Marketing Communication in German and Japanese Manufacturing: A Human-to-Human Lens

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Sheffield Hallam University for the degree of

Doctor of Business Administration (DBA)

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CANDIDATE DECLARATION

I hereby declare that:

1. I have not been enrolled for another award of the University, or other academic or professional organisation, whilst undertaking my research degree.

2. None of the material contained in the thesis has been used in any other submission for an academic award.

3. I certify that this thesis is my own work. The use of all published or other sources of material consulted have been properly and fully acknowledged.

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4. The work undertaken towards the thesis has been conducted in accordance with the SHU Principles of Integrity in Research and the SHU Research Ethics Policy, and ethics approval has been granted for all research studies in the thesis, as shown in the table below.

Ethics review reference number	Title of research study	Approval date	Date of any post-approval amendments (if applicable)
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DEDICATION

My heartfelt thanks go to Dr. Eng. Masahiko Mori. I have had the privilege of working with him for more than twenty years now and it was one conversation with him a few years ago that gave me the final motivation to apply for this DBA programme. He thinks far ahead, treats every person with genuine respect and leads with an integrity that is rare. He has been, and will remain, a role model to me.

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For my husband Klaus

ABSTRACT

The machine-tools industry constitutes a core foundation of global manufacturing, providing the precision technologies required across multiple industrial sectors. As the communication landscape evolves through an expanding mix of digital and traditional channels, industrial actors encounter new ways of accessing information and engaging with suppliers. Germany and Japan, two highly advanced manufacturing economies, offer distinct yet comparable contexts in which technological sophistication and long-term orientation shape communication and purchasing behaviour. However, it remains unclear how decision-makers navigate this growing variety of channels while sustaining the trust, credibility and relational depth required for complex, high-value industrial purchasing decisions. This thesis investigates how decision-makers within these environments navigate marketing communication channels.

The study examines which communication channels are used, and why, by purchasing decision-makers in small and medium-sized enterprises in the German and Japanese machine-tools industries. The scope further includes the perspectives of next-generation professionals to identify emerging shifts in expectations and communication behaviour. Human-to-Human (H2H) interaction provides the analytical lens through which communication processes and their underlying drivers are interpreted.

The research adopts an interpretivist Grounded Theory Methodology. Twenty-four semi-structured interviews were conducted across Germany and Japan, supported by transcription and iterative coding to retain cultural and generational nuance.

Findings demonstrate that industrial communication remains fundamentally shaped by human interaction, even as digitalisation advances. Digital channels, including company websites, search engines, online videos, newsletters and social media, support early stages of information gathering, particularly for younger professionals. However, decisive phases of the purchasing process rely heavily on perceived credibility, trust and direct personal contact with manufacturer representatives. Generational distinctions are more visible than purely national ones: while both younger and senior decision-makers emphasise human exchange as essential for credibility, younger professionals rely more strongly on digital channels for early orientation and information access

The study contributes to knowledge by offering a culturally grounded understanding of marketing communication behaviour in technologically sophisticated B2B environments. It culminates in the development of the Human-to-Human Industrial Communication Framework, which integrates key antecedents of H2H interaction with empirical insights to guide industrial firms in aligning digital accessibility with relational depth.

Keywords: marketing communication, machine-tools industry, SMEs, Germany, Japan, Human-to-Human, Grounded Theory, industrial marketing

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ABBREVIATIONS

AI	Artificial Intelligence
AR	Artificial Reality
B2B	Business-to-business
B2C	Business-to-consumer
CNC	Computer Numeric Control
DMC	Digital Marketing Communication
DMU	Decision Making Unit
EMO	Exposition Mondiale de la Machine-Outil (French for World Machine Tool Exhibition)
GTM	Grounded Theory Methodology
H2H	Human-to-Human
H2H-ICF	Human-to-Human Industrial Communication Framework
IMC	Integrated Marketing Communication
IRR	Industrial Relationship Resiliance
IoT	Internet of Things
JIMTOF	Japan International Machine Tool Fair
NLP	Natural Language Processing
SDL	Service Dominant Logic
SME	Small and Medium-sized Enterprises
SNS	Social Networking Services
VDMA	Verband Deutscher Maschinen und Anlagenbau (english: Mechanical Engineering Industry Association)
VDW	Verband Deutscher Werkzeugmaschinenfabriken (english: German Machine Tools Builder's Association)
VR	Virtual Reality
WOM	Word of Mouth

CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and context

The manufacturing sector plays a central role in the global economy, underpinned by advancing technology and continuous innovation (Schuh et al., 2014). Within this sector, mechanical engineering, and particularly the machine-tools industry, remains a cornerstone of industrial production, shaping future developments in global markets (Kagermann et al., 2013). Machine-tools and their associated manufacturing technologies enable the creation of precision components across industries and thus form the foundation of modern production (CECIMO, 2024).

Machine-tools, advanced technologies and skilled personnel are essential for the economic development of industrialized nations. Conrad (2015) emphasizes that these elements are foundational to production-oriented economies, driving national competitiveness and economic growth. In 2023, the global production value of machine-tools reached €81.1 billion, with China leading as the largest manufacturer worldwide, followed by Germany and Japan (German Machine Tools Builder's Association, 2024). The global consumption of machine-tools remains similarly substantial, as industrialized nations continue to invest in production technologies to enhance their manufacturing capabilities. Within this landscape, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) constitute the majority of customers and play a decisive role in maintaining industrial capacity.

Mechanical engineering, which is strongly characterized by SMEs (European Commission, 2024), faces growing pressure from global competition and technological acceleration. SMEs must continuously adapt to new technologies to remain competitive, increase productivity and open new market opportunities (Buer et al., 2018; Zamani, 2022). Research and development, alongside digitalization, are thus vital drivers of innovation in the machine-tools sector (German Machine Tools Builder's Association, 2021a). However, despite technological leadership, many industrial firms have been comparatively slow in adopting modern marketing communication approaches (Karjaluoto et al., 2015). Traditional methods, such as trade fairs or events, have long been dominant in the business-to-business (B2B) environment. The rapid

development of digital communication technologies, however, is transforming expectations. As Karjaluoto et al. (2015) note, industrial companies are increasingly rethinking customer communication strategies in response to the evolution of digital channels and a changing stakeholder landscape. The core challenge lies in integrating these new tools without losing the relational depth and technical precision that characterize industrial exchange.

Despite the growing availability of digital communication technologies, industrial firms face a fundamental challenge that extends beyond access to customers or information. The core issue lies in maintaining and developing trust-based relationships within an environment of accelerating interaction and expanding communication options. In the machine-tools industry, communication increasingly occurs at higher speed and across multiple channels, often independent of time and location. While this enhances accessibility and convenience, it also places greater demands on organisations to ensure credibility and relational continuity. As a result, questions arise regarding whether existing organisational communication practices are sufficiently equipped to align expanding communication opportunities with relationship oriented and advisory interaction. In particular, it remains unclear how decision makers navigate this growing variety of channels in practice and how the human dimension of complex industrial purchasing is sustained across digital and personal encounters.

Marketing communication in industrial contexts, particularly for technologically complex products such as machine-tools, presents unique challenges. The products' technical nature requires detailed explanations and individually tailored communication (Ulaga & Loveland, 2014). While digital channels are becoming more widespread, their ability to communicate such complex information effectively remains contested. Järvinen and Taiminen (2016) argue that not all digital platforms can adequately convey the specificity and depth required by B2B buyers. Brennan et al. (2020a) further highlight that high-involvement industrial products often require personal, trust-based interactions to ensure comprehension and confidence in supplier competence.

These developments reflect a broader transformation in industrial and B2B marketing: from transactional exchanges based primarily on price and

performance toward relationship-oriented and human-centred interaction. Scholars such as Grönroos (2017) and Håkansson and Snehota (2006) argue that long-term business success increasingly depends on maintaining enduring, trust-based relationships rather than isolated transactions. Relationship marketing thus reframes the exchange process as a network of mutual value creation where cooperation, commitment and communication play central roles. Building on this foundation, the emerging concept of Human-to-Human (H2H) marketing extends the logic of relationship marketing by emphasizing empathy, authenticity and personal credibility as key drivers of business relationships (Gummesson, 2017; Kotler et al., 2021). In industrial contexts, where digital transformation continuously reshapes communication, the H2H perspective provides a crucial lens for integrating technological efficiency with genuine human connection and trust

Given the central role of machine-tools in global manufacturing, communication strategies must increasingly address the expectations of different decision makers, including both current purchasing managers and a digitally proficient next generation. The growing need to combine established forms of personal engagement with expanding digital interaction highlights a central tension in industrial communication. This tension lies in preserving the human dimension of trust and understanding while adapting to evolving communication practices, which forms the core problem addressed by this study.

1.2. Problem statement

As a cornerstone of global manufacturing, the machine-tools industry faces increasing challenges in adapting its marketing communication strategies to a rapidly digitalising environment, which is reflected in new forms of interaction and evolving communication practices. Germany and Japan, two of the world's leading producers, illustrate this transformation particularly well. Both rely heavily on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that combine strong industrial traditions with innovation capacity.

Despite major advances in technology, marketing communication in this sector remains largely rooted in traditional practices such as trade fairs and personal

sales visits. These methods have long conveyed trust and technical credibility but are increasingly complemented, and sometimes disrupted, by digital tools such as online platforms and social media. The key challenge lies in balancing technological efficiency with the relational depth required for complex, high-value B2B decisions. Communicating technical precision while maintaining personal trust through digital channels has become a critical concern (Brennan et al., 2020a; Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016)

This tension reveals a broader problem: while digitalisation expands communication opportunities, it also risks weakening the interpersonal trust that underpins industrial relationships. Companies must therefore understand how decision-makers use communication channels and how cultural and generational factors shape these preferences. Existing B2B marketing theory explains aspects of these behaviours but offers limited guidance on integrating them into coherent communication strategies. The Human-to-Human (H2H) marketing perspective provides a promising lens by focusing on empathy, authenticity and trust as essential components of modern business interaction (Kotler, Pförtsch, & Sponholz, 2021). Yet, its application within industrial and cross-cultural contexts, particularly in settings such as the machine-tools sectors of Germany and Japan, has received limited attention.

This study addresses the need to understand how decision-makers in German and Japanese SMEs select and combine communication channels before purchasing machine-tools or automation solutions, and why. By examining the cultural and generational dynamics that influence communication, the study seeks to bridge the gap between digital efficiency and the human trust that sustains long-term industrial relationships.

1.3. Role of the researcher

I bring more than twenty five years of professional experience in the machine-tools industry, including nearly two decades at DMG MORI, a Japanese global machine-tools manufacturer with more than 13,500 employees worldwide. Since March 2023, I have served as the first female Member of the Board of DMG MORI Co. Ltd. This professional background provides close and

continuous insight into industrial communication practices within a highly technical and international environment.

My research perspective has been shaped by long term leadership responsibility in marketing and corporate communication and by daily professional interaction across the German and Japanese markets. Working between Munich and Tokyo has allowed me to experience first-hand how communication and relationship building differ across cultural contexts, which directly informed the focus of this study.

Given my strong involvement in the industry, reflexivity was central throughout the research process. I engaged in continuous self-reflection to ensure that analysis remained grounded in participants' perspectives rather than my own professional assumptions. This approach allowed my industry experience to support interpretation while maintaining methodological rigour.

Beyond personal relevance, this research aims to contribute to both academic and practical understanding by examining how marketing communication channels are used and perceived in Germany and Japan. The findings seek to support industrial firms in strengthening trust based and human centred communication in an evolving digital environment.

1.4 Aim and objectives of the research

The overall aim of this research is to explore which marketing communication channels are used, and why, by purchasing decision-makers in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Germany and Japan when buying machine-tools or automation solutions, and to interpret these findings through the lens of Human-to-Human (H2H) marketing. The study seeks to enhance understanding of how accelerating communication, digital interaction, cultural context and generational change shape communication behaviour and decision making in complex industrial environments, and to translate these insights into a structured framework for industrial marketing practice.

This research is positioned at the intersection of industrial marketing, relationship management and communication strategy. It addresses the challenge faced by machine-tools producers and suppliers of maintaining trust

based relationships while adapting to expanding communication options and changing interaction patterns. By focusing on the human dimension within technologically mediated communication, the study aims to clarify how personal connection and relational continuity are preserved in industrial purchasing contexts.

To achieve this aim, the study is guided by four interrelated objectives:

Objective 1:

To explore how emergent marketing communication channels influence SME's purchasing decision within the context of machine tools or automation systems.

Sub objectives:

• To identify actors that influence speed, frequency and channel variety usage with the purchasing decision within German and Japanese business context.

• To review the generational based differences that exist between individuals which shape how they use existing and emergent marketing communication channels.

This objective focuses on observable patterns of engagement with marketing communication channels within purchasing decision processes, highlighting how current and next generation decision makers differ in their use and combination of channels prior to a purchasing decision.

Objective 2:

To identify the drivers that shape how purchasing decision makers evaluate and select marketing communication channels, with particular attention to German and Japanese cultural and generational dynamics.

Sub objective:

• Specifically, to conceptualise, through a Human-to-Human lens, how trust, credibility and information depth shape the evaluation of communication channels, as well as associated expectations and interactions.

This objective focuses on the underlying expectations and interpretive frames that shape how communication channels are evaluated, with particular attention to how cultural context and generational perspective influence perceptions of appropriate supplier communication and interaction.

Objective 3:

To empirically identify and evaluate the key influences on decision makers within a changing communication landscape in the German and Japanese machine tools or automation systems

Sub objective:

• Specifically, to identify antecedents that underpin the H2H concept within the emergent communication landscape and shape decision-making.

This objective focuses on how decision makers experience communication in practice and how human connection is sustained within increasingly digital interaction environments.

Objective 4:

To develop a holistic framework that integrates marketing communication channels and Human-to-Human principles, illustrating how critical antecedents shape communication processes and purchasing decision-making in the machine tool industry.

This objective synthesises conceptual and empirical insights to develop a framework that explains how Human-to-Human communication operates within a changing industrial communication landscape. It identifies critical antecedents and illustrates how communication channels and interpersonal interaction shape purchasing decision-making, while offering practical guidance for organisations seeking to embed an H2H mindset to support more effective communication and decision processes.

By integrating these objectives, the research contributes to both academic knowledge and industrial practice. It advances understanding of B2B marketing communication by showing how decision-makers in technologically advanced yet relationship-driven industries construct trust across digital and interpersonal interfaces. These insights inform the development of an H2H-based framework tailored to SMEs in Germany and Japan, supporting organisations in orchestrating communication channels that are both technologically effective and authentically human.

1.5. Overview of the methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretivist perspective in order to explore how marketing communication is understood, experienced and navigated by individuals within the machine-tools industry. Given the complexity of industrial purchasing decisions and the strong influence of human interaction, trust and context, this perspective enables an in-depth examination of how communication practices gain meaning in professional settings across Germany and Japan.

Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM) provides the overarching methodological framework for the study. Rather than testing predefined assumptions, this approach allows concepts and relationships to emerge inductively from empirical data. This was particularly important for capturing the dynamic and often implicit ways in which decision-makers evaluate communication channels and integrate both digital and personal sources of information throughout the purchasing process.

The empirical foundation of the study is based on 24 semi-structured interviews with participants from small and medium-sized enterprises in Germany and Japan. These included both current purchasing decision-makers and younger professionals representing the next generation of industrial decision-makers. This combination made it possible to capture established practices as well as emerging shifts in communication expectations and behaviours.

The qualitative analysis focused on identifying recurring patterns, relationships

and underlying meanings within participants' accounts. Through an iterative process of comparison and interpretation, central themes were developed that reflect how communication is perceived and trusted as well as acted upon in industrial contexts. These insights form the empirical basis for the H2H Industrial Communication Framework presented in the later chapters of this thesis.

Overall, the chosen methodological approach enables a nuanced understanding of marketing communication as a human-centred and context-dependent process. By grounding the analysis in the lived experiences of industrial practitioners, the study contributes both to academic discussion and to practical understanding of how communication supports trust-based decision-making in the German and Japanese machine-tools industries.

1.6. Thesis Structure

To ensure a coherent and transparent research process, the thesis is organised in a logical way that moves from context and theory to the empirical study and its practical contribution. Each chapter builds upon the previous one, creating a clear line of argument that connects the research problem, literature and findings to the development of the final framework. The structure reflects the interpretivist and Grounded Theory approach of the study, where theory emerges inductively from data and is continuously refined through analysis. Table 1 provides an overview of the eight chapters, outlining their main focus and contribution to the overall research objectives.

Chapter & Title	Core Content and Contribution
Chapter 1 - Introduction	Establishes the industrial and academic background of the study, defines the research problem and formulates the research aim and objectives. Outlines the overall methodological orientation.
Chapter 2 - Setting the Scene	Describes the global machine-tool industry and the role of SMEs. Positions the study within industrial and B2B marketing and establishes the economic and strategic context of the research.
Chapter 3 - Literature Review	Critically reviews the evolution of industrial marketing theory, with a focus on communication channels, relationship marketing and H2H marketing. Examines cultural and generational moderators and identifies the research gap addressed by the study.
Chapter 4 - Methodology	Explains the interpretivist research paradigm and the application of Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM). Details data collection, sampling, translation and ethical considerations. Outlines the analytical process through which codes, categories, subcategories and themes were developed.
Chapter 5 - Findings	Presents the empirical findings from 24 semi-structured interviews with German and Japanese decision-makers and young professionals. Analyses the data using the thematic structure developed in Chapter 4 and consolidates recurring patterns into Emergent Factors.
Chapter 6 - Discussion	Interprets the Emergent Factors by linking them to existing theory. Consolidates them into five foundational areas that explain how H2H communication operates in industrial purchasing contexts, while acknowledging contextual variation and boundary conditions.
Chapter 7 - Framework	Develops the H2H Industrial Communication Framework (H2H-ICF). Translates the foundational areas into antecedents that underpin effective H2H communication and articulates two overarching outcomes: Industrial Mindset and Industrial Relationship Resilience (IRR).
Chapter 8 - Conclusion	Summarises the overall findings and contributions to theory and practice. Reflects on methodological and empirical limitations and outlines implications and directions for future research in industrial marketing communication.

Table 1: Overview of the thesis structure (author)

Together, these chapters provide a clear progression from context and theory to findings and practical contribution, guiding the reader toward the development of the H2H Industrial Communication Framework. The next chapter 2 - Setting the Scene, deepens this foundation by examining the machine-tools industry and its significance within global manufacturing.

CHAPTER 2 - RESEARCH FIELD: SETTING THE SCENE

This chapter establishes the contextual foundation of the thesis by outlining the industrial environment in which the study is situated. It highlights the global and national importance of the machine-tools industry, with a focus on Germany and Japan as key markets. The role of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) is emphasised, given their central contribution to innovation and production in both countries. The chapter also addresses the ongoing generational shift in manufacturing, as younger professionals assume greater responsibility and introduce new perspectives into decision-making. Finally, it positions the study within the broader business-to-business (B2B) context, noting the distinct dynamics of industrial markets. The purpose of this chapter is to frame the industrial, organisational and generational context of the study, highlight current limitations in understanding marketing communication practices in industrial settings, and thereby provide a foundation for the theoretical claims and contributions developed in the thesis.

2.1. Commercial context: The machine-tools industry

The manufacturing industry is a vital pillar of modern economies, responsible for producing goods by transforming raw materials into finished products across a wide range of sectors such as automotive, aerospace, medical and electronics (Shokrani et al., 2024). This industry operates through the use of advanced machinery and labor to shape, assemble and finish products that play essential roles in everyday life and in specialized applications like transportation and healthcare. As manufacturing evolves, it relies on technological advancements like CNC (Computer Numerical Control) machines to improve productivity, accuracy and efficiency. The CNC machine-tools industry plays a crucial role in modern manufacturing (CECIMO European Association of Manufacturing Technologies, 2025; Kagermann et al., 2013; Koren, 2010; Wegener et al., 2018). The effectiveness of machine-tools is critical for the cost-efficient production of high-quality goods in industrial manufacturing. Continuous technological advancements and evolving market demands open up possibilities for the rapid development of new products within increasingly shorter timeframes. Machine-tools serve as essential instruments in the

production process, executing the fundamental operations that drive manufacturing (Conrad, 2015). The machine-tools industry suppliers the equipment and continuously innovates to meet the evolving needs of manufacturers. With CNC machines, manufacturers can produce intricate components like parts for airplane engines, medical implants and semiconductor parts efficiently and reliably. Therefore, the CNC machine-tools industry is integral to the broader manufacturing industry, providing the advanced machinery needed to produce complex and high-precision components across a wide range of sectors. Rising quality requirements and the persistent shortage of skilled labour have intensified the demand for automation within the machine-tools industry. This development extends beyond the automation of parts and tool handling, increasingly encompassing software-based solutions that support user guidance and enhance machine utilization efficiency (German Machine Tools Builder's Association, 2025).

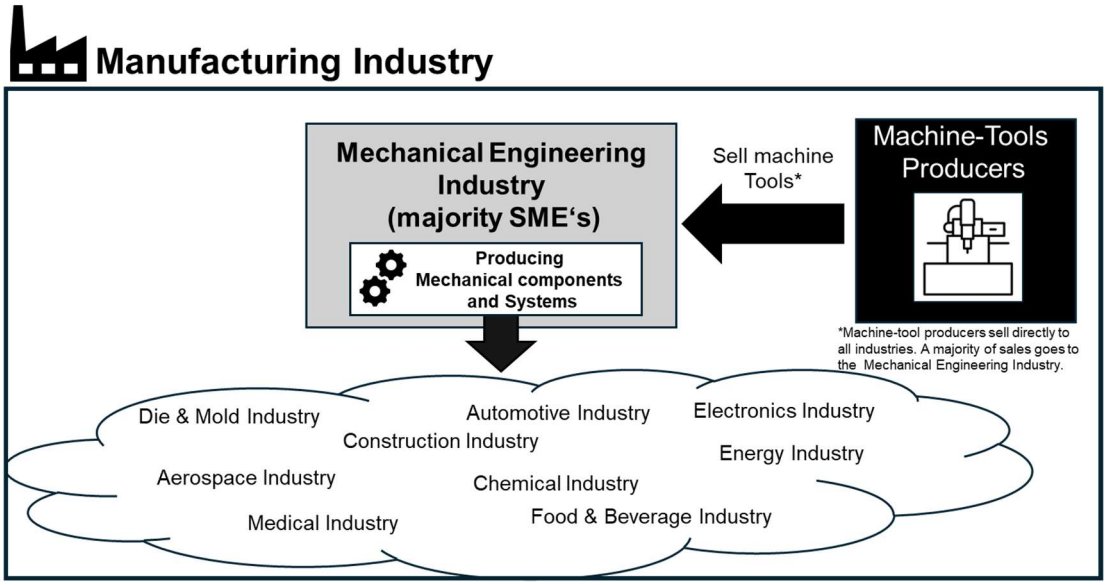


Figure 1: The manufacturing industry landscape (author)

For the purpose of this thesis, the research focus lies specifically on machine-tools and automation solutions. While the empirical investigation concentrates on CNC machines, the term *machine-tools industry* will be applied throughout the thesis for reasons of clarity and consistency.

That said, machine-tools are the backbone of different industries. The global machine-tools market is highly competitive and technologically advanced, with

a small number of countries leading both in production and consumption.

Global machine-tools production is primarily concentrated in a few leading countries, which collectively produce the majority of the world's machine-tools. These include CNC (Computer Numerical Control) machines, which are integral to automated and precision manufacturing processes. The global machine-tools production had a value of 81,6 bill Euro in 2023 (German Machine Tools Builder's Association, 2024)

Production of machine-tools				Consumptions of machine-tools			
Rank	Country	Production amount	% of global production	Rank	Country	Consumption amount	% of global consumption
1.	China	25,3 bill EUR	31%	1.	China	23,7 bill EUR	29%
2.	**Germany**	**10,6 bill EUR**	**13%**	2.	USA	12,0 bill EUR	15%
3.	**Japan**	**9 bill EUR**	**11%**	**3.**	**Germany**	**5,4 bill EUR**	**7%**
4.	USA	7,5 bill EUR	9%	4.	Italy	4,8 bill EUR	6%
5.	Italy	6,9 bill EUR	8%	**5.**	**Japan**	**3,5 bill EUR**	**4%**

Table 2: Global production and consumption of machine-tools (author, source: German Machine-tools Builders Association, 2024)

Overall, the global machine-tools industry is concentrated among a few leading countries as shown in table 2, with China dominating both production and consumption, and Germany, Japan, the United States and Italy forming the remaining core of the top five markets.

While both Germany and Japan are global leaders in machine-tools production, they are also home to diverse manufacturing activities that depend on machine-tools. According to recent data (German Machine Tools Builder's Association, 2024), the consumer base for machine-tools in Germany has shifted notably compared to previous years. In 2017, around 75% of machine-tools sales were concentrated in three main industries: general mechanical engineering, automotive manufacturing and automotive suppliers. By 2019, this concentration had decreased slightly, with 66% of sales still coming from these top three sectors. However, by 2023, the machine-tools industry had diversified further, with just 57% of sales now coming from these three core industries. This

indicates that the customer base is expanding into new sectors, reflecting broader changes in Germany's industrial landscape.

I chose to focus on Japan and Germany for this study because both countries are globally recognized technological leaders in the machine-tools industry, ranking among the top five nations in terms of production and consumption. These markets stand at the forefront of technological innovation and industrial development. Furthermore, I am connected through my professional role to one of the largest Japanese machine-tools producers with longstanding roots in both Japan and Germany. This professional context makes these two markets particularly relevant for examining marketing communication and, consequently, for identifying strategic opportunities for marketers in the machine-toosl industry.

In this context, the main industrial sectors that represent the largest consumers of machine-tools are outlined below, drawing on recent data from the Gernman Machine-tools Builder's Association (German Machine Tools Builder's Association, 2024).

In Germany, general mechanical engineering is the largest consumer of machine-tools, accounting for 30.1% of total sales, followed by the automotive sector with 27.2%. Although the automotive share has declined in recent years, manufacturers and suppliers continue to rely on machine-tools for precision machining and automated production, particularly as the transition toward electric vehicles increases demand for new materials and components. Aerospace accounts for 6% of total sales, reflecting its need for highly precise and reliable machining, while the energy and medical sectors each represent around 2% of machine-tools consumption, driven by applications in power generation and high-precision medical technologies.

Like Germany, Japan is a global leader in the production and consumption of machine-tools. Its highly developed manufacturing sector is characterised by a strong emphasis on automation, precision engineering and technological innovation, with demand concentrated in general mechanical engineering, automotive and electronics.

In the case of Japan, the principal industrial sectors consuming machine-tools are presented below, based on data from the JMTBA ((Japanese Machine Tools Builder's Association, 2024)

In Japan, general mechanical engineering is the largest consumer of machine-tools, accounting for 42.7% of total sales, followed by the automotive sector with 21.1%. Both sectors rely heavily on precision machining and automation, with growing demand driven by investments in smart factories, robotics and the production of components for electric vehicles. The electronics industry accounts for 7% of machine-tools consumption and remains a core pillar of Japan's manufacturing economy, requiring high-precision machine-tools for the production of complex and miniaturised components.

The customer base for machine-tools in both Germany and Japan is diversified. In Germany, general mechanical engineering and automotive remain the largest consumer sectors, alongside growing demand from aerospace, energy and medical technology. In Japan, general mechanical engineering also leads the market, followed by automotive and electronics, reflecting the country's strong emphasis on automation and precision (German Machine Tools Builder's Association, 2025; Japanese Machine Tools Builder's Association, 2024).

In addition to large industrial players, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) play a crucial role in the machine-tools industry. The following section therefore focuses on SMEs in Germany and Japan and their relevance for innovation and industrial development.

2.2. Small and medium size enterprises (SMEs)

According to the European Commission (2024), mechanical engineering represents one of the most significant industrial sectors within the EU economy in terms of both employment and number of businesses. The sector is largely composed of small and medium-sized, often family-owned enterprises, which play a crucial role in innovation and economic growth. This structure is also reflected at DMG MORI, whose global customer base consists of approximately 60% SMEs, making them the largest customer group worldwide (DMG MORI Co. LTD, 2020).

In Japan, SMEs similarly play an indispensable role across manufacturing sectors. Japanese products are widely recognised for their safety and quality, with complex products such as automobiles relying heavily on components supplied by SMEs (Kurosaki, 2017). The importance of these firms extends

beyond national borders, as disruptions to SME supply chains would have global industrial consequences (Kurosaki, 2017). This perspective aligns with the European context, where SMEs are likewise viewed as key drivers of economic development and innovation, supported by long-standing policy initiatives and education frameworks (CECIMO, 2024). These structural characteristics underscore the relevance of focusing this research on SMEs in the mechanical engineering sector.

Within this context, SMEs are formally defined in the EU as firms employing fewer than 250 people and generating an annual turnover below 50 million euros (European Union, 2003), a definition also adopted in the United Kingdom (Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, 2022). In Germany, SMEs form the backbone of the “Mittelstand”, reflecting the economic and cultural importance of family-owned manufacturing businesses. Japan applies sector-specific SME definitions, with manufacturing SMEs defined as firms employing up to 300 people and holding capital of 300 million yen or less (SME Support Japan, 2024). The selection of research participants was aligned with these official criteria to ensure consistency across both national contexts.

From the perspective of machine-tools providers, focusing on SME customers rather than large corporations is particularly relevant for understanding the evolution of marketing communication. In SMEs, purchasing decisions are often made directly by owners or senior managers (Azevedo & Almeida, 2021), creating conditions for close interaction between suppliers and decision-makers. This direct access increases the importance of trust, clarity and relevance in communication, while also amplifying the impact of how information is conveyed across different channels. SMEs are further characterised by agile and flexible decision-making processes, making them particularly sensitive to how communication strategies support or hinder purchasing evaluations.

At the same time, many SMEs are undergoing digital transformation, adopting automation, smart tools and new communication technologies, including social media (Zamani, 2022). While these developments create opportunities for more efficient information exchange, they also introduce challenges related to information overload, channel selection and the integration of digital and personal communication. Understanding how SME decision-makers navigate

these evolving communication environments is therefore central to examining purchasing behaviour and supplier relationships in the machine-tools industry.

In summary, SMEs are central to both the European and Japanese manufacturing landscapes and represent a critical context in which changing communication practices can be observed. Their structural characteristics and ongoing digital transformation make them a particularly relevant lens for examining how marketing communication channels are used, evaluated and trusted. Building on this foundation, the following section turns to generational shifts in management and their implications for communication and purchasing decisions.

2.3. Generation change in management positions

This section examines the ongoing generational shift in management positions and its implications for leadership and decision-making. As senior leaders retire, younger managers step into key roles, bringing new perspectives on technology and, consequently, different approaches to marketing communication channels. Statistics show a slow but steady generational shift in leadership positions within the industry. In the metal and electrical sectors, the proportion of leaders under the age of 40 rose from 40.2% in 2015 to 41.3% in 2018 (Statista, 2018). According to a recent study from the second quarter of 2023, 35% of employees in industrial companies are younger than 40, while 39% are 50 years or older (Statista, 2023).

As the generational shift continues within the manufacturing industry, with a growing proportion of younger leaders and professionals under 40, it is likely that the purchasing decision process will evolve significantly, particularly in terms of the marketing communication channels utilized. Rahman and Gan (2020) mention that generation Y, as digital natives, relies heavily on technology and social media for information, influencing their investment choices. They frequently share and access digital content, which can increase the speed of investment decision-making. This trend is likely to extend to Generation Z as well, who favor digital platforms over traditional communication methods (Schroth, 2019). As these generations ascend to leadership positions, companies should expect a significant shift in how purchasing decisions are influenced. They use messaging apps, social media and email more frequently

than face-to-face interactions. This influences the way they interact with others and how they get information before they make a high value purchasing decision in the future. This generation is accustomed to communicating through videos and images. For example, youtube is one of the top learning methods for Gen Z (Schroth, 2019), which suggests that younger decision-makers may rely more heavily on video demonstrations before making a high-value purchasing decision in the future. Generational differences in the use of digital channels are examined in greater detail in Section 3.6.3. later in this thesis.

Including young professionals alongside decision-makers highlights emerging communication challenges. Research shows that different generations exhibit distinct communication styles and preferences, with younger cohorts often favouring digital and real-time channels, while older groups may prefer more traditional modes of information exchange, which can affect collaboration and decision processes in organisational contexts (Malavika, 2025). Studies also indicate that younger professionals adopt and integrate new technologies more rapidly, leading to varied expectations for how information is accessed, shared and learned across age groups (Choudhardy et al., 2024). These intergenerational differences can create tensions in workplace communication (Wang, 2025) and influence how marketing communication channels are used and evaluated by future leaders and current decision-makers alike.

The chapter now turns to marketing communication in the B2B environment, providing a foundational overview for the more detailed discussion that follows in section 3.2.

2.4. B2B marketing and communications

The manufacturing industry, a cornerstone of the global economy, operates within the broader context of business-to-business (B2B) marketing. Before diving into the specifics of how decision makers in SMEs in this sector utilize marketing communication channels, it is essential to understand the distinct nature of B2B marketing itself. This section will briefly explore B2B marketing, its characteristics and how it differs from business-to-consumer (B2C) marketing.

The academic field of B2B marketing began to coalesce in the late 1960s and early 1970s, emerging out of earlier studies on industrial marketing (Reid & Plank, 2000; Webster, 1965). At that time, it was commonly known as industrial marketing (Brennan et al., 2020; Ellis N., 2010) . However, the term industrial marketing did not fully capture the breadth of marketing activities between service organizations that were not primarily involved in manufacturing. As a result, the naming B2B marketing began to gain prominence during the 1980s and 1990s. In B2B environments, transactions occur between companies rather than individuals, often involving high-value, complex products or services, such as those found in the manufacturing industry, while B2C marketing focuses on reaching individual consumers with often emotional or lifestyle-based messages. Although there are differences in B2B and B2C marketing shown in Table 3 below, it is said that B2B marketing typically relies on more direct communication methods compared to consumer marketing, where mass media channels are more prevalent. This is due to the smaller customer base, the increased importance of building one-to-one relationships and the generally much larger size of individual orders in organizational markets (Ellis N., 2010).

Behaviours & characteristics	Consumer buying	Organizational buying
Number of buyers	Normally large	Normally small
Size of orders	Small	Large
Value of orders	Normally low	Normally high
Evaluating criteria	Social, ego & utility	Price, value & utility
Purchase initiation	Normally self	Normally others
Level of rist	Low to medium	Medium to high
Complexity of decision	Low to medium	Medium to high
Information	Normally short	Normally long

Table 3: Differences between B2C and B2B marketing (adapted from (Ellis N., 2010, p. 39)

Despite its economic significance, B2B marketing has historically received less academic attention than B2C marketing. Lilien (2016) highlights this imbalance and argues that B2B markets are characterised by high complexity, heterogeneous customer needs and multi-actor buying processes.

Organisational purchasing typically involves multiple stakeholders, extended decision cycles and interdependent buyer–seller relationships, which distinguishes B2B marketing fundamentally from consumer contexts and underscores the relevance of examining buying behaviour and communication in greater depth. While some products, like machine-tools, are typically purchased only by organizations and not individual consumers, it is often difficult to clearly differentiate between a business market and a consumer market based solely on the nature of the product. Both organizations and consumers can buy the same products. Importantly, organizations are not impersonal or monolithic entities. They are made up of individuals who continuously make decisions and take specific actions when it comes to purchasing (Brennan et al., 2020).

Decision makers in SMEs, particularly in technologically advanced fields like manufacturing, face unique challenges in navigating the wide array of available products and services, when selecting new machinery or automation solutions. Their decisions might also be influenced by trust, personal relationships and the quality of communication they receive from suppliers. Understanding this balance between rational analysis and human interaction is critical for effective marketing within the manufacturing industry. This perspective was already highlighted by Levitt (1960), who argued that industries should not be understood solely as producers of goods but as providers of solutions to customer needs. He emphasized that the true starting point of any industry lies in identifying customer demands, with the ultimate goal being the effective delivery of satisfaction to those customers.

B2B marketing strategies typically involve more complex sales processes, larger transaction volumes and longer sales cycles (Kotler et al., 2019). It therefore involves building and maintaining relationships with clients over time and emphasizes the importance of trust, reliability and professionalism.

2.5. Conclusion setting the scene

This section has outlined the industrial and organisational context of the study, showing that the machine-tools industry is central to global manufacturing and that Germany and Japan, as two leading markets, provide distinct environments

for analysis. Both countries are characterised by technological sophistication, yet their industrial systems and communication cultures differ in important ways. Within these settings, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) continue to form the backbone of production.

The sector is also experiencing structural transformation. Digital technologies are reshaping production and raising expectations around how companies communicate and make investment decisions. At the same time, a generational shift is emerging in management, with younger professionals introducing new attitudes toward digital interaction. These developments are gradually redefining how industrial relationships are established and sustained. As traditional, relationship-based practices intersect with rapidly evolving communication channels, SME decision-makers increasingly navigate a landscape in which digital tools and personal interaction must be balanced. Cultural differences between Germany and Japan further shape these dynamics, raising the question of how industrial actors can maintain trust and meaningful engagement across digital and intercultural boundaries.

The core problem driving this research lies in the limited understanding of how marketing communication channels are actually used and perceived by SME purchasing decision-makers when evaluating complex, high-value investments such as machine-tools and automation solutions. While existing literature addresses relationship marketing and digital transformation, it offers little empirical insight into how these forces interact in practice within German and Japanese manufacturing. Without such understanding, communication strategies risk becoming misaligned with the realities of industrial decision-making and the expectations of emerging generations.

By situating the study within this industrial, generational and cultural context, this chapter provides the foundation for the subsequent literature review, which examines how marketing communication, relationship marketing and the human-to-human (H2H) perspective help explain the evolving dynamics of communication in the machine-tools industry.

CHAPTER 3 - LITERATURE REVIEW

The way industrial firms communicate is undergoing profound change. Technological advancements, particularly the rapid expansion of digital communication channels, have transformed how information is created, distributed and consumed (Conti et al., 2023; Dutt et al., 2024; Karjaluoto et al., 2015). While these developments increase speed and reach, they also risk weakening the personal and trust-based relationships that traditionally underpin high value industrial transactions. In the machine-tools industry, which is characterised by capital intensive, technically complex and strategically significant investments, this tension between efficiency and personal connection is especially pronounced.

This creates a practical and theoretical challenge: in a communication landscape where traditional and digital channels coexist, how can suppliers ensure that their communication not only reaches decision makers but also supports the trust and credibility that may influence purchasing decisions?

The aim of this chapter is to review the literature that informs the intersection of relationship marketing, Human to Human (H2H) marketing, communication channels, purchasing decisions and contextual moderators such as culture and generation. It provides the conceptual foundations needed to understand how and why decision makers in German and Japanese SMEs select and evaluate communication channels when purchasing machine-tools or automation solutions.

For practitioners, this discussion reflects the need to navigate a crowded information environment in which buyers access multiple channels yet still rely on trust and interpersonal alignment. In theoretical terms, the challenge lies in integrating long standing principles of relationship marketing with digitally enabled approaches that still retain a strong human orientation.

To address these issues, the literature review is organised into five interconnected themes that together form the conceptual framework used in this study. Table 4 outlines the structure of the literature review and its connection to the research focus. The reference to emergent factors does not imply that they were derived from the literature. In line with the Grounded Theory approach, all emergent factors were developed inductively from the empirical

data and are presented in Chapter 5. The table instead indicates how each literature stream provides conceptual context to support the later interpretation of these findings.

Section	Focus	Rationale for Inclusion	Link to Research Focus and Emergent Factors (EF)
3.1 How the Literature Was Approached	Outlines scope, selection criteria and methodological approach to reviewing sources	Ensures transparency and alignment between literature selection, research aim and methodological stance	Clarifies how the iterative review aligned with the Grounded Theory process
3.2. From Transactions to Networks: Relationship Marketing and the Centrality of Trust	Reviews the evolution from transactional to relationship-based and network-oriented marketing	Provides the theoretical roots for understanding trust, loyalty and relational fit in industrial contexts	EF1 Relational trust, EF2 Fit between supplier and customer, EF7 Salesperson as advisor
3.3. The Human to Human (H2H) Marketing Approach	Examines H2H marketing as an evolution of RM, integrating empathy, authenticity and hybrid interaction	Frames the study in a contemporary, people-centred marketing logic suited for hybrid B2B environments	EF1 Relational trust, EF3 Source credibility, EF5 Overload management, EF6 Hybrid communication orchestration
3.4. Communication Channel Ecosystem	Explores the range of traditional, digital and emerging tools, plus the role of third-party information	Maps how decision-makers access and evaluate information across channels	EF3 Source credibility, EF4 Multi-channel behaviour, EF5 Overload management, EF6 Hybrid communication
3.5. B2B Purchasing Decisions: Models and Processes	Reviews key industrial buying models, decision-making units (DMUs), and process stages	Situates communication influences within structured but adaptive buying processes	EF2 Fit between supplier and customer, EF3 Source credibility, EF4 Multi-channel behaviour
3.6. Contextual Influences: Cultural and Generational Influences	Analyses how machine tool industry specifics, national culture and generational change shape communication	Highlights contextual moderators that alter the weight and meaning of channel use	EF8 Generational shift, cross-cultural trust-building nuances
3.7. Literature Review Conclusion and Research Gap	Synthesises the reviewed literature, outlines key theoretical and empirical tensions and identifies the research gap	Consolidates insights from earlier sections, demonstrates the contribution of the study and justifies the research objectives	Clarifies focus on H2H as a lens, aligns EF1–EF8 into a unified framework, and defines the unresolved space where the thesis contributes

Table 4: Structure of the literature review and rational for each section (author)

3.1. How the literature was approached

The literature review was developed iteratively throughout the research journey. Early engagement with the literature helped to outline the scope of the study, refine the research aim and identify initial theoretical and empirical gaps. As the fieldwork progressed, further literature was incorporated to deepen and

contextualise emerging insights. The review draws on work from B2B marketing, industrial sales and communication channels, reflecting the interdisciplinary focus of the study. It is situated within a communication landscape that continues to evolve through technological change and the growing use of digital channels, creating both new opportunities for reach and new challenges for organisations.

In the machine-tools industry, where purchasing decisions are capital-intensive and involve extended evaluation cycles, Human-to-Human (H2H) marketing offers a valuable interpretive lens by placing empathy and authenticity at the centre of communication (Kotler et al., 2021). Generational differences might further influence expectations regarding speed and format of information, adding another dimension to how channels might be selected and used in practice. The review was conducted iteratively, ensuring that emerging insights from data collection informed the focus and scope of subsequent literature searches.

3.1.1. The researcher's choice of literature review

While classical Grounded Theory advocates such as Glaser and Strauss (1967) caution against reviewing literature too early, concerned that it might impose existing frameworks on the data, this study aligns with the position of Urquhart's (2012) perspective. She explains that researchers should not try to fit the data into existing theories. Instead, they should stay open to new insights while keeping in mind what is already known in the field (Urquhart, 2012). Early engagement with literature in this way supports theoretical sensitivity mentioned by Goulding (2002) while allowing the inductive nature of Grounded Theory to remain intact.

In defining the methodology for the review, I considered the distinction between systematic and narrative (traditional) approaches, as discussed by Baumeister and Leary (1997), Jesson et al. (2011) and Saunders et al. (2019). Systematic reviews, which originated in medical science (Saunders et al., 2019) and are now widely applied in the social sciences (Al-Tabbaa et al., 2019), designed to answer specific questions or test hypotheses by following explicit, replicable protocols. Advocates emphasise the transparency of systematic reviews, which

use clearly defined search and selection criteria to “produce a reproducible audit trail of actions and decisions over what was included and what was excluded” (Hart, 2018, p. 105). Critics of narrative reviews often describe them as “flawed and fail to discuss the methodology used to evaluate included articles… purely descriptive with little lasting impact” (Palmatier et al., 2018, p. 3) and as lacking transparency (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006, p. 5). However, this study adopts a narrative approach, as it offers the flexibility needed for exploratory, theory-generating research. Narrative reviews are well-suited to developing ideas and identifying research gaps (Baumeister & Leary, 1997). Their flexibility allows the integration of diverse perspectives without rigid procedural constraints, which is particularly important for this study, as it seeks to connect relationship marketing and H2H marketing concepts.

Combined with early engagement with the literature and the iterative logic of Grounded Theory, this approach provides a conceptual foundation without restricting the emergence of new insights. It enables the subsequent sections on relationship marketing, H2H, communication channels, B2B purchasing processes and contextual influences to remain both theoretically grounded and responsive to the empirical data.

3.1.2. Search strategy and selection criteria

The search for relevant literature began with the definition of key search terms derived from the research questions, following Saunders et al.’s (2019) recommendation that “search terms are the basic terms that describe the research questions” (p. 92). Initial keywords included e.g. “communication,” “communication channels,” “marketing,”, “Germany,” “Japan,”. These terms were further refined by adding synonyms and related phrases to maximise the relevance of results.

Priority was given to academic journal articles, valued for their peer-reviewed quality and relevance, and to books, which offered broader conceptual overviews and pointed to recognised experts in the field. As the search progressed, it became clear that literature directly addressing marketing communication channels in the German and Japanese machine-tools sectors was scarce. This led to an expansion of the scope to include more general B2B

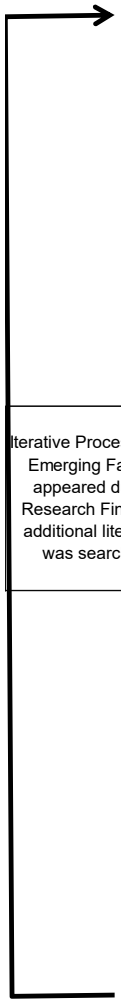
and industrial marketing literature.

Each article identified was first screened for thematic fit through abstracts and conclusions. When relevant, full texts were reviewed in detail. Additional hand-searching of leading journals and citation tracking proved especially valuable, as citation relationships often reveal trends and scholarly networks (Coombes & Nicholson, 2013). To supplement the academic sources, grey literature such as conference papers and industry reports was also considered.

The literature review process followed four stages (adapted from (Gaß et al., 2015):

1. Initial Scoping: Broad exploration to map potentially relevant concepts, including relationship marketing and communication channels.
2. Focused Search: Targeted searches within the most relevant conceptual areas, applying refined search terms and exclusion criteria to remove tangential results.
3. Contextual Deep Dive: Inclusion of industry-specific and cross-cultural literature relevant to the German and Japanese SME machine-tools context, wherever available.
4. Integration and Mapping: Consolidation of insights from the literature, identifying points of convergence and divergence with emerging empirical findings.

Importantly, this was not a linear process. In line with the iterative principles of Grounded Theory, preliminary findings from data analysis often prompted a return to Stage 1, with newly refined search terms and a sharper conceptual focus. This cyclical approach ensured that the literature review remained dynamic and responsive, allowing new insights to shape the scope and direction of subsequent searches.



Stages of Literature Review	Description of Stages	Implementation of Stages	
Stage 1: Database Search	use of academic databases to search for academic articles, conference papers, books and statistics	**Key Words as well as synonyms and alternative search terms were used**	
		Key words	**Synonyms and alternative searchterms**
		Communicatiion	Marketing Communication Customer Communication B2B Communication
		Communication Channel	Communication Technology Communication Style Communication Trends Information Technology Medium of Communication Way of Communication Communication Mix
		Mechanical Engineering Industry	Machine Tool Industry Manufacturing Industry SME B2B Industry
		Marketing	B2B Marketing Industrial Marketing Relationship Marketing CRM
		Purchasing Decisions	B2B Purchasing Industrial Purchasing Industrial Buying
		Generation	Intergenerational Generation X, Y, Z Next Generation
		Culture	Cultural Behaviour Society
		Japan	Asia
		Germany	Europe
		Key Words and Boolean operators were used e.g.: "Communication Channel" AND "mechanical engineering industry" AND "GERMANY" AND "JAPAN"	
Stage 2: Initial Screening	Parameters within the search were defined	Language of Publication Subject Area Business sector Geographic area Publication Period Literature type	English Marketing Manufacturing Germany, Japan 2015 - 2025 refeered journals, books, statistics, conference papers
Stage 3: Clustering	1. articles found were observed by skim reading 2. further handsearching of relevant articles based on reference lists (citation search) 3. thematic areas were conducted	(Marketing Communication) Relationship Marketing Communication Channels B2B Purchasing Decisions Culture, Generation Human-to- Human	
Stage 4: Analysis	main articles were evaluated	Articles were summarized: key topics, methodology, own remarks	

Figure 2: Stages of literature research (author)

Although highly specific literature on communication practices in the machine-tools industry was limited, the review drew on relevant studies from broader B2B and industrial marketing contexts to establish a conceptual foundation. Following the discussion of the review methodology and search strategy, the chapter examines five core themes that together frame the research:

3.2. From Transactions to Networks: Relationship Marketing and the Centrality of Trust	3.3. The Human to Human (H2H) Marketing Approach	3.4. Communication Channel Ecosystem	3.5. B2B Purchasing Decisions: Models and Processes	3.6. Contextual Influences: Cultural and Generational Influences

Table 5: Five core themes that frame the literature research chapter (author)

Relationship marketing, H2H marketing, the communication channel ecosystem, B2B purchasing decisions and contextual influences of industry, culture and generation. These themes are addressed in sequence, moving from foundational relational concepts to the H2H interpretive lens, then mapping communication channels, situating them within decision-making processes and finally embedding them in the industrial, cultural and generational contexts of the German and Japanese machine-tools sectors.

