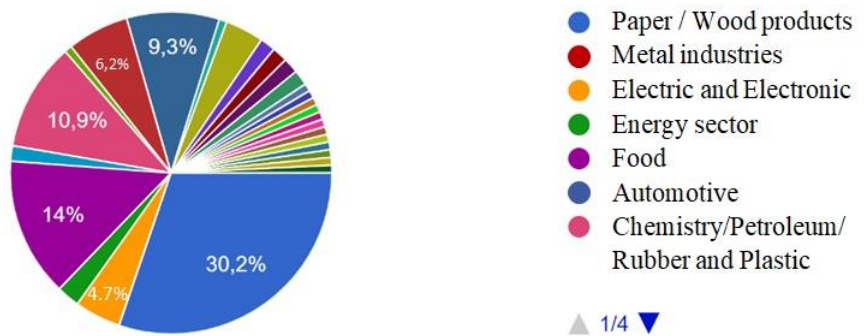
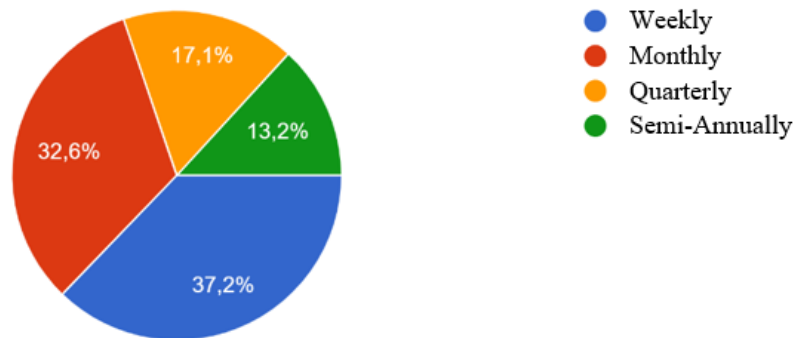4- What is your occupation/job title?
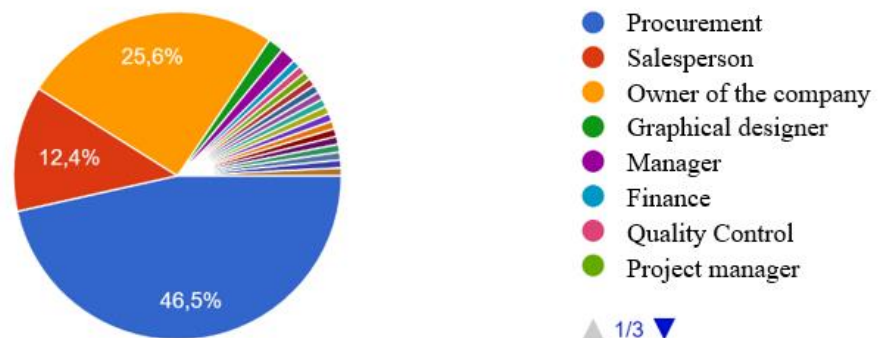
5- How long have you been working at this department?
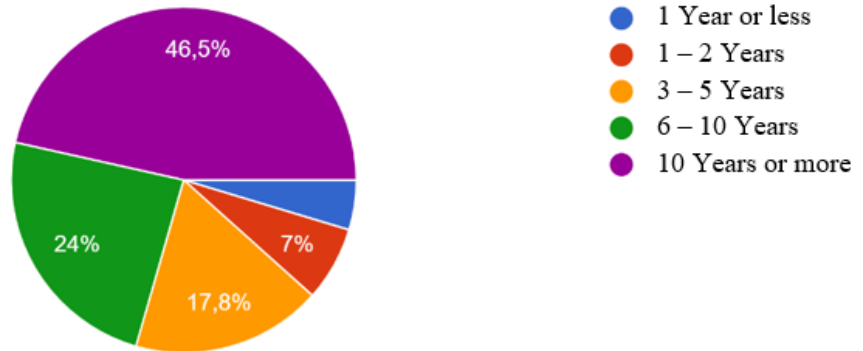
6- In which industry does your company operate?