The discussion now turns to Section 3.2, From Transactions to Networks: Relationship Marketing and the Centrality of Trust, which traces the evolution of marketing thought and provides the theoretical basis for understanding relational dynamics in industrial contexts.

3.2. From transactions to networks: relationship marketing and the centrality of trust

3.2. From Transactions to Networks: Relationship Marketing and the Centrality of Trust	3.3. The Human to Human (H2H) Marketing Approach	3.4. Communication Channel Ecosystem	3.5. B2B Purchasing Decisions: Models and Processes	3.6. Contextual Influences: Cultural and Generational Influences

Table 6: Overview of core themes focusing on section 3.2 (author)

The shift from transactional to relationship marketing has significantly reshaped marketing communication strategies (Ballantyne et al., 2003; Duncan & Moriarty, 1998; Grönroos, 1994; Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995). Traditional marketing communication, as described by Philip Kotler et al. (2019), was predominantly one-directional, aiming to influence purchasing decisions through persuasive messaging. This approach was particularly effective in transactional marketing environments where the primary objective was immediate sales. However, as markets evolved and competition intensified, the limitations of this approach became increasingly evident. Scholars such as Rėklaitis and Pilelienė (2019) emphasize that deeper customer understanding and long-term engagement have become crucial in sustaining competitive advantages. This shift underscores the necessity of moving toward fostering enduring relationships with customers.

3.2.1. The evolution of relationship marketing – The IMP Group and network perspective

The evolution of relationship marketing represents one of the most significant paradigm shifts in marketing thought. Early contributions from the Nordic School of Service in the 1970s marked a departure from the dominant transactional paradigm of the marketing mix. Instead of focusing on discrete exchanges, Nordic scholars such as Grönroos and Gummesson emphasised the continuous and service-oriented nature of marketing. They argued that value is created in the ongoing relationship between provider and customer, where mutual adaptation and shared understanding become sources of competitive advantage (Gummesson & Grönroos, 2012). Their relational paradigm replaced

the notion of marketing as persuasion with one of marketing as relationship building. However, while this view established the relational paradigm, it was primarily conceptual and rooted in service industries rather than complex industrial production, leaving open the question of how such dynamics operate in technology-intensive and capital-heavy sectors such as machine-tools.

Building on this groundwork, the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) Group provided the first empirically grounded alternative to the transactional model. Through extensive network analyses of industrial firms, the IMP scholars (Cunningham, 1980; Håkansson, 1982; Håkansson & Snehota, 2006) demonstrated that business markets cannot be understood as atomistic transactions between independent buyers and sellers. Instead, they function as interdependent systems of organisations embedded in long-term exchange relationships. This interaction approach challenged the prevailing marketing mix framework by shifting the focus from the dyadic sale to the network of relationships in which firms operate. The IMP Group's insight that firms are part of enduring industrial networks represented a critical step toward understanding marketing as a process of relationship management rather than short-term exchange (Ford, 2011; Guercini et al., 2024).

Comparatively, the Nordic School emphasised the process based and service oriented nature of marketing relationships, while the IMP Group offered a more structural and systemic view that focused on interorganisational dependencies and resource ties. Both traditions agreed that lasting success depends on trust and continuity, yet they differed in emphasis: the Nordic School centred on the quality of interaction within relationships, whereas the IMP Group examined the broader architecture in which those relationships are embedded. This distinction is highly relevant in the machine-tools industry, where supplier and customer relations are shaped by long-term technical integration and extensive service commitments. The effectiveness of a machine-tools manufacturer often rests on its position within a wider network of suppliers, partners and customers. The IMP perspective therefore provides a strong lens for analysing industrial collaboration, while the Nordic approach clarifies the interpersonal dynamics that sustain these networks. Table 7 presents a brief comparison of the two traditions.

Dimension	Nordic School	IMP Group	H2H Marekting
Origin	Scandinavia, 1970s	Europe, 1970s	Global, 2010s - 2020s
Focus	Service Marketing, customer relationships	B2B networks, industrial marketing	Human-centric marketing, trust
Key Scholars	Grönroos, Gummesson	Hakansson, Snehota	Kotler, Pfoertsch, Sponholz
Unit of Analysis	Individual customer relationships	Interorganisational networks	Human beings as stakeholders (customers, employees, citizens)
Core Philosophy	Marketing as a service process	Marketing as embedded in business networks	Marketing as a trust-building, empahtetic and purpose driven activity

Table 7: Comparison of Nordic School and IMP Group (author)

The conceptual convergence of these schools prepared the ground for the emergence of Relationship Marketing as a formal discipline. Berry (1983, 2002) introduced the term to capture the strategic shift from attracting new customers to maintaining existing ones. Grönroos (1994) further extended this thinking by framing relationship marketing as a strategic process aimed at trust and inter-organisational coordination rather than mere customer satisfaction. Building on the contributions of scholars such as Christopher et al. (2013) and Morgan (2014), Gummesson (2002) expanded the understanding of relationship marketing by placing it in a wider societal context. He argued that “society is nothing else than a network of relationships” (p. 587), framing marketing not simply as a business discipline but as a social process grounded in human interaction. This interpretation shifted attention from the management of discrete exchanges to the maintenance of interdependent networks that generate mutual value. While this perspective enriched marketing theory by linking economic and social systems, it also raised challenges of scope and conceptual clarity. Later scholars observed that relationship marketing became fragmented into multiple streams with limited theoretical cohesion (Gummerus et al., 2017). This limitation is evident in contemporary B2B industries such as the machine-tools sector, where value creation depends on coordinating many actors across the supply and service ecosystem. In these settings, relationship marketing expands from managing single partnerships to orchestrating networks built on

trust and collaboration. Although the IMP framework remains influential, later scholars have noted its bias toward stability and interdependence, which may understate the greater fluidity and speed introduced by digitalisation. Guercini et al. (2024) emphasise that digital transformation and sustainability transitions bring both human and non-human actors into business networks, reshaping orchestration mechanisms and challenging established coordination logics. Their findings imply that network management in digital contexts relies less on control and more on adaptive collaboration among interconnected actors. Hänninen and Karjaluoto (2017) similarly stress that contemporary relationship marketing requires greater adaptability and responsiveness to customer-driven interaction. The machine-tools industry exemplifies this shift: For example, digital platforms and predictive maintenance systems enhance efficiency yet risk diluting the interpersonal trust traditionally fostered through on-site visits and enduring service relationships. Understanding how industrial firms can balance digital efficiency with relational depth is therefore essential for identifying how communication and trust are built in an increasingly hybrid, technology-driven environment. Despite these challenges, the enduring relevance of relationship marketing lies in its commitment to long-term engagement and trust fulfilment (Geyskens et al., 1998; Hänninen & Karjaluoto, 2017). These principles remain central to business success in capital-intensive industries. Grönroos (1997) argued that in technically demanding and service intensive sectors, customer value emerges through continuous interaction, coordinated support and the ongoing use of organisational resources. In the machine-tools context, the relationship extends well beyond the initial purchase into installation, maintenance and technology upgrades across the machine's lifecycle. This ongoing cycle reflects the sustained interaction central to early relationship marketing theory. Håkansson and Snehota (2006) expanded this view by showing that firms exist within networks of interdependent relationships that shape their identity and performance. They challenged the idea of organisational autonomy, arguing that advantage stems from how companies relate and coordinate within their network. For machine-tools producers, this means that marketing success also depends on being a reliable and collaborative partner in complex value networks. These dynamics are central to this study, which examines how communication is formed and maintained in

such interconnected industrial settings. Lasrado et al. (2023) revisited the relational paradigm by situating it within the context of digital transformation. Their work revealed a paradox: while digital technologies expand reach they may also hinder the interpersonal trust that traditionally sustains long-term business relationships. Efficiency and analytical precision appear insufficient to replace the reassurance derived from direct human engagement. This observation raises a broader question: can digital tools genuinely replicate the credibility and emotional assurance that face-to-face communication conveys? Jiang et al. (2011) similarly distinguished between trust and reliance, suggesting that reliability built through data or system performance does not necessarily translate into affective confidence. Palmatier et al. (2006) had already established a strong link between relationship quality and business performance, a relationship that Lasrado et al. (2023) confirmed, still holds in digital settings. Yet it remains unclear how these relational mechanisms function when human contact is partly replaced by virtual interaction. In industrial settings such as the machine-tools sector, this raises important questions: to what extent can virtual demonstrations or online consultations maintain customer trust, and at what point does personal accountability become essential again? Exploring these tensions is key to understanding how communication evolves under digital conditions.

In summary, the literature shows a progression from service based interaction (Nordic School) to structural network perspectives (IMP Group) and then to digitally enabled relationship marketing. However, the specific question of how communication channels strengthen or weaken relationships in high technology B2B industries is still insufficiently examined. This gap is especially relevant in the machine-tools industry, where long term partnerships and high trust must coexist with rapid digital transformation.

3.2.2. Relationship marketing and industrial firms

While relationship marketing places trust and long-term engagement at its core, its relevance across different industries remains debated. Brennan et al. (2020b) and Fill (2011) argue that enduring customer relationships strengthen brand loyalty and business performance, yet the mechanisms through which such

loyalty emerges vary considerably across markets. In industrial contexts characterised by complex and risk-averse purchasing decisions, human qualities therefore remain a critical yet often underexplored dimension of communication and decision-making.

The relevance of human qualities becomes particularly apparent in the machine-tools industry, where investments are infrequent and decisions involve substantial technological and financial commitment. Suppliers must therefore prove long-term reliability and responsiveness. Charterina et al. (2018) describe this environment as one of “very long-standing buyer–supplier relationships, often spanning the entire lifecycle of complex, custom-built products for which ongoing servicing is vital.” (p.292). Such enduring cooperation aligns with the relationship orientation proposed by Nordic and IMP scholars, though it occurs under conditions of far greater technological interdependence and risk.

From a communication perspective, Karjaluoto et al. (2015) identify two central marketing functions in industrial firms: creating awareness and strengthening reputation. Yet in high-value B2B contexts, these alone appear insufficient. Previous studies suggest that communication in industrial markets prioritises factual information and credibility over emotional appeal. What remains unclear is how this balance works in practice and how communication channels influence decision making in complex, high value settings. This suggests that how communication channels contribute to credibility in the machine-tools sector and when such communication may develop into trust needs examination. Building on this discussion, Grönroos (1994) argued that marketing must evolve from isolated transactions toward ongoing relationships, where value emerges through interaction and continuity. His view remains relevant but must be reconsidered in light of digital transformation, which has changed how industrial actors communicate and collaborate. For example, digital tools expand possibilities for connection, yet they risk reducing the human depth that once defined relationship building. This raises a key question for industrial firms: how can communication remain authentic and relational when it increasingly depends on digital interfaces? Understanding this balance is essential for rethinking relationship marketing as a hybrid form that combines technological efficiency with genuine human engagement.

Yet, as several scholars caution, implementing relationship marketing in industrial contexts often reveals structural and contextual limitations (Gummerus et al., 2017; Hänninen & Karjaluoto, 2017; Guercini et al., 2024). The universal principles of trust and engagement do not automatically transfer across industries or cultures. A machine-tools manufacturer may seek closer relationships through follow-up visits or after sales support, which aligns with relationship marketing, yet such efforts can be limited by resources or differing communication expectations. A European supplier may favour open and data-driven communication, while a Japanese customer may view this directness as impersonal and prefer a slower, trust-building approach grounded in demonstrated reliability over time. This contrast supports the argument of Hänninen and Karjaluoto (2017) who highlight that the success of relationship marketing depends on the supplier's ability to adapt to the customer's contextual norms. What is perceived as credible or trustworthy behaviour in one cultural setting may be interpreted differently in another, underscoring the importance of cultural sensitivity and situational awareness in industrial marketing practice. Another assumption that merits reconsideration is the belief that strong value delivery automatically secures customer loyalty. While frequently implied in relationship-oriented thinking, this view overlooks external influences such as economic shifts. In the machine-tools industry, even highly reliable suppliers may lose customers when competitors offer more efficient solutions or when firms adjust their production strategies. Relationship marketing, therefore, cannot rest on the assumption that satisfaction alone ensures long-term continuity of exchange.

Overall, the literature confirms that relationship marketing provides an important lens for understanding trust and continuity, yet significant questions remain regarding its application in highly technical and capital-intensive industries. In B2B contexts, trust might be commonly defined as existing "when one party has confidence in an exchange partner's reliability and integrity" (Morgan & Hunt, 1994, p. 23). While prior studies suggest that emotional loyalty often gives way to more cognitive and behavioural forms of trust in industrial markets, it remains unclear how such trust is established and communicated in complex purchasing environments. In particular, the balance between digital efficiency and human

engagement warrants further examination. These issues are explored in greater depth in Section 3.2.3, which focuses on trust in B2B relationships. Against this background, a central question emerges for the machine-tools sector: how do decision-makers develop trust in suppliers prior to a purchasing decision, and how are these processes shaped by cultural and generational contexts in Germany and Japan?

While trust is commonly discussed as a relational outcome in B2B exchanges, it is also shaped by the cognitive orientations through which decision-makers interpret relationships, risk and long-term collaboration. In this context, mindset becomes a relevant construct for understanding how such interpretations are formed and sustained. Mindset is understood as the implicit beliefs individuals hold about the stability or malleability of human attributes (Dweck & Yeager, 2019), is commonly described through the distinction between fixed and growth orientations (Plaks, 2017). Although rooted in psychological research, the concept has gained relevance in organisational and B2B settings, where it shapes how managers approach strategic and relational decisions. Papadopoulou et al. (2023) show that managerial mindset influences whether firms adapt or standardise international marketing strategies, indicating that cognitive orientations condition how organisations respond to complexity. Within relationship marketing, mindset functions as a foundational orientation that enables the shift from transactional logic toward long-term, collaborative value creation, since such strategies require an underlying commitment to mutuality, adaptability and trust Sheth et al. (2012). In increasingly digitalised industrial environments, this relational mindset also shapes how firms engage with evolving communication technologies and hybrid interaction formats, and it may differ across generations as younger professionals navigate digital channels with different expectations of speed and relational depth.

3.2.3. Trust in B2B relationships: antecedents and theoretical perspectives

In B2B relationship marketing, trust is widely viewed as a key antecedent of long term relationship success, yet its foundations vary across perspectives. Lewis and Weigert (1985) adopt a sociological view, describing trust as a mechanism that reduces complexity and supports stability in social systems. This systemic

perspective helps explain how trust operates within institutional or cultural structures, such as international supply chains. However, it may overlook the interpersonal behaviours that sustain cooperation in daily practice. In industrial settings such as the machine-tools sector, institutional stability may set the groundwork for continuity, but the trust that drives collaboration is often created through operational interactions between engineers, sales teams and service technicians. In contrast, Morgan and Hunt (1994) take a managerial approach with their commitment–trust theory, defining trust as confidence in a partner's reliability and integrity and linking it directly to relationship commitment and retention. Their model is highly influential, yet it assumes that ethical conduct and consistent performance are sufficient to sustain long term commitment. In industrial markets such as machine-tools, trust is often tested by how suppliers handle technical issues and adapt to customer requirements. Thus, while Morgan and Hunt (1994) present trust as a stabilising construct, in practice it functions as a dynamic capability that must be continually reinforced through performance and responsiveness.

Building on this behavioural view, Čater and Čater (2010) distinguish between cognitive trust, based on assessments of competence, and affective trust, grounded in emotional bonds and goodwill. Their study in manufacturing relationships shows that affective trust can strongly enhance customer loyalty, sometimes more than cognitive evaluations. This challenges the assumption that industrial buyers rely solely on technical or economic criteria. In the machine-tools context, trust may initially be based on assessments of quality and precision but is sustained through long-term collaboration and personal reliability. Trust in industrial settings therefore develops relationally over time, rather than being based only on rational evaluation. Expanding the scope of analysis, Isaeva et al. (2020) synthesise trust theories across management and service literatures, identifying shared goals and co-created solutions as central antecedents of trust. Their review also shows that trust operates on individual, organisational and systemic levels, and that misalignment between these layers can weaken relationships. This is highly relevant to the machine-tools sector, where partnerships often involve complex technical integration and long investment cycles. Close collaboration on customised solutions can strengthen resilience and innovation, but it may also create dependency or reduce a

customer’s willingness to switch suppliers when conditions change. This raises an important question for industrial contexts: does trust primarily support innovation and long term commitment, or can it also limit adaptability when markets shift?

Complementing this, Arthur et al. (2024) empirically demonstrate that trust enhances customer satisfaction, which in turn strengthens engagement, suggesting a cyclical relationship between these constructs. However, their findings also indicate that satisfaction alone does not necessarily imply trust: customers may express contentment with transactional outcomes while remaining cautious about a supplier’s transparency or long-term reliability. This differentiation is especially relevant in industrial markets, where trust often extends beyond immediate satisfaction to expectations of consistent service and innovation capacity over time.

Wu et al. (2024) refine this understanding by introducing the concept of short-term trust: trust that develops during initial interactions and influences purchase intention. Their research shows that this form of trust can open new business relationships but does not ensure continuity without deeper relational or strategic trust.

Author	Year	Title	Trust Definition	Loyalty Definition
Lewis & Weigert	1985	Trust as a Social Reality	Trust is sociological reality that functions as a deep assumption underpinning social order, reducing complexity in relationships	
Morgan & Hunt	1994	The Commitment-Trust Theory of Relationship Marketing	Trust is a key mediating variable in relationship marketing, characerized by confidence in exchange partners' reliability and integrity	Loyalty is linked to relationship commitment, implying a long-term orientation towards a business partner based on trust
Cater & Cater	2010	Product and Relationship Quality Influence on Customer Commitment and Loyalty in B2B Manufacturing Relationships	Trust, as a social dimension of relationship quality, positively influences affective and normative commitment, essential for long-term partnerships	Loyalty is influenced by affective commitment, with emotional factors playing a stronger role than rational, product-based motivation
Iseva et al.	2020	Trust Theory and Customer Services Research: Theoretical Review and Synthesis	Trust is recognized as a strategic asset and a vital element for organizational success, crucial for fostering customer commitment and loyalty	Loyalty is linked to customer commitment and turst, driving long-term engagement and repeat business
Arthur et al.	2024	Commitment, Trust, Relative Dependence and Customer Loyalty in the B2B Setting: The Role of Customer Satisfaction	Trust positively impacts customer satisfaction,w hcih in turn fosters long-term business relationship and loyalty	Loyalty conceptualiued as a sustained commitment that goes beyond short-term transactions, involving long-term business engagements
Wu et al.	2024	Unlocking B2B Buyer Intentions to Purchase: Conceptualizing and validating inside sales purchases	Trust in sellers is a crucial factor in determining buyers' purchase intentions, influencing contact willingness during different phases of the B2B purchasing process	

Table 8: Comparative overview of trust and loyalty constructs in B2B research (author)

Although trust is not the primary focus of this study, several authors offer dimensions that are relevant for understanding communication in industrial markets. Lewis and Weigert (1985) view trust as a societal stabiliser, Morgan and Hunt (1994) emphasise its strategic and ethical role in long term relationships, Čater and Čater (2010) highlight its emotional and interpersonal elements, and Isaeva et al. (2020) together with Arthur et al. (2024) link trust to goal alignment and satisfaction in collaborative systems. These perspectives only partly reflect the realities of the machine-tools industry, where relationships are shaped by technical performance and reliability. Yet even in such rational environments, interpersonal trust remains important, especially when projects require joint problem solving or long term service cooperation. What remains uncertain is how this trust is communicated and sustained when interactions increasingly shift from personal contact to digital platforms. Understanding this link between communication and credibility is a core purpose of this study.

Trust in sales and service personnel is central in high involvement industrial markets. Here, trust develops through direct, experience based interaction and strongly influences long term cooperation. Morgan and Hunt (1994) identify shared values and the absence of opportunism as key antecedents of trust, which in industrial practice often appear through the competence and credibility of sales and service representatives. This implies that in capital intensive sectors, organisational reputation alone is not enough; it must be enacted through human performance at the interface between supplier and customer. Trust therefore functions less as a fixed organisational trait and more as a communicative competence demonstrated through consistent and transparent interaction.

Empirical research by Gansser et al. (2021) supports this view, showing that interpersonal trust in salespeople exerts a stronger influence on customer commitment than institutional trust in the supplier organisation. Their results indicate that technical expertise and social competence jointly form perceived reliability, while overly aggressive selling behaviour can undermine it. In technology-intensive industries, this suggests that customers may evaluate suppliers not only on machine performance, but also on how supplier representatives convey technical possibilities and engage in value-oriented dialogue. In the machine-tools sector, this can be interpreted as a gradual shift from transactional persuasion toward relationship-based credibility, where trust functions as a communicative resource built through expertise and ongoing interaction.

Expanding this perspective, Akrout and Woodside (2024) conceptualise behavioural trust as the visible expression of trust through openness and relational investment. Their study shows that behavioural trust manifests in actions. This interpretation fits industrial collaboration, where innovation often depends on the willingness to exchange information across organisational boundaries. Yet, it also raises questions: to what extent can such openness persist when competition intensifies, or when communication shifts into digital spaces that reduce personal contact? Charterina et al. (2018), analysing the European machine-tools sector, found that while contracts provide structure, interpersonal trust enables knowledge exchange and innovation. This suggests that effective collaboration depends as much on human interpretation and

communication quality as on formal agreements.

Recent literature also challenges the assumption that trust, once established, remains stable. Blöbaum (2021) argues that trust often becomes visible only when it deteriorates, questioning its assumed permanence. Mangus et al. (2023) introduce the concept of trust overestimation, showing that salespeople frequently overrate how much trust customers place in them, leading to misdirected effort and reduced returns. These insights highlight a critical tension: while firms invest in long-term relationships, they may misinterpret the actual state of trust. This risk is likely to increase as interaction shifts toward more digital and remote forms of communication, where cues traditionally associated with trust, such as personal presence, do not translate easily into mediated formats. In the machine-tools industry, where project cycles are lengthy and interactions frequent, formal feedback mechanisms on relational quality are rare, increasing the likelihood that trust is assumed rather than actively assessed.

Taken together, these studies portray trust as an evolving construct encompassing ethical, strategic and behavioural dimensions. Morgan and Hunt (1994) describe its ethical foundations, Gansser et al. (2021) and Akrout and Woodside (2024) illustrate its behavioural enactment, while Blöbaum (2021) and Mangus et al. (2023) emphasise its instability and potential misperception. As industrial communication becomes increasingly digitalised, this raises the question of how organisations can recognise and sustain trust when many of its indicators, such as credibility and relational confidence, are embedded in human behaviour rather than directly observable or quantifiable metrics.

Blöbaum (2021) challenges the assumption that trust, once established, remains stable, arguing that trust often becomes visible only when it deteriorates. This perspective frames trust as contingent and situational, requiring ongoing interpretation within relationships. In long term industrial cooperation, where continuity is often taken for granted, this creates the risk that trust becomes assumed.

This challenge intensifies as communication shifts toward digital and hybrid formats, where behavioural cues through which trust is interpreted translate less clearly into mediated interaction. In the machine-tools industry, characterised by

long project cycles and ongoing collaboration, trust is rarely articulated explicitly and formal mechanisms for evaluating relational quality remain uncommon. As communication practices evolve, trust may therefore persist implicitly despite changing conditions.

Taken together, these insights indicate that trust in industrial relationships is shaped through how credibility, reliability and openness are communicated across evolving channels. This leads to two guiding questions for this study. How do decision makers interpret trust as communication becomes increasingly digital and hybrid? How are shifts in relational quality recognised when trust is embedded in human behaviour and interaction? Addressing these questions frames trust as a communicative and human centred process and provides a direct bridge to the Human to Human marketing perspective underpinning this research.

3.3. The human-to-human marketing communication approach

3.2. From Transactions to Networks: Relationship Marketing and the Centrality of Trust	3.3. The Human to Human (H2H) Marketing Approach	3.4. Communication Channel Ecosystem	3.5. B2B Purchasing Decisions: Models and Processes	3.6. Contextual Influences: Cultural and Generational Influences

Table 9: Overview of core themes focusing on section 3.3 (author)

Following the evolution from transactional to relationship marketing, this section examines the concept of Human-to-Human (H2H) Marketing (Kotler et al., 2021) which has emerged in response to the increasing complexity of interactions in both B2B and B2C contexts. Rather than treating firms and consumers as abstract categories, H2H reframes communication as a human exchange grounded in empathy, authenticity and long-term relational thinking. Behind every customer lies an individual with distinct needs, experiences and expectations. H2H marketing responds by promoting a human-centred approach that privileges personal relationships over purely commercial strategies. This might mean that value creation is no longer defined solely through economic exchange but through shared meaning, trust and mutual

understanding which is a shift that reintroduces the social dimension into industrial marketing practice.

3.3.1. From Nordic School and IMP Group to H2H

As outlined in Section 3.2.1, the Nordic School and the IMP Group provided foundational perspectives for understanding marketing beyond transactions, emphasising service processes and networked interdependence. Building on these traditions, H2H Marketing can be viewed as a conceptual progression that places the person at the centre of the marketing relationship. While the Nordic School's service logic framed marketing as a process of continuous interaction and value co-creation and the IMP Group analysed firms as interdependent actors within industrial networks, H2H takes this logic one step further by asking how individuals within those networks communicate and build trust.

Dimension	Nordic School	IMP Group	H2H Marekting
Origin	Scandinavia, 1970s	Europe, 1970s	Global, 2010s - 2020s
Focus	Service Marketing, customer relationships	B2B networks, industrial marketing	Human-centric marketing, trust
Key Scholars	Grönroos, Gummesson	Hakansson, Snehota	Kotler, Pfoertsch, Sponholz
Unit of Analysis	Individual customer relationships	Interorganisational networks	Human beings as stakeholders (customers, employees, citizens)
Core Philosophy	Marketing as a service process	Marketing as embedded in business networks	Marketing as a trust-building, empahtetic and purpose driven activity

Table 10: Comparison of Nordic School, IMP Group and H2H marketing (author)

While the Nordic School concentrated on service logic and the IMP Group on inter-organisational relationships, H2H shifts the unit of analysis further towards the individual human being as stakeholder, as a customer, as an employee and as a citizens. This represents a conceptual broadening from organisational relationships to society-wide engagement. A further distinction lies in its guiding philosophy: whereas the Nordic School understood marketing as an interactive

service process and the IMP Group interpreted it as embedded network activity, H2H introduces a purpose-driven orientation that explicitly incorporates trust, empathy and authenticity into the marketing dialogue. This development can be interpreted as a response to a growing awareness that economic and technological excellence alone are insufficient to secure sustainable relationships in today's fragmented and digitised markets.

Despite these conceptual shifts, important continuities remain. Like its predecessors, H2H resists transactional short-termism and reinforces the relational, long-term nature of marketing. Yet, its global rise during the 2010s and 2020s coincides with new structural challenges: digitalisation, market transparency and heightened stakeholder expectations for responsibility and purpose. In this sense, the H2H approach builds on earlier relationship frameworks by broadening their scope to encompass the emotional and ethical aspects of interaction.

From an industrial perspective, this development carries particular resonance. In the machine-tools industry, digital transformation has expanded the number of communication channels and accelerated the exchange of technical information, yet it has also reduced opportunities for genuine personal contact. What once relied on face-to-face interaction at trade fairs or on-site visits alone, is now increasingly also mediated through digital tools. This shift may enhance efficiency and transparency, but it also risks diluting the interpersonal dimension that historically sustained trust and collaboration.

Consequently, H2H can be interpreted as both an evolution and a corrective: an evolution in that it extends the Nordic and IMP logics towards a more human scale, and a corrective in that it re-emphasises the emotional and ethical substance that underpins effective communication. However, what remains conceptually open is how these principles materialise within high-technology B2B environments, where communication is mediated by personal and digital tools and cross-cultural interaction. Does the shift towards human-centred communication genuinely transform industrial relationships or does it simply re-label long-standing relational practices under new conditions? How do trust, empathy and authenticity operate when human contact is filtered through data or virtual collaboration? These unresolved questions suggest a continuing

tension between technological efficiency and human connection.

3.3.2. The emergence and framework of H2H marketing

Human-to-Human (H2H) marketing should be understood as an emerging integrative orientation rather than a fully developed or consolidated theory. While articulated most explicitly by Kotler and colleagues, its conceptual roots draw on earlier streams of marketing thought that emphasise relationships, interaction and networks. Relationship marketing highlighted trust and long-term engagement as central to value creation (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Grönroos, 2004), while the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) tradition conceptualised markets as interconnected networks of actors whose interactions evolve over time (Håkansson & Snehota, 1995). H2H builds on these foundations by seeking to reconnect fragmented marketing perspectives around the human experience that underpins exchange. However, despite its intuitive appeal, the H2H concept remains theoretically open and empirically widely underexplored, particularly in industrial contexts. Its contribution therefore lies less in offering a prescriptive model than in providing a unifying lens that invites further investigation into how human relationships, trust and interaction are enacted in complex, technology-driven markets.

As described by Kotler et al. (2021), Human-to-Human (H2H) marketing emerged from a critique of the increasing fragmentation of marketing disciplines and the resulting loss of conceptual coherence. The authors contend that this fragmentation obscured marketing's essential role as a relational and communicative practice. This critique aligns with earlier interaction-focused perspectives, particularly Ballantyne and Varey (2006) view of marketing as an exchange logic grounded in relating, communicating and knowing, where value emerges through ongoing human interaction rather than discrete transactions.

Consequently, H2H was proposed as an integrative model that reunites these perspectives through a focus on shared human experience and empathy. Particularly in industrial contexts characterised by technological complexity and multi-stakeholder interaction, the model challenges the traditional dichotomy between B2B and B2C by emphasising that behind every decision lies a human being whose motivations extend beyond performance and price. This indicates

that even in high-precision sectors such as the machine-tools industry, decisions remain influenced by interpersonal trust as much as by technical evidence.The intellectual foundation of H2H Marketing can be traced back to the Bangalore Model, developed to bridge the growing divide between academic specialisation and practical marketing challenges (Kotler et al., 2021; Pförtsch & Sponholz, 2019). Subsequent scholarship on value co-creation reinforces this integrative logic by reframing markets as spaces of interaction rather than mere exchange. This interaction-oriented view aligns with Service-Dominant Logic (SDL), developed by Vargo and Lusch (2011) which reframes marketing as a process of value co-creation rather than value delivery. From this perspective, value emerges through interaction and relational processes, rather than residing in products or technologies themselves. SDL therefore represents an important theoretical antecedent to H2H Marketing, as both foreground human actors, reciprocal engagement and contextual meaning in market relationships. Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) argue that value emerges through ongoing dialogue and shared problem solving between firms and customers, positioning human interaction as the central focus of value creation. This perspective reflects a growing concern that marketing had become overly firm-centric and detached from lived experience, calling instead for a reorientation towards relational engagement and mutual understanding. In this sense, marketing is repositioned as a discipline of connection, in which economic outcomes are embedded in social interaction. Applied to the machine-tools sector, this implies that advances in automation and digital precision must be complemented by trust-based, empathetic engagement to sustain long-term industrial collaboration. This intellectual trajectory evolved further through the concept of “Mensch Marketing” (Pförtsch & Sponholz, 2019), which explicitly placed people at the centre of all marketing activity. The authors argue that marketing should serve as a tool for understanding and solving complex problems through collaborative engagement. Rather than promoting products, “Mensch Marketing” promotes meaningful relationships built on shared responsibility and authentic dialogue. This philosophical grounding paved the way for the formalisation of H2H Marketing, which integrates emotional intelligence, stakeholder orientation, and sustainable value creation. What this indicates is a paradigm shift: marketing is reframed as participation: a cooperative process

that aligns business objectives with human values.

The H2H framework consists of two interlinked layers that together combine conceptual insight with managerial application (Kotler et.al, 2021).

1. Conceptual Foundation: integrating three key components:

   • *Design Thinking,* which emphasises human-centred problem-solving and empathy as sources of innovation.

   • *Service-Dominant Logic (S-DL),* which redefines value as co-created between suppliers and customers rather than produced by one and consumed by another.

   • *Digitalisation,* which enables new forms of interaction but, as the authors stress, must remain anchored in relational authenticity and trust.

Table 11 (adapted from Pförtsch & Sponholz, 2019, p. 46) summarises these influences and how each contributes to shaping Mensch- and H2H Marketing.

Design Thinking	Service Dominant Logic	Digitization
Human in the Center	Theoretical Fundament	Technical Requirements for H2H Marketing
Marketing Thinking a Mindset	S-DL as Mindset	Dematerialisation
Marketing as iterative Innovation-process	Importance of Customer Experience	Importance of Trust

Table 11: Influences shaping Mensch Marketing adapted from Pförtsch and Sponholz, p. 46 (author)

2. Implementation Model: operationalising the conceptual principles through three interdependent elements:

   - H2H Mindset: embracing empathy and personal connection as guiding principles for leadership and communication.
   - H2H Management: embedding these human values across organisational functions and cross-functional teams.
   - H2H Process: translating these values into practice through integrated communication and trust-building mechanisms.

Figure 3 illustrates the integration of these two layers:

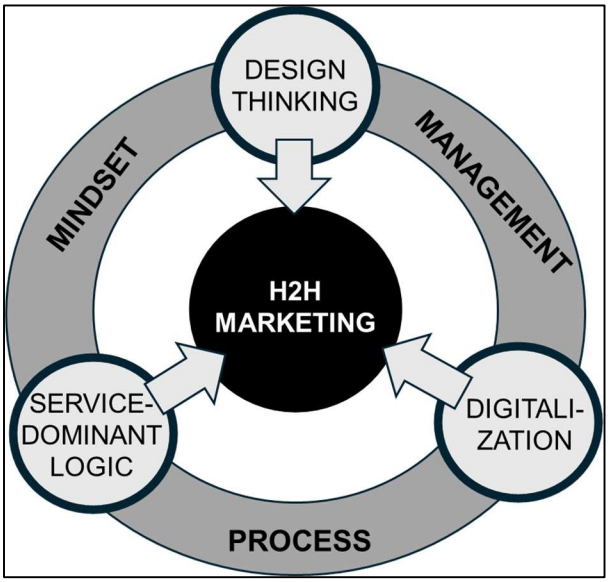


Figure 3: The complete H2H marketing model adapted from Kotler, Pförtsch and Sponholz, 2021, p. 32 (author)

By combining these layers, the H2H framework redefines marketing as a system of human interactions rather than a purely organisational function. Yet this interpretation also presents practical challenges. While the model highlights empathy and authenticity as strategic assets, it remains conceptually broad and prescriptive. Kotler et.al (2021) outlined why firms should act more human-centrically but provided limited guidance on how this can be realised in industries where production processes and customer interactions are highly technical. This raises an important question: can empathy be embedded in structured processes, such as automated communication or standardised service routines, without losing its genuine character? Such tensions are visible in the machine-tools sector, where suppliers must integrate digital tools and precise engineering with the personal collaboration that builds trust.

3.3.3. Relevance for industrial markets

Kotler et al. (2021) present the H2H marketing concept as a response to the increasing need for human-centred thinking. While their framework is conceptual rather than industry-specific, its underlying ideas may hold relevance for capital-intensive and technically complex sectors such as the machine-tools

industry. The authors argue that H2H reconnects business strategy with human values by viewing empathy and authenticity as important resources. This challenges the traditional assumption in industrial marketing that rationality and efficiency alone drive customer loyalty. Yet it remains unclear how such human-centred approaches can be operationalised in engineering-based industries, where decision-making relies heavily on measurable performance indicators. In the machine-tools context, purchasing processes involve both technical evaluation and interpersonal communication between customer's engineers and sales experts. Exploring how these human interactions contribute to credibility and long-term cooperation forms a key aspect of this study.

Authenticity plays a central role in this reconceptualisation. Transparent communication fosters credibility, while inconsistency or exaggeration can rapidly erode it. (Kotler et al., 2021, p. 8) emphasise that "companies can change the direction of their business concept: from shareholder orientation to stakeholder focus." This shift implies that firms create long-term value by engaging all participants in the business ecosystem: employees, partners and customers alike. In industrial practice, such engagement is reflected in collaborative formats like co-development projects, where manufacturers and clients design customised solutions together. These initiatives demonstrate how empathy, authenticity and sustainability become tangible aspects of the H2H philosophy. However, the assumption that these values naturally translate into measurable performance deserves scrutiny. While Kotler and colleagues portray H2H as universally applicable, their framework remains largely conceptual and leaves open how firms can maintain authenticity once human interaction is filtered through automated processes or standardised communication. Digitalisation deepens this tension. It offers efficiency and global reach, yet it can depersonalise relationships that historically relied on proximity and trust. The H2H model recognises digitalisation as an enabler of interaction but does not fully explain how relational authenticity can be preserved. This ambiguity is particularly evident in the machine-tools industry, where digital platforms now complement traditional customer visits and trade-fair meetings. The key question is not whether digital tools will replace human interaction, but how they change its character. For instance, when a salesperson maintains customer contact mainly through online meetings, does this create

more continuous communication or risk losing the personal dialogue that builds long-term trust? This unresolved tension illustrates why H2H remains more interpretive than prescriptive as it outlines guiding principles for interaction but offers limited clarity on how these unfold in complex industrial systems. Cultural variation adds another layer of complexity. Kotler et al. (2023) acknowledge that empathy and trust manifest differently across societies, yet cultural diversity is treated as a background factor rather than an integral element of their framework. In global industries such as machine-tools, however, relational expectations differ substantially. A German buyer may interpret trust through demonstrated precision and adherence to timelines, whereas a Japanese customer may value long-term reliability and personal consistency. These nuances suggest that H2H cannot be applied as a universal formula, instead it must be understood as a flexible orientation that interacts with local business culture and communication norms.

H2H Marketing should therefore be viewed as an evolution of relationship and B2B marketing rather than a replacement. It extends earlier relational theories by integrating stakeholder orientation into strategic practice, yet its open and normative nature invites debate about its concrete implementation. The following table 12 summarises this conceptual shift, from transactional and product-focused approaches toward a more human-centred paradigm, illustrating how the philosophical foundations of marketing have progressively moved closer to the individual level of interaction.

Aspect	B2B Marketing	H2H Marketing	Sources
Trust	Grounded in rational factors such as reliability, technical expertise and contractual fulfillment.	Encompasses both rational and emotional dimensions, emphasizing authenticity, empathy and shared human experiences.	Grönroos (1994); Morgan & Hunt (1994); Kemp et al. (2018);
Relationship Focus	Relationships viewed as strategic assets, with a primary focus on economic value and operational efficiency.	Relationships are humanized, focusing on emotional connection, shared values and mutual growth.	Morgan & Hunt (1994); Grönroos (1994); Kotler, Pförtsch, & Sponholz (2021).
Communication Style	Formal, technical, and centered on organizational objectives.	Conversational, transparent, and tailored to individual needs and emotions.	Fill (2011); Kotler, Pförtsch, & Sponholz (2021); Grönroos (1994).
Customer Role	Customers considered stakeholders within a business framework.	Customers are viewed as partners and individuals, fostering personal and collaborative relationships.	Karjaluoto et al. (2015); Kotler, Pförtsch, & Sponholz (2021).

Table 12: Evolution from B2B marketing to H2H marketing (author)

By positioning empathy, authenticity and trust at the centre of marketing activities, H2H offers a valuable interpretive lens for understanding industrial relationships in high-value, multi-stakeholder environments such as machine-tools. Nevertheless, it also exposes areas that remain conceptually ambiguous. The framework assumes that firms can put empathy into practice and communicate authentically at scale, but there is little empirical evidence showing how companies actually do this in reality. In industries where sales cycles are long and interactions increasingly hybrid, it remains uncertain how companies balance digital efficiency with human connection and how different cultures interpret the sincerity of such exchanges in the machine-tools industry.

Consequently, the discussion of H2H Marketing invites closer examination of the communication context itself. With the conceptual evolution from transactional to human-centred marketing now established, the following section turns to the mechanisms through which this interaction occurs. It explores the marketing-communication and channel ecosystem, traditional and digital.

3.4. Communication channel ecosystem

The communication channel ecosystem in B2B contexts encompasses a diverse range of traditional, digital and emerging channels through which buyers gather and evaluate information. This section examines how actors in the industrial environment navigate this landscape, from established tools such as trade fairs to digital platforms including social media, as well as newer technologies such as AR and VR applications. Alongside these firm-controlled channels, third-party sources and word of mouth play a decisive role in shaping perceptions of credibility and trust. By examining the different communication channels that buyers use, this section illustrates the complexity of modern B2B communication and provides the basis for analysing how these channels matter in the machine-tools industry.

3.2. From Transactions to Networks: Relationship Marketing and the Centrality of Trust	3.3. The Human to Human (H2H) Marketing Approach	3.4. Communication Channel Ecosystem	3.5. B2B Purchasing Decisions: Models and Processes	3.6. Contextual Influences: Cultural and Generational Influences

Table 13: Overview of core themes focusing on section 3.4 (own creation)

3.4.1 Definition, scope and evolution of marketing communication

Before analysing specific communication channels, it is essential to clarify the definition and scope of marketing communication. Establishing this conceptual foundation provides a consistent frame of reference for interpreting how different channels function and interact within industrial settings, contexts where decision processes, stakeholder involvement and long investment horizons differ substantially from consumer markets. The question of what marketing communication does and how it contributes to relationship building therefore requires closer examination of how scholars have conceptualised it over time.

The role of marketing communication in shaping customer relationships has been widely discussed, though authors differ in emphasis and scope Rėklaitis and Pilelienė (2019) describe marketing communication as “an essential tool used in every company’s strategy in order to be successful in terms of reaching customers, to inform, attract and persuade them” (p. 74). Their definition focuses on communication as a way to influence behaviour and achieve strategic goals,

but it still reflects a mainly one-way and transactional view. The verbs “inform, attract and persuade” suggest that the company communicates while the customer reacts. Although this perspective remains relevant for promotional activities, it does not fully reflect the interactive nature of today’s industrial markets. In sectors such as machine-tools, persuasion alone is rarely sufficient. Buyers assess suppliers not only through measurable factors such as precision and service quality, but also through the interpersonal confidence that develops over time. Rėklaitis and Pilelienė’s definition therefore offers a useful starting point but overlooks the importance of dialogue and trust as essential conditions for effective communication in B2B contexts, where the goal is often to build mutual understanding between technically oriented partners.

Building on this limitation, Porcu et al. (2012) propose that the purpose of marketing communication has shifted from “inform, persuade and remind” to “inform, listen and respond” (p. 315). Their argument reflects a broader disciplinary evolution, from transactional to relationship marketing, and recognises the growing importance of bidirectional exchange. Communication is reconceptualised as a conversation, where listening becomes as critical as speaking. This shift corresponds to technological and cultural change: firms are now expected to engage transparently and adapt messages dynamically. However, while Porcu’s model successfully captures the principle of interaction, it risks assuming that responsiveness is equally feasible across all sectors. In highly technical B2B environments, listening and responding require not only attentiveness but deep expertise and long-term relational continuity. For example, when a machine-tools customer raises a technical issue, “responding” often involves engineering consultation. Hence, while Porcu et al. (2012) extend the communicative paradigm, their framework may not fully accommodate the slower, more deliberative pace of industrial interaction.

A more transformative position is advanced by Pförtsch and Sponholz (2019) who argue that marketing should return to the center of value creation and take an active role in identifying and understanding complex, unresolved problems that drive innovation. They see marketing communication not as a supporting activity but as an essential part of how companies create value together with their customers. In the machine-tools industry, this idea is reflected in co-engineering practices, where suppliers and customers collaborate to develop

technical solutions. In such settings, communication is less about persuasion and more about exchanging knowledge and coordinating expertise, turning dialogue into a source of innovation. The same authors emphasise that successful communication strategies require marketing to “merge with the people involved” (Pförtsch & Sponholz, 2019, p. 10). This notion resonates with the H2H approach discussed earlier, situating communication as a human bridge that connects internal and external stakeholders. The argument implies that effective communication is inseparable from organisational culture: empathy and authenticity must be enacted through daily interactions rather than declared in campaigns. In industrial contexts, where cross-functional cooperation is essential, from R&D to after-sales service, this insight is particularly relevant. It can be interpreted to mean that communication competence within firms becomes a competitive capability.

Taken together, these perspectives show an unmistakable movement from persuasion to participation. Communication evolves from an instrument for delivering messages to a platform for relational value creation. Yet, despite this progress, existing research still tells us little about how participatory communication is used in manufacturing industries, where high complexity and large investments tend to limit how openly firms can communicate This conceptual tension underscores why further empirical investigation remains necessary.

Gilliland and Johnston (1997) describe marketing communication as a process that “transforms perceived value into loyalty in its various forms, from attitudinal to behavioural elements” (p. 20). Their view implies that when customers recognise the value a company provides, communication can play a role in strengthening their loyalty. However, in industries where performance is measurable, such as the machine-tools sector, this connection may be less predictable. Even when communication is clear and consistent, loyalty can decline if machines do not meet expectations. In such contexts, communication may function less as a driver of loyalty and more as a stabilising mechanism, for instance, by maintaining transparency when technical challenges or service issues occur. Extending to this, Hänninen and Karjaluoto (2017) frame marketing communication as a bridge connecting a customer’s past experiences, current interactions and future behaviour. This cyclical

interpretation recognises that industrial relationships are path-dependent: previous reliability informs present trust, which in turn shapes future decisions. Yet, their framework assumes a relatively stable environment. In practice, external factors, regulatory change or shifting economic conditions, can abruptly alter communication needs and content. Therefore, while Hänninen and Karjaluoto capture the continuity of industrial relationships, they may understate their volatility. The implication is that communication should be an adaptive mechanism that absorbs and interprets disruption.

From a more managerial standpoint, Karjaluoto et al. (2015) identify two core objectives of industrial marketing communication: “creating awareness and strengthening the brand” (p. 705). Although these remain essential, they appear increasingly limited in today’s industrial settings. Awareness and brand equity alone cannot sustain complex B2B relationships that depend on technical transparency and mutual trust. In machine-tools markets, for instance, communication must also educate stakeholders, translate engineering language into business implications. Moreover, as Hänninen and Karjaluoto (2017) note, effective communication should reflect “customer expectations regarding the interaction that takes place in the relationship” (p. 461). This suggests that communication is no longer supplier-led but co-constructed; it evolves according to the customer’s informational and relational needs.

The conceptualisations summarised in table 14 demonstrate how marketing communication has evolved from a narrow, function-driven activity aimed at persuasion and loyalty (Gilliland & Johnston, 1997) to a multidimensional and customer-centred process (Karjaluoto et al., 2015; Porcu et al., 2012). Early theories stressed message control and behavioural outcomes, later ones incorporated dialogue and brand reinforcement. The most recent perspectives extend this progression further, framing communication as an enabler of value creation and innovation through stakeholder collaboration (Pförtsch & Sponholz, 2019). Collectively, these shifts indicate that communication has moved from being an output of marketing strategy to becoming part of the strategic process itself.

Author(s)	Year	Definition / Conceptualisation
Gilliland & Johnston	1997	View marketing communication as a mechanism that transforms perceived customer value into different forms of loyalty, ranging from attitudinal commitment to behavioural outcomes.
Porcu et al.	2012	Emphasise a shift in communication objectives from one-way persuasion towards interactive processes, highlighting the importance of informing, listening, and responding to customers.
Karjaluoto et al.	2015	Outline two central aims of marketing communication in industrial firms: creating market awareness and reinforcing brand strength.
Hänninen & Karjaluoto	2017	Conceptualise marketing communication as a connecting element that links customers' past experiences with their present interactions and future purchasing behaviours.
Rėklaitis & Pilelienė	2019	Position marketing communication as a strategic tool for achieving business success by reaching customers and supporting the core objectives of informing, attracting, and persuading.
Pförtsch & Sponholz	2019	Argue that marketing communication should extend beyond promotion to contribute directly to value creation, problem-solving and innovation, requiring close engagement with employees, customers and partners.

Table 14: Definitions and conceptualisation of marketing communication (author)

From an industrial standpoint, this evolution repositions communication as both a relational and operational mechanism. It informs and builds trust while mediating between technological precision and human connection. Yet the practical translation of these principles remains insufficiently explored. How do industrial companies balance standardised technical documentation with personal communication? To what degree can digital platforms build the same level of trust that usually develops through direct, face-to-face contact? And how do different organisational cultures understand what it means to "listen" or "respond" when customer expectations differ across countries? These open questions show why further research is needed and highlight the ongoing uncertainty about how communication works before major purchasing decisions in complex B2B markets such as the machine-tools industry.