7- How often you need to purchase packaging products that your company needs?


The following four questions are related to the effect of COVID-19 on the salesperson commitment as an moderating variable. The answers to the questions before (question number 8) and after (question number 9) March 2020 (the official declaration of COVID-19 pandemic), how often the respondents' salesperson call him/her in a month are trivial. The percentage of the respondents claim that salesperson who called once a month before the pandemic began drops from 18.6% to 17.1% after the pandemic broke out. Surprisingly, we see similar drop in all categories of call frequencies when we compare before the start of pandemic with after the pandemic. 2 to 4 calls from salesperson is 30.2% before the pandemic but it is 24.8% after the pandemic. Even the answer 10 and above call frequencies drops 22.5% to 20.9% once the pandemic began.

Figure 4.3 COVID-19 as Moderating Variable for Sales Commitment
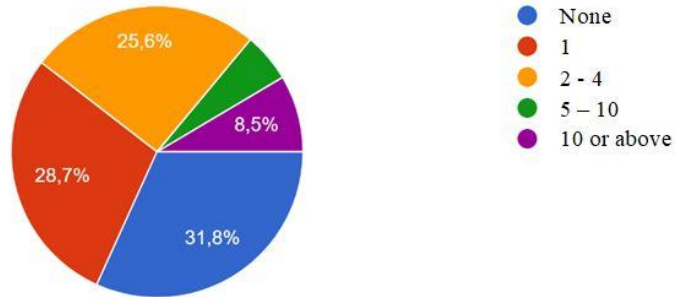
8- Before March 2020 (the official declaration of COVID-19 pandemic), how often did your salesperson call you in a month?
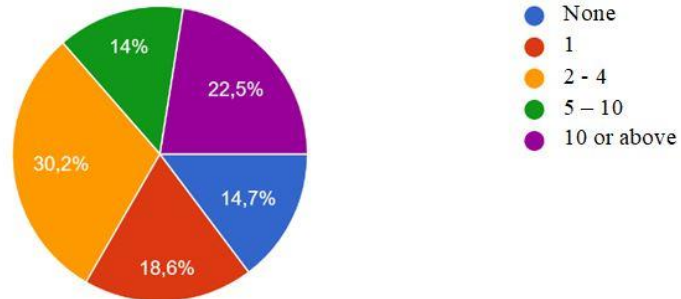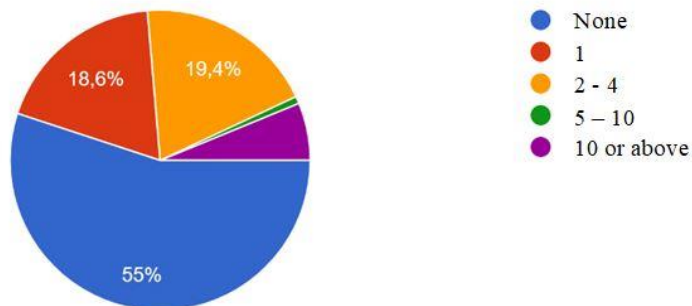

9- After March 2020 (the official declaration of COVID-19 pandemic), how often does your salesperson call you in a month?
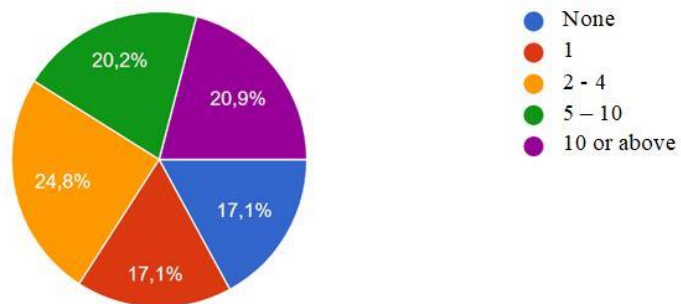
10- Before March 2020 (the official declaration of COVID-19 pandemic), how often did you meet with your salesperson in a month?

11- After March 2020 (the official declaration of COVID-19 pandemic), how often do you meet with your salesperson in a month?