Marketing communication channels in B2B contexts have undergone a profound transformation, moving away from one-directional dissemination toward

multifaceted, interactive engagement (Adamson et al., 2012; Kotler et al., 2016). Early communication relied heavily on simple information-transfer approaches, using direct mail, telephone, fax, and trade journals, where information flowed from supplier to customer with little opportunity for feedback (Hidalgo, 2015). These methods reflected the transactional logic of their time: the objective was to reach as many potential buyers as possible, not to build enduring dialogue. Translating this into the machine-tools industry, these earlier stages of marketing communication reflected a production-oriented mindset, focused on efficiency and standardisation, but with limited attention to personal interaction or adaptability like targeted marketing communication. From today's perspective, such one-way communication appears narrow, as companies now look for more interactive forms of exchange that enable dialogue. The digital revolution fundamentally reconfigured this landscape, redefining how industrial firms communicate, listen and learn. At the same time, the growing reliance on web-based communication reflects an economic and organisational tension: digital content can be scaled and deployed at relatively low cost, making it an attractive substitute for real-time personal interaction, yet this efficiency may come at the risk of reducing relational depth, trust formation and perceived communication quality between industrial partners. Adamson et al. (2012) identified a growing diversity of sources used by industrial buyers, ranging from third-party reviews and professional networks to online forums, corporate websites and trade shows. This might indicate that firms must not only expand their presence across multiple platforms but also ensure that their messages remain consistent and trustworthy across them. Similarly, Kotler et al. (2016) categorised contemporary communication tools into owned media (e.g., websites, blogs, social channels), paid media (e.g., online advertising), and earned media (e.g., peer recommendations and media coverage). Their typology reflects an increasingly integrated and fluid communication environment in which customers simultaneously consume and create content across multiple touchpoints. From an industrial perspective, however, this expansion of communication channels introduces a structural tension. While web-based platforms allow firms to disseminate large volumes of information efficiently and at relatively low cost, they often replace rather than complement accessible, real-time personal interaction. In high-value and technically complex

transactions, such substitution risks weakening relational quality, trust development and the shared understanding that typically emerges through direct human exchange.

Despite such opportunities, digital adoption within B2B markets remains uneven. Rėklaitis and Pilelienė (2019) observe that while social media and digital platforms are gaining relevance, scepticism persists in technically intensive sectors such as machine-tools. The concern is twofold: whether digital media can effectively communicate complex technical solutions and whether they can replicate the relational depth built through personal contact. This hesitation reflects a wider structural question in B2B marketing: can the inherently human aspects of trust and commitment be mediated through technology? In the machine-tools industry, where investment decisions often involve multi-million-euro commitments and long service relationships, this question becomes critical. While online platforms can enhance transparency and information access, the extent to which they can sustain the relational quality traditionally achieved through personal contact remains uncertain and warrants further investigation.

A central challenge in this increasingly fragmented communication landscape lies in integrating traditional and digital tools coherently. Fill and Turnbull (2019) identify five foundational marketing communication instruments: advertising, sales promotion, personal selling, public relations and direct marketing, each historically tied to specific media. Digitalisation has blurred these boundaries, producing hybrid forms of interaction that require deliberate orchestration. Communication effectiveness therefore depends less on individual channels and more on how they are combined to create relational coherence, particularly in industries such as machine-tools, where complex technical information must be communicated. This challenge underpins the rationale for the present study.

Research shows that coordinating different communication channels remains a major challenge. Butkouskaya et al. (2023) found that in omnichannel environments, customer satisfaction depends less on the number of channels and more on three factors: consistency, interactivity and connectivity. Their study shows that consistent messages across touchpoints improve satisfaction, interactive communication increases perceived service quality and connectivity

helps information flow smoothly between platforms. This is highly relevant for industrial markets. In the machine-tools industry, where communication involves for example engineers, buyers and managers, linking these touchpoints consistently is key to being seen as reliable. Even technically correct information can damage trust if it is fragmented or inconsistent, which means that integration is an essential part of building relationships. Conti et al. (2023) examine how digitalisation is changing marketing by improving areas such as customer analysis. Their research shows that digital tools can make both strategy and daily operations more precise, but not all companies benefit in the same way. This suggests that success with hybrid communication depends less on having advanced technology and more on how well technology fits with a company's culture and way of working. In many industrial firms, especially those led by engineering logic, marketing still operates separately from other functions, which limits the ability to use digital tools to build stronger relationships. As a result, this implies that technical progress alone cannot replace the need for clear, consistent communication, highlighting the need for better understanding how communication channels can connect technological competence with human interaction, a key focus of this study.

The growing variety of communication channels has created new opportunities but also greater complexity. It remains unclear how industrial firms, particularly in the machine-tools sector, coordinate personal and digital channels to ensure they complement rather than replace each other, an issue that underscores the need for further investigation in this study. Recent findings by Butkouskaya et al. (2023) support this perspective, showing that satisfaction in omnichannel contexts depends on achieving coherence and synergy rather than mere diversification. This points toward a new managerial imperative: designing communication ecosystems that are not only technologically integrated but also humanly coherent. For the machine-tools industry, this raises the question of how digital communication can be combined with the trust and credibility created through personal contact.

The development of marketing communication channels shows progress but also raises questions. While digitalisation has increased interactivity, it remains unclear how this affects authenticity and human connection, especially among customers in SMEs. From an H2H perspective, it is still uncertain whether digital

tools complement or weaken personal interaction, making this an important focus for the present study.

Building on this foundation, the next section examines traditional and digital communication channels in greater depth, highlighting how each contributes to the broader ecosystem of industrial interaction.

3.4.2 Traditional and digital channels in B2B marketing

Integrating digital and traditional channels has become a central challenge in B2B marketing communication. While digitalisation expands reach and efficiency, industrial sectors like the machine-tools industry still rely on the personal relationships built through offline interaction. Studies by Hänninen and Karjaluoto (2017), Rėklaitis and Pilelienė (2019) and Taiminen and Karjaluoto (2015) show that tools such as blogs, forums and social networks enable collaboration and information exchange, yet many firms might still struggle to combine these with traditional methods. Understanding how this balance is achieved remains crucial for analysing communication in industrial markets. Although digital marketing communication (DMC) provides new possibilities, many industrial firms still make limited use of these tools (Karjaluoto et al., 2015). This hesitation may relate to the lack of sector-specific research and the strong role of traditional approaches. Over the past decade, however, technological progress and changing customer expectations have brought digital channels closer to industrial practice, prompting discussion about how established routines might evolve. Morokhova et al. (2023) highlight the increasing importance of, for example social media, but her focus on consumer markets leaves open how such tools function in more complex B2B settings like the machine-tools industry.

Despite the rise of digital channels, building trust and sustaining strong B2B relationships remains challenging. Mora-Cortez and Johnston (2020) found that digital channels often require more time to generate trust and engagement comparable to face-to-face interactions. Similarly, Murphy and Sashi (2018) show that different communication modes affect interactivity and relationship satisfaction in B2B settings: face-to-face remains most effective for trust-building and unfiltered feedback, while digital tools excel at efficiently

disseminating task-related information. Automated channels, such as email campaigns, offer scale and efficiency but may lack the relational depth required for long-term engagement, reinforcing the value of hybrid, context-specific strategies.

In the machine-tools industry, digital channels appear to complement rather than replace traditional communication, yet how this balance works in practice remains unclear. Tools such as virtual product configurators may help customers understand technical features, but it is uncertain whether they can build the same level of confidence as personal meetings or on-site demonstrations. For many SMEs, where purchasing decisions involve close collaboration and high investment risk, understanding how digital and personal interactions shape trust and decision-making is therefore an important question that needs to be further explored.

Historically, trade shows have served as essential networking hubs, enabling product demonstrations and fostering customer relationships (Hänninen & Karjaluoto, 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted these practices, forcing firms to experiment with digital alternatives such as webinars and online showcases, which offered interactive formats but only partially replicated the engagement of physical events. The German Machine Tools Builder's Association (2021b) reported that the absence of trade fairs significantly affected innovation communication and customer retention, accelerating the adoption of hybrid engagement strategies. Even post-pandemic, major exhibitions in Germany have struggled to regain pre-pandemic attendance (German Machine Tools Builder's Association, 2021b), indicating a structural shift in participation patterns.

The relevance of trade shows is therefore increasingly debated. A critical perspective is provided by Mora-Cortez et al. (2025), whose longitudinal case study of a major mining exhibition demonstrates that trade shows are undergoing a deeper transformation rather than a simple return to pre-pandemic norms. They identify three drivers of change: cultural expectations (e.g. inclusivity and professionalisation), commercial imperatives (e.g. measurable ROI and knowledge exchange), and digital integration (e.g. hybrid formats). While digital augmentation before, during and after events enhances continuity

and reach, the study emphasises that face-to-face encounters remain central to trust-building and social bonding. Exhibitors and attendees alike stressed that business relationships are ultimately conducted between people and that physical presence allows for informal exchanges and relational depth that digital tools cannot fully replicate. The authors conclude that the future relevance of trade shows depends less on replicating past practices and more on how effectively organizers, exhibitors and attendees align their expectations and co-create value across both physical and digital contexts. For the manufacturing industry, these findings raise questions about how trade shows continue to create value in a changing communication landscape. Large events such as EMO (Exposition Mondiale de la Machine-Outil) in Germany or JIMTOF (Japan International Machine Tool Fair) in Japan now combine live machine demonstrations with virtual tours and online presentations. It remains unclear whether such hybrid formats can recreate the same trust and personal connection that develop through direct technical discussions and on-site experience. This uncertainty underscores the need to better understand how trade shows support communication and relationship-building in industrial markets.

Digital tools can also enhance transparency and credibility. Hofacker et al. (2020) highlight the growing interconnectedness in B2B markets, where firms can engage in online discussions and share expertise. This is particularly relevant in the machine-tools industry, where detailed technical knowledge is often a decisive factor in purchasing decisions. Integrating digital and traditional channels remains a challenge. Doetzer and Pflaum (2021) show that digitalised information sharing improves supply chain flexibility, indirectly enhancing marketing communication through faster responsiveness and better decision-making. At the same time, traditional marketing channels remain indispensable for trust-building and long-term partnerships. While Doetzer and Pflaum (2021) emphasise operational benefits, their work does not fully address how digital tools can complement trust-building and relationship management, leaving room for further research. From an H2H marketing perspective, digitalization presents both opportunities and risks. Digital tools can provide deeper insights into customer needs and support more personalised, meaningful experiences. However, there is also a risk of depersonalisation, as automated processes

increasingly replace human decision-making (Pförtsch & Sponholz, 2019, p. 45).

In summary, the literature shows that the integration of digital and traditional channels continues to pose a central challenge in B2B marketing communication. While digitalisation has expanded efficiency and reach, its full potential is still constrained by sectoral reluctance and the enduring value of in-person encounters. As Murphy and Sashi (2018) emphasise, digital tools excel in distributing task-related information, yet face-to-face communication remains most effective for building trust and ensuring relational depth. Similarly, Mora-Cortez and Johnston (2020) underline that digital channels often require more time to foster engagement comparable to offline meetings, reinforcing the complementarity rather than substitution of the two approaches. The debate around the changing relevance of trade shows further illustrates this duality. While still effective for acquiring new customers and presenting innovations, their role for existing clients appears less pronounced. Mora-Cortez et al. (2025) highlight that exhibitions are not simply returning to pre-pandemic practices but undergoing structural transformation. Their findings show that while hybrid formats extend reach and continuity, the relational depth of physical presence remains irreplaceable. At the same time, digital platforms enable firms to share expertise and demonstrate technical competence, thereby complementing but not displacing offline trust-building efforts (Hofacker et al., 2020).

These arguments do not lead to fixed answers but point toward important questions for this research. Existing studies explain what different communication channels can achieve but offer little insight into how their combination or content make hybrid communication credible in complex, high-risk contexts. In the machine-tools industry, it remains unclear how digital touchpoints can best support early decision-making, how in-person demonstrations can be translated into convincing digital formats and where automated processes should give way to human judgement to maintain authenticity. These open questions justify the focus of the next subsection on one of the most dynamic and debated areas of B2B communication: social media.

3.4.3. Social media in B2B marketing communication

Appel et al. (2020) identify a growing trend of B2B firms integrating social media into their marketing strategies, recognising its potential to foster interaction and engagement. They argue that social media has evolved beyond a simple communication tool toward becoming a strategic driver of customer relationships and brand value. At the same time, its dual role as a professional and personal space challenges firms to rethink how they engage with their audiences, requiring more authenticity and openness to dialogue. Iankova et al. (2019) add that, compared with B2C firms, B2B companies still use social media less intensively and assign it lower strategic importance. Among the available platforms, LinkedIn stands out as the most relevant for professional exchange, while YouTube supports the integration of visual content such as product demonstrations or service explanations.

Translating these insights into the manufacturing and machine-tools industries raises several questions. How can firms use social media to communicate complex technical information without oversimplifying it? To what extent can platforms like LinkedIn and YouTube build credibility among SME buyers, who often rely on long-term relationships and detailed product knowledge? These questions are particularly relevant for this study to explore which communication channels are actually used before purchasing decisions are made and how they influence information gathering and evaluation in the machine-tools industry.

Building on this discussion, Rose et al. (2021) show that vendor-sponsored social media activities can strengthen trust and loyalty in B2B relationships. Their findings suggest that social media can serve as a promotional tool but also as a means of maintaining long-term professional relationships. Similar, Salonen et al. (2024) observe that platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn and YouTube enable a shift from one-way communication to two-way engagement, where relevant, authentic and even entertaining content can increase attention and interaction. However, in industrial markets such as manufacturing or machine-tools, these dynamics may not fully apply. Buyers might focus on technical accuracy, rather than emotional appeal, raising the question of how social media content can be adapted to meet these more rational and information-driven expectations.

Mero et al. (2023) provide one of the first comprehensive examinations of influencer marketing in B2B contexts, showing that influence is built primarily on expertise and trustworthiness rather than visibility or follower counts. Unlike B2C influencers, who often focus on reach and emotional appeal, B2B influencers are typically internal specialists or external experts. The study also broadens the understanding of influencer marketing beyond social media, demonstrating that B2B influence operates across multiple channels, including podcasts, webinars, white papers, videos and industry events. These formats enable firms to communicate complex topics and co-create content that enhances credibility and thought leadership. In sectors like manufacturing, this might involve engineers or service specialists sharing application insights through technical webinars or YouTube tutorials. However, while such practices hold promise, the authors note ongoing challenges in evaluating their impact and aligning influencer activity with long and complex industrial sales processes, issues that underscore the relevance of examining communication channel use in industries such as machine-tools.

This notion of expert-led influence connects closely to H2H marketing perspective discussed earlier. Within an H2H orientation, credibility is transmitted through personal authenticity and empathetic communication. B2B influencers, whether internal specialists or independent experts, act as human surrogates for organisational trust, translating technical complexity into relatable and experience-based insight. Their ability to convey competence while remaining approachable mirrors the H2H emphasis on authenticity and emotional assurance. In this sense, influencer communication can be interpreted as an applied form of H2H interaction, where human expertise becomes the medium through which firms build trust and sustain relational continuity in digital spaces.

Dahl et al. (2018) examine how different omni-channel touchpoints, such as personal conversations, email, online videos and social media, affect engagement in social cause campaigns. Their findings show that combining multiple channels yields stronger effects than relying on a single medium, with personal communication and online videos perceived as particularly effective. Although their research is set in a social-marketing context, the principle of integrating complementary touchpoints can be extended to industrial sectors,

where platforms like LinkedIn and YouTube similarly support both relational and technical communication.

Finally, Ignatow and Robinson (2017) argue that digital communication is increasingly shaped by two-way engagement, where social media platforms, user-generated content and online communities enable the co-creation of meaning. In such settings, credibility stems from relevance and skill.

Taken together, the reviewed studies suggest that social media can support trust-building in B2B contexts when it conveys expertise credibly and in line with professional expectations. Appel et al. (2020) describe social media as a strategic space for interaction and engagement, while Iankova et al. (2019) show that its use in B2B markets remains concentrated on LinkedIn and, to a lesser extent, YouTube. This suggests that industrial audiences value authority and verification more than reach. For the manufacturing and machine-tools industries, this raises the question of how digital content helps buyers reduce uncertainty before investment decisions. Rose et al. (2021) and Salonen et al. (2024) argue that vendor-sponsored interaction and authentic content can strengthen relationships, but it remains unclear which forms of digital evidence are most persuasive in complex B2B settings. Ignatow and Robinson (2017) emphasise co-creation, but confidentiality often limits how knowledge can be shared publicly. Mero et al. (2023) highlight the influence of expert-led communication, suggesting that specialists such as application engineers may act as stronger trust signals than corporate channels. Dahl et al. (2018) point to the value of integrating multiple touchpoints, which raises further questions about how digital and offline encounters should be sequenced to enhance credibility. Overall, the literature points toward interaction rather than promotion but leaves open how trust develops across different channels in technical B2B environments and which of them are really relevant for purchasing decisions. These gaps highlight the relevance of this study, which explores which communication channels are used by decision-makers in SMEs within the machine-tools industry and how these channels shape information gathering before purchase decisions.

3.4.4. The impact of third-party information and word of mouth

The discussion of social media channels has shown that while digital platforms

can increase visibility and engagement, their ability to generate trust in high-involvement B2B contexts remains uncertain. This leads to another key aspect of industrial communication: the influence of third-party information and word of mouth (WOM). Related to this is that in manufacturing industries decision-makers might seek reassurance from external sources before approaching a supplier.

WOM is typically generated by customers who are either very satisfied or dissatisfied with a product, though firms may also encourage it by inviting reviews or fostering online communities (Zhu & Zhang, 2010). As digitalisation has expanded communication opportunities (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015), traditional forms such as personal meetings, trade fairs and telephone calls continue to play a decisive role. In technically demanding B2B sectors, WOM is considered influential because it combines authenticity with perceived objectivity (Hänninen & Karjaluoto, 2017).

Even with the rise of virtual interaction, personal contact still matters. Face-to-face communication and direct calls foster trust during major purchasing decisions (Karjaluoto et al., 2015), and even in digital settings, interpersonal connection remains important (Zhu et al., 2012). WOM and third-party information are often seen as more credible than corporate messages (Ishii & Kikumori, 2023). In the machine-tools industry, where buyers must evaluate long-term performance, consultation with peers and experienced users forms part of the due-diligence process. Andersen (2015) reports that 86% of B2B buyers consider peer recommendations the most influential information source, while Durhamlane (2021) found that more than 80% of buyers share supplier-provided content internally, amplifying its effect.

These findings raise important questions for manufacturing SMEs regarding the role of third-party information in early-stage purchasing decisions. In particular, how industrial buyers interpret and trust peer opinions alongside formal supplier communication remains underexplored. Understanding how such external information sources influence channel use before major purchasing decisions in the machine-tools industry is central to this study.

Kotler et al. (2016) describe WOM as interpersonal communication perceived to be more impartial and trustworthy than corporate messaging. Its influence has

expanded in digital contexts, where a single endorsement can reach multiple decision-makers through network effects. Fill (2011) viewed WOM as spontaneous and organic, yet the spread of social media and professional platforms has transformed it into a strategically managed activity. On LinkedIn, for instance, professionals increasingly exchange supplier recommendations, shaping perceptions of credibility across networks that extend far beyond traditional business circles.

In industrial contexts where reliability and technical accuracy are highly valued, external validation can contribute to perceptions of credibility. Digital platforms may strengthen such signals, yet they also make it more difficult to distinguish genuine endorsements from corporate messaging. Ishii and Kikumori (2023) caution that in an era of information overload, interpersonal trust may become even more critical as a filter for credible communication. WOM in B2B environments differs significantly from consumer markets because purchasing decisions involve multiple stakeholders and substantial financial risk. Although user-generated content and influencer marketing can strengthen visibility, questions persist about confidentiality and credibility. Reflecting this shift, Marder et al. (2022) redefine B2B WOM as stakeholder-driven communication about firms or offerings, highlighting its growing strategic role in industrial marketing.

Taken together, these contributions indicate that WOM and third-party information compress complex technical and service judgments into seemingly independent signals that can foster trust. However, several assumptions remain untested in the machine-tools sector. If buyers perceive peer recommendations or LinkedIn case discussions as more credible than supplier claims, what type of third-party evidence holds the most weight for engineers or executives? If supplier-generated content is shared internally and reframed by employees (Durhamlane, 2021), how can companies make sure that when their videos, or case studies are shared by others, the original technical meaning and important details are not lost or misunderstood? And if, as Ishii and Kikumori (2023) suggest, interpersonal trust becomes more valuable under high information density, does a reference visit or in-person endorsement outweigh a digital review in high-risk investment contexts or can digital testimonies achieve comparable credibility when combined with live demonstrations?

At the same time, the mechanisms through which third-party signals generate trust in complex industrial settings remain insufficiently understood. The boundary between authentic recommendation and managed advocacy (Zhu & Zhang, 2010) is often indistinct and human interpretation continues to shape meaning despite digital mediation (Karjaluoto et al., 2015; Zhu et al., 2012). For the machine-tools industry, this ambiguity raises practical and cross-cultural questions: how should suppliers balance peer endorsements and digital case studies to support early evaluation without undermining authenticity? How do these practices differ between Germany and Japan and how far can firms actively stimulate WOM before credibility declines?

Addressing these questions is essential to understanding how third-party information and interpersonal exchange shape perceptions of reliability before purchase decisions. Building on these reflections, the next section turns to emerging trends and future directions in marketing communication.

3.4.5. Emerging trends and future directions

The growing importance of digital communication channels in B2B marketing reflects a broader transformation in how companies connect and exchange knowledge. Artificial intelligence (AI) has been identified as a key driver of this shift because of its ability to process vast datasets and generate insights that support more precise sales strategies and customer engagement (Paschen et al., 2019; Paschen et al., 2020). Kotler et al. (2021) note that AI-driven applications such as chatbots and natural language processing (NLP) systems are increasingly used to initiate contact and guide potential customers through the early stages of interaction. These systems promise scalability and efficiency through personalization and automation. Yet, their use in industrial markets raises questions about whether automated interaction can genuinely replace the relational sensitivity required in complex, high-value sales.

Paschen et al. (2019) extend this discussion by showing how AI enables firms to analyze unstructured data from digital channels to identify preferences, and predict behaviors. For manufacturing firms, this ability could theoretically support early recognition of customer needs or emerging technological interests. However, it remains uncertain how such data-driven insights can be

translated into credible, trust-based communication in sectors like the machine-tools industry, where purchase decisions depend long-term reliability rather than short-term engagement. Augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) further enrich this evolving communication landscape. Wieland et al. (2024) emphasize their potential to create immersive environments for remote engagement, visualization and training. AR can overlay technical data during demonstrations, while VR simulations allow customers to experience machine performance before purchase. These technologies may bridge the gap between digital efficiency and the tactile assurance traditionally achieved through factory visits. Yet, their practical use in industrial markets remains limited, often constrained by cost, Madan and Rosca (2022) identify a general trend toward digital-first marketing strategies, but their focus on consumer contexts leaves open how such tools might be adapted to B2B environments where evaluation processes are slower and more evidence-driven.

Adding another perspective, Bowers et al. (2024) introduce the concept of echoverse marketing, describing how meaning is continuously co-created among multiple actors across digital environments. This view represents a shift from controlled, one-way communication to multidirectional, interactive engagement that unfolds through online communities and professional networks. In industrial contexts, this could translate into knowledge-sharing ecosystems where engineers and customers exchange insights across platforms like LinkedIn or specialized technical forums. Yet, whether such decentralized communication enhances trust or instead complicates information reliability remains an open question.

Taken together, recent studies show that while digital technologies such as AI, AR/VR and networked platforms expand communication possibilities for B2B firms, they also introduce new uncertainties. For the manufacturing and machine-tools industries, particularly among SMEs, the key question is how these tools can be meaningfully integrated into communication strategies that preserve credibility and trust before purchase decisions. Addressing this balance provides a central rationale for this study. Within this transformation, big data analytics plays a crucial role. Davenport et al. (2020) show that real-time insights enable firms to segment audiences, personalise content and therefore refine multi-channel strategies. While such data-driven approaches

can improve efficiency and targeting, they also raise critical questions: does personalisation risk weakening the relational side of B2B communication, and can analytics substitute for the credibility built through expertise and personal contact?

Viewed collectively, the literature suggests that AI, AR/VR or big data offer new forms of interactivity, yet their application in industrial contexts remains exploratory. Paschen et al. (2019, 2020), Wieland et al. (2024), and Kotler et al. (2021) highlight the potential of AI and immersive tools, while Madan and Rosca (2022) note a shift toward digital-first strategies. Still, most research focuses on consumer markets, leaving open how such tools function in B2B environments where decision-making is more complex. For example, AI may accelerate outreach but not necessarily increase credibility with engineers, while AR/VR simulations can visualise performance but may not replace the trust built through on-site demonstrations. These uncertainties underline the need for further study. It can be assumed that for SMEs in manufacturing, the practical challenge lies in integrating new technologies into established routines without losing the human component that underpins trust. How can immersive demonstrations complement, rather than substitute, in-person evaluations and how can firms ensure that digital personalisation enhances rather than dilutes authenticity?

The review of the communication-channel ecosystem reveals that industrial marketing now spans a complex mix of traditional, digital and emerging tools. Offline formats remain vital for building trust and sharing tacit knowledge (Hänninen & Karjaluoto, 2017; Karjaluoto et al., 2015). Digital platforms expand reach and transparency (Hofacker et al., 2020; Doetzer & Pflaum, 2021), while social media and third-party validation can amplify credibility when aligned with buyer expectations (Ishii & Kikumori, 2023; Andersen, 2015; Kotler et al., 2016). Newer technologies enhance efficiency and interactivity (Paschen et al., 2020; Wieland et al., 2024; Davenport et al., 2020), but their adoption in machine-tools manufacturing remains selective.

The unresolved issue, therefore, is how they can be configured to create credible pre-purchase understanding in complex buying centres. Yet the literature remains unclear on how this orchestration works: which combinations of channels and timing guide engineers and procurement.

These open questions form the bridge to the next chapter, which examines B2B purchasing decision models and processes. By situating communication channels within structured buying stages and decision-making units (DMUs).

3.5. B2B purchasing decisions: models and processes

This thesis focuses on identifying which communication channels are used before purchasing machine-tools or automation solutions. To achieve this, it is necessary to examine the decision-making environments in which industrial buyers operate, since analysing how communication is embedded within these frameworks anchors the study in the operational realities of buyer behaviour.

3.2. From Transactions to Networks: Relationship Marketing and the Centrality of Trust	3.3. The Human to Human (H2H) Marketing Approach	3.4. Communication Channel Ecosystem	3.5. B2B Purchasing Decisions: Models and Processes	3.6. Contextual Influences: Cultural and Generational Influences

Table 15: Overview of core themes focusing on section 3.5 (author)

The purchasing decision-making process in B2B environments is inherently complex, often involving different stakeholders (Rėklaitis & Pilelienė, 2019). Organisational buying behaviour is seldom a single act but a structured, multi-step process influenced by internal and external factors (Brennan et al., 2020a). The classic framework of Webster and Wind (1972) continues to shape understanding of organisational purchasing behaviour. Their concept of the Decision-Making Unit (DMU) established purchasing as a collective process involving multiple roles, while Kotler et al. (2019) later refined these roles into categories such as initiators, users, influencers, deciders, approvers, buyers, and gatekeepers. Although analytically useful, this role-based clarity risks oversimplifying how influence actually operates. In technical industries, the boundaries between roles are often fluid, for instance, engineers who specify machine tolerances can indirectly determine the supplier long before formal approval stages begin. Thus, while the DMU model identifies who participates, it remains less clear about how influence evolves over time and how interpersonal trust and communication shape the decision flow.

For the manufacturing and machine-tools industries this lack of clarity is significant. Purchasing decisions in smaller organisations might be made by compact teams where technical and managerial responsibilities overlap. The same individual may act as user, influencer and approver, making communication flows less structured and more dependent on personal relationships. In such settings, trust signals and technical evidence circulate informally and asynchronously, often crossing hierarchical and departmental boundaries. Understanding how these exchanges unfold and how communication channels support or distort them, remains an open empirical question.

Contemporary research has moved beyond early transactional models toward more dynamic interpretations. Steward et al. (2019) describe seven conceptual shifts from economic transactions to relationship-driven, network-based, and increasingly digitalised processes. Decision-making is now seen as iterative, involving multiple stakeholders who move in and out of phases rather than progressing linearly through rational evaluation steps. This challenges the traditional assumption that industrial buyers make decisions based solely on objective cost-benefit comparisons (Fill, 2011). Palmatier and Steinhoff (2021) add that behavioural and relational dynamics play a growing role alongside economic factors.

Taken together, these perspectives position industrial purchasing as a relational and iterative process in which influence extends beyond formally defined DMU roles. While the DMU framework helps identify participants, it offers limited insight into how communication and trust shape influence over time, particularly in smaller manufacturing organisations with overlapping responsibilities. This limitation is especially apparent in technically complex industries such as machine-tools, highlighting the need for empirical investigation into how communication channels operate in practice.

3.5.1. Purchasing decision in the machine-tools industry

Machine-tools are significant capital investments, requiring evaluation of immediate performance as well as long-term reliability and integration with existing systems (Conrad, 2002). Criteria such as precision, production

capacity, scalability and compatibility with digital manufacturing technologies are central (Azevedo & Almeida, 2021). The shift toward automation and data-driven manufacturing adds further complexity, as buyers consider predictive maintenance and overall operational efficiency (Hamada, 2019). Read together, these contributions indicate that the machine-tools DMU evaluates the product itself and also the system around it like service infrastructure and upgrade paths, which means that communication must render systemic value legible not just machine specifications.

Both rational considerations and relationship-based views play a role, although their importance differs across situations. Long-term supplier relationships are often appreciated because they offer continuity and support (Hänninen & Karjaluoto, 2017). However, assuming that such relationships always lead to better outcomes can be misleading, especially when technological developments or cost advantages make alternative suppliers more attractive. This suggests that loyalty is not fixed but shaped by the specific circumstances in which decisions are made. Long-term relationships might help reduce uncertainty and make cooperation easier, but new technologies can make buyers reconsider their options. What remains unclear is how people within the DMU decide between staying with a trusted supplier or switching to a new solution and which kinds of evidence most influence that choice. Trust remains a key factor in supplier selection, particularly in capital-intensive industries where reliability and post-sales support are crucial (Hofacker et al., 2020). Mora-Cortez and Johnston (2020) argue that digital transformation has changed how trust develops, as virtual meetings and online demonstrations become more common. While digital tools such as online configurators and predictive maintenance platforms can increase transparency and efficiency (Steward et al., 2019), they may also create a more distant form of interaction if competence is not communicated through clear and verifiable information. The shift to predominantly digital communication during the pandemic highlighted this tension, as the absence of physical meetings raised questions about how trust and credibility can be established remotely. This points to the relevance of hybrid communication approaches. Different members of the DMU require different forms of reassurance: engineers may prioritise robust technical evidence and procurement may focus on comparability and risk management.

It is therefore unlikely that a single communication channel can meet all of these expectations.

Unlike large corporations with specialised procurement departments, SMEs rely on smaller teams that must consider technical, financial and most probably strategic factors simultaneously. Hamada (2019) adds that decision-makers' openness to innovation also affects purchasing behaviour. In a fast-changing industrial environment, SMEs must balance current production demands with future technological needs. This creates a communication challenge: messages that are too generic or overly sales-oriented might be unlikely to inspire confidence among smaller, experience-driven DMUs. What remains unclear in the existing literature is how suppliers can best combine digital tools (e.g., remote demonstrations) with offline encounters (e.g. test cuts, reference visits) so that each stakeholder's concerns are addressed in a logical order that builds shared confidence toward a final decision.

In summary, the machine-tools industry illustrates a wider issue in B2B purchasing research: while existing models clarify who participates in buying decisions and what criteria matter, they say little about how communication and trust signals circulate within the DMU or when digital and interpersonal proofs are most persuasive. The next section examines established purchasing models and process stages.

3.5.2. B2B Buying Process Models in Literature

Table 16 summarises key B2B buying process models, categorising them by their primary focus and theoretical contribution. Collectively, these frameworks trace the evolution of industrial purchasing from structured, transaction-oriented processes toward more dynamic and network-based decision-making. While these models do not explicitly examine communication, they offer valuable insight into how firms move through different stages of evaluation and commitment.

For this thesis, their relevance lies in providing a process-oriented lens through which communication can be interpreted: they help explain when and why different forms of information and trust become important, even if they do not specify how communication unfolds. The models thus provide a conceptual

foundation for analysing how communication channels might support different phases of decision-making, particularly in SMEs, where overlapping roles and limited resources make purchasing both faster and more interdependent.

These models illustrate how B2B purchasing decisions have evolved from structured, transaction-based processes to more complex, network-driven and digitally influenced decision-making. The Industrial Buying Process Model (Webster, 1965) and Buygrid Model (Robinson et al., 1967) represent early conceptualisations of the B2B purchasing process, where decisions were viewed as logical and sequential. Their value lies in clarifying stages, need recognition, supplier search, evaluation, selection and post-purchase, yet their linearity assumes stable information flows and clear role boundaries. In machine-tools buying, where engineering specifications can effectively pre-select suppliers, the same stages still occur but are often overlapped or revisited as new technical evidence and risk considerations emerge.

Later models introduced alternative perspectives that incorporated behavioural and relational influences. Sheth's Model of Industrial Buyer Behavior (Sheth, 1973) emphasised psychological and sociological drivers, acknowledging that internal conflicts and group dynamics shape outcomes as much as price or performance. The Industrial Market Response Model (Choffray & Lilien, 1978) shifted attention from intra-organisational processes to supplier activity, highlighting how targeted marketing efforts influence choice. Read from a machine-tools lens, these contributions imply that supplier behaviour does not merely "feed" a rational process but reconfigures it by altering perceived risk and expanding feasible sets.

Model	Key Concept	Theme	Relevance to B2B Decision Making
Industrial Buying Process Model (Webster, 1965)	A stepweise model for organisational purchasing, emphasising problem recognition, search and selection	Transaction	One of the earliest structured buying models, focusing on the formal stages of purchasing
Buygrid Model (Robinson et al, 1967)	Buying process categorized into new task, modified rebuy and straight rebuy; defines eight buying phases	Situations	Widely used in industrial marketing, providing a sutrcutured normative framework for purchasing decisions
Model of Industrial Buyer Behaviour (Sheth, 1973)	Psychological and sociological factors influence decision-making, inlcuding conflict resolution	Influences	Incorporates behavioral science into decision-making, recognizing the impact of group dynamics
Industrial Market Response Model (Choffray & Lilien, 1978)	Predicts buyer responses to supplier marketing efforts	Responses	Introduces supplier perspective, linking marketing activities to buyer behavior
Framework for Developing Buyer-Seller Relationships (Dwyer et al., 1987)	Buying as a relationship-building process from awarness to commitment	Relationships	Highlights trust, commitment and supplier engagement over time
Model of industrial Networks (Hakansson &Johanson, 1992)	Industrial purchasing decisions occur within a network of actors, activities and resources	Networks	Recognizes the interdependencies between buyers and suppliers
Customer Decision Journey (Edelmann & Singer, 2015)	Buying is non-linear and shaped by mulitple touchpoints, including digital engagement	Journeys	Modern approach emphasizing digital transformation in B2B marketing

Table 16: The evolution of B2B buying process models adapted from Steward et al. (2019) , p. 6 (author)

As the understanding of B2B purchasing evolved, researchers placed greater emphasis on long-term relationships and network dynamics. Dwyer et al. (1987) proposed a framework for developing buyer–seller relationships, foregrounding trust, commitment and supplier engagement. The Model of Industrial Networks (Hakansson & Johanson, 1992) further located decisions within a web of actors and stressing interdependencies. This network perspective is particularly salient in the machine-tools sector, where integration with existing systems, access to

service know-how and coordination with partners are co-determinants of purchase feasibility. In practice, buyers evaluate suppliers not only individually but as nodes within an operational ecosystem.

Edelman and Singer's (2015) Customer Decision Journey challenges the traditional linear view of purchasing by suggesting that B2B buyers move back and forth across multiple touchpoints in an iterative process. Rather than proceeding step by step, decision-makers revisit earlier stages as new information, needs or risks emerge. This perspective reflects the reality of modern industrial buying, where digital and personal interactions continuously overlap.

In the machine-tools industry, such non-linearity has clear implications. Communication strategies must be prepared for repetition and re-evaluation, as a single decision rarely follows a straight path. For example, an engineer might request new performance data after revising tolerance specifications, or a procurement manager might reopen cost discussions once lifecycle assumptions change. These loops reveal that communication cannot rely on one-time persuasion but must sustain engagement across time and channels. For SMEs, this dynamic is even more pronounced, as smaller teams often combine technical, financial and strategic roles within the same individuals. Thus, effective communication in such environments depends on maintaining continuity and transparency across these recurring interactions.

While traditional B2B purchasing models such as the as Buygrid (Robinson et.al., 1967) and Industrial Buyer Behaviour (Sheth,1973) provided structured approaches, they reflect a pre-digital era with limited communication channels. Contemporary B2B processes are increasingly nonlinear, influenced by multiple touchpoints and digital platforms. Grewal et al. (2015) critically examine the Buygrid model's sequential structure, arguing that decision-making now consists of simultaneous processes of implementation, evaluation, reassessment, and confirmation rather than a strict step-by-step approach. They highlight the role of technological advancements and global procurement strategies in shifting power dynamics between buyers and sellers. For industrial communication, this interpretation is pivotal: it suggests that messaging should anticipate concurrency, different DMU actors needing different proofs at the

same time, rather than assuming a single orderly flow.

A key limitation of traditional buying models lies in their limited view of communication. Most were developed at a time when interaction was dominated by direct sales, trade fairs, printed materials and personal networks. Since then, the rise of social media and online content might have transformed how decision-makers search for information and verify suppliers particularly in the early stages of purchasing.

Even so, the structured logic of the Buygrid model remains valuable as an analytical framework. It helps to identify how different communication channels might influence specific stages of the buying process. In the context of machine-tools purchasing, this framework can clarify which types of evidence, such as technical videos, are most relevant at particular stages and for specific decision-making roles, without assuming that all buyers follow the same linear path.

Across these models, the literature explains who takes part in industrial buying and which stages are involved, but it says far less about how communication actually moves within the DMU, especially in today's non-linear, digitally supported decision processes. This gap is particularly relevant in capital-intensive industries such as machine-tools, where decisions involve multiple actors with different concerns. It remains uncertain which combinations of digital and offline channels most effectively reduce perceived risk for engineers, procurement professionals and executives at various points in the process. Likewise, we know little about how supplier-created content is reinterpreted and shared among peers inside the buying centre. Understanding these orchestration mechanisms, rather than assuming a simple linear process, defines the central research problem for this study, especially: how communication channels are selected and interpreted by decision-makers in the industrial purchasing process.

3.5.3. Behavioural and relational influence on decision-making

While early models of organisational buying assumed a largely rational and sequential decision-making process, more recent research highlights that B2B purchasing is shaped by behavioural, affective and relational influences that extend beyond purely logical evaluation (Ehret et al., 2024; Szwajlik, 2024).

Rational models offer analytical clarity by enabling transparent comparison and justification of alternatives. However, in complex technical contexts such as machine-tools procurement, decisions rarely follow a linear logic. Multiple stakeholders blur the boundary between rational evaluation and human judgement. In this sense, rational perspectives remain necessary but insufficient, explaining how firms should decide rather than how decisions are actually reached under conditions of uncertainty. Empirical research supports this broader view. Hofacker et al. (2020) demonstrate that purchasing outcomes are shaped not only by economic factors but also by behavioural dimensions such as trust and prior experience. Signals of supplier competence and integrity alter how risk is perceived. Importantly, trust does not replace evidence but it might shape its interpretation. In machine-tools procurement, a supplier's proven responsiveness during a spindle failure or retrofit can outweigh a minor performance difference on paper. Emotional factors add another layer of complexity. Kemp et al. (2018) show that feelings such as anxiety and excitement influence professional decision-making as much as rational considerations. From this perspective, emotions act as channels through which risk and reward are interpreted. For machine-tools suppliers, the challenge is to structure emotions. Relationship-centred strategies seek to integrate these rational, behavioural and emotional dynamics. Palmatier and Steinhoff (2021) argue that strong relationships improve coordination and reduce uncertainty, enhancing overall performance.

Seeking to capture how such dynamics evolve, Rutherford and Matthews (2024) propose a dynamic, iterative model of interaction stages: pre-interaction, initial contact, fit exploration and relationship alignment. The model's strength lies in acknowledging iteration and the interplay between technical validation and relational trust. Even within this framework, timing across the DMU can remain asynchronous: engineers may evaluate fit while procurement is still validating supplier viability, and executives may defer approval until financial cycles align. For suppliers, this means communication must be layered and sequenced across time, delivering technical validation early to engineers, cost justification later to procurement and strategic reassurance to management.

Brand reputation adds another influential factor. Maulana et al. (2023) find that trust and brand perception strongly shape purchasing behaviour, particularly in

micro-enterprises and SMEs. When resources and evaluation capacity are limited, brand familiarity serves as a proxy for reliability. In machine-tools SMEs, this effect may be particularly important: a trusted brand can make initial engagement easier, but it does not remove the need for careful technical evaluation. Instead, it opens the door for evaluation. The challenge lies in maintaining this balance by using brand trust as an entry point without allowing it to shortcut the necessary technical and service assessments.

Bringing these strands together, purchasing in the machine-tools industry emerges as a structured yet fluid process in which rational criteria and brand perceptions intersect. Classic models such as Buygrid (Robinson et.al., 1967) and Industrial Buyer Behaviour (Sheth,1973) provide a durable foundation, yet, as shown earlier, they do not fully account for the iterative, networked and digitally mediated realities of modern industrial buying. In practice, multiple stakeholders interact through overlapping roles.

The central implication is that communication channels do not act independently, their impact depends on how they align with the distinct concerns and risk perceptions of each DMU role. Trust and confidence emerge not from individual messages but from the orchestration of evidence across time and touchpoints. In machine-tools purchasing, a central question remains: how should digital and offline communication be combined to build trust across different roles in the DMU? Closely linked to this is when and how specific forms of evidence most effectively reduce perceived risk. Addressing these questions leads to understanding of how communication transforms initial interest into confident supplier commitment.

This section outlined how B2B purchasing unfolds through non-linear, multi-role processes and raised questions about how evidence and messages are orchestrated across the DMU. The next section turns to contextual influences discussed in the literature, culture and generation, that might shape information preferences and the selection and interpretation of communication channels in industrial buying.

3.6. Contextual influences: cultural and generational influences

Understanding which communication channels influence purchasing decisions requires attention to decision-making processes and also to the contextual conditions in which they occur. In the machine-tools industry, high capital intensity, technological complexity and long product lifecycles create communication requirements distinct from other B2B markets. National cultures shape expectations of trust and relational conduct, while generational change introduces contrasting preferences between digital-first and traditional approaches. These moderators reshape how channels are interpreted and valued in purchasing. This section introduces the final theme of the literature review, building on the earlier discussions of relationship marketing and trust (Section 3.2.), human-to-human marketing (Section 3.3.), the communication channel ecosystem (Section 3.4.), and B2B purchasing decisions (Section 3.5.)

3.2. From Transactions to Networks: Relationship Marketing and the Centrality of Trust	3.3. The Human to Human (H2H) Marketing Approach	3.4. Communication Channel Ecosystem	3.5. B2B Purchasing Decisions: Models and Processes	3.6. Contextual Influences: Cultural and Generational Influences

Table 17: Overview of core themes focusing on section 3.6 (own creation)

These orientations help explain how decision-makers in Germany and Japan approach communication in industrial contexts, yet they must be viewed critically. Hall's (1977) distinction between high-context and low-context cultures remains useful as a starting point, but it only partly reflects today's business realities. Globalisation and digitalisation have blurred cultural boundaries, introducing new ways of sharing information and building trust.

For example, in Japan, traditional business interactions still rely on hierarchy and implicit understanding, yet digital tools such as online platforms and data dashboards have made communication more structured and transparent. In Germany, decision-making has long been guided by directness and detailed documentation but increasing international collaboration and the use of digital channels have also encouraged more adaptive and relational communication

styles.

In the machine-tools industry, these shifts are visible when comparing how SMEs interact with potential customers: German firms may focus on detailed technical data sheets and performance comparisons, while Japanese firms may prioritise relationship continuity and service reliability. This suggests that cultural frameworks are no longer fixed categories but evolving practices shaped by context and technology.

Beyond Hall's framework, Hofstede et al. (2010) provide additional dimensions for analysing cultural distinctions, including individualism versus collectivism and uncertainty avoidance. Germany, characterised by a more individualistic and low-uncertainty-avoidance culture, tends to prioritise autonomy in decision-making, risk assessment based on quantifiable data and clearly defined processes. In contrast, Japan, with its collectivist and high-uncertainty-avoidance tendencies, favours long-term relationships, incremental decision-making, and an emphasis on minimising risks through deep trust and supplier reliability. In machine-tools contexts, this might mean that German buying centres prefer standardised, auditable evidence, whereas Japanese buying centres attach additional value to phased trials and service continuity.

These theories help explain why communication styles differ across cultures, but they offer little insight into how culturally shaped preferences interact with modern digital tools and personal interactions over time. This gap raises important practical questions central to this study: Which combinations of communication channels most effectively reduce perceived risk for different roles within German and Japanese buying centres? How can the tone and level of detail in digital materials be adjusted so that they remain clear and credible in Germany and Japan? And when does human interaction need to complement digital communication to turn initial interest into a confident purchasing decision in complex machine-tools investments?

3.6.1. Cultural influences on communication channels in Germany and Japan

Cultural distinctions significantly shape communication preferences, influencing how businesses engage in B2B marketing across national contexts. While

existing research, such as that by Lim and Urakami J. (2019), provides valuable insight into broad tendencies, its industry transferability remains uncertain. Their study highlights that Germans, as representatives of low-context cultures, favour direct and explicit communication, whereas Japanese communication, rooted in high-context norms, often relies on images and non-verbal cues. Because their evidence is drawn largely from students as research participants, it should be applied to high-stakes industrial purchasing with caution. However, the main ideas might still align with what is observed in real-world practice within the machine-tools industry. The main strength of Lim and Urakami (2019) lies in the clarity of their theoretical direction, while their limitation is the lack of sector-specific detail. In the context of machine-tools communication, this suggests the need to combine clear technical evidence, such as technical details specifications, with relationship-building signals that fit cultural expectations, instead of focusing on only one of these aspects. Digital transformation has made cross-cultural communication more complex. Mora-Cortez and Johnston (2020) point out that when non-verbal cues are missing in digital exchanges, communication becomes more ambiguous for high-context cultures. Text-based tools such as email or chat can remove the social nuances that help build trust. This does not mean that digital tools do not work in Japan, but rather that their tone and format are crucial. For example, video calls can bring back visual and emotional cues that make interactions feel more personal. In contrast, German buyers may prefer clear and structured formats such as well-organised emails or data-based presentations that can be easily shared internally. In practice, the same digital platform can be perceived as credible or impersonal depending on how well it reflects the communication style and expectations of each culture.

The concept of cultural distance introduced by Rosenbloom and Larsen (2003) helps explain challenges in international B2B communication. Their work shows that differences between high- and low-context cultures influence how effectively messages are understood. German decision-makers often prefer clear, structured communication such as emails or detailed documents, while Japanese counterparts tend to value more personal exchanges, like phone calls, where subtle clarification and trust-building can take place. In the machine-tools industry, this means that technology alone cannot close these gaps. Communication should therefore combine both structured written materials for

clarity and personal conversations that help confirm understanding and align expectations. Rather than bridging cultural differences automatically, modern communication technologies may unintentionally amplify them. Lim and Urakami (2019) argue that digital media introduce new modes of self-expression, but underlying preferences persist. Hofstede et al. (2010) likewise warn that “the software of the machines may be globalized, but the software of the minds that use them is not” (p.391). This implies that simply adding platforms or automating outreach does not produce cross-cultural equivalence. For machine-tools suppliers, the strategic task is not digital access per se but digital alignment: formats that respect how credibility is constructed locally.

New technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) can help improve communication but also create new challenges. Paschen et al. (2020) suggest that AI could make communication more effective in high-context cultures by recognising non-verbal signals like tone of voice or facial expression. However, they also point out that these systems need culturally relevant data to work well. Without it, automation can make communication feel impersonal, especially in situations where relationships and subtle understanding matter. In industrial marketing AI tools should therefore support human interaction rather than replace it, for example, by helping to prepare meetings or organise information. In the machine-tools industry, an AI-generated summary of past service cases can be helpful, but it cannot replace the reassurance that comes from speaking directly with a knowledgeable service engineer. Yamamoto and Lloyd (2019) provide useful cultural insights by showing how Confucianism, Buddhism and Shintoism influence Japanese business behaviour through values such as long-term orientation, harmony and shared responsibility. They explain that *tatemae* (public façade) and *honne* (true intentions) shape communication practices: harmony is maintained in public, while genuine concerns are often expressed privately. Yet, their analysis remains mainly descriptive and less practical for understanding how such values play out in today’s digital, data-driven B2B settings. It warns against an overly technical approach to communication but offers little guidance on how digital efficiency and relational depth can be balanced in hybrid environments. A more contemporary angle is provided by Ashta and Stokes (2023), who contrasts Japan’s emphasis on harmony, risk aversion and long-term orientation with Europe’s openness to risk and

innovation. Ashta and Stokes (2023) reinforces this view by showing how empathy and cultural sensitivity shape effective interaction in intercultural industrial settings, particularly in Japan. In the machine-tools industry, these orientations often manifest as communication positioning: Japanese manufacturers and their customers may emphasise reliability and after-sales continuity, while European firms often highlight cutting-edge features and rapid ROI.

For the manufacturing and machine-tools industries, these insights imply that communication processes must balance openness with cultural sensitivity in order to sustain trust and avoid misunderstandings. In German and Japanese SME relationships, attention to how and when information is exchanged appears as important as the content itself, particularly in the development of trust-based dialogue across cultural contexts.

Despite the acknowledged importance of culturally informed communication in industrial B2B relationships, its concrete application within the machine-tools industry remains insufficiently specified. What remains unclear is which cultural differences in communication are most salient and how they can be effectively integrated into the design and sequencing of communication channels. This includes the question of how digital and interpersonal touchpoints can be combined to reduce perceived risk for German and Japanese decision-makers. Overall, while the literature offers valuable theoretical foundations, it provides limited guidance on how culture-specific cues translate into effective communication strategies in practice. Addressing this gap provides a clear rationale for examining how SMEs in the machine-tools industry use and combine communication channels prior to purchase decisions.

3.6.2. Culture, decision-making and the role of word-of-mouth

The work of de Mooij and Hofstede (2010) highlights that differences in cultural values, particularly individualism versus collectivism, power distance and uncertainty avoidance, shape how people process information. Rather than treating communication as a universal process, their analysis shows that its role varies across cultures: in individualistic, low-context environments such as Germany, clarity and factual accuracy are prioritised, while in collectivistic, high-

context environments such as Japan, relationship-building and harmony are central. These distinctions are especially relevant for industrial sectors like the machine-tools industry, where communication must balance technical transparency with relational sensitivity. For machine-tools producers operating across both markets, this raises an important question for the present study: how culturally embedded communication styles influence the selection and interpretation of marketing channels before major purchasing decisions.

Building on these cultural distinctions, it becomes clear that differences in communication style extend directly into how decision-makers evaluate information and assess credibility in B2B contexts. The effectiveness of marketing channels, and particularly of word-of-mouth, cannot be understood without considering how trust and authority are culturally defined.

The influence of WOM in decision-making appears particularly strong in high-context cultures such as Japan, where interpersonal trust and established networks shape how information is interpreted (Kikumori & Ishii, 2023). Their study shows that Japanese decision-makers often turn to WOM to reduce ambiguity, supported by a cultural preference for certainty and trusted sources. In comparison, German decision-makers, working within a lower-context and more individualistic environment, tend to place greater emphasis on transparency, direct communication and data-driven evaluations rather than relational ties. Money (2004) adds to this discussion by examining how WOM affects B2B loyalty and switching behaviour. He contrasts Japan's relationship-oriented business environment with the more efficiency-focused tendencies observed in low-context cultures. His findings indicate that long-term connections and interpersonal networks play a substantial role in Japanese business relationships, whereas considerations of performance and efficiency often carry more weight in lower-context settings.

However, these studies also point to a research gap relevant to this thesis: little is known about how culturally shaped communication patterns apply to industrial sectors such as the machine-tools industry, where a high level of technical understanding is essential. For SMEs in particular, understanding how decision-makers interpret and share recommendations across different cultural settings remains crucial for designing communication strategies that effectively build

trust before purchase decisions.

Decision-making in Japan often follows a collective, consensus-oriented process, as illustrated by Sagi (2015) discussion of the Ringi system. This participatory approach emphasises harmony and shared responsibility, with proposals moving through several layers of discussion and approval. Hofstede (2001) links these patterns to cultural preferences for group cohesion and structured hierarchy, while Nakane's (1972) work on Japan's vertical social order explains why coordination and relational alignment are central to organisational decision-making. Together, these perspectives help to contextualise the emphasis on long-term trust and coordinated action within Japanese management practices. However, this time-intensive decision-making style contrasts sharply with Germany's efficiency-driven approach, where hierarchical authority often facilitates faster, more direct decision-making (Rutherford & Matthews, 2024).

In Germany, decision-making is characterized by clarity and a preference for direct communication. Rutherford and Matthews (2024) notes that German decision-makers prioritize transparent exchanges and expect detailed information, valuing efficiency over relational depth. This aligns with Saeki and Horak (2014) findings, which reveal that German automakers emphasize technical competence and formalized processes over interpersonal trust. The use of online bidding platforms and structured procurement procedures illustrates Germany's preference for data-driven, quantifiable decision-making, contrasting with Japan's emphasis on trust-based, relationship-driven evaluations.

Trust plays a distinct but culturally shaped role in supplier–customer relationships. Saeki and Horak (2014) show that in Japan, extensive communication before a contract and the careful building of interpersonal trust are important elements of working with suppliers. This supports long-term cooperation but can also increase costs and lengthen decision-making. In contrast, German firms tend to rely more on structured evaluation processes that focus on demonstrable performance and conformity with required standards, which can make supplier selection more formalised and less dependent on interpersonal interaction.

These cultural contrasts illustrate the complexity of aligning marketing communication strategies with decision-making norms. Japanese customers may require extended pre-sales interaction and assurances of long-term commitment, while German customers might prioritize efficiency and measurable performance indicators. This highlights the need for adaptive marketing strategies that cater to these differing expectations.

Findings from Ishii and Kikumori (2023), Money (2004) and Saeki and Horak (2014) underscore the importance of culturally tailored marketing communication strategies. This raises critical questions about how digital communication channels can be integrated into a traditionally human-driven trust-building process. Hult et al. (2022) note that customer satisfaction is an important performance indicator across cultures, although the underlying drivers vary. In Japan, long-term relationships and consistent service are central, reflecting a cultural preference for stability and harmonious cooperation. In contrast, German decision-makers may focus more on whether agreed technical requirements are met and whether solutions perform reliably, reflecting a stronger orientation toward measurable results.

Modern communication technologies can improve efficiency and support faster decision-making, but they do not always capture the cultural subtleties that shape trust and word-of-mouth (WOM). Paschen et al. (2020) highlight that artificial intelligence (AI) may one day help interpret non-verbal signals, but such tools still lack the sensitivity needed to reproduce human trust unless they draw on culturally grounded insights. In high-context settings like Japan, where much communication relies on shared understanding and personal relationships, H2H engagement remains indispensable. Digital tools can assist, but they rarely replace the reassurance created through direct interaction.

Understanding how cultural norms shape decision-making and the use of WOM is essential for refining industrial marketing communication. Japanese business practice tends to be more relationship-oriented, while German firms often emphasise precision and efficiency, influencing how value and trust are communicated. However, it is still unclear which mix of peer recommendations and technical information most effectively builds pre-purchase confidence among German and Japanese SMEs in the machine-tools industry.

3.6.3. Generational differences in communication perceptions

Generational differences in the use of marketing communication channels have been identified across several studies, reflecting the combined effects of technological influences and socialization patterns. The study by Dorie and Loranger (2020) highlights clear distinctions across cohorts, with Baby Boomers remaining the least active across digital touchpoints, showing low engagement with mobile phones and social media while continuing to demonstrate strong spending power in brick-and-mortar settings. Generation X presents a balanced pattern, using all channels at expected frequencies and spending comparatively higher amounts in physical stores and through social media purchases. Xennials emerge as the most consistent multi-channel users, engaging frequently across mobile, tablet, computer, and store channels, reflecting their hybrid position between digital adoption and traditional preferences. Millennials, by contrast, display the highest reliance on mobile and social media for shopping activities, yet are less inclined to frequent physical stores or use tablets regularly. Their spending levels tend to be lower both online and in stores, which may mirror financial constraints and deal-seeking behaviour. Dorie and Loranger (2020) define Baby Boomers as those born between 1943 and 1960, Generation X between 1961 and 1976, Xennials as the micro-generation born from 1977 to 1983, and Millennials from 1984 to 2004. Xennials are described as a transitional group, blending traits of Generation X and Millennials due to their unique position at the advent of the internet and social media. Taken together, these findings illustrate that each generational cohort pursues distinct channel strategies, with younger groups gravitating towards mobile and social media, while older groups continue to rely more heavily on traditional or computer-based interactions (Dorie & Loranger, 2020).

These patterns are directionally useful but must be treated with care in industrial buying. Dorie and Loranger (2020) analyse retail behaviours; in B2B machine-tools contexts, cohort effects are filtered through role and firm procedures. In a typical DMU, mixed generations will co-exist. This suggests that platform preference is not a proxy for credibility: younger cohorts may find content on social or mobile, but trust in capital-intensive purchases still hinges on verifiable data, peer endorsements and service history. Practically, suppliers should tailor

format and depth to cohort tendencies without diluting evidence quality. The open question for this thesis is how generational preferences in Germany and Japan interact with cultural expectations to shape which messages and formats actually move multi-role buying centres toward pre-purchase confidence.

It should be noted that other authors define generational cohorts slightly differently, and the exact birth years vary across studies. However, by synthesizing the available definitions, the following table 18 was created to compare Generations X, Y, and Z in the context of marketing communication, providing a clearer overview

Aspect	Generation X (1965–1979)	Generation Y (1980–1994)	Generation Z (1995–2009)
Digital Habitus	Cautious, privacy-conscious, selective	Adaptive, collaborative, tech-integrated	Immersive, mobile-native, socially aware
Preferred Channels	Email, websites, forums	Social media, mobile apps, video platforms	TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, messaging apps
Content Style Preference	Informative, structured, credible	Visual, interactive, personalized	Short-form, authentic, fast-paced, meme-driven
Trust Factors	Authority, expertise, brand reputation	Peer reviews, influencer endorsements	Peer validation, transparency, social proof
Engagement Behavior	Passive browsing, long-form reading	Active sharing, commenting, short-form content	Real-time interaction, co-creation, viral trends
Marketing Tone	Professional, rational, detailed	Friendly, authentic, innovative	Relatable, humorous, socially conscious
Platform Usage	Desktop-heavy, traditional media	Mobile-first, social networks	Mobile-only, app-centric, video-first
Response to Ads	Skeptical, prefers organic content	Responsive to native ads and storytelling	Engages with branded content, creators, challenges

Table 18: Comparative overview of generations X, Y and Z in marketing communication (author)

Generational context has also been shown to significantly shape communication behaviours, largely driven by technological developments. Twenge (2010) emphasizes that each generation adopts distinct communication patterns, with television shaping the Silents and Boomers, the internet defining Generation X, and social media becoming central for Millennials and Generation Z. These technological shifts have accelerated generational turnover, producing faster

changes in how individuals interact and exchange information. Importantly, younger cohorts such as Generation Z display a preference for digital and social media engagement, often at the expense of face-to-face interaction, while still valuing empathy and meaningful connections in workplace settings. This underscores that communication preferences are not only culturally embedded but also generationally situated, offering an essential lens for understanding how different age groups approach marketing communication in B2B contexts (Balon, 2024; Twenge, 2010).

The value of this argument lies in showing how attention and message processing differ across generations, whether through mobile and social channels or in-person exchanges, and whether information is consumed in short or long form. However, applying these patterns directly to capital-intensive B2B markets is not straightforward. In the machine-tools industry, for instance, capturing attention is only the first step; credibility depends on technical verification and organisational approval. A short video might engage younger engineers, but final decisions might still rely on measurable proof such as tolerance data. Complementing this perspective, Zeng et al. (2025) highlight that generational differences extend beyond simple channel choice to include expectations of credibility and relationship quality. Younger generations, such as Generation Y and Generation Z, tend to rely more heavily on digital platforms, social media, and fast, flexible exchanges, reflecting their familiarity with and confidence in digital technologies. In contrast, older generations, including Baby Boomers and Generation X, demonstrate a stronger preference for traditional channels such as face-to-face meetings, telephone conversations and emails, which they associate with trust, reliability and personal interaction. Zeng et al. (2025) argue that to manage intergenerational dynamics, organisations need hybrid communication strategies that combine digital and traditional approaches to create more credible and effective exchanges.

In industrial buying, this approach offers both opportunities and risks. Its strength lies in flexibility, different formats could address diverse preferences, such as short mobile content for younger engineers and detailed reports for senior decision-makers. The risk lies in inconsistency, if tone or depth varies too much between channels, credibility may weaken. In the machine-tools sector, this could appear when digital enthusiasm meets technical scepticism during

formal reviews. A balanced solution may be to design concise digital materials that link to detailed evidence, ensuring all stakeholders access the same reliable information.

Aligned with these observations, Rillera Marzo (2023) stresses that intergenerational differences strongly shape communication preferences in the digital age. Elder generations tend to favour traditional channels such as face-to-face or written communication, while younger cohorts, who grew up with digital technology, display greater ease with electronic forms. These divergent preferences can often lead to misunderstandings, with younger users accustomed to immediacy and brevity, whereas older individuals may struggle with the rapid pace and evolving norms of digital interaction.

Understanding generational differences in communication preferences is important for analysing how industrial buyers use and combine communication channels. This is particularly relevant for this study, as participants represent different age groups. A central uncertainty remains, however: it is difficult to distinguish which differences in communication behaviour are genuinely generational and which may instead relate to organisational position or responsibility. As younger professionals progress into roles with greater decision-making authority, their familiarity with digital communication and expectations for faster, more interactive exchanges may influence how firms shape their marketing and relationship strategies.

Taken together, the reviewed literature provides a strong foundation but also shows what remains unclear for machine-tools SMEs in Germany and Japan. While trust and H2H interaction are well recognised, there is limited insight into how digital tools, peer input and personal contact should be coordinated for different roles within the decision-making unit. Existing models acknowledge that purchasing processes are iterative, yet they offer little guidance on how communication channels operate across cultural and generational contexts. What is needed is a clearer understanding of how media and human contact are combined to build pre-purchase confidence in the machine-tools sector. The next section outlines this research gap and introduces the propositions and themes that guide the empirical analysis.

3.7. Literature review conclusion and research gap

Before outlining the research gap and resulting research streams, the following summarises the key insights from each section of this literature review:

Relationship marketing and trust (Section 3.2)

Foundational work positions trust as the coordinating mechanism of durable B2B relationships (Grönroos, 1994, 1997; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Building on the Nordic and IMP traditions (Gummesson & Grönroos, 2012; Håkansson & Snehota, 2006), industrial marketing shifts attention from isolated exchanges to embedded networks, with recent scholars calling for renewed theorising (Gummerus et al., 2017). Industry studies further show the importance of interpersonal trust and long-term ties (Charterina et al., 2018; Hänninen & Karjaluoto, 2017). What remains insufficiently addressed is how this relational capital shapes pre-purchase channel use in long-cycle machine-tools decisions.

H2H marketing lens (Section 3.3)

H2H positions marketing as a human-centred and purpose-driven orientation (Kotler et al., 2021) that resonates with machine-tools purchasing, where sales and service actors support customers in navigating technological complexity and investment risk. Building on relationship marketing and interaction-based perspectives (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Grönroos, 2004; Håkansson & Snehota, 1995), H2H reframes communication around trust, empathy and shared meaning. However, the literature largely treats H2H as an overarching philosophy rather than an operational process (Ballantyne & Varey, 2006; Pförtsch & Sponholz, 2019). It offers limited insight into how authenticity and human cues materialise in technical communication or how digital and personal interaction should be orchestrated in multi-actor decision contexts. This raises a central question: how can human signals be embedded into channel use so that capital-intensive decisions appear both technically sound and interpersonally trustworthy?

Communication channel ecosystem (Section 3.4)

Existing research documents traditional, digital and emerging channels (Hänninen & Karjaluoto, 2017; Karjaluoto et al., 2015; Taiminen & Karjaluoto,

2015). Advances such as AI, data driven tools and immersive formats offer new possibilities but uneven adoption persists in B2B settings (Davenport et al., 2020; Paschen et al., 2019, 2020; Wieland et al., 2024). Third party perspectives and peer influence remain influential, including through online platforms (Appel et al., 2020). For machine-tools communication, the challenge is less the number of channels than how specific formats support different roles and how information moves through the DMU without losing nuance. The literature outlines available media but offers limited insight into how channels should be coordinated across stages and actors.

B2B purchasing decisions, models and processes (Section 3.5)

Classic models (Webster, 1965; Robinson et al., 1967; Sheth, 1973; Choffray & Lilien, 1978; Dwyer et al., 1987; Håkansson & Johanson, 1992) and more recent journey approaches (Grewal et al., 2015; Steward et al., 2019) highlight the non-linear nature of purchasing and the centrality of the DMU (Webster & Wind, 1972; Kotler et al., 2019; Brennan et al., 2020). What they address less clearly is how communication shapes early impressions, reduces uncertainty and influences initial supplier preference. This is particularly relevant for SMEs in Germany and Japan, where limited managerial capacity and risk sensitivity increase the importance of early cues.

Contextual influences: culture and generation (Section 3.6)

Cultural and generational research explains why signals are interpreted differently across groups (Hall, 1977; Hofstede et al., 2010; Lim & Urakami, 2019; Hult et al., 2022; Dorie & Loranger, 2020; Twenge, 2010; Zeng et al., 2025). In Germany, explicit detail and documentation tend to be prioritised, while in Japan, relational continuity and risk reduction carry greater weight. Younger cohorts prefer faster, digital communication, whereas senior actors often expect formal and comparable materials. Yet the practical implications for machine-tools purchasing remain underexplored, particularly how culture and generation jointly shape expectations for tone, evidence and personal interaction.

Across these five domains a common gap emerges. The literature explains why relationships matter and which communication formats exist, but provides far less insight into how decision makers in capital intensive industries actually

select and combine channels before commitment. Existing theories offer strong conceptual foundations but limited guidance on how credibility and trust develop in the early stages of industrial purchasing. Digital transformation has made hybrid communication central to relationship development, yet the operational implications of the H2H perspective in manufacturing remain insufficiently examined.

Similarly, while communication channels are well described, little is known about how industrial buyers sequence and integrate them for evaluation and risk reduction. Purchasing models outline actor roles but treat communication as background, and cultural and generational insights are rarely linked to channel use in practice. Taken together, this points to the need for a contextualised understanding of how communication channels are orchestrated, how trust and credibility emerge through Human to Human interaction and how cultural and generational factors influence these dynamics. This study addresses this gap by examining SME practices in Germany and Japan and by developing a framework that conceptualises the orchestration of digital and interpersonal communication through an H2H lens.

3.7.1. Research propositions and thematic research streams

Research Proposition 1: Communication channels in industrial purchasing Purchasing decision-makers in SMEs rely on multiple channels before committing to machine-tools or automation investments. These channels deliver technical knowledge and support trust-building, but their relative weight and ordering remain unclear. This study examines how decision-makers in Germany and Japan select, combine and prioritise channels, and why certain options are perceived as more relevant or reliable than others.

Research Aim 1: To investigate the marketing communication channels used by purchasing decision-makers in SMEs in Germany and Japan prior to a purchasing decision.

Research Proposition 2: Cultural and generational influences on communication preferences

Cultural norms and generational orientations shape how communication is interpreted and used. Germans tend to favour transparency and structured processes, Japanese emphasise relational trust and consensus-building. Younger cohorts lean toward digital communication, while senior managers often prefer more traditional, auditable exchanges. This study explores how these expectations intersect to condition channel selection and combination in industrial SMEs.

Research Aim 2: To examine the factors influencing how and why specific communication channels are selected, including contextual elements such as culture and generations

Research Proposition 3: Establishing an H2H marketing framework for industrial communication

H2H marketing stresses empathy, authenticity and trust, yet its structured application in industrial communication remains limited. In machine-tools, suppliers must balance digital efficiency with the relational depth of personal interaction. This study investigates how H2H principles can be translated into touchpoint-level practices and synthesised into an integrative framework, so that channel use and human cues jointly support defensible pre-purchase confidence.

Research Aim 3: To explore the role of Human-to-Human Marketing in building trust and guiding decision-making through communication channels.

Research Aim 4: To develop a human-to-human-based framework that explains how communication channels are orchestrated across the purchasing process and offers practical guidance for marketers and decision-makers to plan effective communication strategies across cultural and generational contexts.

The gaps identified in the literature highlight the need for an empirical approach that captures how decision-makers use communication channels in practice and how these choices contribute to supplier preference. To examine these dynamics within the context of machine-tools SMEs in Germany and Japan, the next chapter outlines the methodological design of this study. It explains the reasoning behind the chosen research paradigm, the use of a Grounded Theory approach and the procedures for data collection and analysis. By detailing how insights were generated and interpreted, Chapter 4 provides the foundation for understanding which communication channels are used, why they are selected and how they shape the purchasing process.

CHAPTER 4 – METHODOLOGY

4.1. Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to provide a comprehensive overview of the methodological choices made in addressing the research objectives of this study. The discussion begins by considering the ontological and epistemological positions that underpin the research and aligns these assumptions with the overall research aim and objectives. In particular, this chapter explains the choice of interpretivism as the guiding research philosophy. The rationale for adopting Grounded Theory as the core methodology is explored, highlighting its influence in shaping the research design and its suitability for the research problem.

Other sections of this chapter consider the strategic choices made in relation to the research sample, including criteria for participant selection and recruitment methods. The critical examination of the data collection processes is also presented, followed by a detailed account of the data analysis procedures used to interpret and draw conclusions from the data collected. Through these discussions, this chapter seeks to illustrate how each methodological decision contributed to the achievement of the overall research objectives and ensured the rigour and validity of the study's findings.

4.1.1. The researcher’s journey: From idea to research design

This study emerged from my long-standing professional experience in the machine-tools industry across Germany and Japan, particularly within marketing and communication roles. Ongoing digitalisation and the rapid expansion of communication channels repeatedly confronted me with a central question: which marketing communication channels truly matter for purchasing decision-makers and why? Divergent views across organisations, cultures and generations suggested that these assumptions required empirical investigation.

Although marketing communication and industrial decision-making are well established in the literature, I identified limited research focusing on SMEs in the machine-tools industry, particularly within a German-Japanese context. Given the economic significance of SMEs, this gap provided a clear rationale for the

study. I therefore set out to explore which marketing communication channels are used, and why, by purchasing decision-makers in SMEs in Germany and Japan when buying machine-tools or automation solutions, interpreting the findings through a Human-to-Human (H2H) marketing lens.

To address this under-researched and practice-driven topic, I adopted an exploratory Grounded Theory approach. This enabled insights to emerge from practitioners' lived experiences rather than from predefined models. During data collection, generational differences in communication preferences became evident, leading me to extend the participant group to include next-generation professionals in line with the iterative logic of Grounded Theory. This decision strengthened the analysis and supported a more nuanced understanding of both current and emerging communication practices.

4.2. Philosophical positioning

Before outlining the methodological framework of this study, it is essential to articulate the philosophical foundations that underpin the research. Every researcher approaches a study with implicit assumptions about what reality is, how it can be known, and how knowledge should be interpreted (Creswell, 2014; Myers, 2013). These philosophical beliefs are rarely neutral and shape what is considered valid knowledge and how the world is studied. Making them explicit provides a clear foundation for the choices made in the research design. Kuhn (1962) described these shared assumptions as paradigms, comprehensive worldviews that guide the way research is conceived and conducted. In this context, a research paradigm can be understood as a belief system or worldview that guides the investigator "not only in choice of method, but in ontological and epistemological fundamental ways" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 105). Building on this idea, Guba and Lincoln (1994) defined a paradigm as a basic belief system consisting of interconnected ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions that together determine how a researcher approaches reality. They further argued that such paradigms cannot be proven true in any absolute sense but derive their value from how coherently they align with the purpose and context of a particular study.

This study explores how decision-makers in SMEs in the machine-tools industry of Germany and Japan use and interpret communication channels before making investment decisions. Understanding these processes means exploring how people construct meaning within professional and cultural contexts. Consequently, a purely positivist orientation focused on measurable variables would be insufficient. Instead, the research aligns with a qualitative tradition grounded in interpretivism and constructivism, paradigms that view knowledge as contextual and co-created through human experience. The following section therefore first outlines these paradigms in general before connecting them to the specific philosophical stance adopted in this study.

4.2.1. Understanding interpretivism and constructivism

Interpretivism emerged in response to positivism's assumption that human and social phenomena can be studied using the same methods as the natural sciences. It draws on hermeneutics and phenomenology, emphasising the importance of understanding rather than explaining (Crotty, 2015). For interpretivists, reality is socially produced and understood through the perspectives of the people who experience it. The researcher's task is to explore these meanings and make sense of how individuals interpret their world within specific contexts.

Epistemologically, interpretivism views knowledge as emerging through interpretation and interaction. Understanding develops when the researcher engages with participants and interprets their perspectives within their social and cultural contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach positions the researcher as an instrument of understanding whose sensitivity to context and reflexivity are essential to the credibility of the findings. Knowledge is therefore seen as subjective and situated, dependent on how individuals make sense of their experiences (Myers, 2013). Reality is understood as a dynamic process that evolves through ongoing communication and interaction rather than a fixed structure waiting to be discovered. This view underlines that what is studied in social research are interpretations of experience that gain significance only within the settings and relationships from which they emerge. Recognising this, interpretivism calls for an inquiry process that respects multiplicity and

complexity while remaining transparent about the interpretive role of the researcher.

Hothersall (2019) reinforces this perspective by emphasising that interpretivist and social constructionist paradigms place human experience and understanding at the centre of knowledge creation, viewing knowledge as contextual and formed through social interaction. He contrasts this with positivist approaches that prioritise prediction and generalisation, arguing that such perspectives risk overlooking the relational and value-based dimensions of human inquiry. By framing knowledge as negotiated and contingent, Hothersall (2019) draws attention to the complexity of meaning-making in social contexts, where understanding is never fixed but continuously constructed through dialogue. This standpoint resonates strongly with research into communication, as it highlights how meaning depends on the interaction between individuals and their environments. At the same time, his argument invites a more critical reflection: while acknowledging the situated nature of understanding, researchers must also recognise the challenge this poses for ensuring consistency and credibility across diverse contexts. In this sense, Hothersall's interpretation reinforces the interpretivist position that meaning and knowledge are inherently relational, yet it also calls for methodological rigour and reflexivity when exploring such evolving human constructs.

Closely related to interpretivism is constructivism, a worldview that emphasises the active role of people in creating and interpreting reality. While interpretivism focuses on understanding meaning, constructivism extends this idea by assuming that reality itself is formed through human interaction. Constructivist ontology therefore assumes that multiple realities exist, each shaped by the experiences and interpretations of individuals and groups (Charmaz, 2014a; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Reality is not external and waiting to be discovered but continuously produced and sustained through social processes.

Kaushik and Walsh (2019) explain constructivism as a paradigm that seeks to understand how individuals perceive and make sense of the world in which they live and work. According to their view, researchers build knowledge by relying on participants' perspectives and by analysing the subjective meanings that people assign to their experiences. Constructivist inquiry therefore begins with

lived realities and develops inductively toward broader conceptual understanding. It recognises that the researcher is part of the world being studied and that their interpretations contribute to the creation of meaning, which positions research as a collaborative process between all involved actors.

Guba and Lincoln (1994) describe constructivist ontology as relativist, meaning that reality exists in multiple forms depending on the perspectives of those who construct it, and its epistemology as transactional and subjectivist, as knowledge develops through the interaction between researcher and participant. Knowledge is therefore created as the study progresses, not discovered as an independent truth. Charmaz (2014a), in her constructivist interpretation of Grounded Theory, similarly views data and analysis as social constructions that reflect the shared interpretations of both researcher and participants. Constructivism thus treats inquiry as an interpretive process that generates situated and contextual understanding rather than universally objective explanations. Constructivism functions as both an ontological and an epistemological position. Ontologically, it recognises that reality is multiple and continually shaped through human experience. Epistemologically, it views knowledge as created through reflexive engagement and active interpretation. Slevitch (2011) points out that such inquiry relies on subjectivism, since meaning arises through the human capacity to interpret experiences. This means that what people know and understand is always shaped by their individual perceptions and the situations in which they find themselves. Bell et al. (2019) and Saunders et al. (2019) add that constructivism, in contrast to positivism, values the understanding of phenomena within their specific contexts instead of seeking generalisations across diverse settings. In other words, the goal is to explore how and why people make sense of reality in particular environments rather than to produce universal laws that apply to all cases. Lohse (2017) contributes an important philosophical complement by criticising overly abstract conceptions of ontology and calling for what he terms ontology in practice, which gains meaning when linked to actual research processes. This reasoning aligns with constructivism, as both emphasise the lived and situated nature of understanding. Nevertheless, this study does not adopt a pragmatist orientation, since pragmatism prioritises action and practical outcomes over the interpretation of meaning. The aim of the present research is not to determine

what works most efficiently but to explore how meaning and reality are constructed and communicated. In this regard, Lohse's argument supports the idea that ontology should be grounded in practice, while the constructivist and interpretivist orientation provides a more coherent and philosophically consistent foundation for this study.

4.2.2. Relationship and differences between interpretivism and constructivism

Interpretivism and constructivism share many basic assumptions and are often used together in qualitative research, although there are subtle differences between them. Interpretivism is mainly concerned with how knowledge is formed, while constructivism focuses on what reality is and how it comes into being (Crotty, 2015). Interpretivists aim to understand human experience by interpreting the meanings that people attach to their actions and surroundings. Constructivists go one step further by assuming that reality itself is created through these interpretations. In simple terms, interpretivism seeks to understand meaning, whereas constructivism explores how meaning shapes and defines reality.

Both perspectives reject the idea that knowledge can exist separately from the people who create it. Instead, they see the researcher and participants as working together to build understanding. Guba and Lincoln (1994) describe this as a close relationship in which the researcher is personally involved rather than a distant observer. Charmaz (2014) supports this view by explaining that a researcher's background, values and reflections become part of the process through which knowledge develops. The outcome is therefore not a neutral or fixed truth but an interpretive understanding of the social world.

Hothersall (2019) strengthens this perspective by grouping interpretivism, constructivism and social constructionism within a wider set of approaches that recognise knowledge as context-dependent and shaped by interaction. He highlights that language, communication and reflection are central to how reality is created and understood. This demonstrates that interpretivism and constructivism do not oppose one another but complement each other within qualitative inquiry. Interpretivism explains how knowledge is gained through

understanding, while constructivism provides the foundation for how that understanding forms part of the reality being studied

To illustrate this relationship, Table 19 summarises the philosophical distinctions among positivism, interpretivism and constructivism.

Philosophical view	Ontology (Nature of Reality)	Epistemology (Nature of Knowledge)	Logic of inquiry	Purpose of research
Positivism	Objective, single reality independent of human perception	Knowledge discovered through measurement and observation	Deductive	Prediction and control
Interpretivism	Reality understood through subjective meaning	Knowledge gained through interpretation of participants' perspectives	Inductive	Understanding experience
Constructivism	Multiple, socially constructed realities	Knowledge co-created through reflexive interaction	Inductive or abductive	Co-construction of meaning

Table 19: Overview of philosophical distinctions among positivism, interpretivism and constructivism (author)

Thus, constructivism extends interpretivism by making explicit the relational nature of reality and knowledge. Both reject the notion of objective truth, but constructivism adds the recognition that even understanding itself shapes the reality being studied. This distinction is important for this research because it examines how understanding and meaning are constructed through human communication within specific industrial contexts.

4.2.3. My philosophical position: A constructivist worldview informed by interpretivist principles

Based on these foundations, this study adopts a constructivist worldview that is informed by interpretivist principles. This means that the way we understand reality and the way we gain knowledge are closely connected. What we believe about the nature of reality shapes how we study it, and how we study it in turn influences what we believe reality to be.

From an ontological point of view, I assume that reality is not single or fixed but created in different ways by different people. Decision-makers interpret communication through their own professional roles, cultural backgrounds and personal experiences. As a result, there is no single correct way to communicate effectively. Each individual or group builds their own understanding of what

credibility and relevance mean in a given context. These understandings represent valid realities that reflect the diversity of perspectives within industrial and organisational environments.

From an epistemological point of view, I understand knowledge as something that is created together through interaction between researcher and participant. Insights develop through communication rather than being collected as isolated facts. The interviews in this study were therefore conducted as conversations that allowed meaning to emerge, evolve and be clarified through dialogue. In this process, I did not act as a neutral observer but as a partner in interpretation. My understanding was influenced by my professional background and experience within the industry context. Being aware of this influence is essential, which is why reflexivity was a key part of the research process.

Although certain scholars, such as Lohse (2017), Kaushik and Walsh (2019) and Hothersall (2019) discuss the relevance of pragmatist philosophy to social inquiry, pragmatism was not adopted here. Pragmatism emphasises practical outcomes and focuses on action and consequence rather than meaning and understanding. The purpose of this study, however, is to explore how meaning is constructed and how communication channels are perceived as credible by research participants. These objectives require an interpretive rather than an action-oriented paradigm. While elements of pragmatist thinking resonate with the applied nature of industrial research, pragmatism as a philosophical foundation does not align with the ontological and epistemological commitments of constructivist inquiry.

This constructivist and interpretivist stance fits closely with Charmaz's (2014) constructivist version of Grounded Theory, which sees both data and analysis as products of shared meaning between researcher and participants. It also connects naturally with the Human-to-Human (H2H) marketing approach that frames this thesis. In both research and marketing, understanding is created through genuine human interaction. Just as strong professional relationships depend on empathy and mutual understanding, meaningful research relies on dialogue and reflection between people. The H2H perspective therefore mirrors the assumptions of constructivism, where reality and knowledge are continuously co-created through communication and shared experience.

4.2.4. Reflexivity and the role of the researcher

Constructivist research views knowledge as something created through interaction, which makes reflexivity a central part of the research process. The researcher's position and experiences naturally influence how data are interpreted. Following Guba and Lincoln (1994), I maintained a reflexive approach throughout this study, recognising that my understanding developed through ongoing dialogue with participants and continuous engagement with the data. Memo writing, theoretical sampling and constant comparison, which are key elements of Grounded Theory, supported this process by helping me examine emerging meanings and remain attentive to new perspectives.

Slevitch (2011) explains that the difference between qualitative and quantitative research lies not only in their methods but also in how they justify knowledge. In constructivist research, credibility is built through coherence and the extent to which the findings reflect participants' realities. The value of this study therefore depends on the authenticity of its interpretations and the depth of its engagement with those who contributed to their experiences.

In summary, this study is based on a constructivist view of reality and an interpretivist view of knowledge. From an ontological perspective, it assumes that reality is shaped by people and their interactions within specific contexts. From an epistemological perspective, it recognises that knowledge develops through dialogue and interpretation between researcher and participant. This worldview fits well with the study's focus on Human-to-Human communication and the use of Constructivist Grounded Theory, which aims to build conceptual understanding step by step from the perspectives of those involved.

Interpretivism offers a way to understand how people create meaning, while constructivism explains how these meanings influence the realities in which they act. Together, they create a strong philosophical foundation for examining how decision-makers develop understanding through communication. This foundation also supports the qualitative, reflective and iterative approach that guides the following methodological steps.

Overall, the constructivist and interpretivist perspective reflects the essence of this research, which focuses on the human creation of meaning in professional environments. Just as meaningful professional relationships grow through

dialogue, knowledge in this study is developed through collaboration between researcher and participant. This philosophical position provides both the intellectual clarity and the ethical grounding for the methodology that follows.

4.3. Research methodology

Selecting an appropriate research methodology is a crucial step in ensuring that the research objectives can be addressed meaningfully. In this study, the focus on marketing communication channels in the machine-tools industry, specifically within the contexts of Germany and Japan, required an approach that could capture the depth and complexity of human perceptions and interactions. A purely quantitative design would have been too limited to reflect the nuanced motivations and cultural influences shaping how communication channels are used and why particular choices are made.

A qualitative approach was therefore chosen, as it enables exploration beyond measurable indicators to uncover the reasoning and interpretation behind participants' actions. It allows attention to context and lived experience, elements essential for understanding decision-making processes in industrial environments. Through qualitative inquiry, I was able to explore how individuals interpret communication in relation to their professional and cultural settings and to give voice to their personal experiences and perspectives.

When developing the methodology, I considered several qualitative approaches. However, the exploratory nature of my research required a method capable of generating new theoretical insights rather than testing existing assumptions. Grounded Theory emerged as the most suitable choice because it provides both flexibility and structure, allowing theory to develop directly from the data. Its iterative design made it possible to follow the emerging insights, to uncover patterns across cultural and generational contexts and to build a theory firmly grounded in the lived realities of participants. The following sections explain this rationale in greater detail and describe how Grounded Theory underpins the overall research design.

4.3.1. The rationale for qualitative research in this thesis

In industrial B2B marketing, understanding both behaviour and motivation is fundamental to explaining how communication channels are used and how they influence purchasing decisions. In the machine-tools industry, these channels are diverse and shaped by cultural and organisational factors that cannot be fully understood through surface-level observation or quantitative measurement

For these reasons, I selected a qualitative approach. It allowed me to explore which communication channels are used and why they are chosen and how the decision-making process unfolds in context. This approach provided the flexibility to follow emerging themes and adapt the focus as new insights developed during the research process. Qualitative inquiry is particularly suited to studies where meaning is central and where context strongly influences behaviour. It enables a depth of understanding that reflects the lived experiences of participants rather than abstract generalisations (Saunders et al., 2019). Through this approach, the study could capture the subtleties of communication in cross-cultural industrial settings. The qualitative design also ensured that the research remained responsive to participants' perspectives, allowing their voices to shape the development of categories and insights. This responsiveness is consistent with the interpretivist and constructivist foundations of the study and supports the overall aim of developing a theory that reflects how communication channels are understood and used in the machine-tools industry.

4.3.2. Qualitative research methodologies

In shaping this study, I reflected carefully on several qualitative methodologies, each offering distinct advantages and particular limitations. Narrative research, with its focus on collecting and analysing personal experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018), could have provided valuable insights into how individual decision-makers in the machine-tools industry experience marketing communication channels. However, its strength lies in reconstructing personal accounts in depth rather than developing broader conceptual frameworks. As my aim was to identify patterns that extend across companies and contexts, narrative research appeared too narrow in scope.

Phenomenology was also considered, as it seeks to explore how individuals perceive and make sense of lived experience (Giorgi, 2009). This approach could have illuminated how buyers experience and interpret communication channels in decision-making situations. Even so, phenomenology is primarily concerned with describing the essence of experience rather than explaining underlying social or organisational processes. While this contributes to a deeper understanding of meaning, it does not align with my objective of developing a theory that explains communication behaviour within an industrial setting.

Ethnography presented another possible path. By immersing the researcher in participants' social environments, ethnography enables rich insight into everyday practices, norms, and cultural meanings (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Given the cultural dimension of my research, this approach was initially appealing, as it could have revealed how contextual factors shape communication practices. However, ethnographic research typically requires prolonged and intensive field engagement, often involving sustained participation in daily organisational life. This level of immersion was not feasible for a study focused on professional decision-making across multiple SMEs, and it would have shifted the emphasis away from theory generation toward contextual description.

Case study methodology was also evaluated, as it supports in-depth exploration of phenomena within real-world contexts. It would have been possible to view Germany and Japan as two comparative cases, examining communication practices in each. Although this approach is flexible and accommodates multiple data sources, it is bound to clearly defined cases (Halaweh, 2012). This boundedness did not fit my intention to generate a broader theoretical explanation of communication behaviour across the machine-tools industry. Moreover, case studies tend to produce rich descriptions rather than abstract conceptual theory.

Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM), by contrast, provides systematic analytical procedures such as open, axial, and selective coding that move beyond description toward the development of explanatory categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Through this reflection, it became evident that while each of the other methodologies could have produced valuable insights, none matched

the exploratory and theory-building purpose of this study. The research required an approach capable of capturing complexity, reflecting cultural variation, and generating theory directly from participants' experiences. For these reasons, Grounded Theory emerged as the most appropriate methodological choice. The next section discusses GTM in more detail and explains its philosophical and methodological relevance for this study.

4.3.3. Grounded Theory - The methodology of this research

Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM) is a qualitative research approach designed to generate theory directly from empirical data. Originally developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), GTM was introduced as a response to the dominance of positivist paradigms that emphasised hypothesis testing and deductive reasoning. Instead of beginning with predefined theories, Glaser and Strauss proposed that theoretical understanding should emerge inductively through systematic engagement with data collected in the field. This innovation reshaped qualitative research by showing that strong and meaningful theories can arise from practice rather than be imposed on it.

At the core of GTM lies the iterative relationship between data collection and analysis, where each stage informs the other through a process of constant comparison. New data are continuously examined in light of existing categories, allowing concepts to evolve and reflect the underlying patterns in participants' accounts (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). These categories form the building blocks of a theory that remains grounded in the lived experiences of participants. Over time, GTM has developed into several schools of thought: Glaser (1978) emphasised an open and flexible approach that allows theory to emerge organically, while Corbin and Strauss (2015) proposed a more structured coding framework to ensure analytical depth and rigour. Later, Charmaz (2014b) offered a constructivist interpretation of Grounded Theory, emphasising the co-construction of data between researcher and participant and aligning closely with interpretivist philosophy and the acknowledgement of subjectivity in qualitative inquiry.

Theory building in the context of Grounded Theory refers to the systematic

development of conceptual explanations that account for patterns and relationships observed in the data. Rather than producing a mere summary of findings, the aim is to move from individual observations to a set of interconnected ideas that explain *how* and *why* phenomena occur. In this sense, theory building involves abstraction while remaining firmly rooted in empirical reality. The resulting theory does not claim universal truth but provides a conceptual framework that captures the complexity and variation of lived experience.

While both Grounded Theory and Thematic Analysis focus on identifying patterns within qualitative data, they differ in purpose and process. Thematic Analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), is a flexible method for organising and interpreting themes across data sets. It allows researchers to capture meaning and highlight patterns but does not necessarily aim to build explanatory theory. Braun and Clarke (2006) further clarify that Thematic Analysis should be viewed as a method rather than a methodology. It provides an analytic toolkit for identifying and reporting themes but does not include the iterative theoretical sampling, coding hierarchy or constant comparative logic that define Grounded Theory. By contrast, GTM moves toward theoretical integration, seeking to explain underlying social processes rather than merely describe them. For this reason, Grounded Theory was better suited to the aims of this study, which required generating new conceptual understanding about how and why communication channels are used.

This historical and methodological evolution of GTM is directly relevant to the present research. The objective of this study is to identify which marketing communication channels SMEs in the machine-tools industry in Germany and Japan use and also to explore why they are chosen and how human and cultural factors shape these decisions. To achieve this, an approach was required that could move beyond descriptive accounts and allow theoretical insights to emerge step by step from the data. GTM provides this flexibility through its iterative process, where data collection and analysis occur simultaneously, and where emerging categories guide further exploration. This cyclical movement between data and interpretation makes it possible to trace how meanings are constructed and to refine understanding as the research progresses.

Several features of Grounded Theory make it particularly appropriate for the objectives of this study:

- Theory generation: aligns with the goal of developing a framework that explains how and why communication channels are selected in complex B2B contexts.
- Iterative and adaptive design: supports exploration across cultural and generational settings, allowing insights to evolve from the data.
- Systematic coding procedures: ensure rigour and consistency so that emerging categories are grounded in evidence rather than anecdote.
- Focus on process and interaction: matches the study's interest in decision-making dynamics and the human aspects of communication in the machine-tools industry.

Taken together, the theoretical foundations and methodological strengths of Grounded Theory demonstrate why it provides the most suitable framework for this research. It combines analytical discipline with flexibility, allowing theory to develop inductively from participants' experiences. The resulting insights capture both the technological and relational complexity of industrial marketing communication. In the following section, the philosophical and practical relevance of Grounded Theory for achieving the research objectives is discussed in more detail

4.3.3.1. Purpose of Grounded Theory Methodology in relation to the research objectives

The Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM) aligns closely with the overall aim of this study, which is to explore which marketing communication channels are used, and why, by purchasing decision-makers in SMEs in Germany and Japan when acquiring machine tools or automation solutions, interpreted through the lens of Human-to-Human (H2H) marketing. Given the study's focus on accelerating communication dynamics and the moderating role of cultural and generational change, GTM provides a methodological approach that allows theory to emerge inductively from participants' lived experiences while remaining sensitive to contextual variation.

The first objective, which explores how emergent marketing communication channels influence SME purchasing decisions, requires an approach that captures observable patterns of channel engagement as they unfold in practice. GTM supports this through its inductive logic and systematic coding procedures, enabling the identification of how decision-makers combine traditional and emergent channels prior to a purchasing decision. This approach allows differences between current and next-generation decision-makers, as well as the influence of actors shaping speed, frequency and channel variety, to emerge directly from the data.

The second objective, which seeks to identify the drivers shaping how purchasing decision-makers evaluate and select marketing communication channels, demands close attention to interpretive frames such as trust, credibility and information depth. These evaluations are embedded within cultural and generational contexts and are shaped by expectations regarding appropriate supplier behaviour and interaction. GTM is well suited to this objective as it foregrounds social processes and relationships, allowing categories to evolve iteratively and ensuring that the emerging analysis reflects how communication channels are assessed and legitimised in real industrial settings.

The third objective focuses on empirically identifying and evaluating key influences on decision-makers within a changing communication landscape, with particular emphasis on antecedents underpinning the H2H concept. This objective highlights how human connection is experienced and sustained within increasingly digital interaction environments. GTM's emphasis on action, interaction and meaning enables the identification of these antecedents as they surface through participants' accounts, capturing how personal interaction and relational signals contribute to decision-making alongside technologically mediated communication.

The fourth objective, to develop a holistic framework that integrates marketing communication channels and H2H principles, requires both methodological rigour and interpretive sensitivity. GTM supports this through its structured yet flexible coding logic to link empirical observations with higher-level concepts. This process ensures that the resulting framework is firmly grounded in empirical

evidence while illustrating how critical antecedents shape the orchestration of communication channels across stages of the industrial buying process.

Overall, Grounded Theory provides the methodological foundation required to address all four research objectives. Its design supports the development of an empirically grounded explanation of complex communication behaviour in industrial contexts. It ensures that the findings remain closely connected to the lived experiences of SME decision-makers while enabling the development of a framework that contributes to both academic knowledge and industrial marketing practice.

4.3.3.2. Philosophical underpinning of GTM

One of the key strengths of Grounded Theory is its philosophical flexibility. It can be applied by researchers working within both positivist and interpretivist paradigms, as it accommodates different forms of data and can be adapted to either qualitative or mixed-method designs (Saunders et al., 2019). In this study, however, the interpretivist orientation of Grounded Theory provides the most appropriate foundation. The focus lies on understanding subjective experiences and the meanings attached to communication processes and interactions in the machine-tools industry.

Within the broad spectrum of Grounded Theory traditions, this study follows a constructivist interpretation. Constructivist Grounded Theory, as developed by Charmaz (2014), emphasises that data and analysis are co-created through interaction between researcher and participant. This perspective recognises that meaning does not exist independently but emerges through dialogue and interpretation. The researcher therefore becomes an active participant in the research process, shaping and being shaped by the evolving understanding of the phenomenon under study.

This constructivist stance aligns with the interpretivist paradigm described earlier, in which reality is viewed as context-bound and socially constructed (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). For this research, this philosophical grounding is particularly relevant because communication channels in industrial contexts are shaped by relational dynamics and guided by the shared values and expectations that define professional interaction.

Understanding how these meanings are created and negotiated requires sensitivity to the social and contextual dimensions of interaction rather than an assumption of objective truth.

Applying a constructivist form of Grounded Theory therefore meant approaching data collection and analysis as iterative and interpretive processes. Conversations with decision-makers and young professionals in the machine-tools industry provided insight not only into the channels they use but also into the reasoning and cultural framing behind those choices. Through repeated comparison, memo writing and theoretical sampling, understanding developed progressively as categories became refined and connections between them were established. The resulting theory reflects the lived experiences of participants and captures the relational and communicative processes through which meaning is constructed.

Acknowledging the role of the researcher in this process was an essential part of maintaining transparency and reflexivity. My professional experience in the industry and my cross-cultural background influenced how I interpreted data and engaged with participants. Constructivist GTM regards this influence as an integral component of co-creating understanding. By remaining reflexive and transparent throughout the process, I ensured that interpretations stayed close to participants' realities while also recognising the interpretive lens through which they were viewed.

Ultimately, this philosophical underpinning connects directly to the Human-to-Human (H2H) perspective that guides this research. Both constructivism and H2H thinking emphasise that meaning and knowledge are created through interaction. The same principles that define effective human communication in business relationships also shape the way understanding develops in qualitative inquiry. Adopting a constructivist interpretation of Grounded Theory therefore provided both the methodological flexibility and the philosophical depth required to capture the complexity of human communication in the industrial B2B context. It ensured that the theory generated reflects the data collected and the co-constructed nature of meaning within professional and cultural relationships.