Most interestingly, the percentage of the respondents who claim that they never talked with their salesperson over the phone before the pandemic increases from 14.7% to 17.1%. The only meaningful and expected increase is for the category 5 to 10 calls. Before the pandemic, 14% of the participants talked to their salesperson five

to ten times and this percentage increases to 20.2% after the pandemic. The anticipation was that all categories of phone calls would increase after March 2020 due to social distancing and precautions implemented by the state. It is even more unusual to observe that the number of people who never talked to their salesperson before the pandemic augments after March 2020. These results lead to only one conclusion: it is not possible to reject the null for the proposition 1a.

Figure 4.4 Corporate Image on Business Continuity

12- On a scale from 1 to 5, what is the quality of the product you purchase? (1- Very low, 2- Low, 3- Average, 4- High, 5- Very high)
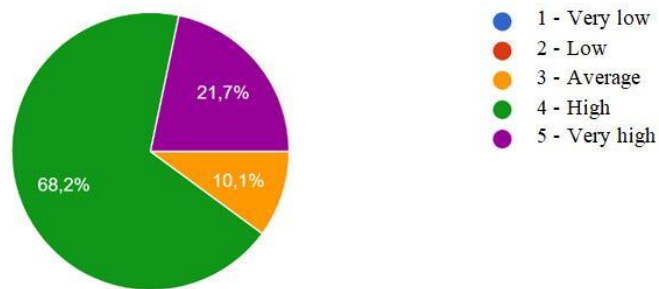
13- Do a company's certifications that meet the international production standards affect your purchase decision?
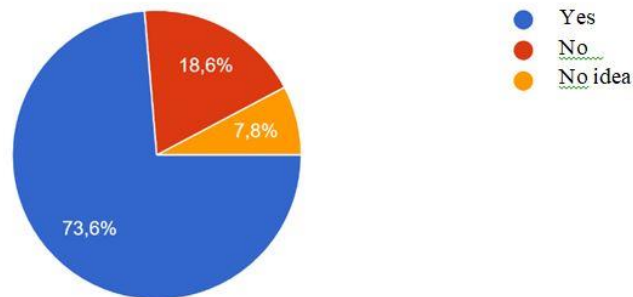
Notwithstanding, the results overall do provide evidence for the effect of the pandemic on salesperson commitment and proposition 1b is confirmed. The percentage of the respondents who never meet with their salesperson face-to-face before the pandemic increases from 31.8% to 55%. This increase is exactly what the proposition has projected. The percentage of the respondents who meet with their salesperson face-to-face only once a month before the pandemic decreases from 28.7% to 18.6%. The percentage of 2 to 4 times decreases from 25.6% to 19.4%. The rest is very similar for other frequencies to meet face-to-face. It is evident that the seller and buyer do not desire to meet each other face-to-face anymore but it is difficult to conclude that the alternative strategies to face-to-face meetings are frequent phone calls.

**Figure 4.5 Price on Business Continuity**

14- Compared with the market price, how would you evaluate the prices of products you purchase?
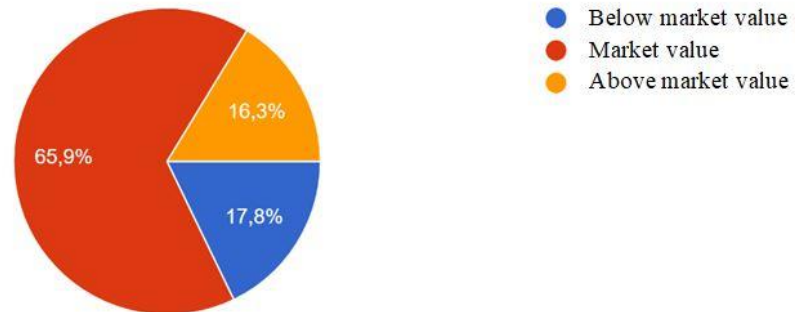
The questions 12 and 13 are regarding the second proposition on the effect of corporate image. The respondents' perception around the quality of the product they purchase is crushingly either high or very high. That is, 68.2% of the survey participants believe that they purchase high quality products and 21.7% believe that the product is very high quality. This result indicates that independent of whether the product is actually high quality or not, product quality is important for the customers. The answer to the following question adduces evidence to support the second proposition. 73.6% think that a company's certifications that meet the international production standards affect purchase decision. Corporate image generates the impression that customers can buy products at the same quality level every time they make a purchase. Thus, one can conclude that the second proposition is also confirmed.