4.3.3.3. Theoretical sampling and saturation

Theoretical sampling is a central principle of Grounded Theory and represents one of the key features that distinguish it from other qualitative methodologies. Originally introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and further developed by Corbin and Strauss (2015), it refers to a process in which data collection is guided by the evolving analysis rather than predetermined criteria. Instead of seeking statistical representativeness, theoretical sampling aims to refine and elaborate emerging categories so that each new participant or data source adds conceptual depth to the developing theory.

In this research, theoretical sampling was used to gather insights from purchasing decision-makers in SMEs within the machine-tools industry in Germany and Japan. Early interviews provided an initial understanding of how communication channels were perceived and used. As analysis progressed, these early insights informed subsequent sampling decisions. For instance, once recurring patterns began to emerge among senior decision-makers, the inclusion of younger professionals was intentionally pursued to expand the theoretical scope and to test whether generational perspectives influenced communication preferences. This gradual, responsive approach ensured that data collection remained conceptually focused and grounded in the realities of industrial practice.

The process of theoretical sampling also allowed continuous interaction between data collection and analysis. After each set of interviews, key themes and relationships were identified, compared and refined. These findings guided the next sampling stage, focusing on areas that required further clarification or offered potential for theoretical extension. This dynamic cycle of collecting, analysing and returning to the field exemplifies what Corbin and Strauss (2015) describe as the iterative nature of Grounded Theory, in which the developing theory progressively shapes the direction of inquiry.

A related concept is theoretical saturation, which refers to the point at which further data collection no longer yields new insights or variations within the categories being developed (Charmaz, 2014a). In this study, saturation was reached when interviews consistently confirmed the existing categories rather than extending them. For example, patterns concerning trust, channel credibility

and the role of personal contact recurred across both cultural contexts and professional hierarchies without introducing fundamentally new perspectives. At that stage, the categories were sufficiently rich and internally consistent to support theoretical integration.

Reaching saturation was understood as achieving conceptual completeness, meaning that the data sufficiently captured the variety and depth of participant experiences relevant to the research questions. This approach enhanced the credibility and transparency of the findings by ensuring that each emerging construct was examined in adequate detail and had reached a stable level of development before the analysis progressed.

In summary, theoretical sampling and saturation together provided the methodological rigour necessary to ensure that the resulting theory was firmly grounded in empirical data. By allowing analysis to guide data collection, these principles kept the study focused and theoretically rich. They also reflect the constructivist and interpretivist orientation of this research, in which understanding evolves through continuous interaction between researcher and participants.

4.3.3.4. Sense making and data interpretation

The process of sense-making in Grounded Theory involves moving step by step from raw data toward more abstract interpretations through continuous engagement with the material. In this study, sense-making followed the constructivist view that meaning emerges through interpretation and interaction. Each stage of data collection informed the next, allowing analytical insights to develop progressively rather than being established in advance.

Data interpretation began with open coding, during which interview transcripts were examined line by line to identify initial concepts that captured participants' experiences. These codes represented actions, perceptions and meanings related to the use of marketing communication channels. The intention at this stage was to remain close to participants' own language and to let meaning emerge inductively. Through constant comparison, these early codes were repeatedly evaluated in relation to new data, which refined existing categories and revealed emerging connections. This iterative process continued as

additional interviews were conducted, ensuring that patterns remained grounded in the experiences of industrial decision-makers.

As the analysis advanced, axial coding was applied to explore the relationships between categories and to identify underlying processes. This phase helped clarify how structural conditions such as company size, purchase complexity and interpersonal dynamics influenced communication behaviour. The next stage, selective coding, brought the developing categories together into a coherent theoretical structure, connecting the central concept of Human-to-Human communication to broader processes of trust-building and decision-making.

Throughout this analytical journey, memo writing served as a reflective and conceptual tool. Memos were used to document analytical insights and connections between categories. They supported the ongoing process of interpretation by recording how understanding developed and by tracing the my reasoning throughout the study. Through continuous engagement with these memos, descriptive observations were gradually transformed into theoretical interpretations.

Reflexivity played a central role in ensuring interpretive depth and transparency. My professional background in the machine-tools industry and cross-cultural experience provided both insight and responsibility. I remained attentive to how my perspective could shape interpretation and addressed this through systematic reflection and comparison with participants' narratives. By acknowledging my influence while striving for balance and clarity, I ensured that the analysis remained both authentic and contextually grounded.

Sense-making in this study therefore represents an interpretive and reflective process through which empirical evidence was transformed into conceptual understanding. Through constant comparison, memo writing and reflexive engagement, recurring patterns of communication behaviour and trust formation were developed into theoretical categories. The specific procedures for coding and memo writing are described in detail in Section 4.5, which outlines the data collection and analysis process in full. These combined steps ensured that the emerging theory remained firmly connected to participants' lived experiences and accurately reflected the human dynamics that define marketing

communication in industrial B2B environments.

Grounded Theory Methodology provides a rigorous and adaptable framework for this study. Its iterative process of data collection and analysis, together with its emphasis on developing theory from empirical evidence, makes it particularly suitable for exploring how and why marketing communication channels are used in SMEs within the machine-tools industry in Germany and Japan. The combination of inductive reasoning and systematic coding ensures that emerging insights are firmly anchored in participants' experiences and directly linked to the research objectives.

The use of theoretical sampling and saturation enhanced the depth and credibility of the findings by allowing concepts to evolve progressively until they reached conceptual completeness. These principles ensured that the emerging framework was empirically grounded while also retaining flexibility to incorporate new insights as they arose. The result is a theory that mirrors the dynamic and relational nature of communication within industrial decision-making processes.

A further strength of Grounded Theory lies in its ability to accommodate cultural and organisational diversity. This flexibility is particularly valuable for cross-cultural research, as it enables the methodology to capture subtle variations in how communication practices are shaped by context and interpreted by different actors. Through its iterative, reflective and theory-building orientation, Grounded Theory provides the structure needed for analytical rigour and the openness required to understand human experience in its complexity.

4.3.3.5. Critical reflection on the limitations of Grounded Theory Methodology

Although Grounded Theory Methodology offers a robust framework for inductive theory building, it has inherent limitations that require critical reflection. Acknowledging these limitations strengthens the methodological justification and demonstrates awareness that all qualitative approaches involve trade-offs.

One key critique concerns the epistemological diversity of grounded theory. The existence of multiple variants, including Glaserian, Straussian and constructivist approaches, has enriched the methodology while also creating ambiguity regarding its application. Lee (2024) notes that grounded theory is frequently

adopted without sufficient clarity regarding philosophical positioning, which can weaken methodological coherence . In this study, this challenge was addressed through an explicit constructivist grounding aligned with an interpretivist paradigm.

A second limitation relates to theoretical saturation, which remains difficult to define and operationalise. Saturation commonly depends on researcher judgement and may be contested, particularly in complex or cross-cultural research contexts. Paapa and Kambona (2025) highlight that saturation should be understood as conceptual sufficiency rather than a definitive endpoint, an interpretation adopted in this study.

Grounded theory is also methodologically demanding, requiring sustained iterative analysis and high analytical skill. Guerrero Puerta & Lorente Garcá (2024) identify coding complexity and theory development as recurring challenges for doctoral researchers. These risks were managed through a structured coding process supported by systematic memo writing.

Finally, constructivist grounded theory foregrounds interpretive subjectivity, which can raise concerns regarding reliability and consistency. Syed and Nelson (2015) argue that traditional reliability concepts sit uneasily within interpretive qualitative research, underscoring the importance of reflexivity and transparency throughout the analytical process

Taken together, these considerations informed the disciplined application of Grounded Theory in this study and directly shaped the development of the integrative framework presented in Chapter 7, ensuring that theoretical abstraction remained closely anchored in participants' lived experiences while maintaining analytical coherence across the research process.

4.4. Research design

Research design refers to the overall strategy and structure of a research study, outlining how the researcher collects, analyses and interprets data to answer specific research questions. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), research design serves as a framework that guides the methods and procedures used in the study, ensuring that the research process is coherent and systematic. It

encompasses decisions related to the type of research, the selection of participants, data collection methods and the analysis techniques employed. The purpose of a well-constructed research design is to ensure that the study is methodologically sound and that the research objectives are aligned with appropriate methods for gathering and analysing data. A clear design also enhances the validity and trustworthiness of the findings by providing a transparent roadmap for addressing the research questions in a structured and credible manner. Grounded in the interpretivist–constructivist paradigm introduced earlier, the research design of this study ensures that the methodology remains consistent with its philosophical foundation and purpose.

4.4.1. The role of the researcher

My involvement in this study is characterised by a long-standing and active connection to the machine-tools industry in both Germany and Japan (see section 2.1.). With more than twenty years of experience in marketing and communication, much of it in leadership roles for a Japanese machine-tools builder, I currently serve as Member of the Board of a global machine-tools company with German-Japanese roots. I am also a member of the board of the German Machine-tools Builders' Association (VDW) and the Association of German Machinery and Plant Manufacturers (VDMA). This professional background forms also the interpretive lens through which this research was approached.

My insider status offered a distinct advantage for addressing the research objectives. With experience across different management levels in Germany and Japan, I have a close understanding of marketing communication and buyer behaviour in the machine-tools industry. For instance, I have been involved in discussions comparing traditional brochures with digital channels, and in exchanges where Japanese colleagues emphasised long-term trust while German colleagues prioritised transparency and data. These experiences sharpened my awareness of cultural differences and supported the development of trust and rapport with participants.

During the interviews, many participants appeared comfortable and open, knowing that I understood both the technical and cultural dimensions of their

professional world. This familiarity encouraged them to share perspectives that might have remained hidden to a researcher without such industry-specific insight. When participants talked about balancing communication formats such as trade fairs or social media, I could relate to their experiences and ask more targeted questions. My familiarity with the industry's developments also helped me understand subtle points, such as the shift from face-to-face meetings to virtual exchanges, without needing lengthy explanations.

This contextual insight proved equally valuable during analysis. My professional experience enabled me to interpret both explicit statements and implicit meanings. For example, when a Japanese participant stressed reliability without explicitly using the word "trust," I understood this as a culturally specific expression of the same underlying value. Such interpretive sensitivity strengthened the analysis and allowed me to capture nuances that might otherwise have been overlooked. Birks and Mills (2015) highlight that the ability to apply professional expertise in a reflective and disciplined way contributes to the quality of Grounded Theory research. In this study, my long-standing experience in the machine-tools sector enriched the interpretation of data and deepened the theoretical insights that emerged.

At the same time, I remained aware of the potential risks that accompany insider research. As Creswell (2014) notes, deep familiarity with the research context can introduce bias, such as favouring interpretations that confirm prior assumptions. To mitigate this, I practised ongoing reflexivity throughout the research process. I systematically documented my reflections, assumptions and emerging interpretations in memos, using these to maintain awareness of how my background could influence meaning-making. Corbin and Strauss (2015) emphasise that such reflexivity is essential to ensure that emerging concepts remain grounded in the data rather than in the researcher's expectations.

To preserve independence and authenticity, participants were selected with care. None had direct professional ties to me, and only one participant had met me previously at a trade fair in person. This ensured that participants could speak freely and that my interpretations were not shaped by pre-existing professional relationships. This approach aligns with Glaser and Strauss's (1967) guidance that Grounded Theory researchers should allow findings to

emerge from the data itself through systematic comparison.

The cross-cultural nature of the research further reinforced the need for reflexivity. My experience in Japan helped me recognise implicit meanings and communication subtleties, while my familiarity with the German industrial environment enabled me to contextualise local perspectives. Moving between these two cultural spheres required constant reflection to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants' words rather than in my own assumptions. This cultural fluency was essential to achieving the study's cross-cultural objectives and to capturing the distinct dynamics of each business context.

Balancing insider understanding with analytical rigour was an ongoing task. My professional expertise provided contextual depth, while reflexivity and careful participant selection helped ensure balanced and credible interpretations. By combining experiential knowledge with systematic analysis, the findings became both contextually meaningful and methodologically sound. This balance reflects the constructivist view that understanding is co-created through interaction between researcher and participants within shared professional contexts.

Having outlined the role of the researcher and the measures taken to maintain reflexivity and rigour, the next section turns to the practical dimension of the study, describing the procedures of data collection and analysis in greater detail.

4.5. Data collection and analysis procedure

The processes of data collection and analysis are central to the development of theory within Grounded Theory Methodology. This section summarises the data collection phases and explains how these were integrated with iterative analysis. The aim is to show how theoretical ideas emerged from the systematic interaction between data, interpretation and reflection. Particular attention is given to the coding process, the use of NVivo software alongside manual techniques, and the iterative cycle through which coding informed theoretical development.

4.5.1 Theoretical foundation for data collection in Grounded Theory

Grounded Theory follows an iterative process in which data collection and analysis continually shape one another. As categories emerged, participants were chosen because their perspectives could further clarify or expand these developing categories, not to achieve statistical representation. This process continued until no substantially new ideas appeared and the main categories were sufficiently developed to explain the phenomenon.

For this research, such an adaptive and iterative design was indispensable. The focus on purchasing decision-makers in SMEs in Germany and Japan required a methodology that could remain open to emerging directions in the data, especially as cultural and generational differences became apparent. Theoretical sampling guided the step-by-step progression of the study: it began with senior decision-makers and later included young professionals to incorporate generational perspectives. This approach ensured that the emerging theory was grounded in real experiences and reflected both organisational practices and individual viewpoints across different professional contexts.

Interviews are among the most widely used methods in Grounded Theory because they provide direct access to participants' experiences and meanings. Myers (2013) differentiates between structured, unstructured and semi-structured interviews. Structured formats follow a fixed set of questions, which limits flexibility and can restrict the discovery of new themes, making them less appropriate for GTM. Unstructured interviews offer maximum openness (Corbin & Strauss, 2015), yet their lack of structure may hinder analytical focus, especially in cross-cultural contexts where language and interpretation play important roles.

To balance these considerations, semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary data collection method. This format allowed sufficient flexibility to pursue emerging themes while maintaining a clear link to the research objectives. Participants could express their views in their own terms, while the interview guide provided enough structure to ensure coherence across the interviews. This approach encouraged rich, detailed accounts of how decision-makers in the machine-tools industry perceive and use different marketing

communication channels and why certain choices are made. The semi-structured format also aligned with the interpretivist–constructivist orientation of this study, supporting an open exchange in which meaning was co-created through dialogue between researcher and participant.

4.5.2. Research participants and selection

The selection of research participants was directly aligned with the aim of this study, which is to explore which marketing communication channels are used and why by purchasing decision-makers in SMEs in Germany and Japan when buying machine-tools or automation solutions. For this reason, it was essential that participants had been directly involved in such purchasing decisions within the three years preceding the interview. The focus on SMEs reflects the central role this sector plays in the machine-tools industry in both Germany and Japan, where small and medium-sized enterprises are key drivers of industrial demand and innovation. As the research advanced, I recognised that the initial sample included few younger participants, only one was under thirty during the first two interview stages. To address this, young professionals were intentionally included in the third stage of data collection. Although they do not yet hold sole decision-making authority, they actively participate in discussions and evaluations. Their inclusion was essential to capture generational perspectives and to address one of the study's key objectives: understanding how cultural and generational factors influence communication behaviour.

Participants were selected through a combination of purposive and theoretical sampling. Instead of random selection, the focus was on identifying individuals who could provide rich and relevant insights into the research objectives. Suitable participants were identified through my professional network and through recommendations from trusted industry contacts. After receiving these suggestions, I reached out to potential participants directly, either by phone or email, to explain the study and invite them to take part. This process ensured that all participants had current experience in purchasing machine-tools or automation solutions while also representing a diversity of organisational contexts and professional roles.

To preserve the integrity of the research, particular attention was given to

maintaining independence between researcher and participants. None of the interviewees had worked with me previously, and only one had briefly met me at a trade fair. This separation encouraged openness and reduced the possibility that participants' responses might be influenced by existing relationships. Consistent with the principles of Grounded Theory, participant selection was shaped progressively by emerging findings. As new themes appeared, the sample was refined to explore them in greater depth, allowing for a balanced representation across roles, generations and cultural settings.

The table 20 below provides an overview of the research participants, indicating their country, professional position, approximate age and generation, level of decision-making authority, and perceptions regarding the importance of human interaction. It reflects an intentional balance between participants from Germany and Japan, including senior decision-makers, company owners, purchasing leads and young professionals. This composition ensured that the study captured viewpoints from individuals responsible for final purchasing decisions as well as from those who contribute to or influence these processes within their organisations.

The diversity represented across the two countries highlights both established and emerging perspectives within the industry. Experienced leaders shared well-grounded practices shaped by years of engagement in the market, while younger professionals provided a glimpse into evolving expectations and digital communication preferences. The prominence of human interaction, as shown in the participant overview, was not a predetermined selection criterion but rather an insight that emerged organically through the interviews. This outcome further underscores how central interpersonal relationships remain in industrial purchasing communication despite technological advances.

Together, these participant characteristics ensured that the data captured reflected both continuity and transformation within the communication practices of SMEs. The next section outlines how these interviews were conducted and how data were gathered systematically to support theory development in line with the principles of Grounded Theory.

Participant	Country	Position / Role	Age / Generation (estimation)	Decision-Making Authority	Importance of Human Interaction
P1_G	Germany	Senior decision-maker	40 - 45 years	Final authority (consults stakeholders)	Very high
P2_G	Germany	Purchasing lead	40 - 45 years	Final authority, collaborative with team	High
P3_G	Germany	Owner / co-shareholder	45 - 50 years	Shared with employees (operators involved)	Very high
P4_G	Germany	Purchasing decision-maker	45 - 50 years	Final authority (consults foremen/QA staff)	High
P5_J	Japan	Company president	55 - 60 years	Final authority, strongly collaborative	Very high
P6_J	Japan	Director	60 - 65 years	Key role, collaborative with R&D/production	Very high
P7_J	Japan	Senior decision-maker	55 - 60 years	Final authority, relies on long-term partners	Very high
P8_J	Japan	Procurement lead	55 - 60 years	Final authority, consults management/section heads	Very high
P9_G	Germany	Family business co-decision-maker	45 - 50 years	Shared with other key leader, includes department heads	High
P10_G	Germany	Senior decision-maker	55 - 60 years	Final authority	Very high
P11_G	Germany	Next-generation successor	25 - 30 years	Shared with father	High
P12_G	Germany	Investment manager	45 - 50 years	Jointly prepares proposals, final approval by shareholders	High
P13_J	Japan	Machinery/automation buyer	45 - 50 years	Input role, final authority with senior manager	High
P14_J	Japan	Machinery investment lead	55 - 60 years	Final authority (after internal review)	Very high
P15_J	Japan	Co-decision-maker (SME)	45 - 50 years	One of three decision-makers	High
P16_J	Japan	Sole decision-maker	55 - 60 years	Final authority (employees pre-filter info)	Very high
P17_J	Japan	Sales manager	20 - 25 years	Advisory/participatory role, not sole	High
P18_J	Japan	Development staff	20 - 25 years	Advisory input only	Moderate–high
P19_J	Japan	Engineer	20 - 25 years	Advisory input only	Moderate–high
P20_J	Japan	Junior engineer	20 - 25 years	Advisory input only	High
P21_G	Germany	Master Craftsman	20 - 25 years	Advisory input only	High
P22_G	Germany	Special design engineer	20 - 25 years	Minor input only	High
P23_G	Germany	Engineer	20 - 25 years	Minor input only	High
P24_G	Germany	Engineer (dual study program)	20 - 25 years	Minor input only	High

Table 20: Overview of research participants and key demographics (author)

4.5.3. Data collection process: three phases of research

Data collection was organised into three phases that built on one another. In line with Grounded Theory, data collection and analysis occurred in parallel through constant comparison, memo writing and iterative coding. This continuous interaction ensured that early findings shaped later interviews and that emerging categories guided the research direction. The phased approach allowed the study to move from broad exploration to deeper theoretical refinement, gradually approaching saturation across cultural and generational contexts.

While the detailed coding procedure is discussed later in Section 4.5.4, this

section describes the design and execution of the three data collection phases, each of which contributed distinct perspectives to the study's overall objectives.

4.5.2.1. Phase one: decision-makers in Japan and Germany (September–November 2022)

The first phase of data collection took place between September and November 2022 and focused on semi-structured interviews with company owners and managing directors who were directly involved in purchasing decisions within SMEs in the machine-tools industry. Participants were selected based on their companies having purchased a machine-tools within the previous three years. In total, eight interviews were conducted, four in Japan and four in Germany.

In smaller organisations, purchasing responsibility is often concentrated in the hands of a few individuals, making this group particularly well positioned to explain how communication channels influence high-value investment decisions. Their accounts provided an initial entry point into the decision-making environment.

In Japan, the interviews reflected the specific dynamics of professional communication. Because I am not fluent in Japanese, a translator participated to ensure that interviewees could express themselves naturally (see Section 4.5.3.1). Although this occasionally interrupted conversational flow, it allowed participants to share complex and culturally nuanced perspectives. Hosting a European researcher was unusual for many Japanese participants and their hospitality was generous. Company tours, informal conversations and extended time together before and after the interviews created an atmosphere of openness and trust. These interactions added valuable context and demonstrated the cultural importance of hospitality as a way to strengthen professional relationships. These visits were, however, time-intensive. Each company invested considerable effort in presenting its operations and the visit for an interview often occupied nearly a full day. Although most sites were located within the greater Tokyo area, travelling between them required up to two hours each way. Such practical aspects illustrated the relational dimension of Japanese business culture, where offering time and attention to guests carries deep significance.

In contrast, the German interviews were more direct and logistically efficient. Most participants preferred online interviews rather than face-to-face meetings, prioritising time management and practicality. Only one participant chose an in-person interview, whereas the others selected video conferencing to minimise time. This difference highlighted distinct cultural preferences regarding formality and relationship building.

Across both countries, the semi-structured format was central to the success of the first phase. Using an interview guide (see Appendices 5 and 6) provided structure while leaving space for unexpected insights. Participants often introduced themes beyond the initial scope, such as digitalisation, the importance of trust in supplier relationships and the continuing relevance of direct contact with manufacturers. These early findings confirmed the suitability of the semi-structured format and demonstrated the iterative value of Grounded Theory, where early insights shape subsequent data collection.

4.5.2.2. Phase two: expanded interviews in Japan and Germany (January–March 2023)

After analysing the phase one data, several themes emerged that warranted deeper exploration. Phase Two, conducted between January and March 2023, was therefore designed to expand and refine understanding of how communication channels are used in practice. Again, eight interviews were conducted, four in Japan and four in Germany.

Drawing on experience from the first phase, where hospitality extended interview durations in Japan, I decided to frame online interviews as the preferred format for phase two. When inviting participants, I explained that interviews would ideally be conducted virtually and offered in-person meetings only upon explicit request. This adjustment respected participants' time and allowed more focused discussions. It was particularly relevant for Japanese participants, as the January-March period coincides with the financial year-end in Japanese companies, a busy time for most firms.

All interviews in this phase were conducted online, which made scheduling more flexible and allowed for concentrated dialogue although most of the interviews with Japanese participants took place during the night for me when I was in

Europe due to eight hour time difference. The interview guide was revised based on the insights gained from phase one. The questions were refined to explore specific communication channels, the role of relational factors in decision-making and expectations about future developments. For instance, I included new questions about the role of social media in professional contexts after it was mentioned spontaneously several times in earlier discussions.

The online format proved highly effective, providing a structured yet conversational environment. The semi-structured approach again allowed flexibility to follow unexpected themes and to probe deeper into individual experiences. This phase enriched the developing theoretical categories and provided a stronger comparative basis for analysing similarities and differences between German and Japanese decision-makers.

4.5.2.3. Phase three: young professionals (August 2023)

Analysis of the phase two data showed that although several theoretical categories were well developed, saturation had not been fully reached for the second research objective concerning cultural and generational factors. Only one participant under thirty had been interviewed in the earlier phases, leaving the perspective of younger professionals underrepresented. Given that they are often early adopters of digital technologies and likely to become future decision-makers, their inclusion was crucial for understanding emerging patterns in communication behaviour.

Before beginning the third phase, two exploratory interviews were conducted with young professionals to assess whether this group would provide valuable new insights. These preliminary discussions confirmed their relevance, revealing distinctive views on digital tools and communication dynamics. Encouraged by these results, I initiated phase three in August 2023, conducting eight interviews, four with young professionals in Japan and four in Germany.

The young professionals were selected for their involvement in purchasing-related activities, even if not in final decision-making roles. Their perspectives provided a view of generational change in communication preferences and expectations. As in earlier phases, the semi-structured interview format enabled open discussion while ensuring consistency across cases.

The findings from these interviews highlighted clear generational distinctions in communication preferences and digital fluency. Younger participants displayed greater comfort and agility in navigating digital platforms, contrasting with the more structured, traditional approaches of senior managers. Including these voices expanded the scope of the research and ensured full coverage of the study's objectives. The online format again proved efficient, enabling flexibility in scheduling across both countries.

Table 21 provides an overview of the three research stages, including participant groups, interview dates and duration.

Phase	Region	No.	Interviewpartner	Gender	Role	On site / Online	Date	Duration
Phase 1	Germany	1.	P1_G	M	Decision maker	on site	22.09.2022	01:05
		2.	P2_G	M	Decision maker	online	14.10.2022	01:02
		3.	P3_G	M	Decision maker	online	11.11.2022	00:59
		4.	P4_G	M	Decision maker	online	21.12.2022	00:39
	Japan	5.	P5_J	M	Decision maker	on site	26.10.2022	01:30
		6.	P6_J	M	Decision maker	online	27.10.2022	00:46
		7.	P7_J	M	Decision maker	on site	27.10.2022	00:40
		8.	P8_J	F	Decision maker	on site	01.11.2022	00:41
Phase 2	Germany	9.	P9_G	M	Decision maker	online	08.03.2023	00:25
		10.	P10_G	M	Decision maker	online	09.03.2023	00:33
		11.	P11_G	M	Decision maker	online	16.03.2023	00:31
		12.	P12_G	M	Decision maker	online	16.03.2023	00:28
	Japan	13.	P13_J	M	Decision maker	online	16.01.2023	00:51
		14.	P14_J	M	Decision maker	online	01.03.2023	00:41
		15.	P15_J	M	Decision maker	online	02.03.2023	00:42
		16.	P16_J	M	Decision maker	online	10.03.2023	00:33
Phase 3	Japan	17.	P17_J	M	Young professional	online	29.08.2023	00:46
		18.	P18_J	M	Young professional	online	30.08.2023	00:33
		19.	P19_J	M	Young professional	online	30.08.2023	00:46
		20.	P20_J	M	Young professional	online	30.08.2023	00:30
	Germany	21.	P21_G	M	Young professional	online	30.08.2023	00:33
		22.	P22_G	M	Young professional	online	31.08.2023	00:36
		23.	P23_G	M	Young professional	online	31.08.2023	00:38
		24.	P24_G	F	Young professional	online	31.08.2023	00:40

Table 21: Overview of research stages, participants, interview dates and duration (author)

4.5.2.4. Data saturation and constant comparison

Achieving data saturation is a central element in Grounded Theory, as it marks the point where additional data no longer reveal new insights and the main categories are conceptually well developed. Reaching this stage ensures that the emerging theory is comprehensive, coherent and grounded in empirical evidence. In this study, data saturation was monitored continuously across all three phases of data collection.

After the completion of phases one and two, saturation had been achieved for the first and third research objectives: identifying the marketing communication channels used by decision-makers in SMEs (objective 1) and examining the role of Human-to-Human Marketing in shaping trust and guiding purchasing decisions (objective 3). However, the second objective, exploring the cultural and generational factors that influence the use and perception of communication channels, required further investigation. Full saturation was reached only after phase three, when the perspectives of young professionals were incorporated. Their views added essential depth to the dataset by revealing generational differences in digital preferences and communication styles. This inclusion completed the theoretical picture, ensuring that the emerging framework captured both established practices and evolving trends among the next generation of decision-makers.

The process of constant comparison, as articulated by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and further elaborated by Corbin and Strauss (2015), guided this development throughout the study. Each new interview was systematically compared with earlier data to test and refine existing categories. This recursive process supported theoretical sampling decisions and helped determine when the categories had reached conceptual density. Through ongoing comparison overlaps were identified and distinctions sharpened, ensuring that the theory evolved logically from the data.

The interplay between constant comparison and theoretical sampling also strengthened the internal validity of the study. Comparing insights from senior decision-makers with those from younger professionals revealed both stability and change in communication behaviour, providing a richer, more layered understanding of how meaning and trust are constructed in industrial marketing

contexts. By confirming that no new conceptual categories emerged after the final set of interviews, the study achieved theoretical saturation and established a solid foundation for the framework developed in later chapters.

4.5.3. Translation and transcription

Translation plays a central role in cross-cultural qualitative research, especially when interviews take place in multiple languages. In this study, interviews were conducted in both Japan and Germany, which required close attention to linguistic nuances, cultural differences and the influence of translation on meaning and data quality. As Gales (2003) notes, Grounded Theory is particularly suited to cross-cultural research because language and meaning are deeply connected and understanding how people communicate is essential for generating the theory in this study.

Translation, however, involves more than the conversion of words from one language to another. It represents, as Mouratidou et al. (2020) explain, a process shaped by cultural and social contexts in which preserving meaning takes precedence over achieving literal equivalence. I remained attentive to this throughout the study, making deliberate choices to ensure that participants could express themselves naturally and without linguistic barriers. The central aim was to protect the intended meaning behind participants' words, even when expressed through different linguistic and cultural lenses.

4.5.3.1 Translation in the research project

In Japan, translation was essential since participants were interviewed in their native Japanese. Because I am not fluent in Japanese, it was important that interviewees could speak freely in their mother tongue to express complex ideas and experiences in depth. This approach aligns with the principles of Grounded Theory, where the richness of data depends on participants' ability to describe their realities in their own terms. To ensure accuracy and fluency, I collaborated with professional translators from my company's in-house translation team in Japan. These translators were highly experienced in the machine-tools industry and familiar with its technical vocabulary, which proved vital for maintaining

precision and natural flow during the interviews. The process followed a structured translation sequence: I asked questions in English, which were translated into Japanese and participants' responses were then translated back into English. Although this process lengthened the interviews, it encouraged reflection and often led to deeper understanding.

The German interviews followed a different procedure. As a native German speaker, I conducted them directly in German. For analysis, I translated the transcripts into English. Initially, I used DeepL translation software to create draft translations, which I then reviewed and edited line by line against the original transcripts. While automated translation tools offered efficiency, they could not fully convey the subtle nuances of industry-specific terminology. My repeated reviews ensured that the English versions accurately reflected participants' intentions and preserved the integrity of their perspectives. Figure 4 below visualised this processes.

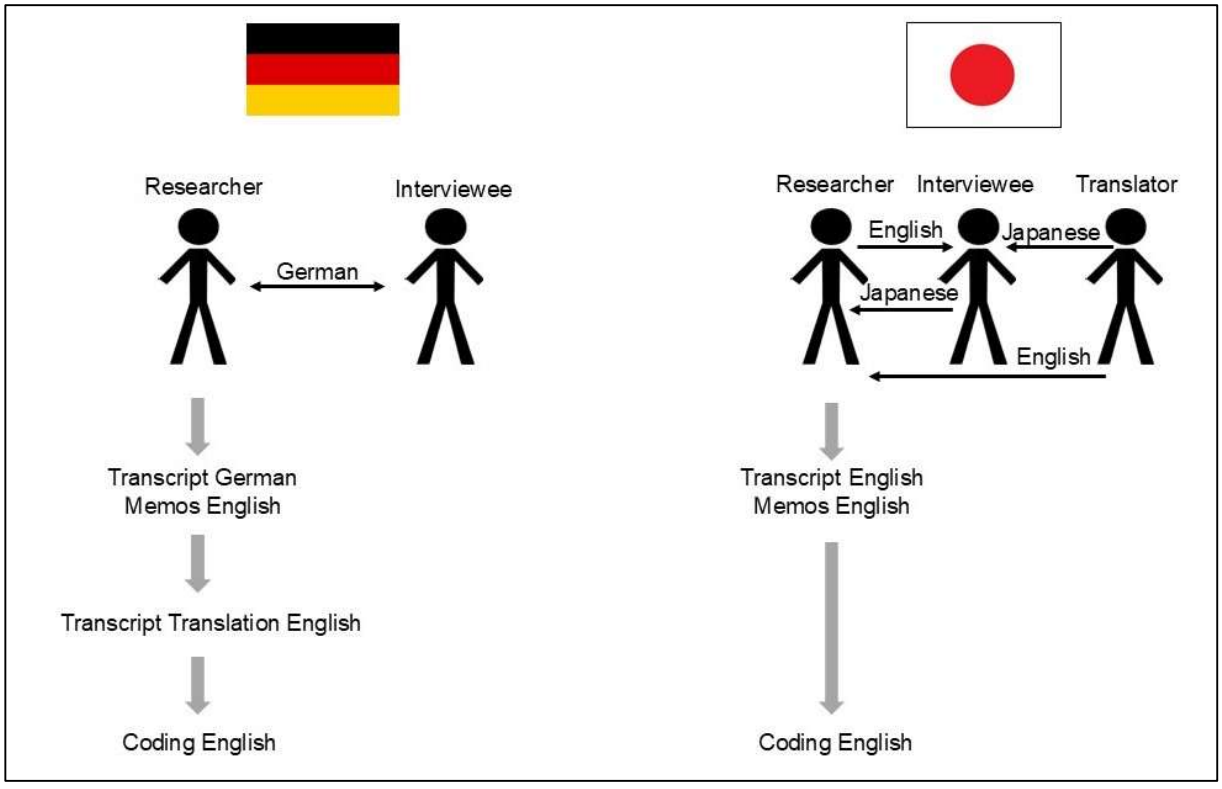


Figure 4: Translation and transcription process in this research (author)

Mouratidou et al. (2020) notes that even accurate translations can differ slightly because of cultural and social nuances. I accepted this as a natural part of cross-cultural qualitative research and focused on preserving the participants' intended meanings rather than aiming for literal consistency. Within Grounded Theory, the priority was to reflect the significance of their experiences, not to produce perfect linguistic matches.

By remaining actively engaged in the translation process, working closely with professional translators in Japan and reviewing all German transcripts myself, I ensured that linguistic diversity did not compromise the quality or consistency of the data. This approach supported the constructivist aim of representing participants' voices authentically and maintaining the depth of meaning that underpins Grounded Theory inquiry.

However, conducting research across cultures requires sensitivity not only to language but also to the cultural frameworks in which communication takes place. Hall's (1977) distinction between high-context and low-context cultures provides a useful perspective for interpreting these dynamics. German participants, representing a low-context culture, tend to communicate explicitly and directly, while Japanese participants, from a high-context culture, often rely on indirect expression and non-verbal cues (see section 3.6.).

In low-context settings such as Germany, participants generally articulate their thoughts precisely, which makes translation relatively straightforward. In high-context settings such as Japan, however, meaning often resides beyond the spoken words. Translating in this environment required interpretive attention to ensure that these implicit meanings were reflected accurately in the transcripts.

With over two decades of professional experience working with German and Japanese colleagues, I was highly aware of these cultural nuances. This experience did not make me an expert in either culture but provided a deep familiarity with their communication patterns. Such awareness was crucial for interpreting data sensitively and fairly, allowing me to appreciate both the direct clarity of German communication and the subtle, relational character of Japanese discourse. This cultural attentiveness strengthened the credibility of interpretation and ensured that meaning was contextualised appropriately within each cultural setting.

4.5.3.2. The transcription process

The interviews conducted in Japan were transcribed directly into English (Appendix 7), while those conducted in Germany were first transcribed in German and later translated into English (Appendix 8). Transcribing all interviews in English was a deliberate methodological decision to streamline the coding and analysis process, which was carried out in English, and to maintain consistency with the language of this thesis. This approach ensured a coherent and unified analytical framework across both cultural contexts.

Transcriptions were produced with careful attention to accuracy, ensuring that participants' words were captured faithfully. Each transcript was read several times to check precision and develop familiarity with the data. Charmaz (2014) emphasises that immersion in the data is essential in Grounded Theory, as it enables the researcher to recognise emerging ideas and patterns even during early stages of analysis. For the Japanese interviews, translation was integrated into the transcription process, as the translator provided English renderings during the sessions. This simultaneous translation minimised the risk of losing meaning during later interpretation and allowed a smoother progression from spoken responses to written transcripts. To ensure accuracy, the original Japanese audio recordings were retained and revisited whenever clarification was needed. For the German interviews, conducted in the participants' native language, transcription and translation followed a separate process. Although I am fluent in German, converting the material into English required close attention to subtle linguistic and cultural nuances. To assist with efficiency, DeepL translation software was used to create an initial draft, which I then carefully reviewed and refined against the original transcripts. This combination of technological support and manual verification ensured accuracy and maintained the richness of meaning throughout the dataset.

The deliberate effort to unify all transcripts in English created an analytical foundation that was both systematic and transparent. Having completed data collection, translation and transcription, the next step was the systematic analysis of the material. The following section explains the coding and data analysis procedures, illustrating how grounded theory principles such as constant comparison and theoretical memo writing were applied to develop conceptual categories and themes.

4.5.4. Data Analysis Process

The data analysis process in this study followed the principles of Grounded Theory, moving through successive stages of coding that connected empirical data to conceptual understanding. The process began with initial coding, aimed at capturing a wide range of insights from the interview material. It then advanced to focused coding, where the most significant codes were refined and organised into broader categories. Finally, theoretical coding brought these categories together into overarching themes that explained how participants made sense of communication practices in the machine-tools industry.

4.5.4.1. Insight into Coding

Coding represents the core analytic activity of Grounded Theory. It allows large amounts of qualitative data to be organised systematically and interpreted through cycles of comparison and abstraction. Through coding, the researcher moves from detailed descriptions toward the development of categories and relationships that form the basis of an emerging theory. Corbin and Strauss (2015) describe three main stages in this process: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Open coding involves examining the data line by line to identify recurring ideas and patterns. Axial coding links these ideas together, identifying relationships between categories. Selective coding then integrates them into a coherent theoretical framework. Charmaz (2014a), building on this tradition, proposes a more flexible approach comprising two main stages, initial and focused coding, designed to allow interpretation to evolve dynamically as new insights appear.

In this study, Charmaz's approach was particularly appropriate because it provided the flexibility needed to work with cross-cultural data collected in two languages. During initial coding, I divided the data into small, meaningful units and assigned provisional labels that captured actions or meanings. During focused coding, I refined these codes, identifying those that were most significant or recurrent across interviews and merging them into broader conceptual categories. This flexible structure aligned well with the iterative and comparative logic of Grounded Theory, allowing new insights to guide the analysis as it unfolded.

NVivo software was employed to support the organisation and retrieval of coded data. As Saunders et al. (2019) and Myers (2013) explain, qualitative data analysis software assists researchers by managing extensive data files and facilitating transparent coding procedures. In this research, NVivo helped structure the data efficiently, enabling me to concentrate on interpretation.

4.5.4.2. The coding process in this research

Before formal coding began, I undertook an initial familiarisation phase, reading each transcript several times. Braun et al. (2022) emphasise that immersion in the data is vital for building an intuitive understanding of content and context. During this stage, I manually annotated transcripts to highlight emerging ideas and potential links between participants' accounts. This early engagement allowed me to begin recognising preliminary patterns and prepared the foundation for systematic coding in NVivo. Manual coding was especially valuable in the early stages, as it kept me closely connected to participants' narratives and attuned to subtle meanings and emotional undertones that might otherwise be overlooked. Marking up transcripts by hand encouraged reflection and provided an interpretive bridge between participants' language and my analytical perspective.

The first analytic phase involved initial coding, where I examined the data line by line and assigned short, descriptive labels to each segment (Charmaz, 2014). Using NVivo, I coded through all data collection phases, 24 interview transcripts, which resulted in 934 initial codes that captured a wide spectrum of observations, ranging from participants' preferences for certain communication channels to their views on credibility, trust and technological change. Alongside NVivo, I continued to engage manually with the data to preserve closeness to participants' meanings.

The process was guided by constant comparison, a core principle of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Each new piece of data was compared with existing codes, allowing for ongoing refinement and the identification of patterns across interviews. This iterative cycle of comparison enhanced the depth and consistency of the analysis and kept the development of ideas firmly grounded in the data. Figure 5 below shows a screenshot fromm NVivo made during the

coding process.

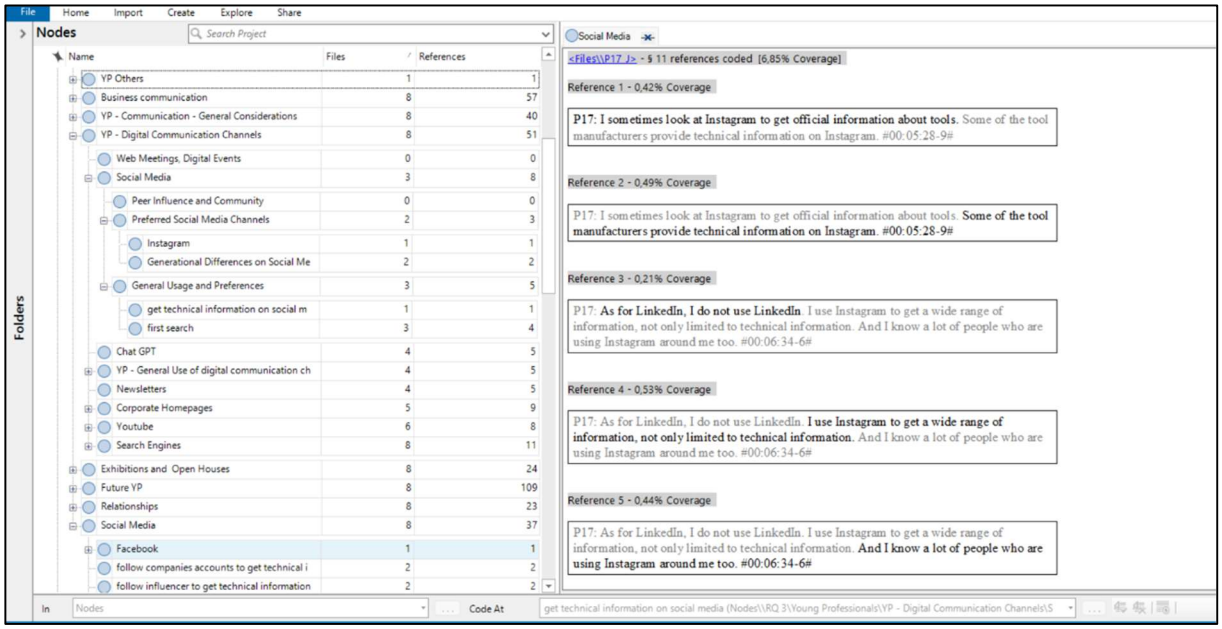


Figure 5: NVivo screenshot during coding process (author)

The next stage involved focused coding, where I identified the most frequent and conceptually strong codes to develop broader analytical categories. NVivo supported this process by enabling me to group related codes and examine their interconnections. Focused coding required careful decision-making about which ideas best captured the essence of participants' experiences (Charmaz, 2014).

To complement NVivo's technical structure, I used manual methods such as visual mapping to explore relationships between categories. This combination of digital and manual engagement promoted deeper analytical reflection and helped me reveal connections that might not have been apparent through software analysis alone. As categories began to stabilise, recurring themes became visible, including evolving attitudes toward digital tool and the coexistence of traditional and modern communication practices

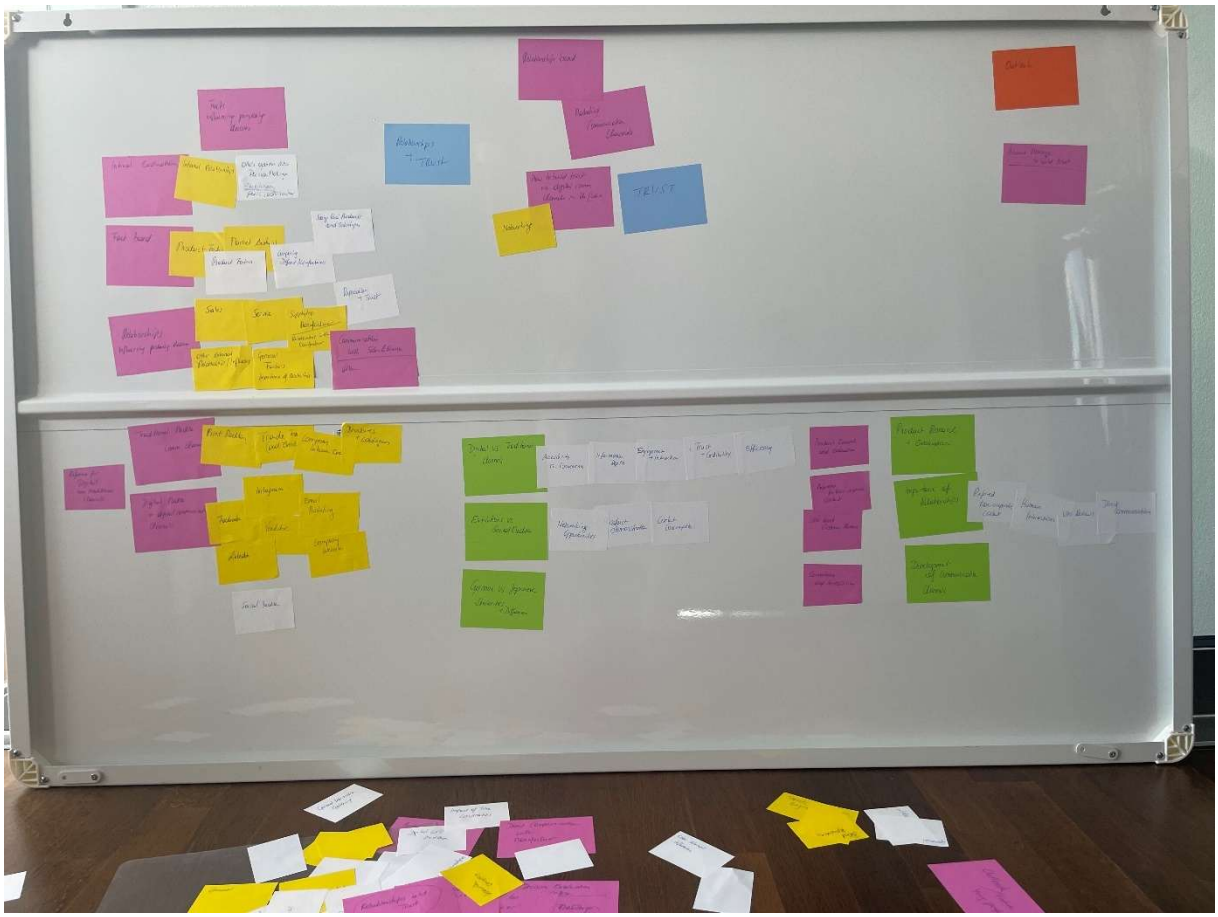


Figure 6: Mindmap during category finding phase (author)

The final analytic phase was theoretical coding, where the relationships among categories were integrated into a coherent theoretical model. Through repeated comparison and refinement, I distilled the analysis into four central themes, ten categories, and thirty-five subcategories that represented the core dimensions of participants' experiences.

Maintaining active engagement with the transcripts during this stage ensured that the emerging theory remained closely linked to participants' voices. I repeatedly revisited the data to verify that categories accurately reflected participants' perspectives and to confirm that no new concepts were required.

The theoretical coding stage produced four overarching themes that structure the findings of this thesis:

1. Factors Influencing Purchasing Behaviour
2. Marketing Communication Channels
3. Communication Perceptions
4. Prospective Developments

Together, these themes form the analytical foundation of the study, examining communication practices and their underlying dynamics through a Human-to-Human (H2H) lens across cultural and generational contexts. They also provide the conceptual bridge between the empirical data and the emergent theoretical framework developed in the following chapters.

Theme	Categories	Sub Categories
Factors influencing purchasing behaviour	**Key facts influencing purchase decisions**	Product Factors
		Supplier and Market Analysis
	Relational influence on purchasing decisions	External relationship impacts
		Internal relationship impacts
		Relationships to Machine Provider
		Trust and Competence in Sales and Service Personell
	Support and Service Quality	Problem Solving and Care
		Network and Treatment by Manufacturer
Marketing Communication Channels	**Digital Marketing Communication Channels**	Corporate Homepages
		Newsletters
		Search Engines
		Social Media
		Web Meetings and Digital Events
		youtube
		Chat GPT
	Traditional Marketing Communication Channels	Exhibitions
		Open House
		Corporate Brochures and Magazines
		Technical Magazines, Press
	Direct Interaction and Detailed Communication	Detailed and focused information gathering
		importance of face-to-face communication
Communication Perceptions	**Communication Dynamics**	Traditional vs Digital Communication
		Challenges with information overload
	Trust in Communication	Information Trust in Personal Interactions
		Trusted Source Preferrence
		Reliability in Information
Prospective Developments	**Prospective Developments - Personal Relationships**	Importance of human interactions
		Increase of sales persons' tasks
	Prospective Developments - Communication Channels	general change of communication channels
		Digital Platforms and Social Media
		Virtual Presence Technologies (AR, VR, Metaverse)
		AI in Communication (Chat GPT)
		Exhibitions and real product presentation
		Efficiency and Speed
		increase of targeted information

Table 22: Themes, categories and subcategories emerging from coding (author)

The analytical pathway described links method and mindset. Through iterative coding, constant comparison, memo writing and careful translation, meanings were developed in dialogue with participants and with the researcher's reflexive stance. This approach reflects the constructivist and interpretivist foundations of the study, in which knowledge grows through interaction and context. The resulting categories and themes provide a transparent bridge from data to theory and prepare the ground for the next steps. The following sections address

research quality and ethics by outlining the strategies used to ensure credibility, transferability and dependability and by detailing the ethical procedures that governed recruitment, interviewing, translation and analysis.

4.6. Quality criteria: credibility and transferability of this research

Credibility and transferability are key quality criteria in qualitative research, especially in Grounded Theory, which aims to develop theory grounded in participants' experiences. Because qualitative inquiry relies on interpretation, demonstrating these two criteria is essential for ensuring the trustworthiness and relevance of the findings. Credibility refers to the extent to which the results authentically represent participants' experiences and meanings. Guba & Lincoln (1994) describe credibility as the qualitative equivalent of internal validity, focusing on how accurately findings reflect the truth as understood by those involved in the phenomenon being studied. In this research, credibility was strengthened by adhering closely to the core principles of grounded theory, including constant comparison, iterative coding and theoretical sampling. Each new interview was analysed in relation to previously collected data, allowing emerging categories to evolve progressively and ensuring that they remained firmly rooted in participants' accounts of communication behaviours in the machine-tools industry in Germany and Japan.

The use of semi-structured interviews further enhanced credibility, as their flexibility enabled participants to express their perspectives freely while allowing me to explore new directions that emerged during the conversation. Theoretical sampling guided the ongoing selection of participants who could contribute most meaningfully to the development of the emerging theory, ensuring alignment between data collection and evolving analysis (Charmaz, 2014). Triangulation was also applied by comparing findings across participant groups, decision-makers and young professionals, as well as between the two cultural contexts. This comparison confirmed that the categories and themes were consistently reflected across different perspectives, thus strengthening credibility.

Reflexivity formed another important pillar of credibility. Throughout the

research process, I maintained awareness of my professional position and potential biases. Following Finlay (2002), I engaged in reflective journaling to document my assumptions and decisions, helping to ensure transparency and analytical openness. This ongoing reflexivity enabled me to remain attentive to unexpected findings and to preserve participants' voices as the central foundation of the analysis.

Transferability, in contrast, refers to the extent to which findings can be meaningfully applied to other contexts or settings Guba & Lincoln (1994). In this study, transferability was supported by the diversity and richness of the data collected. The inclusion of both decision-makers and young professionals from Germany and Japan provided a comprehensive and culturally varied foundation for the emerging theory. Although rooted in specific industrial contexts, the findings address broader themes that are relevant to other B2B industries.

Data saturation further reinforced transferability by ensuring that all theoretical categories were conceptually well developed. Saturation was reached for Research Objectives 1 and 3 after the second phase of interviews, while the inclusion of young professionals in Phase 3 ensured full saturation for Objective 2, which focused on cultural and generational influences. Together, these phases guaranteed that the emerging theory was comprehensive and reflected a wide range of perspectives.

Although the focus of this study was the machine-tools industry in Germany and Japan, the findings provide valuable insights for similar industries facing challenges in balancing digital and personal communication. The developed framework can serve as an analytical lens for understanding communication dynamics in other industrial contexts where long-term relationships and trust are central to business success.

4.7. Limitations of the research process

Despite the methodological rigour applied throughout the study, certain limitations must be acknowledged. These limitations reflect the practical realities of conducting qualitative and cross-cultural research and provide context for interpreting the findings.

One limitation relates to the timing of data collection in Japan. Several interviews were conducted between January and March, a period that coincides with the end of the Japanese fiscal year. Participants were under significant time pressure to finalise contracts and achieve business targets. Although the interviews were completed successfully, this busy period may have constrained the time some participants could dedicate to reflection, occasionally leading to shorter or more concise discussions than might have occurred during a less demanding period.

A second limitation concerns the translation process. Even though I worked closely with professional translators familiar with the machine-tools industry and repeatedly reviewed the transcripts, subtle nuances of meaning may not have been fully conveyed in English. This issue was especially relevant in the Japanese interviews, where meaning often depends on context and non-verbal expression. Despite every effort to preserve participants' intended meanings, it remains possible that some cultural subtleties were softened during translation.

Finally, my own professional background in the industry may have influenced the research dynamic. My experience was invaluable for building rapport and contextual understanding, yet it may also have shaped participants' responses. In a few cases, participants appeared to assume that I already shared certain knowledge and therefore omitted explanations that might have provided additional detail. During the Phase 3 interviews with young professionals, I observed that some participants expressed slight hesitation or formality, likely out of respect for my senior position. While this behaviour is natural within hierarchical cultural settings, it may have influenced the openness of their responses.

A further limitation arises from the interpretive nature of Grounded Theory Methodology. The resulting framework reflects context-specific insights shaped by participants, settings and analytical judgement, and is therefore not intended to be statistically generalisable. Instead, it offers theoretically grounded insights that may be transferable to comparable industrial contexts.

Recognising these limitations contributes to the transparency and reflexivity of the research. They illustrate the contextual realities within which the study was conducted and underscore the interpretive nature of grounded theory. By

acknowledging these factors, the research maintains integrity and provides a balanced foundation for understanding how the findings should be interpreted and applied.

4.8. Ethical considerations

A key objective of this research was to ensure the protection and well-being of all participants throughout the study. The individuals who shared their professional experiences and insights were afforded the highest ethical consideration at every stage. This section outlines the ethical framework that guided the research and the measures taken to ensure compliance with institutional and professional standards.

Addressing ethical concerns is essential in all stages of research, from the formulation of aims and objectives to data collection, analysis, and dissemination (Bell et al., 2019; Saunders et al., 2019). Following the principles of beneficence, which promotes ethical practice and social good, and non-maleficence, which seeks to avoid harm or malpractice, the study was designed to uphold professional integrity and protect all participants (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 259). The ethical framework was guided by Sheffield Hallam University's ethics policy and procedures (Sheffield Hallam University - University ethics policy and procedures, 2017), which set out the following key principles: beneficence, non-malfeasance, integrity, informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and impartiality (Sheffield Hallam University, 2017, p. 2).

Creswell and Poth (2018) describe three overarching ethical principles, respect for persons, concern for welfare and justice, that encompass both the treatment of individuals and the management of data. To ensure full compliance, the research was submitted to the university's ethics approval system, Converis, where formal approval was granted before data collection commenced (Sheffield Hallam University, 2019).

During participant recruitment, access was gained through professional and personal networks within the machine-tools industry. Given my senior position in the sector, I was conscious that participants might experience hesitation when

discussing topics such as purchasing decision-making or internal evaluation processes. Some participants were customers or potential customers of my employer, while several younger participants were professionally connected through my broader network.

To prevent any perception of conflict of interest, I explicitly explained my professional role and clarified that this research was conducted independently of my employer, without financial or organisational sponsorship. I reassured all participants that their information would remain strictly confidential and that no personal or company-specific data would be shared with third parties. This transparency helped to establish trust and encouraged openness during the interviews.

Before each interview, participants received an information sheet and consent form written in their native language, either Japanese or German (see Appendices 1 to 4). These documents outlined the study's purpose, ethical standards and data management procedures, and specified participants' rights, including the right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Written consent was obtained before each interview and the same boundaries were reiterated verbally to ensure mutual understanding. Participation was entirely voluntary, and no incentives were provided.

Confidentiality and anonymity were safeguarded throughout the research process. All electronic data were stored on password-protected devices and an encrypted external hard drive. Transcripts were anonymised using pseudonyms and identifying details were removed to protect privacy. Participants were offered the opportunity to review their interview notes and clarify or withdraw statements before inclusion in the analysis. Following the designated retention period, all files will be permanently deleted in accordance with university policy.

Ethical awareness remained central to the research process. In line with the principles of beneficence, non-malfeasance and integrity, I sought to balance the pursuit of knowledge with sensitivity to participants' time, professional commitments and potential concerns. Reflexivity also played a vital role. By reflecting critically on my dual position as both researcher and senior professional in the industry, I maintained awareness of how my background could influence participant interactions and interpretations. This continuous self-

monitoring, combined with adherence to institutional guidelines, ensured that ethical integrity was maintained across all stages of the project.

4.9. Conclusion

This chapter has established the methodological foundation of the study, grounded in Grounded Theory Methodology and informed by an interpretivist–constructivist perspective. This positioning framed meaning as socially constructed and co-created, enabling exploration of how SME decision-makers communicate within complex industrial purchasing contexts. A constructivist interpretation of GTM provided analytical flexibility and rigour through iterative data collection, coding and constant comparison, while acknowledging its epistemological and practical limitations and addressing them through reflexive and transparent application.

Semi-structured interviews generated rich data, with translation and transcription treated as interpretive acts, particularly in the Japanese context. NVivo, alongside manual analysis, supported systematic coding while maintaining proximity to participants' voices. Research quality was ensured through credibility, transferability and reflexivity, supported by cross-cultural comparison and adherence to Sheffield Hallam University's ethical framework.

Together, these methodological choices produced empirically grounded categories that illuminate industrial communication across cultural settings. The next chapter presents the findings through four overarching themes: Factors Influencing Purchasing Behaviour, Marketing Communication Channels, Communication Perceptions and Prospective Developments.

CHAPTER 5 - RESEARCH FINDINGS

5.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the empirical findings of the study, based on 24 semi-structured interviews with decision-makers and next-generation professionals in small and medium-sized enterprises within the German and Japanese manufacturing sectors. The aim of the chapter is to show how participants describe and make sense of marketing communication channels in the period leading up to purchasing decisions for machine-tools and automation solutions.

Following a constructivist Grounded Theory approach, the findings are organised thematically, allowing patterns, similarities and differences to emerge inductively from participants' accounts. The focus is on participants' descriptions of communication practices, information sources and decision-related experiences, providing an empirical foundation for the subsequent discussion and theorisation.

The chapter is structured around four themes derived from the Grounded Theory analysis. The first theme examines factors influencing purchasing decisions, followed by marketing communication channels used prior to purchase. The third theme explores communication perceptions, including trust and credibility, while the final theme addresses prospective developments in industrial communication.

5.2. Research findings

The findings presented in this chapter are the outcome of an inductive Grounded Theory analysis. Data collection and analysis proceeded iteratively, with open coding generating initial concepts that were progressively grouped through constant comparison. These concepts were then clustered into categories, which formed the basis for the higher-order themes presented in this chapter. The themes were therefore not derived from the literature in advance but constructed from recurring patterns in participants' accounts, reflecting how decision-makers themselves described and connected their experiences.

5.2.1. Theme 1: Factors influencing purchasing behaviour

Across the interviews, participants first described what shapes their purchasing decisions for machine-tools and automation solutions. They explained how investments are evaluated and what is perceived as reliable or worth committing to. Rather than being driven by technical or financial criteria alone, decisions reflected a combination of operational considerations, experiential judgement and interpersonal factors. The categories that follow capture these recurring influences as articulated by the participants.

Theme	Categories	Sub Categories
Factors influencing purchasing behaviour	**Key facts influencing purchase decisions**	Product Factors
		Supplier and Market Analysis
	Relational influence on purchasing decisions	External relationship impacts
		Internal relationship impacts
		Relationships to Machine Provider
		Trust and Competence in Sales and Service Personell
	Support and Service Quality	Problem Solving and Care
		Network and Treatment by Manufacturer

Table 23: Theme 1 factors influencing purchasing decisions including categories and subcategories (author)

Key facts influencing purchasing decisions

While technical benchmarks such as precision and functionality remained relevant, participants more often emphasised pragmatic and experience-based considerations when evaluating machine-tools or automation solutions. Decisions were described as shaped by operational integration, usability and perceived reliability rather than by formal performance indicators alone.

One participant, for example, rejected a technically advanced solution due to poor usability:

“Even if the machine had the same price, [company]—even though they are super machines, a super reputation, super accurate or anything else – have actually kicked themselves out for me… It took him 15–20 minutes to get this product through the software with 15 different windows to the machine.”

(P1_G)

Usability, particularly in software interfaces, was therefore a decisive criterion. The same participant viewed smaller firms and start-ups more positively, highlighting their openness to new approaches:

“Especially the young start-ups actually make better solutions because they are more open to new ways.” (P1_G)

Durability and service expectations also influenced purchasing decisions, with participants indicating a willingness to invest more upfront when long-term reliability and support were assured:

“If we know that the machine will run in ten years, we have good service, a sustainable spare part, then you spend a few euros more than if a cheap low-quality product comes.” (P2_G)

Beyond technical evaluation, participants described the importance of validating solutions through direct experience before committing to an investment:

“They always have to test their tools, holders, etc. beforehand so that we can see whether we are just buying a pig in a poke or whether we have found a suitable tool that is worth the investment.” (P10_G)

In addition to internal testing, some decision-makers relied on informal benchmarking and observation of competitors to assess whether solutions were market-proven:

“I first go and look at the ‘Drehteile-Verband’… Who’s making money? And the one that earns money, what does it use?” (P2_G)

At the same time, concerns were raised about adopting solutions without an established track record:

“If I haven't seen anyone who already has that in stock, who is producing with that, that means for me: No spare parts. No structure. Maybe it will be over tomorrow.” (P2_G)

A different emphasis emerged in the Japanese context, where evaluation focused more strongly on system-wide integration:

"We are rather looking at the process chain of the production as a whole… there are a lot of different parameters outside from the main machining process that we have to take into consideration." (P14_J)

Finally, some participants expressed scepticism toward claims of rapid digitalisation, particularly among smaller firms:

"A lot of people talk about digitalisation, but nobody does it. So very few. Except for the really big ones." (P1_G)

Relational Influences on purchasing decisions

Participants described purchasing decisions as embedded in interpersonal relationships, both within their organisations and with external partners. Rather than occurring in isolation, decisions were shaped through internal consultation and through trust developed with specific individuals involved in the purchasing process.

Internally, decision-makers reported consulting colleagues across hierarchical levels to broaden their assessment and incorporate operational insight, while retaining final responsibility for the decision. As one participant explained:

"There is a certain dictatorship. But on the other hand, I have learned to ask everyone from the assembly line worker to the top – managers. […] Internal consultation is what I would call it." (P1_G)

This form of consultation was described as a pragmatic mechanism for risk reduction, drawing on experience from different parts of the organisation without transferring decision authority.

Externally, trust was closely associated with personal relationships rather than organisational reputation alone, particularly given the financial significance of

machine-tools investments. One participant emphasised how interpersonal trust influenced recommendations:

"There is a lot of money at stake. There has to be trust… when you get along well, you react differently as a person. Then it is a completely different recommendation." (P3_G)

Continuity and personal responsibility were also identified as important indicators of supplier reliability across longer investment processes. One participant described the value of consistent personal support beyond the initial sales interaction:

"Personal advice is important to us – the person who stands by the product and supports us through the further investment up to commissioning." (P10_G)

In the Japanese context, relational trust was reinforced through direct engagement and observation. One participant highlighted the importance of visiting reference customers to validate decisions:

"It is very easy to get in touch with these reference customers and see for themselves." (P13_J)

Across these accounts, relationships functioned as a means of managing uncertainty and assessing reliability. Internal consultation supported informed judgement, while external trust developed through personal familiarity, continuity and direct engagement with suppliers. These relational influences shaped how decision-makers evaluated what felt dependable and worth investing in.

Support and Service Quality

This category highlights how expectations around service and aftercare influence purchasing decisions. Across interviews, service quality was not described as a downstream consideration but as an early indicator of supplier reliability. Participants evaluated service as part of the overall investment,

closely linked to risk management and operational continuity.

Personal responsiveness emerged as a key signal of reliability. One participant described how rapid, individual engagement shaped confidence in the supplier:

“If I write to [person] that I have a problem here, then I know that the next day someone will be here… he goes all the way up to the managing director if he has to.” (P1_G)

Such responsiveness was valued not only for solving problems quickly, but because it conveyed responsibility and commitment beyond formal service structures.

Service expectations also influenced price sensitivity. One participant explained that competent and proactive sales support justified higher investment:

“If the salesperson is competent, has a clue and cares, then that’s a very big plus… then you also like to buy the more expensive system.” (P11_G)

Here, value was assessed not solely in technical or financial terms, but in relation to the reliability of human support.

Rather than relying on anonymous service systems, participants preferred clearly identifiable contact persons who could take ownership of issues. As one interviewee noted:

“It is important that you have an effective contact person… who takes the problem seriously and gives immediate feedback.” (P21_G)

This contrast between personalised support and impersonal service structures highlights how service becomes a visible expression of trustworthiness. Across accounts, service quality was closely tied to continuity, accessibility and perceived care, shaping how suppliers were judged long before technical performance could be evaluated in practice.

Across the three categories, purchasing decisions were shown to extend beyond price or technical specifications alone. Participants described decisions as shaped by the fit of a solution within daily operations, by efforts to reduce risk through experience and by interpersonal relationships that supported judgement and reliability. Machines were evaluated in terms of usability and integration within existing processes. Alongside these operational considerations, internal consultation and external continuity with trusted individuals played an important role in determining what felt dependable and worth investing in.

Emergent Factors Theme 1: Factors Influencing purchasing behaviour

Taken together, the findings show that purchasing decisions in the machine-tools and automation sector are shaped by multiple, interconnected considerations rather than by price or technical specifications alone. Participants evaluated machines in terms of operational fit, usability and integration within existing processes, while confidence in decisions was strengthened through testing, peer reference and direct observation. Alongside these operational factors, internal consultation and continuity with trusted external contacts influenced how reliability and investment worth were assessed.

5.2.2. Theme 2: Marketing communication channel

Following the examination of factors influencing purchasing decisions, this theme focuses on how decision-makers gather and evaluate information prior to investments in machine-tools and automation solutions. Across interviews, participants described using a combination of digital and traditional communication channels, selecting and filtering them based on perceived relevance, credibility and usefulness within their specific decision contexts.

Rather than relying on a single dominant channel, decision-makers described navigating multiple formats in parallel. Communication channels were assessed pragmatically, particularly in terms of how well they supported orientation, comparison and uncertainty reduction during the preparation phase. Table 24 summarises the categories and subcategories that emerged from the data.

Theme	Categories	Sub Categories
Marketing Communication Channels	Digital Marketing Communication Channels	Corporate Homepages
		Newsletters
		Search Engines
		Social Media
		Web Meetings and Digital Events
		youtube
		Chat GPT
	Traditional Marketing Communication Channels	Exhibitions
		Open House
		Corporate Brochures and Magazines
		Technical Magazines, Press
	Direct Interaction and Detailed Communication	Detailed and focused information gathering
		importance of face-to-face communication

Table 24: Theme 2 marketing communication channels including categories and subcategories (author)

Digital Marketing Communication Channels

Digital channels were consistently described as part of everyday information routines, particularly at early stages of supplier and technology evaluation. Company websites, search engines and video platforms were most frequently mentioned as entry points for initial orientation.

Company websites were commonly used to collect structured information about suppliers and products. One participant stated:

“Yes. So actually 95% of it is via company homepages. We collect information via the company homepages.” (P11_G)

At the same time, participants described challenges when navigating extensive product portfolios:

“We actually have to go through the homepage - which is very good with you - turners, millers, etc. So we have to search. We don't know the [company] repertoire. It's too big.” (P2_G)

Websites were also described as gateways to further digital touchpoints:

“If the homepage of the manufacturer has links to Facebook, to YouTube, or other social media, of course we will check it out. If it's available.” (P15_J)

Search engines were frequently used to identify suppliers or technologies, particularly when participants were exploring unfamiliar solution areas:

“I enter a search term, MES systems for example, and say: Okay, who do I come across? I come across [company] for example. Okay, all right. Then I call the [company] salesperson and ask: What do you do with MES…?” (P10_G)

“Actually rather mostly 99% Google and then sometimes Bing here and there. But mainly Google.” (P12_G)

Despite their efficiency, search engines were also associated with frustration regarding relevance and information overload:

“There’s so much information, but we don’t get the information we really want. If we look at Google, there's a lot of related information shown to us, but it's getting more difficult to really get to the point where we want to go.” (P15_J)

Video content, particularly on YouTube, was described more positively, as it enabled visual access and flexible consumption:

“The simplest thing, where I actually see everything best, is a product presentation on YouTube. Because there it's always available, at the time I want.” (P1_G)

Several participants distinguished between supplier-generated content and experience-based user reports, placing greater trust in the latter:

“And it’s actually more the reviews... real experience reports. And based on these, I let myself be influenced. But not naively, I try to understand who of this product tester really means it.” (P1_G)

Views on social media platforms were mixed. While some participants used channels such as Instagram to stay informed:

“I sometimes look at Instagram to get official information about tools. Some of

the tool manufacturers provide technical information on Instagram." (P17_J)

others rejected them as unsuitable for their professional routines:

"I can't cope with Instagram. I think I'm probably too old for that." (P1_G)

"For me it's no good always sitting on the mobile phone. I'm someone who likes to have personal contact and form my opinion in person." (P12_G)

Emerging digital tools such as ChatGPT were mentioned with caution. Some participants described using it for idea generation:

"And as for ChatGPT, I use it when I need ideas or a starting point before collecting information." (P19_J)

while expressing scepticism regarding reliability:

"I've never thought that ChatGPT is a reliable information source." (P19_J)

"It's really practical in some areas, but you also have to be careful with it … I once wanted to use it for a presentation on a fairly specific topic…. all the others didn't exist or couldn't be found, so I didn't know where the information came from and it just produced rubbish." (P23_G)

Digital events such as webinars were similarly evaluated ambivalently. One participant noted:

"I tried to participate with you more often. I found the level too stuffy." (P1_G)

Others emphasised the absence of sensory and interpersonal experience:

"It's not my world, because I simply miss the personal touch. I see the machine standing there... but it's different when you see it live." (P11_G)

Overall, the data indicates that digital channels form an important but limited part of decision-makers' information practices. They are primarily used for

orientation and initial exploration, while confidence in information often depends on subsequent validation through personal interaction. Digital formats were rarely described as sufficient on their own, but rather as prompts for further dialogue and verification.

Traditional Marketing Communication Channels

Traditional marketing communication channels, including exhibitions, open houses, brochures and technical magazines, continued to play a role in decision-makers' information practices. Their use was selective and purpose-driven, often supporting comparison, experiential understanding and direct interaction rather than serving as standalone information sources.

Japanese participants frequently highlighted exhibitions as important spaces for direct comparison and first-hand communication. One participant explained:

"We visit the big exhibitions that are conducted once or twice per year and where a lot of manufacturers gather at one time at one spot. And we use this opportunities to gather a lot of information about recent developments. Also, we can get information that we normally cannot receive. It's a very good opportunity to talk to many manufacturers at the same time. And to compare." (P15_J)

Exhibitions were also described as difficult to replace, even if they were not always attended with a concrete purchasing intention:

"Going to these kind of events is something that cannot be replaced. But on the other side, it is also not the most urgent and eager to go to these kinds of events." (P14_J)

Several Japanese participants emphasised the experiential difference between physical exhibitions and digital formats:

"The biggest difference is the information of 2D and 3D. In my view it's still a big difference in the quality of information you can get through online media in 2D and real exhibitions in 3D." (P16_J)

Others described exhibitions as spaces for broad orientation rather than detailed evaluation:

“When he looks at YouTube or at exhibitions, it's about getting an idea of what could be happening or what is happening right now, but not something too specific.” (P14_J)

German participants similarly framed exhibitions as selective and goal-oriented. Attendance was often linked to a specific investment need:

“If we have a specific topic where we say that we now have a machine XY, then trade fairs are actually important. Then we also go there, but then we specifically approach the machine.” (P12_G)

Open houses were frequently described as more focused and efficient than large fairs. One participant stated:

“An open house always brings more than a fair, but is of course more time-consuming.” (P2_G)

Views on printed materials were divided. Some participants continued to value physical formats:

“I still like to have a brochure or a catalogue in my hand, because then I can write something in it and then I can draw in it.” (P11_G)

Others rejected brochures and magazines almost entirely:

“I’ve either discontinued all the magazines we actually have or they're already selected downstairs at reception and thrown away.” (P1_G)

Japanese participants described continued use of selected print media, often alongside digital access:

“I have some subscriptions… for example, the Nikkei newspaper… and read them as physical editions.” (P13_J)

Overall, traditional marketing communication channels were neither obsolete nor dominant. Exhibitions and open houses were valued for experiential insight and direct interaction, while printed materials were increasingly filtered and selectively used. Their relevance depended on timing, purpose and the level of depth required during the preparation phase

Direct Interaction and Detailed Communication

This category captures how direct interaction, including phone calls and face-to-face meetings, continues to shape purchasing decisions for machine-tools and automation solutions. While digital and traditional channels support early information gathering, participants consistently described direct dialogue as decisive when detailed evaluation and trust were required.

Several participants described personal contact as the primary way of filtering and assessing technical information. One German participant explained:

“So then of course I go to the homepage or I pick it up from the offers that we get. In the case of [company], it's simply that I call Mr [person] or the application techniques. We talk on the phone… and we then pick out the technical details: spindle performance etc. But we don't go to the website and look… we don't do that.” (P10_G)

Japanese participants similarly emphasised the importance of personal relationships when uncertainty was high:

“When we want to purchase new equipment… there are a lot of questions and things that are unclear beforehand. So for us, we regard it very highly to have a personal relationship to the salesperson to get all of this necessary information.” (P13_J)

Trust in information was closely linked to trust in the person providing it:

“You need to have a relationship to the company, to the manufacturer… You need to have a close and open relationship so that you can trust what they promise you, what they tell you.” (P13_J)

Several participants described a sequential process in which digital channels were used for initial orientation, followed by personal clarification:

“But the first decision we make on the homepage is based on superficial information. So we don't go into depth right away… then I pick up the phone and call them and they explain it to me in more detail or introduce the company.” (P12_G)

Informal messaging tools were also integrated into direct communication. One participant described WhatsApp as central to ongoing interaction:

“For me, WhatsApp is the most important communication tool, and increasingly so… I get a video, I get a link, I get two projects… The salesman sometimes answers me on Saturdays and Sundays. I always have a contact person.” (P1_G)

The same participant linked this responsiveness directly to purchasing decisions:

“That is service… and also influences your decision to buy.” (P1_G)

Trust was also highlighted in high-stakes situations:

“There is a lot of money at stake. There has to be trust… [Person], we get along relatively well. Then you react differently as a person.” (P3_G)

Face-to-face interaction was described as indispensable when complexity increased. A Japanese participant noted:

“We have a certain limit of how much work we can actually do online… So we have to physically meet in places.” (P6_J)

Others expressed clear communication hierarchies:

“Personal visits are the most important. The second important tool are E-mails.” (P16_J)

German participants echoed the need for direct contact in urgent situations:

“If it's really urgent… there simply has to be the feedback… and there the personal contact is simply important for me.” (P21_G)

“I prefer to have direct contact in a short conversation to clarify things better.” (P24_G)

Overall, the findings show that direct interaction remains central across cultures and generations. Informal messages, structured meetings and spontaneous calls were described as critical for managing complexity, building confidence and finalising purchasing decisions.

Emerging Factors Theme 2: Communication channels in the purchasing process

This theme shows that communication in industrial purchasing is shaped less by the availability of channels than by their perceived relevance, credibility and personal quality. Decision-makers selectively combine formats based on context, experience and trust.

Digital channels such as websites and search engines are widely used for early orientation, offering speed and visual access. Their value, however, is often limited without human interpretation or validation, particularly when decisions become complex. Traditional formats remain relevant but serve more focused purposes. Exhibitions and open houses support confirmation, comparison and experiential understanding, while printed materials evoke mixed responses and are increasingly filtered based on usefulness and preference.

Across all channels, direct interaction emerged as decisive. Calls and visits enabled clarification and reinforced confidence, positioning human contact as the central integrative element in the communication process.

Cultural and generational differences influenced how channels were prioritised but did not replace the shared reliance on personal interaction. Overall, purchasing decisions emerged from a layered combination of digital, traditional and interpersonal exchange, with trust acting as the connecting thread across

all formats.

5.2.3. Theme 3: Communication perceptions

Building on the previous theme, this section examines how decision makers perceive and interpret marketing communication throughout the purchasing process. It explores how information is assessed both during active investment phases and in earlier periods of market observation and supplier comparison.

Across the interviews, credibility emerged as a central concern. Participants described how trust, relevance and perceived usefulness shape whether information is engaged with or ignored, particularly in contexts marked by information overload. Perceptions were influenced not only by content, but by format, accessibility and the balance between digital and traditional channels.

This theme analyses how decision makers make sense of communication and the often implicit criteria guiding attention, dismissal and follow-up. Two categories address these dynamics: communication dynamics across formats, and trust in communication.

Theme	Categories	Sub Categories
Communication Perceptions	**Communication Dynamics**	Traditional vs Digital Communication
		Challenges with information overload
	Trust in Communication	Information Trust in Personal Interactions
		Trusted Source Preferrence
		Reliability in Information

Table 25: Theme 3 communication perceptions including categories and subcategories (author)

Communication Dynamics

This category explores how decision-makers perceive and navigate an increasingly complex communication landscape. Participants described a continuous balancing act between the convenience of digital formats and the perceived reliability of more traditional sources. While digital tools offer speed and broad access, they also introduce new forms of fatigue and uncertainty.

Across the interviews, engagement with digital communication was typically cautious rather than enthusiastic. Digital channels such as search engines or

YouTube were often used as supporting tools within a broader process of verification. One German participant explained that information gathering usually begins with personal exchange before moving online:

"The most important thing for me is really that I ask people and in parallel myself… and then I look on YouTube or something. I listen to what they say and just try to evaluate." (P1_G)

This illustrates that digital information is rarely accepted at face value. Instead, it is assessed alongside peer input and personal judgement. Experience-based and user-generated content was seen as particularly valuable. As the same participant noted:

"It's actually more the reviews… so really experience reports. And on the basis of these, I'm quite honest, I let myself be influenced." (P1_G)

Other participants echoed this preference for realistic and practice-oriented material. One German interviewee highlighted the importance of seeing machines in real conditions:

"I'm usually a fan of user videos to see what it looks like in reality and how it sounds." (P10_G)

At the same time, participants described increasing difficulty in navigating online information. Searching for relevant technical content was often perceived as time-consuming and frustrating:

"It usually takes me too long to find something… I have to keep entering different search terms… I am overwhelmed with information, but I don't get to where I actually want to go." (P10_G)

This sense of overload was also evident among Japanese participants. One described the cognitive effort involved in evaluating digital content:

"There's so much information, but we don't get the information we really want… it costs us a lot of energy to decide whether this information is trustworthy or not." (P15_J)

In response to this overload, some participants described reverting to more traditional formats when digital searches failed to deliver clarity:

"You sit in front of the computer for an hour and haven't actually found out anything… then you could theoretically reach for the brochure again." (P10_G)

Younger participants generally expressed greater familiarity with digital platforms. One noted:

"I use YouTube and Twitter or X… I have been using these tools for a long time and it is convenient for me." (P18_J)

However, this fluency did not eliminate concerns about information quality. As another Japanese participant observed:

"We are faced with an overflowing amount of information… it gets very difficult to judge the quality of information." (P15_J)

Overall, these accounts depict a communication environment that offers abundance but demands constant evaluation. Across cultures and generations, decision-makers moved flexibly between digital and traditional channels in search of relevance and credibility. What mattered most was not the format itself, but whether communication helped reduce uncertainty and supported informed next steps.

Trust in Communication

This category examines how trust shapes whether communication is accepted, questioned or acted upon. While the previous category focused on formats and overload, this section addresses a more fundamental issue: what makes information believable in high-stakes industrial contexts.

Trust was rarely linked to channels alone across the interviews. Instead, credibility emerged through the relationship between sender and receiver. Participants consistently described greater openness toward information shared by known and respected individuals. This suggests that communication is judged less by presentation than by perceived sincerity and familiarity.

This logic extended to digital content. User-generated material and experience-based accounts were often considered more credible than polished corporate communication. What mattered was not professionalism, but whether the source appeared honest and grounded in real use. At the same time, participants remained selective, carefully weighing who was speaking and why.

Personalised communication further strengthened trust. Messages gained relevance when they were clearly connected to the recipient's context. As one German participant explained:

"It's a good idea when I personally get a link from someone I know and am told: Watch out, this is the new thing we have in the pipeline and this might fit you or not." (P10_G)

Here, credibility stems from effort and attentiveness. The value lies less in the information itself than in the fact that someone took responsibility for recommending it. A similar pattern appeared in responses to newsletters and other standardised formats:

"If someone would send me a link personally, I would look at it more than if the... It's the same with the newsletters." (P12_G)

This highlights how trust often forms at the intersection of content and sender. Even mass communication becomes meaningful when embedded in personal

exchange.

Japanese participants emphasised another dimension of trust, focusing on how messages are explained and substantiated. One participant noted:

“When we talk to sales personnel, of course they want to appear appealing… But we look for the truth and we look how they explain it and whether it's evidence based or not.” (P15_J)

This reflects a careful evaluation of tone, structure and consistency. Trust here develops through attentive listening rather than immediate persuasion. Across both countries, participants also stressed the importance of direct interaction. Initial contact might occur digitally, but confidence deepened through personal engagement:

“The first step is to get in touch with them by telephone or by email. And then the second step is to have them actually visit the company.” (P13_J)

First impressions were also shaped visually. Websites played a role in signalling professionalism and reliability:

“If the website looks good and, above all, if it is easy to navigate. If you have to search for everything forever and can't find it, then you immediately have a bad feeling … I want this website to give me the information I need to make a purchasing decision.” (P23_G)

Yet visual trust was rarely sufficient on its own. As the same participant clarified:

“Often to get a first impression. But when it really gets down to the details, I think it's more productive to talk to someone who can tell you where to find things.” (P23_G)

Generational differences influenced how trust was navigated, but not its importance. Younger participants relied more explicitly on source credibility and verifiability:

“I always make sure that I’m using really trustworthy sources that I can cite… and that you can rely on in the end.” (P24_G)

In contrast, older participants often referred to accumulated personal experience and long-standing networks as a basis for judgement. Across both groups, however, trust remained relational rather than automatic.

This was captured succinctly by one participant:

“There is simply no more important communication. No one can replace it. That really is from person to person. It is indispensable. And we rely on that.” (P3_G)

Overall, trust in communication emerged as a gradual and context-dependent judgement. It was shaped by relevance, tone and personal connection rather than by format alone. Communication became credible when it aligned with prior experience and was delivered in a way that felt informed, attentive and human.

Emerging Factors Theme 3: Communication perceptions

Theme 3 showed that decision makers actively interpret communication rather than passively consume it. Credibility was shaped less by format than by relevance, source and relational cues.

Digital channels were widely used for orientation but rarely trusted without further validation. Information overload led many participants to treat online sources as starting points rather than decisive inputs.

Across Germany and Japan, trust remained central, though assessed differently. Japanese participants paid closer attention to how information was explained, while German participants emphasised the sender and consistency with prior experience. Generational differences influenced how information was filtered, but not the importance of human interaction.

Overall, communication emerged as a process of sense-making grounded in relationships. This leads to the final theme, which examines how decision makers anticipate the future development of communication and the evolving

role of human interaction in an increasingly digital environment.

5.2.4. Theme 4: Prospective developments

This final theme shifts the focus from current practices to anticipated developments in marketing communication. It explores how decision-makers expect communication to evolve, both in terms of technologies and tools and in the role of personal relationships. Participants reflected on ongoing challenges and future expectations, often pointing to a need to better balance digital efficiency with human interaction.

The theme is organised into two categories. The first examines the future relevance of personal relationships, while the second addresses expected developments in communication channels, including the growing role of AI. Together, these insights provide a forward-looking view of how marketing communication in the machine-tools industry may develop.

Theme	Categories	Sub Categories
Prospective Developments	Prospective Developments - Personal Relationships	Importance of human interactions
		Increase of sales persons' tasks
	Prospective Developments - Communication Channels	general change of communication channels
		Digital Platforms and Social Media
		Virtual Presence Technologies (AR, VR, Metaverse)
		AI in Communication (Chat GPT)
		Exhibitions and real product presentation
		Efficiency and Speed
		increase of targeted information

Table 26: Theme 4 prospective developments including categories and subcategories (author)

Prospective Developments - Personal Relationships

This category explores how decision-makers anticipate the future role of personal relationships in business communication. Despite ongoing digitalisation, participants from both Germany and Japan consistently expected direct human interaction to remain central to industrial decision-making.

Digital tools were widely acknowledged as increasing in importance, but rarely seen as capable of replacing relational depth. One German participant expressed clear scepticism toward the idea that technologies such as AI could

substitute human connection:

“It's all well and good what they're talking about, with artificial intelligence or something, but there's still the issue of feelings and interpersonal, and I personally can't imagine… that I say I am completely digital or artificial intelligence. I can't imagine that, because on the other hand, it's still people.” (P1_G)

Rather than decline, several participants expected personal contact to become even more important. As one German interviewee stated:

“Yes, this personal contact will be more important than ever in the future, also in sales. Absolutely. So I am firmly convinced of that.” (P3_G)

A similar view was expressed in Japan:

“In the end, to meet directly with persons, this direct information sharing, this direct meeting with persons, will be even more important, we think.” (P13_J)

The importance of face-to-face interaction was particularly emphasised in high-investment contexts:

“Even in the future, having the real meeting will be important at the first stage… especially because I deal with expensive products.” (P17_J)

Participants highlighted that personal meetings enable deeper understanding and interpretation beyond information exchange:

“When it comes to purchasing decisions, I think face-to-face communication is better… it will help us understand in a deeper sense.” (P19_J)

“There are a lot of nonverbal cues or non-action cues. So that is why I think face-to-face communication remains important.” (P20_J)

Generational nuance emerged, but without challenging the core importance of human contact. A younger German participant observed:

“My generation would not yet be ready to replace personal contact with purely digital contact… but you can see that younger people are already using digital media more and might be willing to even consider something like that earlier.” (P23_G)

At the same time, participants anticipated a changing role for sales personnel. Rather than disappearing, sales roles were expected to become more consultative and digitally supported:

“The mix remains. The mix between personal and digital remains. Only the one who comes in person must be so equipped - not with a trolley and ten folders - but preferably with iPad and solutions.” (P3_G)

This shift toward more tailored, solution-oriented interaction was reinforced by another German participant:

“I think it's becoming more and more important for the manufacturers to be able to provide the right concept for the respective customer… what was more general in the past will certainly become much more specific in the next few years.” (P4_G)

Digital tools were often framed as compensatory rather than substitutive, particularly where sales resources are limited:

“Maybe there are less visits and more communication through the Internet… [Company] has much less human resources in sales so they use more digital methods to compensate for that.” (P7_J)

The broader sentiment was captured succinctly by one participant:

“The future will look like this: Humanity will simply be more decisive again. We will need more trust again.” (P3_G)

Overall, participants anticipated not a replacement of personal relationships, but a reconfiguration. Digital tools were expected to enhance efficiency, while decisive moments in communication would continue to rely on human presence, judgement and trust. This sets the stage for the final category, which examines how communication channels themselves are expected to evolve.

Prospective Developments - Communication Channels

This category explores how decision-makers anticipate the future development of communication tools and platforms in the machine-tools industry. Building on the continued importance of human interaction, participants described a future shaped by further digitalisation, growing personalisation and pragmatic concerns around efficiency, relevance and trust.

Across interviews, further digitisation was widely expected, particularly by younger professionals. One Japanese participant linked this development directly to generational habits:

"I think it's going to be more important because the younger generation are very used to SNS or social network and they are the ones who are going to create the future." (P18_J)

Alongside this generational shift, participants anticipated more targeted and automated communication. Artificial intelligence was frequently mentioned as a supportive tool rather than a replacement for human judgement. As one Japanese participant noted:

"A lot of information right now is not very specific but only giving hints about the future… Maybe here also the usage of AI could accompany this." (P14_J)

Similarly, a German participant imagined a future in which information is delivered proactively rather than searched for:

“At some point, you will probably be informed in such a targeted way that when you have to make a decision, you will have exactly the right information available. So the information comes to me, rather than me having to go out and search the internet.” (P10_G)

While these views reflect optimism about efficiency, not all participants were uncritical. Some expressed discomfort with digital formats that lack emotional or sensory depth. Others envisioned hybrid solutions that combine digital access with physical presence. One German participant described such a scenario:

“Possibly even just with a tablet in front of the machine, on which all the information is displayed with submenus and links that can be used to quickly access information and only for further questions there might be an information stand.” (P21_G)

Physical formats such as exhibitions were also expected to remain relevant, particularly for sensitive innovations:

“The new products will be presented at a trade fair, especially with patent protection and all sorts of things… You still have to look at trade fairs.” (P22_G)

Efficiency emerged as a key expectation for future tools. Poorly designed systems were seen as costly in both time and emotional energy:

“All processes must be stable and secure and I try to spend as little time as possible on things that I then have to do twice… That costs time and nerves.” (P10_G)

Participants also anticipated shifts in dominant communication channels. One interviewee questioned the long-term relevance of email, drawing parallels with the decline of SMS:

“I can imagine it without emails… it's conceivable that email will be over at some point.” (P21_G)

Finally, several participants highlighted the importance of integration across systems. Rather than individual tools, future value was expected to lie in connected digital ecosystems:

"The companies that will benefit most are those that can connect digitally… where all systems can communicate and talk to each other." (P1_G)

Overall, participants envisioned a future in which communication becomes more personalised, integrated and time-efficient. While new technologies such as AI and messaging platforms were largely welcomed, acceptance depended on whether they enhanced relevance without undermining trust or human connection. The anticipated challenge lies in balancing automation with authenticity, ensuring that future communication systems remain efficient while still feeling credible, contextual and human.

Emerging Factors Theme 4: Prospective developments

This final theme highlights how decision-makers and younger professionals anticipate the future of communication in the machine-tools industry. Rather than framing digitalisation and human interaction as opposing forces, participants viewed them as complementary elements that must be carefully balanced.

Across both categories, there was strong agreement that personal contact will remain essential, even if used more selectively. Face-to-face interaction was valued for building trust, conveying nuance and providing contextual understanding that digital tools cannot fully replace. At the same time, expectations toward personal contact are shifting, with sales roles increasingly seen as consultative and value-driven.

Digitalisation was largely understood as an enabling infrastructure. Participants anticipated more proactive, targeted information delivery, supported by AI, while expressing caution toward tools that increase complexity or distance. Hybrid formats that combine digital efficiency with human presence were viewed as particularly promising.

Generational differences shaped how these developments were perceived, but not the underlying priorities. Younger participants showed greater ease with digital tools, while senior participants emphasised stability and long-term relationships. Together, these perspectives point toward an integrated communication model in which digital tools enhance efficiency and personalisation, while human interaction continues to provide trust and assurance.

These insights provide the foundation for the final chapter, which synthesises the implications across all four themes.

5.3. Emergent factors and overall picture of research finding

This chapter examined how marketing communication shapes purchasing decisions in the machine-tools industry, focusing on which channels are used and why. Drawing directly on participants' accounts, the findings show that communication is defined not simply by the availability of tools, but by how information is interpreted, filtered and trusted in relational and organisational contexts. Across all themes, trust emerged as the central organising principle of industrial communication.

The four themes collectively generated a set of emergent factors derived inductively from the findings rather than from predefined theoretical constructs. Theme 1 demonstrated that purchasing decisions are shaped as much by perceived supplier reliability and operational fit as by technical specifications. Theme 2 showed that decision-makers do not rely on single channels but actively orchestrate digital, traditional and interpersonal formats, with personal interaction becoming decisive in complex or final stages. Theme 3 highlighted that information is actively interpreted rather than passively consumed, with source credibility outweighing format in information-dense environments. Theme 4 extended these insights toward the future, revealing expectations of greater digital integration alongside a sustained and even heightened importance of trust-based human interaction.

Taken together, these findings gave rise to a set of emergent factors, summarised in Table 27. These factors capture recurring patterns across

participants that emerge through consistent comparison, revealing how communication is enacted and made meaningful in everyday industrial practice.

#	Emerging Factor	Description
1	Relational trust as driver of decisions	Trust in individuals and long-term reliability influences every stage of decision-making.
2	Strategic and operational fit	Product features are interpreted in terms of long-term alignment with production needs and company values.
3	Credibility of source over format	Communication is judged by who sends it. Familiarity and emotional tone matter.
4	Multi-modal channel behaviour	Decision-makers shift flexibly between formats: digital, traditional, personal-based on need and context.
5	Emotional and cognitive overload	The sheer volume of content has made relevance and curation more important than access or quantity.
6	Hybrid communication (personal + digital)	Future communication is seen as a blend (not replacement): digital tools enhance but do not replace relationships.
7	Salesperson (and serviceperson) as trusted advisor	Future sales roles are consultative, relational and adaptive, balancing technology with human understanding.
8	Generational shift in tool adoption	Younger professionals are more open to digital experimentation but still value credibility and trust.

Table 27: Key factors emerging from the findings (author)

Interconnectedness of Emerging Factors

When examined together, the emerging factors reveal a layered and interdependent system of meaning-making in industrial marketing communication. At its centre lies relational trust, a foundational dynamic that influences how information is received but also how communication channels are selected and used. Trust interacts dynamically with perceptions of strategic fit, source credibility, and the evolving expectations around the role of the salesperson as advisor.

The concept of strategic fit is the alignment between product and process. It further extends to how communication itself is tailored to the operational context of the decision-maker. This tailoring is often executed through a hybrid communication approach, where personal and digital formats are not seen as opposites, but as mutually reinforcing. For instance, a face-to-face meeting may follow an AI-generated prompt, or a printed brochure may be validated through peer reviews and YouTube demonstrations. In this sense, the multi-modal channel use acts as a bridge between relational intent and technological enablement.

Credibility of source plays a central role in mediating these interactions. The same information, if received from a trusted advisor or a known peer, is interpreted differently than when presented through generic corporate content. This filtering is particularly crucial in light of emotional overload, where participants described the growing exhaustion from high-volume, low-value communication.

These dynamics are further shaped by a generational shift that adds nuance. Younger participants show a higher comfort level with digital tools and expect more immediacy and interactivity. Yet they do not reject personal contact. Instead, they expect it to be more consultative and value-adding, reflecting an evolution of the salesperson’s role. In this way, generational perspectives amplify rather than contradict the human-centric expectations shared across all age groups.

Taken together, these insights form a cohesive picture: Communication in the machine-tools industry is an active, relational practice formed by the interaction of people, tools, context and evolving technology. Trust anchors this system.

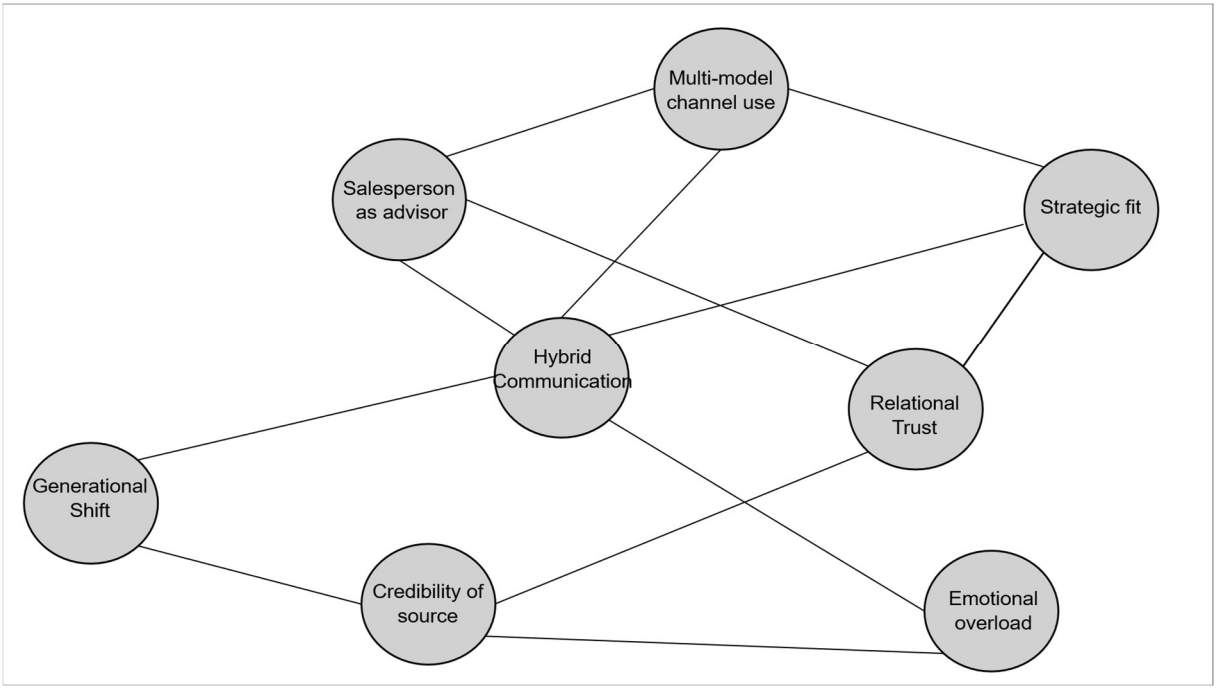


Figure 7: Interconnectedness of emerging factors of marketing communication (author)

The emerging factors identified in this study do not operate independently; they form an interconnected system that shapes how marketing communication is perceived and used in the machine-tools industry. As shown in the visual map (Figure 7), elements such as hybrid communication, relational trust and the evolving advisory role of the salesperson appear as central nodes linked to multiple surrounding factors. For example, hybrid communication is closely connected to multi modal channel use, emotional overload and generational change, indicating that the blend of digital and human contact is both a response to and a driver of wider behavioural shifts. Likewise, strategic fit is shaped by source credibility and strengthened through trust based relationships. Together, these links show that communication decisions are rarely linear but shaped by interdependent emotional, strategic and contextual cues.