Figure 4.6 Salesperson Commitment on Business Continuity

15- Is it convenient you to have a personal sales representative for the product you intend to purchase?
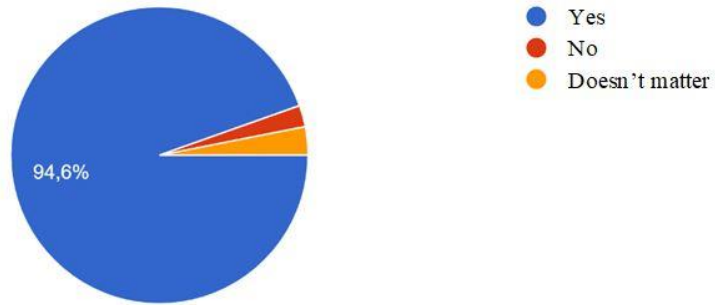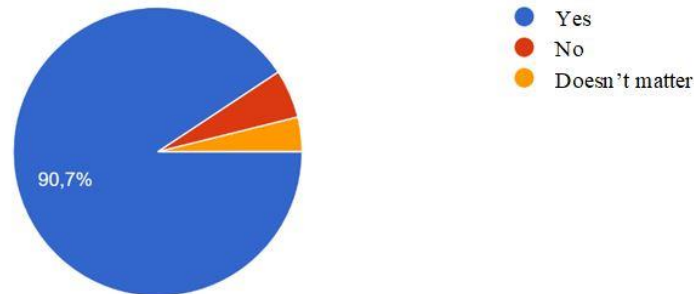

16- Instead of sending an email to the general ordering mail address, do you prefer to directly email your personal sales representative?
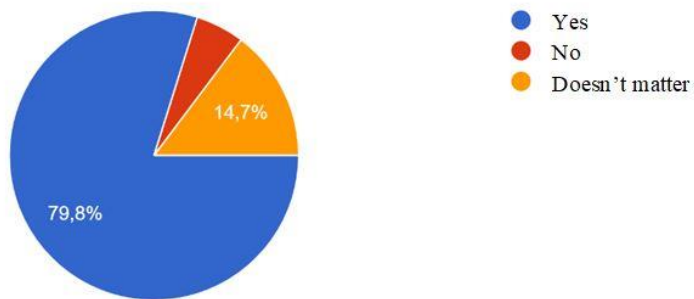
17- Do you think that your personal sales representative's expertise on the product affect your purchasing decisions?

The next question measures the importance of price and seeks support for the third proposition. Only 16.3% state that the price at which they make the purchase is above its value. 65.9% indicate that it is at the value it should be and 17.8% believe that it is below the market. This finding also shows that price is an important factor that influences customer purchase decisions, confirming the third proposition. It more importantly shows that a product does not have to be cheap for a customer to prefer it. Customers will choose to buy it even if it is at the value that should be.

The following three questions are designed for Proposition 1. Answers to all these three questions provide a considerable strong support for the effect of salesperson commitment. 94.6% of the participants state that it is convenient that they have a personal sales representative for the product they intend to purchase. 79.8% state that they prefer to directly email your personal sales representative, instead of sending an email to the general ordering mail address. 90.7% think that the expertise of their personal sales representative's expertise on the product affects their purchasing decision.