Several tensions also emerged. Participants valued digital tools yet often felt fatigued by them, reflecting a pull between efficiency and overload. Younger professionals were more open to AI and social media, yet still sought personal credibility and face to face reassurance, revealing a tension between digital fluency and relational depth. Sales and service roles are expected to become

more consultative and technologically enabled, while still maintaining emotional intelligence and availability, illustrating the dual expectation to be both digitally responsive and personally present.

To visualise these relationships, Table 28 summarises the Emergent Factors and their interdependencies, illustrating how the patterns identified in Chapter 5 reinforce and interact with one another within industrial communication processes.

Emergent Factor	Core Interdependencies	Brief Explanation
EF1 Relational Trust	EF2, EF3, EF6, EF7, EF8	Central hub: trust enables credibility, advisor roles and hybrid orchestration; moderated by fit and generational dynamics.
EF2 Strategic & Operational Fit	EF1, EF3, EF7	Fit is validated through trust, advisor expertise and credible information; reinforces confidence in long-term supplier relationships.
EF3 Source Credibility	EF1, EF4, EF6, EF7	Credibility of sender (often advisor) shapes channel effectiveness; underpins hybrid orchestration and trust.
EF4 Multi-Modal Channel Behaviour	EF3, EF5, EF6	Buyers use multiple channels pragmatically; effectiveness depends on credibility, overload management and hybrid integration.
EF5 Overload Management	EF3, EF4, EF6	Filtering required in information-rich environments; hybrid orchestration and credible advisors help mitigate overload.
EF6 Hybrid Communication Orchestration	EF1, EF3, EF4, EF5, EF7	Digital and face-to-face modes complement each other; orchestration depends on trust, credibility and overload reduction.
EF7 Salesperson as Advisor	EF1, EF2, EF3, EF6	Advisors embody trust and credibility, validate fit, and curate hybrid communication journeys.
EF8 Generational Shift	EF1–EF7 (all)	Acts as a moderator, reshaping how trust, channels and advisor roles are enacted across younger vs. older decision-makers.

Table 28: Emergent factors in chapter 5 and their interdependencies (author)

The themes and categories presented in this chapter emerged inductively from the data introduced in Chapter 4 and were refined through comparison across interviews. Grounded in participants' accounts, the resulting emergent factors capture recurring patterns in purchasing behaviour, communication practices and relational evaluations within the machine-tools and automation context. These insights provide the foundation for the discussion in Chapter 6, where the findings are interpreted in relation to existing literature.

CHAPTER 6 – DISCUSSION

6.1. Introduction: Purpose and structure

This chapter moves from what was identified through empirical analysis to what these findings mean for theory and practice in the context of the machine-tools industry. Building on Chapter 3 (Literature Review), Chapter 4 (Methodology) and Chapter 5 (Findings), it interprets how the results of this study advance existing knowledge on marketing communication, relationship building and purchasing behaviour in industrial markets. In doing so, the chapter connects established theoretical perspectives on relationship marketing, Human-to-Human (H2H) marketing and communication channels with the lived experiences expressed by decision-makers in German and Japanese SMEs.

The analysis underpinning this discussion is grounded in a constructivist Grounded Theory approach based on 24 semi-structured interviews with decision-makers and young professionals in Germany and Japan. Through iterative coding and comparison, Chapter 4 developed categories, sub-categories and themes from the empirical material, while Chapter 5 consolidated these insights into Emergent Factors that capture recurring mechanisms shaping communication and decision-making in industrial purchasing contexts. The discussion presented here therefore builds directly on participant voices, moving beyond description to explain how these patterns operate and why they matter.

In this chapter, interpretation refers to the analytical step in which the Emergent Factors identified in Chapter 5 are consolidated into a set of foundational elements and examined in relation to existing theory in order to explain underlying mechanisms and patterns of industrial communication. Rather than treating communication channels as isolated tools, the interpretation highlights how meaning, credibility and relevance emerge through the interaction between people, organisational context and continuity over time. Trust is shown to develop through personal accountability and relational consistency, while digital tools function primarily as supporting instruments rather than substitutes for human connection.

The findings further illustrate how these foundations are shaped by cultural and generational influences. German and Japanese participants follow different logics in establishing credibility and reassurance, reflecting distinct cultural expectations around transparency, consensus and responsibility. At the same time, differences in communication preferences appear more pronounced across generations than across national contexts. Younger professionals combine digital curiosity and speed with an ongoing need for expert guidance and personal validation, pointing to a shift in how credibility is accessed and confirmed rather than a departure from relational expectations altogether. These insights contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how decision-makers evaluate information and manage uncertainty before committing to major capital investments.

Together, these interpretations address the research aim of exploring which marketing communication channels are used in industrial purchasing, why they are selected, and how they contribute to the establishment of credibility prior to purchasing decisions. The chapter links the empirical findings back to the conceptual foundations introduced in Chapter 3, demonstrating that even in highly technical and digitally mediated environments, human connection remains central to effective communication.

The golden thread that connects this chapter with the rest of the thesis can be summarised as follows: Chapter 3 established the conceptual foundations drawn from the literature; Chapter 4 developed the analytical structure by deriving codes, categories and themes from the empirical data; Chapter 5 presented the resulting findings in the form of Emergent Factors; and Chapter 6 integrates these strands to interpret what the findings mean for theory and practice and why they matter. This interpretive step lays the groundwork for Chapter 7, where the identified foundations are translated into antecedents within a practical framework for H2H communication and channel orchestration in the machine-tools industry.

Across all themes, the findings show that Human-to-Human (H2H) interaction functions as the connective logic through which communication becomes meaningful in industrial purchasing contexts. Rather than representing isolated themes, the areas discussed in this chapter are understood as foundational

conditions that enable H2H communication to emerge and function effectively.

Accordingly, the chapter is structured around five foundational areas that together form the analytical basis for understanding how communication, trust and credibility are established in industrial markets:

1. Trust and credibility embodied in people;
2. Communication channels and their orchestration;
3. Communication within the B2B buying process;
4. Cultural and generational moderators; and
5. Human-to-Human marketing as the integrative lens.

Each foundational area links the empirical findings to relevant theoretical perspectives and interprets their significance for industrial marketing practice. Together, these foundations provide the necessary conditions from which the antecedents of effective H2H communication are derived in Chapter 7.

6.1.1 From themes to a system

The interpretation presented in this chapter builds on the analytical pathway established through the Grounded Theory process, in which empirical material moved from initial codes to categories, themes and, ultimately, to the Emergent Factors identified in Chapter 5. These Emergent Factors capture recurring mechanisms in how decision-makers communicate, build trust and evaluate information prior to purchasing decisions. In this chapter, they are further consolidated into a set of foundational elements that explain how these mechanisms operate in relation to one another.

Building on this foundation, Table 29 shows how the interrelated Emergent Factors identified in Chapters 4 and 5 were interpreted as a set of foundational elements that *inform and organise the discussion* in this chapter. The table makes explicit the analytical progression from empirical findings to interpretive foundations, providing a transparent point of orientation for the theoretical analysis developed in Chapter 6.

Themes from data analyis (Chapter 4)	Emergent Factors From Findings (Chapter 5)	Foundational areas guiding Chapter 6
Factors influencing purchasing decisions	**EF1** Relational Trust; **EF2** Strategic & Operational Fit; **EF3** Source Credibility	**Foundation 1:** Trust and credibility embodied in people; **Foundation 3:** Communication within the B2B buying process
Marketing communication channels	**EF4** Multi-Modal Channel Behaviour; **EF5** Overload Management; **EF6** Hybrid Communication Orchestration	**Foundation 2**: Communication channels and their orchestration
Communication perceptions	**EF7** Salesperson as Advisor	**Foundation 1**: Trust and credibility embodied in people; **Foundation 5:** H2H as the integrative lens
Prospective developments	**EF8** Generational Shift	**Foundation 4:** Cultural and generational moderators; **Foundation 5:** H2H as the integrative lens

Table 29: Themes, emergent factors and foundational area development path (author)

The discussion is structured around five foundational areas derived from recurring patterns in the interview data and selected for their explanatory relevance to theory and practice.

- **Foundation 1: Trust and credibility embodied in people**

  Trust is established when individual representatives in a company, across sales and service, take visible ownership of information and maintain continuity throughout the relationship. Credibility becomes tangible through consistency and a personal sense of responsibility that connects the organisation's promises and informations with the customer's industrial reality.

- **Foundation 2: Communication channels and their orchestration.**

  Effective channel orchestration combines digital accessibility with targeted personal interaction, ensuring that information is both relevant and reliable. This coordination prevents overload and guides buyers from initial orientation toward confident decision-making.

- **Foundation 3: Communication within the B2B buying process.**

  Communication adapts to each stage and actor, evolving from digital information exchange in early awareness to more personal, trust-based interaction during validation and commitment. Each phase requires a distinct balance between factual evidence and human credibility

- **Foundation 4: Cultural and generational moderators.**

  Cultural norms and generational preferences influence how communication is conducted and which channels are chosen to build credibility. German participants valued precision and procedural clarity, while Japanese participants emphasised continuity and reliability. Across both groups, generational contrasts were even more pronounced: younger professionals favoured speed and digital access but still sought expert guidance and authentic personal contact.

- **Foundation 5: H2H as the integrative lens.**

  The Human-to-Human perspective connects all previous topics by showing that effective communication is built on genuine relationships. It highlights how human connection turns information exchange into mutual understanding and ensures trust across different cultures and generations.

In summary, these five foundational areas can be considered to provide the foundations for understanding the most salient patterns in the data, aligning them with the thesis's theoretical focus, and informing the development of the H2H communication framework, with implications for suppliers in the machine-tools industry

6.2. Foundation 1: Trust and credibility embodied in people

Trust in industrial business relationships is not a static condition but something that must be continuously earned through behaviour. In capital-intensive sectors like the machine-tools industry, the cost of failure is high, and buyers evaluate suppliers by their reliability in everyday actions. "He sometimes answers me on Saturdays and Sundays. I always have a contact person. I can see whether he's there or not." (P1_G). This shows that availability and ownership are more than polite gestures; they are concrete signals that make trust visible. Blöbaum (2021) explains that trust becomes most noticeable when it is tested, and

Mangus et al. (2023) add that salespeople often overestimate the level of trust customers place in them, leading to a gap between perception and reality. The interviews in this study confirm that buyers do not trust companies in general, but people who behave consistently and take visible responsibility. This shifts the understanding of trust from an abstract belief to something observable and measurable. It also means that the salesperson or service engineer becomes central to maintaining credibility throughout the process.

Morgan and Hunt (1994) described trust as a foundation for commitment, assuming that once it is established, cooperation follows. The findings here show a more dynamic picture. In the machine-tools business, trust and commitment evolve together through repeated communication and verified actions. “There is simply no more important communication. No one can replace it. That really is from person to person. It is indispensable. And we rely on that.” (P3_G). Trust in this sense is not a one-time achievement but a living relationship confirmed through every exchange. Gansser et al. (2021) found that interpersonal trust based on competence and integrity often has more impact than trust in the organisation itself. The interviews reinforce this and go further. Customers judge reliability not only by technical performance but by how predictable and human the communication feels. When the same contact person remains available from quotation to the deliver of a machine and beyond, buyers interpret this continuity as a guarantee that promises will be kept. Where handovers are unclear or communication becomes impersonal, confidence erodes quickly. This shows that in practice, trust depends less on contracts and more on consistent, transparent behaviour.

Charterina et al. (2018) argued that trust enables cooperation once collaboration has started. The present findings show that trust begins long before that. Buyers expect early evidence of transparency and competence before they commit. “Often to get a first impression. But when it really gets down to the details, I think it's more productive to talk to someone who can tell you where to find things.” (P23_G). Although this quote comes from a younger professional, it captures a pattern seen across generations: trust starts with communication that shows both expertise and accountability. For companies, this means that technical experts should be part of the dialogue early, demonstrating openness and practical understanding. This visible proof of competence reduces perceived

risk and creates a basis for further cooperation.

Personalised communication reinforces credibility by linking technical detail to the buyer's own context. Grönroos (1994) and Gummesson and Grönroos (2012) emphasise that value is created through interaction, not one-way messaging. Buyers in this study responded positively when suppliers demonstrated familiarity with their production challenges. "It's a good idea when I personally get a link from someone I know and am told: Watch out, this is the new thing we have in the pipeline and this might fit you or not." (P10_G). Another stated: "If someone would send me a link personally, I would look at it more than if the... It's the same with the newsletters." (P12_G). Personalisation in this context means technical empathy. When a salesperson or application engineer provides information directly relevant to the customer's needs, communication turns into a form of service. Butkouskaya et al. (2023) highlight that the effectiveness of omnichannel marketing depends on continuity and relevance. The results confirm this: personal contact gives digital communication meaning and converts information into reassurance. For practice, this means companies should more on targeted, personal follow-up that shows genuine understanding of customer needs.

Digital channels help buyers gather information efficiently, but final credibility is always tied to personal interaction. One younger participant explained: "If the website looks good and, above all, if it is easy to navigate… I want this website to give me the information I need to make a purchasing decision." (P23_G). Yet even this generation expects to verify information through a person who can explain the context. "When it really gets down to the details, I think it's more productive to talk to someone who can tell you where to find things." (P23_G). This hybrid logic supports earlier research by Murphy and Sashi (2018) and Mora-Cortez and Johnston (2020): digital tools improve access and speed, but trust crystallises through human contact. For suppliers, this means that digital platforms should not replace people but connect to them quickly. A well-designed website or configurator builds credibility only when it leads directly to a knowledgeable expert who can respond to individual questions. The younger generation therefore brings a new expectation: seamless transitions between digital and human contact are not a luxury but a requirement for trust.

Next-generation professionals also described how they verify information and assess reliability. “I always make sure that I’m using really trustworthy sources that I can cite… and that you can rely on in the end.” (P24_G). This confirms a change in behaviour: even digital-native decision-makers remain selective and base trust on transparency and evidence. It supports the view of Duncan and Moriarty (1998) and Ballantyne et al. (2003) that buyers have moved from persuasion to relational evaluation, assessing the consistency of information across sources. For industrial suppliers, this means that credibility is earned through accessible contacts and visible expertise.

In Japan, several participants described trust as a step-by-step process that deepens through successive forms of contact. “The first step is to get in touch with them by telephone or by email. And then the second step is to have them actually visit the company.” (P13_J). Another explained, “We look for the truth and we look how they explain it and whether it's evidence based or not.” (P15_J). This pattern supports research by Steward et al. (2019) and Grewal et al. (2015) showing that purchasing processes are looping and interactive rather than linear. In the Japanese context, credibility builds through gradual exposure and repeated proof. A remote meeting may start the dialogue, but confidence grows only when the supplier visits and answers detailed questions. For suppliers, this requires patience and continuity. Stepwise trust building takes time but creates durable partnerships once confidence is established.

Trust also matures through experience and networks. “Over the years you naturally gather some contacts… and can assess a bit, let’s say, who is right and who is wrong.” (P1_G). This reflects Lewis and Weigert’s (1985) argument that trust reduces complexity over time and stabilises through repeated interaction. In the machine-tools business, past collaboration as well as installed machines,and recommendations from peers act as informal quality validation. Buyers who have already seen reliable performance are more willing to take new suppliers. For practice, this highlights the importance of maintaining long-term visibility and continuity with customers beyond the single sale. Service interactions are the moments where trust is most directly confirmed or lost. “He comes here, he knows the company, he knows the employees, he solves the problems.” (P10_G). Another participant noted frustration when such continuity was missing: “…to get a service technician on the phone… I have to call in

myself.” (P10_G). These statements underline that service quality is not only technical but relational. Akrout and Woodside (2024) describe trust as the willingness to take sensible risks when communication remains open and reliable. The findings here show that if ownership is lost during handovers, trust erodes quickly. For companies, this means that sales and service teams must communicate as one unit. Clear response procedures and visible accountability prevent irritation and reassure customers that the relationship does not end after purchase.

Peer validation further strengthens credibility in a market overwhelmed by information. “It’s actually more the reviews… so really experience reports. And on the basis of these, I’m quite honest, I let myself be influenced.” (P1_G). Buyers interpret peer experiences as more neutral and trustworthy than official marketing (Ishii & Kikumori, 2023; Zhu & Zhang, 2010). This shows that even in highly technical industries, human references carry more weight than promotional content. For practice, this means that companies should create structured opportunities for peer exchange, such as open houses, reference visits, or authentic customer stories presented by real users.

Overall, the study confirms that trust in industrial relationships is a lived performance. Named sales and service experts and transparent communication form the backbone of credibility. Digital tools help buyers navigate options, but they only persuade when backed by visible human accountability (Murphy & Sashi, 2018; Butkouskaya et al., 2023; Kotler et al., 2019). Cultural and generational differences influence how trust is built, yet all participants agreed that confidence grows from personal connection and consistent behaviour over time.

For practitioners, trust should be built into the organisation. Companies should make responsible experts visible, connect digital entry points to a real person and ensure smooth transitions between departments. Promising quick responses and support before purchase increases transparency and confidence. Measuring how fast human contact follows digital inquiries and how long that contact remains active helps monitor and improve the quality of trust. In other words, trust is a measurable outcome of communication quality.

From a theoretical perspective, this study extends commitment–trust and

relationship marketing theory by showing how trust is actively produced and maintained in industrial settings. While Morgan and Hunt (1994) described trust as a fixed condition preceding commitment, the findings reveal it as a continuous communicative process grounded in human behaviour. This adds a practical layer to relationship marketing, identifying the specific actions, like responsiveness and ownership, that make trust credible in practice. It also connects relationship marketing to the H2H perspective by demonstrating that trust is a human performance that turns digital interaction into real assurance.

These findings primarily address Research Stream 1 (Aim 1) and Research Stream 2 (Aim 2), which explore how communication channels build credibility and how interpersonal trust shapes decision-making in SMEs in Germany and Japan. The study explains how credibility arises when communication channels are linked to identifiable people who act with ownership and continuity. By identifying the behavioural mechanisms through which trust operates, the analysis provides theoretical depth and practical guidance for designing trust-based communication systems. These insights form the conceptual bridge to the next section, which examines how credibility and interaction are orchestrated across hybrid touchpoints in the industrial buying process.

Taken together, these mechanisms show that trust in the machine-tools industry is fundamentally Human-to-Human. Even where digital tools support information gathering, credibility becomes convincing only when embodied by individuals who take responsibility, demonstrate competence and remain present across the lifecycle

6.3. Foundation 2: Communication channels and their orchestration

This section examines how decision-makers in the machine-tools industry combine and evaluate communication channels across their buying journeys. The findings reveal a clear movement away from linear, single-channel communication toward hybrid and deliberately orchestrated paths. Porcu et al. (2012) conceptualised integrated marketing communication as a process of strategic coherence in which formerly isolated tools become interlinked around

shared objectives. They argued that marketing has evolved from the transactional logic of “inform, persuade, and remind” toward a relational cycle of “inform, listen, and respond.” This study confirms that shift yet extends it by showing that, in industrial environments, orchestration is not merely communicative coordination but a practical method of reducing uncertainty in multi-actor, high-investment decisions. Butkouskaya et al. (2023) found that the effectiveness of omnichannel communication is determined not by the quantity of channels used but by how coherently and interactively they are connected, allowing customers to move smoothly between touchpoints without losing context or continuity. In other words, value arises when information and interaction are linked across stages of the journey, so that each channel reinforces rather than duplicates the others. The present study supports this view and deepens it by revealing that machine-tools buyers evaluate coherence through responsiveness: they trust channels that shorten the route to a competent person who can translate information into operational meaning. Kotler et al. (2019) and Pförtsch & Sponholz (2019) placed this interpersonal bridge at the core of H2H marketing, arguing that empathy and credibility are what hold complex systems of communication together. The findings substantiate this humanising perspective, demonstrating that orchestration in practice means designing communication as a continuum from digital access to personal assurance.

Unlike the fast-moving consumer markets on which much omnichannel research is based, industrial purchasing involves prolonged evaluation and high investment. Here, communication serves to synchronise information and interpretation across engineers and operators. The orchestration challenge is therefore organisational as well as communicative: suppliers must connect digital interfaces, salespeople and service experts into one traceable journey that sustains confidence throughout the buying cycle.

Participants consistently placed company websites and search engines at the start of their routines: “Yes. So actually 95 % of it is via company homepages. We collect information via the company homepages.” (P11_G). Yet early orientation did not guarantee clarity when portfolios were broad: “We actually have to go through the homepage – which is very good with you – turners, millers, etc. So we have to search. We don't know the [company] repertoire. It's

too big.” (P2_G). Kotler et al. (2016) observed that owned media build legitimacy but only create value when they help users navigate complexity and locate human assistance. Butkouskaya et al. (2023) likewise argued that websites must act as relational gateways rather than static repositories. The findings support these theoretical perspectives but add an important practical insight. Buyers use company websites as orientation tools to navigate complex product portfolios and to understand which solutions might fit their needs. They view the website less as a static collection of products and more as a guide that should lead them toward relevant examples, clear comparisons, and an identifiable expert. When searching for information, decision-makers aim for efficiency: they want to find meaningful cues that help them judge a supplier’s competence and credibility without unnecessary effort. A clear structure, intuitive navigation, and visible human contact points therefore become critical signals of professionalism and reliability. In practice, transparency and guidance create more trust than extensive but poorly connected data.

Interviewees described company websites as gateways that open access to further sources of information and contact opportunities. “If the homepage … has links to Facebook, to YouTube … of course we will check it out.” (P15_J). This indicates that buyers expect websites to connect different touchpoints rather than function as isolated tools. Search habits were routine but often inefficient. As one participant explained, “Actually rather mostly 99 % Google … But mainly Google.” (P12_G). Another added, “There’s so much information, but we don’t get the information we really want.” (P15_J). These examples illustrate that while online search remains the natural starting point, it rarely provides the depth or relevance required for complex industrial decisions.

Fill and Turnbull (2019) identify five foundational marketing communication instruments: advertising, sales promotion, personal selling, public relations, and direct marketing but digitalisation has blurred the boundaries between these instruments and created hybrid forms that need deliberate orchestration. The findings show what this looks like in practice. Buyers move across tools to reach clarity. They start online to get oriented and then turn to a person for interpretation: “I enter a search term, MES systems for example … Then I call the [company] salesperson and ask: What do you do with MES…?” (P10_G). In the machine-tools industry, orchestration therefore means connecting online

discovery to human advice and technical validation in a single, coherent path. The practical effect is that effectiveness rests on how well channels converge and carry a consistent experience across steps, rather than on the strength of any single tool. This finding extends the existing omnichannel theory by translating it into the reality of high-risk B2B contexts. For machine-tools buyers, what matters most is how effectively communication channels connect. The true value lies in smooth transitions between digital discovery and personal exchange, where information turns into personal exchange and understanding.

Video content emerged as a pivotal medium for demonstrating competence and making complex technologies accessible. Participants repeatedly referred to YouTube as their preferred channel for visual understanding and continuous access. “The simplest thing, where I actually see everything best, is a product presentation on YouTube.” (P1_G). Another explained the appeal of authenticity: “It’s actually more the reviews … real experience reports.” (P1_G). Similarly, “I’m usually a fan of user videos to see what it looks like in reality.” (P10_G). These accounts suggest that buyers do not watch videos simply for promotion but to see processes, performance as well as machine quality in realistic conditions. In this respect, YouTube functions as a learning platform and a substitute for early-stage physical demonstrations, helping users evaluate relevance before they invest time in direct contact.

Iankova et al. (2019) and Rose et al. (2021) showed that social platforms contribute differently to credibility in B2B contexts: LinkedIn strengthens professional authority through networked reputation, while YouTube builds experiential trust by making knowledge visible and shareable. The findings of this study confirm and extend this view. For machine-tools buyers, credibility grows when these platforms are connected to company-owned media, allowing viewers to move seamlessly from public videos to specific case examples or contact with experts. Mora-Cortez and Johnston (2020) noted that low-interaction media tend to build trust slowly because they lack immediate dialogue, whereas Murphy and Sashi (2018) emphasised that satisfaction increases when customers can exchange unfiltered feedback. The current research brings these perspectives together: YouTube offers the first layer of visibility, but trust develops only when the viewer can verify the content.

The importance of YouTube in this industry lies in its blend of technical transparency and accessibility. Machine-tools buyers value the possibility to observe machining results, cutting sounds or automation sequences at any time and to compare them across suppliers. Authenticity becomes the true credibility marker. Videos that show real machining or customer cases outperform stylised marketing content because they allow potential buyers to imagine the machine in their own production environment. In practical terms, this means that videos should act as an invitation to continue the dialogue, probably linking to application experts. When visual evidence is connected to human interaction does digital visibility turn into engagement and trust.

Social media were used selectively and for specific tasks rather than as general information sources by the research participants. One younger participant explained, “I sometimes look at Instagram to get official information about tools.” (P17_J). Others, however, felt that these formats did not suit their routines or professional habits: “I can't cope with Instagram. I think I'm probably too old for that.” (P1_G). Another added, “For me it's no good always sitting on the mobile phone. I'm someone who likes to have personal contact.” (P12_G). This variety of responses reflects a pragmatic approach: participants use social media when it offers functional value or quick updates, but they rely on personal interaction when it comes to investment decisions.

Across these diverse channels, the interviews show that digital touchpoints gain persuasive power only when they connect users to identifiable people. This confirms that channel orchestration in industrial markets ultimately functions as an H2H process: digital tools open the door, but human interaction carries the buyer through.

Appel et al. (2020) described this transformation of social media from mass broadcasting to co-created spaces in which interaction determine effectiveness. Digital communication becomes persuasive when it feels human and dialogic. The findings of this study echo this argument: buyers respond positively when social content offers meaningful insight or connects them to credible experts, but they ignore superficial promotion. This points to the growing importance of authenticity as a relational signal. In the context of machine-tools marketing, authenticity means demonstrating technical facts or application knowledge

rather than focusing on brand slogans or visual effects.

Iankova et al. (2019) and Rose et al. (2021) argued that social platforms complement rather than replace traditional B2B channels, with LinkedIn providing professional credibility and YouTube delivering experiential validation. The present findings confirm that pattern but reveal the limits of its transferability: while younger engineers appreciate the accessibility of Instagram or Twitter / X for quick updates, decision-makers still associate professional authority more strongly with LinkedIn and with content that links directly to case examples or contact persons. It was particularly interesting that only Japanese participants mentioned Twitter / X as part of their professional information habits. This suggests that platform choice is not only generational but also cultural.

Butkouskaya et al. (2023) cautioned that expanding digital presence without coordination easily leads to overload. The interviews demonstrate this in practice as participants felt overwhelmed by the volume of content and valued curated, technical information that shortened their search path. Kotler et al. (2019) and Pförtsch & Sponholz (2019) emphasised that effective communication in the digital era depends on integrating human interaction with technological tools. Within the H2H perspective, digital channels are understood as extensions of personal relationships that support, rather than replace, direct human exchange. The evidence here supports that: social platforms can amplify awareness and connection, but credibility still depends on visible human accountability. For industrial suppliers, this means that the purpose of social media is orientation. Posts should function as gateways that lead viewers toward deeper proof, such as reference videos or expert explanation. When designed in this way, social media become effective entry points into the hybrid communication journey.

Physical encounters remained decisive moments for validation and negotiation. As one participant noted, “Simply because then you see the machine live again and also know what you're getting into.” (P11_G). The research participant further differentiated between exploratory and evaluative purposes: “General information gathering tends to be at trade fairs like AMB … But if it’s more in depth … then you go to in-house exhibitions.” (P11_G). These statements illustrate that final reassurance still depends on tangible experiences. Murphy

and Sashi (2018) demonstrated that trust and relationship satisfaction strengthen through direct, unfiltered interaction, while Mora-Cortez and Johnston (2020) found that such face-to-face engagement reduces perceived risk in high-stakes B2B contexts. The findings of this study bring these perspectives together: physical contact serves as a mechanism for confirmation and real experiences by seeing the products matters.

Recent industry analysis by the VDW (2021) reinforces this evolution, showing that trade fairs are shifting from pure product showcases toward hybrid learning environments. The interviews substantiate this transformation and make its dual logic visible. Large fairs provide breadth and orientation, while smaller open-house exhibitions enable deeper evaluation, live proof, and negotiation in a more personal atmosphere. The physical presence of machines and experts activates sensory and social cues that no digital format can replicate. These embodied experiences sustain the human dimension of credibility and explain why physical formats continue to function as decisive trust anchors within an increasingly digitalised communication landscape.

As technical discussions intensified, buyers increasingly relied on direct human interaction to clarify details and confirm feasibility. “I call Mr [person] or the application techniques … we then pick out the technical details.” (P10_G). The importance of personal accountability was further emphasised: “That is important to us … the person who then also stands by his product.” (P10_G). These statements illustrate that trust is built through the relevance and continuity of the people involved. Fill and Turnbull (2019) argued that communication effectiveness depends on aligning the type of channel with the depth of relationship, mass communication for awareness and interpersonal dialogue for commitment. The present findings bring this principle to life: buyers do not consciously follow a designed omnichannel sequence, but rather move intuitively from digital exploration toward personal reassurance once online information stops adding value.

This behavioural pattern also reflects the logic of Service-Dominant Theory. Communication, therefore, becomes a site of co-creation where supplier and customer jointly define what matters for performance and risk reduction. In this context, the salesperson or service engineer is not merely a transmitter of

technical data but a translator who connects specifications to the customer's operational reality. This shift reframes interpersonal to an integral part of how industrial value and trust are co-produced throughout the purchasing process.

Informal messaging further compressed communication cycles. "For me, WhatsApp is the most important communication tool … The salesman sometimes answers me on Saturdays and Sundays." (P1_G). "That is service … and also influences your decision to buy." (P1_G). Kotler et al. (2019) described such immediacy as central to H2H credibility, empathy and availability translate directly into trust. The interviews make this concrete: informal messages transform responsiveness into a signal of reliability. Murphy & Sashi (2018) similarly found that reciprocity enhances satisfaction. The study extends this insight by identifying informal contact as the connective layer, responsiveness should be institutionalised ensuring that digital enquiry triggers timely human follow-up.

New technologies such as generative AI and virtual events were met with curiosity but tempered trust. "I use it when I need ideas or a starting point….I've never thought that ChatGPT is a reliable information source." (P19_J). One younger professional added, "It's really practical … but I didn't know where the information came from." (P23_G). These reflections reveal that while digital tools are valued for convenience and inspiration, they lose credibility when their origins or authorship remain unclear. Mora-Cortez and Johnston (2020) observed a similar dynamic, noting that while digital channels enhance efficiency, they often reduce emotional assurance because human intent is harder to perceive. These perspectives explain why participants in this study engaged with emerging technologies selectively: they welcomed AI-generated content as a stimulus for new ideas but resisted using it for validation or decision-making. In the industrial environment, credibility still depends on a traceable human source who can explain and take responsibility for the information provided.

Across interviews, participants described having access to too much information but too little orientation. One German participant noted, "It usually takes me too long to find something … I am overwhelmed with information." (P10_G). A Japanese interviewee echoed this frustration: "It costs us a lot of energy to

decide whether this information is trustworthy." (P15_J). These statements reflect a common tension: digital channels have multiplied, but the effort to evaluate and connect the information has shifted to the buyer. Butkouskaya et al. (2023) warned that an abundance of channels does not improve communication quality unless messages are consistent, interactive, and well connected. The findings confirm this problem and extend it by showing how industrial buyers respond to it in practice. When suppliers do not provide clear guidance, buyers create their own routes through the information landscape. They begin with online scanning, switch to personal dialogue when they need clarification, and then return to digital sources for verification or comparison. In reality, channel orchestration is a shared process in which both sides, the buyer and the supplier, contribute to connecting digital and human touchpoints. Buyers actively manage their information flow to make sense of complex choices, while suppliers often underestimate how much work this requires.

Cultural and generational differences shaped how participants approached communication, but they did not alter its fundamental logic. Japanese decision-makers often framed credibility through the lens of long-term relationships and established sources. One explained, "You need to have a relationship to the company … to trust what they promise." (P13_J), and the same participant added, "I have some subscriptions … the Nikkei newspaper … and read them as physical editions." (P13_J). These remarks show that reliability is rooted in continuity and recognised authority rather than in the novelty of channels. Trust, in this view, is accumulated through repeated interactions and supported by reputable media that confirm a company's standing. Younger professionals, by contrast, valued immediacy and ease of access. As one commented, "I use YouTube and Twitter or X … it is convenient for me." (P18_J). Convenience, however, did not equate to confidence; even the digital-oriented participants still turned to personal contact for final reassurance. This suggests that generational differences influence how information is reached, not how it is ultimately verified. The underlying expectation of human confirmation remains constant. Japanese buyers tend to seek relational assurance before engaging in technical validation, whereas German buyers often begin with factual evidence before extending personal trust. Both paths, however, converge in the same direction: human dialogue serves as the decisive moment of validation. This convergence

highlights that, regardless of channel choice or cultural habit, credibility in the machine-tools industry is ultimately secured through person-to-person exchange.

In summary, communication in industrial purchasing is hybrid by necessity. Digital channels provide reach and efficiency, but credibility emerges only when they connect to people who assume responsibility. The study advances omnichannel theory by redefining orchestration as a dynamic, human-centred process in which clarity and responsiveness transform information into confidence. It goes beyond earlier literature by grounding the integrative logic of Porcu et al. (2012) and Butkouskaya et al. (2023) in the concrete behaviour of industrial buyers, showing that strategic integration materialises through everyday collaboration between digital and personal touchpoints.

For practitioners, this means replacing information overload with guided pathways and ensuring that every stage of the journey culminates in human validation. Conceptually, this section contributes to Research Stream 1 by explaining how decision-makers in SMEs combine and sequence communication channels before purchase and why particular configurations foster stronger credibility.

Thus, instead of being a technical integration of media, orchestration is a Human-to-Human alignment where each channel serves as an entry into dialogue, reassurance and personalised support.

6.4. Foundation 3: Communication within the B2B buying process

Industrial buying in the machine-tools sector emerges as an iterative, negotiated process in which communication orchestrates the flow of judgment across people. Rather than a rational sequence of steps, decisions evolve as living dialogues among actors who balance authority and expertise. Classic buying-centre theory already showed that industrial purchases rarely rest with a single chooser but depend on the interaction of multiple roles that influence and validate each other’s perceptions. Relationship and network scholars such as Dwyer et al. (1987) and Håkansson and Johanson (1992) further established

that outcomes are embedded in webs of interdependence and long-term interaction rather than isolated transactions. Contemporary journey research (Edelman & Singer, 2015; Grewal et al., 2015; Steward et al., 2019) adds that buying is cyclical and adaptive, revisiting stages as new information and stakeholders appear.

The interviews confirm these ideas and specify how they take shape in practice: communication is the mechanism that holds this complexity together. As one Japanese decision-maker explained, “The decision is made through discussions between the production site, the engineering team, and the management. We evaluate from different points of view before finalising anything.” (P6_J). Another added, “There are many people involved… engineering, procurement, and production. The process repeats several times until all requirements are aligned.” (P15_J). Buyers thus loop activities until the validation coincide. Communication, rather than hierarchy, becomes the organising principle that ensures coherence across shifting stages within SMEs.

A recurring sequence begins broadly with information gathering and narrows toward contextual fit and credible assurance. One decision-maker described the dual nature of this process: “There is a certain dictatorship. But on the other hand, I have learned to ask everyone from the assembly line worker to the top managers. […] Internal consultation is what I would call it.” (P1_G). Yet he acknowledged where responsibility remains: “The decision is more or less already made in my head.” (P1_G). Others voiced a similar pattern: “Before I make the decision, I talk to the machine operators. They often know better where the problems are, and I trust their feedback before I buy something new.” (P2_G). Another noted, “We have internal discussions in which we look at the technical details and the possible use cases together before I talk to the supplier again.” (P11_G). These statements reveal a decision dynamic that is both consultative and accountable. Internal consultation operates as a communicative filter, surfacing operational realities and fostering collective validation without diluting authority. In SMEs, where expertise and risk are concentrated in a few individuals, this pattern mirrors the DMU concept but extends it: communication distributes trust and legitimises authority under conditions of personal responsibility.

Following internal consultation, buyers move to proof-building as one participant explained, “They always have to test their tools, holders, etc. beforehand so that we can see whether we are just buying a pig in a poke or whether we have found a suitable tool that is worth the investment.” (P10_G). Further this research participant clarified the expectation: “We always want to see it running … That’s the only way we can be sure.” (P10_G). Japanese participants described comparable routines: “Before we decide, we ask the supplier to test our materials and show how the cycle time looks. Only then we can convince the management.” (P14_J). Beyond internal testing, external benchmarking complements evaluation: “I first go and look at the ‘Drehteile-Verband’… Who’s making money? And the one that earns money, what does it use? What does he produce with?” (P2_G). Another confirmed the value of peer testimony: “If we can talk to someone who already uses the same machine, that’s even better. It gives us confidence that the investment will pay off.” (P3_G). These accounts show that in high-investment contexts, credibility depends on communicative transparency like peer endorsement and verifiable use. Relationship and network perspectives help explain this logic: under high switching costs, buyers rely on shared proof to reduce risk (Dwyer et al., 1987; Håkansson & Johanson, 1992). Proof thus becomes a communicative performance that aligns supplier claims with user experience.

The purchase outcome develops through co-creation rather than discovery, as buyers and advisors iteratively test assumptions and adjust technical parameters. As one Japanese participant explained, “We are rather looking at the process chain of the production as a whole... there are a lot of different parameters outside from the main machining process that we have to take into consideration.” (P14_J). German participants emphasised transparency and comparability when narrowing choices, seeking measurable differences between concepts. These tendencies mirror broader cultural orientations (Hall, 1977; Hofstede et al., 2010): German buyers tend toward explicit data and detailed documentation, while Japanese buyers favour system harmony and holistic fit. Yet in both contexts, fit is ultimately co-created through communication that integrates technical proof with contextual understanding. The findings extend the literature’s shift from sequential to networked models by showing that value emerges not from specification alone but from the dialogue

that links specification to use between the suppliers and the buyers experts.

Usability and service horizons further recalibrate how decision-makers evaluate suppliers. Operational ease, intuitive software, and long-term maintainability often outweigh even established brand reputations. One manager explained rejecting a high-reputation brand: “Even if the machine had the same price, [company]… even though they are super machines, a super reputation, super accurate or anything else… have actually kicked themselves out for me… It took him 15–20 minutes to get this product through the software with 15 different windows to the machine.” (P1_G). Another underlined that continuity matters more than cost: “If we know that the machine will run in ten years, we have good service, a sustainable spare part, then you spend a few euros more than if a cheap low-quality product comes.” (P2_G).

These priorities highlight a shift from focusing purely on precision toward valuing integration and usability as part of communication credibility. Hamada (2019) adds that decision-makers’ openness to innovation also affects purchasing behaviour, as they must balance immediate production requirements with long-term technological developments. The findings extend this idea by showing that openness to innovation is not limited to product adoption but also to how suppliers communicate their technological competence in relatable, user-oriented terms. When software usability and service transparency are effectively communicated, they serve as tangible proofs of empathy and accountability. In this sense, communication about service and ease of operation becomes an essential part of how trust is built and maintained throughout the buying process.

As decisions progress, attention shifts from artefacts to actors. Participants linked their willingness to pay directly to perceived care, continuity, and expertise: “If the salesperson is competent, has a clue and cares, then that’s a big plus. [...] You also like to buy the more expensive system than the cheaper one where you have to actively write an email to the salesperson again and again.” (P11_G). Another stressed the importance of accountability across the full investment: “Of course we would like to have that in the communication that we are advised. That is important to us, because personal advice; the person who then of course also stands by his product and can then also advise us accordingly and then also stands by us during the further investment up to the

commissioning.” (P10_G). This pattern aligns with the view of Palmatier and Steinhoff (2021), who argue that emotional connection and authenticity generate stronger commitment than procedural reliability alone. Hofacker et al. (2020) similarly warn that digitalisation can weaken perceived trust when empathy and personal engagement are missing. Mora-Cortez and Johnston (2020) add that transparency and responsiveness sustain relationship satisfaction in complex industrial settings. Finally, Hänninen and Karjaluoto (2017) highlight that digital tools should reinforce, not replace, interpersonal dialogue to maintain credibility. Together, these perspectives illuminate why participants valued continuity and visible ownership: trust in the machine-tools context does arise from relational consistency expecting that the same knowledgeable person remains reachable and responsive throughout the entire investment process and probably beyond.

The cultural perspectives observed in this study shed further light on how communication supports decision-making within the industrial buying process. Japanese participants highlighted that, especially in large or ambiguous investments, face-to-face meetings enable deeper mutual understanding and the interpretation of subtle cues: “When it comes to purchasing decisions, I think face-to-face communication is better… it will help us understand in a deeper sense.” (P19_J). Another explained, “There are a lot of nonverbal cues or non-action cues. So that is why I think face-to-face communication remains important.” (P20_J). Several interviewees even anticipated that direct meetings will regain importance: “In the end, to meet directly with persons… will be even more important, we think.” (P13_J); “Even in the future, having the real meeting will be important at the first stage… especially because I deal with expensive products.” (P17_J). These insights illustrate how Japanese decision-makers and young professionals emphasise relational assurance and shared understanding before committing to major investments, reflecting Hall’s (1977) concept of high-context communication, where much of the meaning lies beyond the spoken word. In contrast, German participants tended to rely on explicitness and documentation to create the same reassurance effect. Both approaches ultimately serve the same purpose within the buying process: reducing uncertainty and turning complex technical evaluations into shared confidence and long-term partnership.

Expectations towards the sales role are clearly changing. One German participant captured the new balance: “The mix remains. The mix between personal and digital remains. Only the one who comes in person must be so equipped not with a trolley and ten folders but preferably with iPad and solutions.” (P3_G). Others described a growing reliance on remote communication due to limited sales capacity: “Maybe there are less visits and more communication through the Internet… [Company] has much less human resources in sales so they use more digital methods to compensate for that.” (P7_J). Alongside these constraints, differentiation increasingly rests on the ability to tailor concepts: “It’s becoming more and more important for manufacturers to provide the right concept for the respective customer… what was more general in the past will certainly become much more specific in the next few years.” (P4_G).

Kotler et al. (2019) argued that in modern B2B environments, digital tools should not replace but enhance personal interaction by preparing better-informed and higher-value conversations. Fill and Turnbull (2019) added that communication effectiveness relies on aligning instruments with relationship depth rather than message repetition. Butkouskaya et al. (2023) extended this idea by showing that successful omnichannel strategies depend on integrating digital and human touchpoints into one coherent customer experience. The findings of this study reinforce all three arguments but also extend them: in the machine-tools sector, the salesperson’s credibility increasingly depends on their ability to navigate digital systems and support to find solutions that fit the customer’s production realities.

This evolution reframes sales as a hybrid advisory function which is anchored in personal trust but empowered by digital evidence and collaborative problem-solving. It suggests that the future salesperson in industrial markets is no longer merely a transmitter of information but an advisor or translator between technology and the human decision-making process.

In summary, machine-tools buying concludes with communicating confidence. Early buying models still name constituent tasks, but contemporary DMU, network, and journey perspectives better capture the lived process observed here: buyers in SMEs do not decide alone they move repeatedly between

consultation and benchmarking. Fit is co-created through dialogue, and closure occurs only when credibility is carried by people who remain present.

Practically, this means aligning communication design with the buyer's proof-building logic. Suppliers should guide customers through progressive validation, digital clarity for orientation, tangible proof through tests and benchmarks as well as human accountability for commitment. Test cuts with customer parts and reference cases lead to trust. When communication systematically connects digital orientation with human follow-up and long-term service continuity, it transforms uncertainty into confidence.

What becomes clear is that the B2B buying process is a sequence of H2H confirmations: information is shared digitally, interpreted interpersonally, validated technically and ultimately authorised through trusted personal relationships. The buying process advances when human actors reduce ambiguity and turn complex data into shared confidence.

6.5 Foundation 4: Cultural and generational moderators

In industrial purchasing, trust and credibility are negotiated outcomes that develop through interaction. Confidence in a supplier does not exist independently of communication; it is built and adjusted as buyers and sellers exchange information across multiple media and contexts. The findings of this study reveal that the ways in which trust is formed and the sequence through which buyers move from digital exploration to personal validation, vary slightly across cultural and generational logics. In Japan, credibility is grounded in personal connection: "You need to have a relationship to the company, to the manufacturer… You need to have a close and open relationship so that you can trust what they promise you, what they tell you." (P13_J). This emphasis on relational reassurance supports Hall's (1977) idea of high-context communication, where meaning is transmitted through shared understanding rather than explicit data. It also echoes Hofstede et al. (2010), who associate higher uncertainty avoidance with consensus-driven decision-making. Another Japanese participant illustrated this broader frame of evaluation: "We are rather looking at the process chain of the production as a whole... there are a lot of

different parameters outside from the main machining process that we have to take into consideration." (P14_J). These insights underline that in high-context environments, trust and proof evolve through ongoing dialogue that links technical evaluation with long-term collaboration and relational continuity.

By contrast, German participants described a more data-driven, low-context approach in which credibility depends on clarity, comparability, and structured information. One younger professional connected trust directly to the usability of digital interfaces: "If the website looks good and, above all, if it is easy to navigate. If you have to search for everything forever and can't find it, then you immediately have a bad feeling … I want this website to give me the information I need to make a purchasing decision." (P23_G). Such statements mirror Hall's (1977) low-context framework, where clarity and efficiency are perceived as signs of professionalism. Yet even within this logic, information overload was evident: "It usually takes me too long to find something… I have to keep entering different search terms… I am overwhelmed with information, but I don't get to where I actually want to go." (P10_G). These observations confirm Lim and Urakami's (2019) argument that while digitalisation has blurred some cultural boundaries, the cues buyers use to interpret credibility remain locally defined. German participants value explicit and accessible information, but ultimately still rely on dialogue with trusted individuals to transform factual accuracy into confidence.

Digitalisation and globalisation have therefore narrowed but not eliminated cultural distinctions. Both German and Japanese participants followed broadly similar sequences, starting with online research, consulting websites and videos for orientation, and then seeking human confirmation before major investment decisions, but they applied different emphasis to each step. Japanese research participants used digital tools as a preliminary means of contact before deepening engagement through in-person visits. One explained this stepwise logic clearly: "The first step is to get in touch with them by telephone or by email. And then the second step is to have them actually visit the company." (P13_J). In contrast, German decision-makers tended to prioritise transparent, data-rich websites to form an initial impression before initiating personal communication. "The first decision we make on the homepage is based on superficial information… then I pick up the phone and call them and they explain it to me

in more detail or introduce the company." (P12_G). Across both contexts, digital contact functions as an entry point rather than an endpoint, and the decisive factor remains the transition from digital orientation to human reassurance. The differences identified are thus nuances in rather than categorical contrasts. Both research groups ultimately rely on interpersonal dialogue to convert information into credible assurance.

Among German participants, transparency and navigability emerged as central credibility cues. These expectations align with Mora-Cortez and Johnston's (2020) observation that digital tools enhance efficiency but cannot replace relational engagement in high-stakes B2B contexts. Buyers use online data for orientation but depend on human expertise to verify applicability and risk. In the machine-tools sector, where investments are long-term, digital assets only serve their purpose when they quickly connect to identifiable experts able to discuss. The findings thus refine existing theory by showing that low-context expectations translate directly into design principles for digital communication, means interfaces must provide transparency while signaling human availability and accountability.