Figure 4.7 Factors for Establishing Business Relationship

18- Why would you seek an alternate supplier?
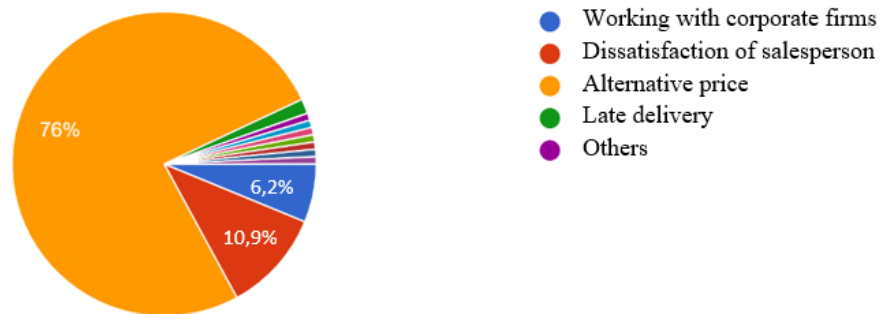
- Working with corporate firms
- Dissatisfaction of salesperson
- Alternative price
- Late delivery
- Others

19- What criteria are more important to you when you make an agreement with a new supplier?

- Getting more benefits from salesperson
- Alternative price and quality
- Corporate image of the firms
- Others

Finally, answers to Questions 18 and 19 support that all three factors – price, corporate image, and salesperson commitment – are important not only for the continuity of an existing business relationship but also establishment of a new relationship. An overwhelming majority, 76%, responds that they seek a new supplier in search of an alternative price. 86% reply that price and quality are the most important criteria for seeking an alternative supplier. Ultimately, the answers to

the last question indicate that the respondents are from either substantially large companies (30.2%) or considerably small firms (32.6%).

Figure 4.8 Customer's Number of Suppliers

20- How many suppliers do you work with from different sectors?

●	1 – 10
●	11 – 20
●	21 – 30
●	31 – 50
●	51 or above

30,2%
32,6%
12,4%
12,4%
12,4%
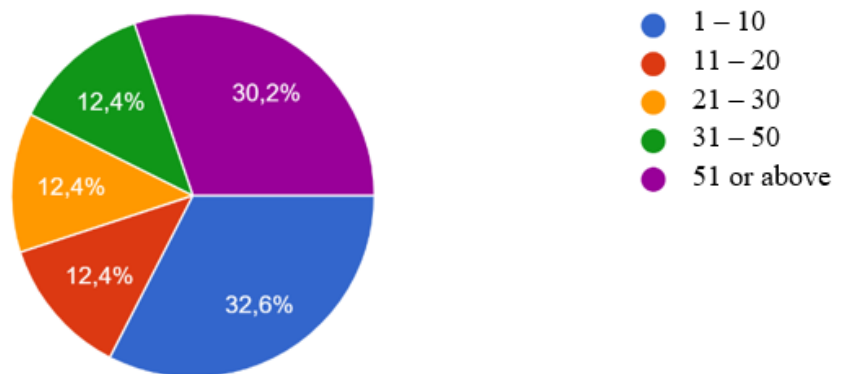
Findings related with the propositions were found to be quite interesting especially the experience of the customer representative in the relationship of the buyer and their manufacturer. According to these findings salesperson commitment is quite important.

DISCUSSION

This thesis contributes to our understanding of customer purchase decision in four ways. First of all, it is clear that the business as we know has gone through drastic changes as the survey results demonstrate that two actors (seller and buyer) wish to avoid meeting face-to-face. Predicated on this finding, salespeople must have gotten more creative to sell their products. However, this creative way appears not to be more frequent phone calls. The failure to reject the null for Proposition connotes the need for further research on the effects of COVID-19, either as an independent variable or a moderating variable. In other words, this research opens a new research area. The research question is what some of the strategies that salespersons use to sell products are when their selling capabilities are constrained due to social distancing?

Notwithstanding, Proposition 1, Proposition 2, Proposition 3 which are related to salesperson commitment, corporate image, and price, respectively, are confirmed. In regard to corporate image, it is evident that customers in B2B relationships are concerned with the quality of the product they purchase. More importantly, they admit that their purchase decision is influenced by internationally recognized certificates that give seller reliability. Another interesting and confirmed finding is the effect of price. This thesis finds that what matters to customers is not that the product is cheap. It is rather customer perception on whether the products they purchase deserve the money for which the seller asks for. This finding shows that businesses are not so much concerned with maximizing their profits but with optimum price. When price is at optimum, but not maximum, quality of the product and the service must also be at the optimum. However, the need for optimum service brings the importance of the salesperson onto the stage as the salesperson is the one that ensure that the customers have the optimum service.

Accordingly, salesperson commitment is perhaps the most important finding. Respondents are asked three questions to measure the impact of salesperson and they

have answered all three in support of the proposition on salesperson commitment. The customers' overwhelming preference for a committed salesperson may be indicating that salesperson effect is more substantial than corporate image and price when it comes to the continuity of business relationships in B2B markets. This finding can be explained through the fact that companies do not offer solutions to the customer's problems, but salespeople do. Salespeople can take the initiative to produce solutions and outcomes for the customer needs, whereas companies are not human. They are entities with no communicative skills.

Lastly, corporate image appears to be the least important mechanism for establishing a new business relationship between two companies. Nevertheless, price and quality are more important to start a business relationship than both corporate image and displeasure from the salesperson. These findings do not contradict with the proposition and findings because the main goal of this thesis is to explore the factors that lead companies to continue their business relationships. Corporate image is still essential to the customer purchase decision because as the survey results indicate, customers believe that they are purchasing high or very high-quality products and yet they also think that the price they pay is at the market value. The price of a very high-quality product is not very likely to be at the market value. A very high-quality product should be a high price. This conflicting can only be answered with the corporate image because a high corporate image gives the impression to the customers that the price they are given is a fair one for such a 'high-quality' product.

CHAPTER 5

5. CONCLUSION

This thesis aims to answer what factors influence customer purchase decision in B2B markets and particularly attempts to investigate mechanisms behind the continuity of business relationship between two companies. It argues that price, corporate image, and salesperson commitment influence the continuity of business relationships between two companies in B2B markets. Based on a data collected from 129 survey respondents in the Marmara region, this research confirms the propositions.

Price, corporate image, and salesperson commitment do matter, and these three factors are more likely to end or sustain a business relationship. It finds that salesperson commitment has a substantially higher impact on business continuity than corporate image and price because salesperson creates alternative solutions to customers when customers have problems. Salespeople may take initiative to generate solutions that can be tailored to customers individually. Price especially matters when customers begin to consider establishing a new business relationship. COVID-19 is found to be a moderating variable that influences the relationship of price, corporate image and salesperson's commitment with the purchasing buying decision.

There are some limitations of the research. One limitation of the research is about price. Especially price perception may change from company to another company. Addition to this, buyers of the company which are involved in this research, may hesitate to share their opinions clearly for not losing their bargaining power. Sales person commitment is another limitation. Individual approach or attitude of the sales person may change the results. That is why approaches should be

considered with all details. Propositions developed for this thesis later on may be constructed and developed as hypothesis and statistical analysis can be made for the further studies regarding this topic.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX A: SURVEY

1-What is your age range?

2-What is your gender?

3-What is your level of education?

4-What is your occupation/job title?

5-In which industry does your company operate?

6-How long have you been working at this department?

7-How often you need to purchase packaging products that your company needs?

8-Before March 2020 (the official declaration of COVID-19 pandemic), how often did your salesperson call you in a month?

9-After March 2020 (the official declaration of COVID-19 pandemic), how often does your salesperson call you in a month?

10-Before March 2020 (the official declaration of COVID-19 pandemic), how often did you meet with your salesperson in a month?

11-After March 2020 (the official declaration of COVID-19 pandemic), how often do you meet with your salesperson in a month?

12-On a scale from 1 to 5, what is the quality of the product you purchase? (1 very low, 2 low, 3 average, 4 high, 5 very high)

13-Do a company's certifications that meet the international production standards affect your purchase decision?

14-Compared with the market price, how would you evaluate the prices of products you purchase?

15-Is it convenient you to have a personal sales representative for the product you intend to purchase?

16-Instead of sending an email to the general ordering mail address, do you prefer to directly email your personal sales representative?

17-Do you think that your personal sales representative's expertise on the product affect your purchasing decisions?

18-Why would you seek an alternate supplier?

19-What criteria are more important to you when you make an agreement with a new supplier?

ÖZGEÇMİŞ