Japanese interviewees, on the other hand, framed credibility around continuity and senior presence. One decision-maker stressed that "Personal visits are the most important. The second important tool are E-mails." (P16_J). Another described the fatigue caused by digital information overload: "There's so much information, but we don't get the information we really want… it costs us a lot of energy to decide whether this information is trustworthy or not." (P15_J). Such perspectives confirm Hofstede's (2010) interpretation of high uncertainty avoidance. In saturated digital environments, face-to-face encounters act as interpretive filters that restore meaning and reduce ambiguity. The findings therefore extend Hall's (1977) framework by demonstrating that digital abundance can amplify, rather than diminish, the need for relational trust. In the Japanese machine-tools context, credible communication begins with low-risk remote contact but matures with a stable team.

Generational dynamics further recalibrate the speed and starting point of the buying process rather than its overall structure. Younger professionals typically begin their research online, using platforms such as YouTube or Twitter/X for

orientation: “I use YouTube and Twitter or X… I have been using these tools for a long time and it is convenient for me.” (P18_J). However, they remain conscious of source reliability: “I always make sure that I’m using really trustworthy sources that I can cite… and that you can rely on in the end.” (P24_G). More experienced decision-makers, by contrast, prefer early escalation to personal contact once an initial screening is complete. Despite these different entry points, both generations converge on the same endpoint: “There is simply no more important communication. No one can replace it. That really is from person to person. It is indispensable. And we rely on that.” (P3_G). Dorie and Loranger (2020) and Twenge (2010) found that younger cohorts are more comfortable navigating multiple digital platforms. The current findings confirm these tendencies but specify that in complex B2B settings, digital fluency alters process efficiency rather than decision logic as buyers of all generations finalise trust through accountable human dialogue.

Information overload emerged as a cross-cutting issue across generations and cultures. Several participants noted the time required to identify relevant information, reflecting Butkouskaya et al.’s (2023) warning that omnichannel abundance can reduce satisfaction if not paired with coherence and guidance. The interviews extend this observation by illustrating how buyers compensate for this overload through self-orchestration, shifting between digital exploration and interpersonal dialogue to rebuild clarity. Lim and Urakami (2019) similarly warned that global standardisation often removes local trust cues, and the findings confirm that industrial buyers mitigate this loss by turning to people they know. In the machine-tools sector, sales and service specialists act as translators who connect technical information to the buyer’s operational context. This transformation of generic information into contextual assurance demonstrates that communication effectiveness depends less on the quantity of data and more on its interpretability through human interaction.

While digital discovery is globally accessible, its role within the buying process remains culturally shaped. Both German and Japanese buyers use similar platforms such as YouTube for technical orientation, yet the purpose of this interaction differs. For German participants, online content serves as a means to obtain transparent, structured information and to assess technical competence before initiating contact with a supplier. Japanese participants, by

contrast, view digital resources as a low-risk introduction that precedes personal engagement, using them to form an initial impression before relational trust is built through direct meetings. The distinction therefore lies not in how the same content is interpreted, but in how it is sequenced and integrated into culturally grounded pathways of credibility formation. This nuance refines Hall's (1977) and Hofstede's (2010) frameworks by showing that even in a global digital environment, the transition from online exploration to human validation remains culturally specific.

Across both cultures, long-term reliability remains the decisive trust signal. Hult et al. (2022) and Paschen et al. (2020) argued that in long-cycle industrial purchases, buyers evaluate suppliers on their capacity to share risk and sustain service continuity. The findings confirm this in both national contexts but reveal distinct trust cues: German participants interpret reliability through documented transparency and immediate access, while Japanese buyers interpret it through continuity of personnel and personal accountability. These results align with Rutherford and Matthews (2024) and Ashta (2023), who highlight that global marketing succeeds when it adapts to local credibility cues rather than imposing uniform formats.

Taken together, the findings and literature converge on a nuanced insight: digitalisation has made the industrial buying journey more borderless but not culturally neutral. Cultural and generational factors influence how trust is earned and how quickly buyers move from digital orientation to personal assurance. For theory, this confirms the enduring relevance of context-sensitive communication frameworks while extending them into hybrid realities where meaning is co-created between global assets and local relationships. For practice, it implies that suppliers must integrate structured digital transparency with culturally resonant trust-building mechanisms. While the emphasis varies across cultures and generations, the findings show that the underlying mechanism is consistently Human-to-Human. Whether through relational reassurance in Japan or structured transparency in Germany, credibility is ultimately formed when people interpret information together.

This forms the conceptual bridge to the next section, which develops Human-to-Human (H2H) communication as the integrative lens across the industrial

buying lifecycle.

6.6. Foundation 5: H2H as the integrative lens

This final foundation returns to the overarching research aim: to explain which marketing communication channels are used and why by purchasing decision-makers in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Germany and Japan when acquiring machine-tools or automation solutions, and through a Human-to-Human (H2H) perspective, to explore how interpersonal interaction builds trust and credibility throughout the purchasing process.

The H2H model, introduced in the literature review, repositions marketing communication as a human experience that connects cognitive, emotional and social dimensions. Rather than classifying exchanges as business-to-business or business-to-consumer, Kotler, Pförtsch and Sponholz (2021) and Pförtsch and Sponholz (2019) argue that all communication is fundamentally between people. The model combines three core dimensions: authenticity, empathy and credibility, proposing that value is created when information is transferred and interpreted through genuine human interaction. Digital tools can extend this reach and efficiency, but they cannot replace the personal connection through which trust and commitment are formed.

The empirical findings of this study translate these conceptual dimensions into observable mechanisms. Authenticity becomes visible when communication is personal, transparent and responsive, for instance, when sales and service experts remain reachable across all stages of the buying process. Empathy materialises in the supplier's ability to understand and interpret the customer's technical and organisational context, transforming data into meaningful assurance. Credibility is realised when accountability is embodied by identifiable individuals who accompany the buyer from the first contac. In this light, H2H is a communicative mode that humanises the entire channel ecosystem. Applying this lens to the findings clarifies how digital and interpersonal elements combine to create trust in practice.

In a capital-intensive industry characterised by high technological complexity

and long investment lifecycles, digitalisation has multiplied communication touchpoints but has not changed the fundamental logic of persuasion. Confidence still depends on people who translate data into operational assurance and embody reliability. The H2H perspective therefore provides the connective logic linking channels, buying stages and contextual factors across this study.

The interviews confirm that websites, videos and social media platforms are useful for initial orientation, yet credibility arises only when a person contextualises and interprets information. A younger German professional explained, “Often to get a first impression. But when it really gets down to the details, I think it's more productive to talk to someone who can tell you where to find things.” (P23_G). Another described the same sequence: “The first decision we make on the homepage is based on superficial information… then I pick up the phone and call them and they explain it to me in more detail or introduce the company.” (P12_G). Social media extend this logic into earlier stages. As one Japanese participant noted, “I use YouTube and Twitter or X… I have been using these tools for a long time and it is convenient for me.” (P18_J). Credibility in such environments stems from the perceived authenticity of real people sharing insights directly. Rather than replacing interpersonal exchange, these channels make human presence visible earlier in the process. As another Japanese respondent emphasised, “You need to have a relationship to the company, to the manufacturer… You need to have a close and open relationship so that you can trust what they promise you.” (P13_J). Across contexts, decisions become believable only when digital signals are anchored by identifiable individuals who demonstrate competence, accountability, and care.

While digitalisation increases access to information, participants also described the challenge of abundance. One Japanese decision-maker summarised the problem: “There’s so much information, but we don’t get the information we really want… it’s getting more difficult to really get to the point where we want to go.” (P15_J). Here, human curation becomes decisive. Buyers progress when an expert filters, prioritises, and connects information into meaningful sequences. Hybrid orchestration, where digital access and interpersonal support are intertwined, transforms fragmented information into coherent proof. In the machine-tools industry, confidence builds through a sequence of small

validations: a short process video followed by a technical call, and finally a live demonstration or open-house visit. People are the integrators who ensure that each step adds context. This confirms that H2H communication functions as the glue within omnichannel systems: technology expands reach, but humans transform fragments into a narrative of trust.

The same principle explains how alignment between supplier and buyer emerges. Purchasing decisions in SMEs are rarely linear transactions, they are iterative negotiations in which both sides reconcile technical and service considerations. A German participant described this interaction: “I call Mr [person] or the application techniques. We talk on the phone… and we then pick out the technical details: spindle performance etc. But we don't go to the website and look… we don't do that.” (P10_G). The same respondent stressed continuity as an essential element of trust: “That is important to us, because personal advice; the person who then of course also stands by his product and can then also advise us accordingly and then also stands by us during the further investment up to the commissioning.” (P10_G). These comments illustrate that alignment is negotiated through ongoing interaction. Another German decision-maker linked competence and care directly to willingness to pay: “If the salesperson is competent, has a clue and cares, then that’s a big plus. [...] You also like to buy the more expensive system than the cheaper one where you have to actively write an email to the salesperson again and again.” (P11_G). Trust grows when experts remain visible across stages and share responsibility for outcomes. Interaction quality and empathy therefore become strategic assets in themselves.

Cultural and generational influences further shape how buyers navigate this hybrid process. Japanese participants often described a structured path from remote contact to embodied reassurance: “Personal visits are the most important. The second important tool are E-mails.” (P16_J). Another added, “Even in the future, having the real meeting will be important at the first stage… especially because I deal with expensive products.” (P17_J). German participants followed a similar logic but placed more weight on clarity and efficiency before escalation: “There is simply no more important communication. No one can replace it. That really is from person to person.” (P3_G). Generational shifts mainly influence tempo rather than substance. Younger

professionals begin their search digitally yet they, too, seek personal confirmation once the stakes rise. These nuances confirm that while digitalisation blurs some cultural distinctions, it does not erase them. The human checkpoint remains universal: credibility and commitment are finalised through interpersonal validation, regardless of the initial channel mix.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that communication in the machine-tools industry becomes effective only when digital access is converted into human assurance. Channels distribute knowledge and facilitate discovery, but people authenticate meaning. In SMEs, where accountability is personal, the credibility of the individual often equates to the credibility of the company. This extends relationship-marketing and omnichannel theory by identifying H2H communication as the mechanism through which they operate in practice. Even in globally networked, digitally advanced industries, purchasing confidence depends on identifiable humans who transform complexity into trust through responsiveness, expertise and empathy. Communication strategies should therefore be designed around human assurance: digital steps should lead visibly to expert dialogue and sustained accountability from the first contact through delivery and service.

By integrating digital reach, human authentication, cultural nuance and generational pace, this section fulfils the study's overall aim. It demonstrates how the H2H concept introduced in the literature review manifests in real industrial practice and explains how trust, credibility and channel use are intertwined throughout the buying journey. This integrative perspective also explains why the previous core topics converge: each describes a different dimension of how H2H communication translates information into trust in complex industrial contexts.

6.7. Boundary conditions and analytical nuance

While the discussion in this chapter has identified clear and recurring patterns across the interviews, it is important to acknowledge that these patterns did not appear uniformly or without variation across all participants and contexts. The foundations outlined in this chapter represent dominant tendencies. Their

expression was shaped by organisational size, prior supplier relationships, individual roles within the decision-making unit and the specific phase of the purchasing process.

In some cases, participants relied more heavily on digital channels than suggested by the dominant H2H logic, particularly where strong prior trust existed or where internal technical expertise reduced perceived risk. Conversely, in highly novel or strategically critical investment situations, even digitally confident decision-makers emphasised extended personal interaction and reassurance. These variations indicate that the importance of human interaction varies with uncertainty, organisational routines and the depth of existing relationships.

Cultural and generational influences also manifested in nuanced ways. While clear tendencies were observable across German and Japanese contexts, individual experience and international exposure. Similarly, younger professionals did not uniformly prioritise all digital channels, rather, they demonstrated a flexible sequencing of digital exploration and interpersonal validation depending on situational demands.

Acknowledging these boundary conditions reinforces the interpretation of the five foundational areas as enabling conditions. They provide an analytical foundation for understanding how H2H communication operates across contexts, while allowing for adaptive configuration in practice. This nuanced positioning supports the transition to Chapter 7, where these foundations are further developed into antecedents within a structured H2H Communication Framework.

6.8. Conclusion

This chapter examined how communication in machine-tools purchasing operates in practice and how the empirical findings connect to existing theoretical models. Across five foundational areas, a consistent Human-to-Human (H2H) logic emerges: digital channels create access and orientation but

purchasing decisions progress only when identifiable people connect evidence to the buyer's specific context, remain accountable across stages and make long-term reliability visible. Rather than proposing a new theory, the discussion has clarified how trust and credibility are negotiated in high-risk, capital-intensive settings and how communication channels and human interaction must work together to generate confidence and commitment.

Within the machine-tools industry, this dynamic is shaped by high technological complexity and long service lifecycles. The findings demonstrate that the persuasive power of communication depends less on the channel itself than on how and when it transitions towards human validation. Digital encounters, whether websites or social-media content, function effectively only when they either make credible experts visible or prepare the ground for personal interaction with accountable individuals. In this respect, the findings confirm the core premise of the H2H perspective introduced in the literature review: authenticity, empathy and credibility remain decisive in transforming information into trust.

From this interpretive synthesis, five practice-oriented pillars are articulated: trust and credibility, orchestration of channels, strategic and operational fit, cultural and generational context and advisory and service roles. These pillars do not represent prescriptive stages but reflect dominant patterns through which the foundational areas identified in this study are enacted in practice.

Trust and credibility must be demonstrated early and consistently. Buyers expect visibility of responsible experts and tangible proof of long-term reliability from the outset. Personal accountability, named contacts, clear response standards, escalation pathways and continuity of personnel across the lifecycle are therefore central to effective communication.

Channel orchestration requires coherence rather than volume. Buyers advance when information is sequenced into meaningful proofs that guide them towards dialogue. Digital assets are most effective when they link concise, relevant content directly to opportunities for personal exchange, while trade fairs and open houses function as critical validation points within this hybrid journey.

Strategic and operational fit is co-created through stage-specific evidence. Suppliers must demonstrate alignment with customer-specific technical and

service requirements through concrete proofs such as test cuts and application demonstrations. Such evidence translates technical specifications into confidence and reduces perceived operational risk.

Cultural and generational context shapes the tempo and cues of communication rather than its ultimate direction. While digital habits show signs of convergence, cultural logics continue to influence what counts as credible evidence. German buyers tend to value structured transparency and rapid access to expertise, whereas Japanese buyers emphasise gradual trust-building and relational continuity. Younger professionals often begin their information search digitally but still seek interpersonal validation before commitment, underscoring the continued relevance of human assurance across generations.

Finally, advisory and service roles define the long-term credibility of communication. From an H2H perspective, sales and service professionals act as hybrid advisors who connect digital and physical proofs into coherent customer journeys. Their effectiveness depends not only on technical expertise but on responsiveness and the ability to coordinate specialist knowledge across organisations.

In practice, the salesperson or service expert often functions less as a narrow technical specialist and more as the relational anchor for the customer. As the human interface of the supplier organisation, this role ensures continuity, coordinates internal expertise across machine-tools, automation, digitisation, and service, and translates technical depth into a coherent and accountable dialogue. Through this integrative role, the H2H logic becomes tangible for the customer as lived reliability.

Taken together, these pillars provide actionable guidance for marketing and sales leaders in the machine-tools industry while also reinforcing the interpretive foundations developed in this chapter. They extend relationship-marketing perspectives into a digitally mediated industrial context by showing that communication becomes effective when technology is organised around authentic human assurance. At the same time, they do not yet constitute a framework but rather define the conditions from which such a framework can be systematically developed.

Pillar	Key Implications (Recommendations) for Practice
1. Trust and Credibility	Make named experts visible on digital assets with direct contact options.
	Show long-term reliability early by explaining service availability, spare-parts supply and guaranteed response times throughout the machine's lifecycle
2. Orchestration of Channels	Replace information overload with guided pathways linking concise digital proofs to expert dialogue.
	Integrate trade fairs, open houses and factory visits as decisive validation stages within hybrid communication journeys.
3. Strategic and Operational Fit	Show how the proposed machine or automation solution fits the customer's real production process, for example, by sharing case studies from similar applications
	Present service capability during evaluation, not post-purchase.
4. Cultural and Generational Context	Adapt communication to local expectations: in Germany, prioritise clear, structured information, quick access to technical experts and consistent contact with the same representatives; in Japan, build trust gradually through personal meetings and ongoing relationships that demonstrate reliability over time
	Offer concise digital content such as short videos or quick demos for younger professionals
5. Advisory and Service Roles	Position and train sales and service teams as hybrid advisors connecting digital and physical touchpoints.
	Recognise salespeople as relationship anchors who coordinate internal experts in machine tools, automation, digitalisation and service to deliver one coherent customer experience.

Table 30: Pillars derived from foundations and relevant implications for practice (author)

Collectively, these insights align communication channels and people into a coherent system in which credibility is co-created through interaction. They therefore form the conceptual and analytical bridge to Chapter 7, which builds on these foundations to identify the antecedents of effective H2H communication and to develop a structured H2H Communication Framework for the machine-tools industry.

CHAPTER 7 - FRAMEWORK

7.1. Introduction: purpose and positioning of the framework

This chapter presents the Human-to-Human Industrial Communication Framework (H2H-ICF), which represents the central practical and theoretical outcome of this research. Developed through a constructivist Grounded Theory process, the framework translates empirically observed communication patterns among decision-makers in German and Japanese SMEs into a structured yet adaptable model for industrial marketing communication.

The purpose of this chapter is threefold. First, it explains how the H2H-ICF was developed by building on the analytical foundations established in Chapters 4 and 5 and the interpretive synthesis presented in Chapter 6. Second, it identifies and explicates the antecedents, underlying enabling conditions, that support each component of the framework. These antecedents are derived directly from participants' communication behaviour, particularly their use, sequencing, and evaluation of marketing communication channels in the period leading up to purchasing decisions. Third, the chapter demonstrates how these antecedents collectively shape two overarching outcomes that emerge from the analysis: Industrial Mindset and Industrial Relationship Resilience (IRR). These outcomes reflect the orientation and stability required for credible, long-term communication in technologically complex B2B contexts and are discussed in the final section of this chapter.

While the H2H-ICF organises complex communication dynamics into a clear structure, it recognises that industrial interactions remain fluid in practice. The boundaries between framework elements can overlap, and some mechanisms interact in ways that cannot be fully standardized. Acknowledging these limitations strengthens the analytical value of the framework by situating it within the realities of industrial practice.

7.2. Methodological development of the framework

The development of the H2H-ICF follows the analytical logic of the Grounded Theory process outlined in Chapter 4. In that chapter, interviews were systematically analysed through iterative coding and comparison leading to the development of categories, subcategories and themes grounded in participants' accounts.

In Chapter 5, these analytical steps resulted in four overarching themes: factors influencing purchasing behaviour, marketing communication channels, communication Perceptions and prospective developments. Each theme was supported by a set of categories and subcategories that captured how decision-makers in German and Japanese SMEs as well as the next generation evaluated technical information, interpreted relational cues, navigated digital and traditional communication channels, managed information overload and anticipated future developments in communication practices.

Through constant comparison, these themes were further abstracted into a set of emergent factors, presented at the end of Chapter 5. These emergent factors represent dominant and recurring communication patterns observed across participants, rather than isolated or context-specific behaviours.

In Chapter 6, the Emergent Factors were interpreted and consolidated into five foundational areas. These areas served as the analytical basis for understanding how Human-to-Human (H2H) communication operates in industrial purchasing contexts. These foundational areas did not constitute outcomes in themselves but functioned as enabling conditions that informed the interpretive discussion.

Building on this analytical progression, the present chapter takes the next step by translating these foundations into a set of antecedents that underpin the H2H-ICF. These antecedents articulate the conditions required for effective H2H communication and provide the structural logic through which the framework is constructed and operationalised.

	Research Function	Key Output	Contribution to the H2H-ICF
Chapter 4 - Methodology	Data analysis and theory-building through a constructivist Grounded Theory approach	Codes, categories, subcategories, and themes derived inductively from interview data	Establishes the analytical structure and conceptual building blocks that ground the framework in empirical data
Chapter 5 - Findings	Empirical analysis of participant perspectives using the thematic structure developed in Chapter 4	Emergent Factors capturing dominant and recurring communication patterns across cases	Identifies the key mechanisms shaping communication, trust, and decision-making in industrial purchasing
Chapter 6 - Discussion	Interpretive synthesis linking Emergent Factors to existing theory	Five foundational areas explaining how H2H communication operates in practice	Defines the foundations that enable H2H communication and prepares their translation into framework logic
Chapter 7 - Framework	Framework development and abstraction	Antecedents, H2H-ICF structure, Industrial Mindset, and Industrial Relationship Resilience (IRR)	Translates foundations into actionable antecedents and integrates them into the H2H Industrial Communication Framework

Table 31: Methodological pathway of this thesis (author)

Two insights from this interpretive synthesis became particularly influential for the development of the framework. The first insight was that communication channels did not operate as isolated tools. Participants consistently moved across corporate homepages, search engines, online videos, trade fairs, printed materials and in-person consultations. Channels gained meaning only when they were connected into a sequence that allowed decision-makers to understand and validate information. This confirmed hybrid communication behaviour as a defining characteristic of industrial communication. The second insight was that credibility remained fundamentally human even when information originated from digital sources. Participants used digital channels for orientation and efficiency, yet they consistently relied on trusted individuals to interpret or contextualise the information they had found online.

These insights guided the identification of the antecedents that underpin each part of the H2H-ICF. The antecedents do not reproduce themes or Emerging Factors, instead, they express the underlying mechanisms that make communication effective in complex industrial environments. They provide the conceptual scaffolding for the framework and establish the link between empirical findings and the structured model presented in the following sections.

7.3. The H2H Industrial Communication Framework

The H2H Industrial Communication Framework (H2H-ICF) consists of three interconnected layers shown in table 32 below.

• the core H2H layer: The H2H mindset

• the operational layer with the five practice pillars

• the environmental layer: culture and generation

Framework layer	Foundational elements	Purpose in communication	Indicative practices
Core layer: H2H mindset	Authenticity, empathy and credibility as guiding principles.	Establish the human foundation for all communication activities.	Transparent messages, consistent follow-up, visible accountability.
Operational layer: Five practice pillars	1. Trust & Credibility: reliability through identifiable experts.	Translate H2H principles into actionable mechanisms that generate confidence and continuity.	Guided customer journeys, contextual proofs, personalised follow-up, intercultural awareness.
	2. Channel Orchestration: integration of digital and personal channels.		
	3. Strategic & Operational Fit: evidence of solution relevance.		
	4. Cultural & Generational Context: adaptation of tone and pace.		
	5. Advisory & Service Roles: sales and service as relationship anchors.		
Environmental layer: culture & generation	National culture, generational mindsets and organisational norms.	Moderate how communication cues are interpreted and valued.	Localised content, mentoring between generations, culture-specific relationship management.

Table 32: Framework layers and their description for the H2G-ICF (author)

Each layer represents a different function in the communication process. The core layer (H2H mindset) sets the fundamental orientation that underlies credible industrial communication. The operational layer (practice pillars) translates this orientation into the communication behaviours and channel practices that decision-makers rely on throughout their information search and evaluation. The environmental layer reflects the cultural and generational conditions that influence how communication is interpreted across contexts.

Together, the three layers show how communication channels, interpersonal interaction and contextual influences interact in shaping trust and purchasing confidence. They also establish the structural basis from which the identified antecedents derive and through which each part of the framework is supported. These antecedents express the mechanisms that make communication

effective in industrial settings and form the conceptual foundation for the subsequent sections.

Although the layers are conceptually distinct, they are closely interrelated. Antecedents in the core layer influence how the practice pillars are enacted, and the environmental layer shapes how these behaviours are perceived across cultural and generational groups. Several pillars overlap in practice: continuity of contact reinforces advisory roles, channel orchestration often supports technical competence and cultural or generational expectations inform what counts as credible communication in both digital and personal formats. Recognising these interrelationships is essential for understanding why a hierarchical structure was chosen. The core layer contains the most fundamental mechanisms, the practice pillars operationalise these mechanisms and the environmental layer conditions how they unfold in different settings.

At the same time, the hierarchical structure should not be interpreted as implying rigid boundaries or strictly linear influence. Industrial communication is shaped by simultaneous interactions between human judgement and contextual expectations. The framework therefore captures an ordered representation of the findings while acknowledging that, in practice, these components develop dynamically and often reciprocally.

7.3.1 Core H2H layer: Antecedents of the industrial mindset

The core H2H layer represents the foundational orientation that guides industrial communication. Two antecedents were consistently present across participants and cultures and therefore form the highest level of the hierarchy:

Antecedent 1: Human accountability as the anchor of credibility

This antecedent captures the finding that participants evaluated reliability through the individuals representing the supplier. Accountability was experienced through channel behaviour such as prompt responses and continuity of contact. It therefore occupies the highest position in the hierarchy, as communication could not be perceived as credible without it.

Antecedent 2: Human validation of digital information

Participants used digital channels such as corporate homepages, search

engines, technical videos and social media to form initial impressions. However, confidence in these sources depended on personal confirmation through meetings or interactions during open houses or trade fairs. This antecedent reflects the interplay between digital and personal communication described in categories such as detailed information gathering, importance of face-to-face communication and trusted source preference. Although essential, it functions as a secondary antecedent because it presupposes accountability.

Together, the antecedents form what this thesis terms the Industrial Mindset. This mindset captures the communication orientation that supports credibility in industrial environments. Unlike the broader H2H mindset described by Kotler et.al (2021), which emphasises empathy, authenticity and general human-centred interaction, the Industrial Mindset developed here is grounded in the specific communication realities of industrial B2B settings in the machine-tools industry. It reflects the empirical finding that credibility depends on visible accountability and that digital information gains meaning only when it is validated by a trusted individual. These mechanisms were consistent across German and Japanese participants and across generations, indicating that they represent stable expectations in high-investment, technology-driven decision-making. The Industrial Mindset therefore extends existing H2H thinking by specifying how human-centred communication is interpreted in industrial contexts.

The positioning of the Industrial Mindset aligns with the broader conceptualisation of mindset as an implicit belief system that shapes how individuals interpret situations and respond to complexity (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Plaks, 2017). In organisational and B2B contexts, such orientations influence whether firms adopt adaptive, collaborative or standardised approaches to strategic decisions (Papadopoulou et al., 2023). Relationship marketing literature similarly highlights that a relational mindset enables the shift from transactional exchanges toward long-term, trust-based value creation (Sheth, Parvatiyar & Sinha, 2012). The Industrial Mindset reflects these theoretical assumptions but translates them into industrial communication realities where accountability, interpretive support and human confirmation become stabilised expectations.

The findings also indicate that the Industrial Mindset has a dual developmental character. Elements of the mindset emerge naturally through repeated interaction and shared interpretive habits. At the same time, the mindset can be intentionally cultivated through organisational training, communication structures and cross-functional alignment that reinforce accountability and relational continuity. This dual nature means that the mindset functions both as an observed pattern and as an organisational aspiration. For many firms, this represents a practical challenge, as maintaining the mindset requires consistent behavioural reinforcement and supportive internal processes.

Recognising these dynamics also requires acknowledging limitations: the Industrial Mindset cannot be fully standardised, as it depends on interpersonal dynamics and contextual variation. It should therefore be understood as an evolving communication capability.

7.3.2 Practice Pillars: Antecedents and Operational Logic

The five Practice Pillars translate the Core Layer into observable communication behaviour. In this context, communication behaviour refers to the ways in which decision-makers search for information, combine digital and personal channels, interpret messages and interact with supplier representatives throughout the purchasing process.

7.3.2.1. Pillar 1: Trust and Credibility

Trust and credibility form the foundation of communication in industrial purchasing and this pillar reflects how decision-makers evaluated the reliability of both people and information across the communication journey. Three antecedents shape this pillar.

Antecedent: Continuity of contact across channels

Decision-makers consistently emphasised the importance of interacting with the same knowledgeable individual across different communication formats. Continuity of contact created a sense of reliability and commitment, and it was repeatedly described as one of the strongest signals of trustworthiness.

Antecedent: Technical competence communicated through channels

Confidence increased when supplier representatives were able to explain

technical details clearly and consistently, regardless of the channel used, whether through a machining video or an in-person demonstration. This competence had a strong influence on whether a supplier was perceived as a credible partner.

Antecedent: Transparency in communication

Participants consistently valued communication that was open and clear. Transparency was reflected in realistic explanations and straightforward messages that conveyed accurate information.

7.3.2.2. Pillar 2: Channel Orchestration

Channel orchestration captures how decision-makers combine multiple communication formats into a coherent information pathway. Two antecedents shape this pillar.

Antecedent: Efficiency-driven information search

Participants used digital tools to gain rapid orientation, preferring sources that provided clear, structured and easily accessible information. Efficiency was a decisive factor in selecting initial channels and shaped how decision-makers navigated the early stages of the communication journey.

Antecedent: Expectation of seamless transitions between channels

Participants moved naturally between digital sources and personal interaction and expected suppliers to support this movement.

7.3.2.3. Pillar 3: Strategic and Operational Fit

This pillar captures how decision-makers assess whether a solution aligns with their technical requirements and production environment. Two antecedents guide this evaluation.

Antecedent: Proof-driven evaluation

Participants relied on tangible evidence to verify performance claims. Demonstrations, test cuts, reference examples and similar forms of proof were essential for building confidence and determining whether a machine or solution would deliver the expected results in practice.

Antecedent: Collective internal validation

Decisions were strengthened through internal consultation involving different stakeholders like machine operators and technicians. This collective assessment ensured that the proposed solution matched the realities of the shopfloor and supported long-term operational goals.

7.3.2.4. Pillar 4: Cultural and Generational Responsiveness

This pillar reflects how communication is interpreted differently across cultural contexts and professional generations. Decision-makers viewed the same channels and messages through distinct lenses shaped communication habits. Two antecedents define this pillar.

Antecedent: Cultural interpretation of communication

Participants from Germany and Japan evaluated communicative signals differently, particularly in relation to personal contact and relational cues. These cultural preferences influenced how information was perceived and which communication behaviours were considered credible or appropriate.

Antecedent: Generational expectations in hybrid communication

Younger decision-makers valued immediate digital access and flexibility, while still relying on expert confirmation for key decisions. More experienced professionals preferred earlier personal contact and structured information. These generational tendencies shaped expectations around the format of communication.

7.3.2.5. Pillar 5: Advisory and Service Roles

This pillar reflects the central role of sales and service representatives as long-term partners in the communication journey. Participants consistently emphasised that purchasing decisions in industrial contexts depend on the quality of guidance they receive throughout the process. Three antecedents shape this pillar.

Antecedent: Sales as multichannel coordinators

Sales representatives were expected to connect information across channels

and their ability to structure and coordinate the flow of information strongly influenced how clear and trustworthy the communication experience felt.

Antecedent: Service as a decisive trust touchpoint

Service interactions had a significant impact on credibility. Reliable and solution-oriented responses strengthened trust because the information provided by service personnel was perceived as accurate and dependable.

Antecedent: Interpretation in complex decision environments

Participants relied on advisors to translate technical information into practical meaning. The ability to contextualise data and offer realistic guidance was essential for helping decision-makers navigate complexity and make confident choices.

7.3.6. Environmental Layer: Contextual Antecedents

The Environmental Layer captures the contextual influences that shape how communication is perceived and interpreted in industrial settings. While this layer does not prescribe direct communication behaviour, it provides the conditions within which the Core Layer and the Practice Pillars operate. Two antecedents form the basis of this layer.

Antecedent: Cultural expectations shaping communication interpretation

Participants from Germany and Japan approached communication with slightly different assumptions. These cultural expectations influenced how messages were understood and which communication behaviours were perceived as respectful or credible. Cultural context therefore shaped the interpretation of communication practices across all other layers of the framework.

Antecedent: Generational orientation toward channel use

Expectations regarding channel selection and communication styles differed across generations. Younger decision-makers preferred rapid digital access yet still valued expert confirmation at key moments. More experienced professionals emphasised earlier personal contact. These generational tendencies conditioned how communication channels were evaluated.

Together, these contextual antecedents influence the way communication practices are interpreted. They provide the broader setting within which the Core

Layer and the Practice Pillars unfold and help explain the variation in how industrial communication is experienced across cultures and generations.

Figure 8 below summarises the antecedents for each layer.

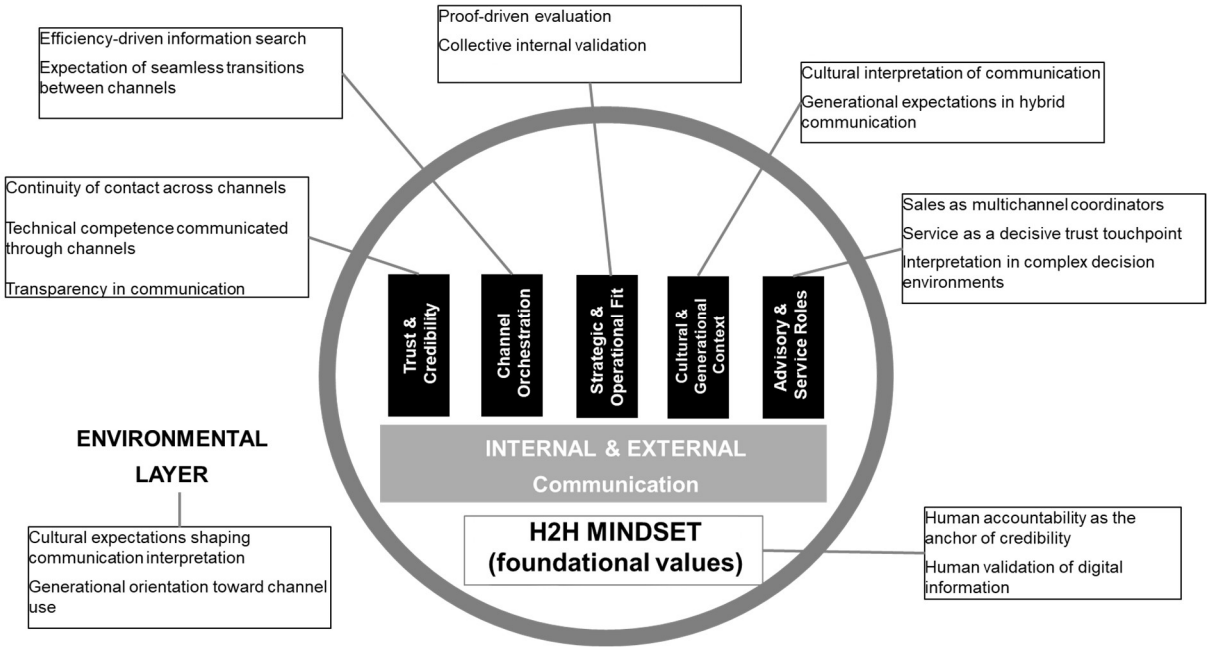


Figure 8: Antecedents for the main layers of the H2H Industrial communication framework (author)

7.4 Applying the Framework in Industrial Practice

The implementation of the H2H-ICF in industrial settings requires translating the three layers and their antecedents into coherent communication practices. Table 33 outlines below how each pillar can be applied across organisational functions.

Practice Pillar	External Communication: Customer & Market Focus	Internal Communication: Organisational Alignment & Capability	Indicative Outcomes
1. Trust & Credibility	Demonstrate continuity and reliability through identifiable experts. Communicate transparently (service availability, response/ delivery times). Feature named contact persons on digital platforms and communication materials.	Build a trust culture internally. Introduce feedback routines that encourage openness between departments. Provide training in responsive communication and transparency.	Faster response times, improved customer satisfaction, strengthened employee accountability.
2. Channel Orchestration	Design hybrid customer journeys that guide buyers from digital orientation to human consultation. Coordinate digital and personal touchpoints (trade fairs, open houses, online campaigns) to create coherent narratives.	Align marketing, sales, and service through shared planning sessions. Map customer journeys internally and clarify handover points between digital leads and personal contacts.	Reduction of message fragmentation, more seamless buyer experience, improved internal coordination.
3. Strategic & Operational Fit	Communicate contextual proof early: use real application examples (test cuts, reference installations like customer stories). Provide transparent information on service and maintenance during pre-sales communication.	Train teams to articulate value beyond technical data. Integrate engineering and sales knowledge through cross-functional workshops or project reviews.	Higher conversion rates from demonstrations to sales, increased perceived relevance of communication.
4. Cultural & Generational Context	Adapt tone, content, and communication pace to the specific expectations of German and Japanese customers, and across generations. Provide structured, fact-based content for senior engineers and digital previews for younger decision-makers.	Conduct intercultural and intergenerational workshops. Implement mentoring programmes pairing experienced employees with digital-native colleagues. Encourage reflection on communication habits.	Reduced misinterpretation risk, enhanced mutual understanding, better collaboration across markets and generations.
5. Advisory & Service Roles	Position sales and service as trusted advisors rather than product sellers. Encourage proactive outreach before and after the sale-follow-up visits, personalised messages, and transparent updates.	Establish a continuous learning system ("H2H Academy") that develops empathy, listening, and digital advisory competence. Evaluate advisory quality through customer feedback, not only sales metrics.	Stronger long-term relationships, higher perceived competence, and measurable loyalty.

Table 33: Practice pillars in relation to internal and external communication (author)

7.5 Conclusion: Industrial Mindset and Industrial Relationship Resilience (IRR)

The H2H Industrial Communication Framework (H2H-ICF) consolidates the empirical insights of this study into a structured model that explains how communication channels and interpersonal interaction jointly support trust and purchasing confidence in industrial B2B, specifically in the machine-tools industry, contexts. The framework reflects the ways in which decision-makers navigate digital and personal communication and evaluate credibility to form reliable and competent engagement across multiple touchpoints.

The first outcome emerging from this framework is the industrial mindset, which was defined earlier in this chapter. It reflects the communication orientation that supports credibility in technically complex and high-risk environments. Grounded in empirical findings from both Germany and Japan, the industrial mindset explains how communication becomes trustworthy in industrial settings and how decision-makers assess the intentions and reliability of those who represent a machine-tools provider. In contrast to the broader H2H perspective proposed by Kotler, Pförtsch and Sponholz, which focuses on general principles of empathy and authenticity, the Industrial Mindset developed in this thesis is domain-specific and built from observed communication behaviour. It highlights the mechanisms through which human-centred communication is enacted in industrial purchasing processes.

A second outcome that follows from the framework is Industrial Relationship Resilience (IRR). IRR becomes possible when the elements of the framework operate coherently across the Core Layer, the Practice Pillars and the Environmental Layer. When communication is accountable, technically competent, coordinated across functions and responsive to cultural and generational expectations, the conditions for stable and reliable industrial relationships begin to develop.

Industrial Relationship Resilience can be defined as the capacity of an industrial relationship to remain credible and reliable over time, even as technologies evolve or communication habits shift. It reflects a form of relational stability that is rooted in communication behaviour.

IRR is important because industrial purchasing decisions involve long investment cycles and high investments especially for SMEs. Under these conditions, relationships strengthen when communication sends aligned signals over time. The empirical findings showed that decision-makers experienced greater confidence when information from different functions matched and when explanations remained consistent across channels validated by humans.

By capturing these dynamics, IRR adds a new dimension to understanding industrial relationships. Existing H2H literature acknowledges the role of relationships in business contexts, yet it does not explain how communication practices contribute to long-term relational durability in environments characterised by technical complexity and multi-stakeholder involvement. IRR addresses this gap by linking communication consistency and cross-functional coherence to the resilience of industrial partnerships over time. The notion of Industrial Relationship Resilience connects directly with established theoretical perspectives on relationship continuity in business markets. Relationship Marketing theory highlights commitment and trust as foundations of long-term relationships (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), while the Industrial Network Approach emphasises stability created through repeated interactions and consistent communication across organisational boundaries (Håkansson & Snehota, 1995). IRR builds on these foundations but advances them by explaining how communication practices generate stability in industrial contexts characterised by technical complexity and multi-stakeholder involvement. This shifts the emphasis from relationship intent to communication coherence as the key driver.

The relationship between the Industrial Mindset and IRR is best understood as reciprocal rather than sequential. Characteristics of the mindset, such as accountability, interpretive support and coherent behavioural expectations, enable the communicative stability that IRR describes. Resilient relational patterns reinforce the mindset by stabilising expectations across touchpoints, functions and channels. This mutual reinforcement aligns with theoretical perspectives that view relationship continuity as emerging from repeated interaction rather than linear causality.

At the same time, the development of an H2H-oriented Industrial Mindset and Industrial Relationship Resilience (IRR) is not without challenges. Their effectiveness remains contingent on organisational structures, internal processes, communication capabilities and contextual conditions within the firm. Moving towards an Industrial Mindset and IRR-driven H2H approach therefore requires organisations to critically reflect on how consistently human-centred principles are embedded across marketing, sales, service and leadership practices, rather than being applied selectively.

One key challenge lies in aligning strategic intent with operational execution. While firms may endorse H2H values conceptually, limitations in cross-functional coordination, skills development or incentive systems can hinder their practical implementation. In addition, differences in organisational maturity and resource availability suggest that the emergence of IRR may follow different trajectories across firms, rather than unfolding in a linear or uniform manner.

Figure 9 illustrates this dynamic by positioning the H2H Industrial Communication Framework (H2H-ICF) as an integrative orientation that connects communication channels, relational practices and contextual fit through the dual lenses of Industrial Mindset and Industrial Relationship Resilience. Rather than proposing a prescriptive model, the framework highlights interdependencies that firms must actively manage when seeking to strengthen trust-based, human-centred communication in complex industrial environments.

Accordingly, this study positions the H2H-ICF as a conceptual guide rather than a universally standardised solution. While it is grounded in empirical insights from the machine-tools industry, further research is required to examine how these mechanisms translate across different industrial sectors, organisational sizes and market conditions. Acknowledging these challenges not only strengthens the robustness of the framework but also reflects the inherent complexity of human-to-human communication in industrial contexts.

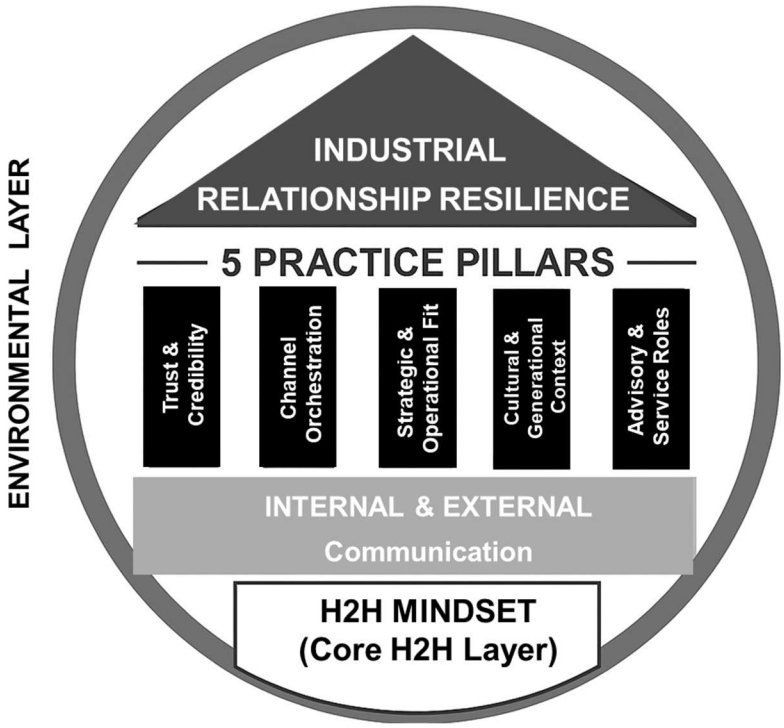


Figure 9: H2H Industrial Communication Framework (H2H-ICF) (author)

Together, the Industrial Mindset and Industrial Relationship Resilience (IRR) demonstrate the broader significance of the H2H Industrial Communication Framework (H2H-ICF). They illustrate how communication channels and interpersonal interaction interact to shape decision-making in complex industrial environments. At the same time, they form the conceptual foundation of this thesis' contribution to theory and knowledge: an empirically grounded extension of Human-to-Human (H2H) thinking into industrial B2B communication, articulated through a framework that explains how communication practices build and sustain credibility in machine-tools purchasing processes. These contributions provide the basis for the discussion of theoretical and practical implications, as well as limitations and future research directions, which are developed in Chapter 8.

CHAPTER 8 - CONCLUSION

This final chapter concludes the thesis by bringing together its empirical insights, theoretical development and practical implications. The study set out to address a central problem in the machine-tools industry: although digitalisation has multiplied available communication channels, it remained unclear how purchasing decision-makers in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Germany and Japan actually use these channels, why they privilege some over others, and how this behaviour relates to Human-to-Human (H2H) marketing. In a sector characterised by high investments, technical complexity and long-term relationships, this challenge extends beyond communication alone, as it influences trust formation, decision confidence and the sustainability of industrial partnerships. Over the course of the research journey, the wider context evolved significantly through ongoing digital acceleration and the emergence of generative AI tools, developments that shaped both the design and interpretation of the study. Against this backdrop, the chapter summarises the major findings, revisits the research aim and objectives, discusses the contributions to knowledge and practice, outlines management implications, reflects on limitations and avenues for further research, and closes with a reflection on my learning journey.

8.1. Summary and synthesis of major findings

This research set out to understand how marketing communication channels function within the purchasing processes of SMEs in the German and Japanese machine-tools sectors, and why certain channels are preferred over others. Drawing on 24 interviews with senior decision-makers and next-generation professionals, combined with perspectives from relationship marketing, industrial network research and H2H marketing, the study shows that industrial communication is best understood as a hybrid system in which digital tools and human interaction are interdependent rather than competing.

First, purchasing in the machine-tools industry emerged as a contextual and relational process shaped by technical performance and the quality of interaction between supplier and customer. Decision-makers evaluated

suppliers not only on machine capability, but also on the perceived reliability, responsiveness and continuity of the people representing the organisation. Operational fit and interpersonal trust proved decisive, confirming that value is created through interaction and showing how communication practices make trust visible in day-to-day collaboration.

Second, the study demonstrates that industrial decision-makers rely on a hybrid mix of digital and traditional communication channels. Digital sources such as company websites, search engines, social media and video platforms support early orientation and comparison, while traditional channels, including exhibitions, open houses and on-site visits, remain essential for validation, proof of performance and final reassurance. Communication effectiveness is therefore determined by the orchestration between channels and the way they guide customers towards trusted, knowledgeable individuals.

Third, the findings highlight that communication effectiveness rests strongly on credibility and responsiveness. Participants valued technically detailed yet personally meaningful information and directed their trust primarily towards individuals. German participants tended to emphasise factual transparency and structured information, whereas Japanese participants placed greater weight on relationship harmony and long-term consistency. At the same time, generational differences proved particularly significant: younger professionals showed high digital confidence but still sought expert validation when making final assessments.

Fourth, participants anticipated that artificial intelligence, virtual demonstrations and interactive digital tools will increasingly support industrial communication. However, they stressed that technological innovation is only beneficial when it strengthens human connection. Younger professionals in particular expect seamless transitions between online and in-person interaction and value suppliers who combine easily accessible information with advisory competence and relational continuity.

Finally, these insights informed the development of the H2H Industrial Communication Framework (H2H-ICF), which conceptualises industrial communication as a continuous process linking digital orientation, human validation, proof and fit, commitment and service continuity. At its centre,

authenticity and credibility function as guiding values, supported by five practice pillars: trust and credibility, channel orchestration, strategic and operational fit, cultural and generational context, and advisory and service roles. The framework translates the qualitative findings into a practical system that connects digital communication with human competence and offers a transferable model for industries where relationships underpin technological progress.

Taken together, the findings reposition communication within the machine-tools industry as a relational capability that integrates technology with empathy and continuity. Digital tools extend reach and transparency, but trust and decision confidence emerge when human actors contextualise and embody the information being shared. This synthesis provides the foundation for the study's contributions to theory, practice and management, as well as for the limitations and future research directions discussed in the remainder of this chapter.

8.2. Revisiting the research aim and objectives

The overall aim of this research was to explore which marketing communication channels are used, and why, by purchasing decision-makers in SMEs in Germany and Japan when acquiring machine-tools or automation solutions, and to interpret these patterns through the lens of Human-to-Human (H2H) marketing. This aim was addressed through four interrelated objectives, each of which has been achieved as outlined below.

Objective 1: To explore how emergent marketing communication channels influence SME purchasing decisions in the machine-tools and automation context.

This objective was met by identifying how decision-makers engage with both established and emergent communication channels across different stages of the purchasing process. The findings show that digital channels increasingly influence the speed and frequency of information exchange and expand channel variety during early exploration, while physical touchpoints such as exhibitions, open houses and personal meetings remain critical for validation and

reassurance. The analysis further captures how different organisational actors shape channel sequencing and intensity and how generational differences influence engagement with emergent communication channels within German and Japanese SMEs.

Objective 2: To identify the drivers shaping how purchasing decision-makers evaluate and select marketing communication channels, with particular attention to cultural and generational dynamics.

This objective was achieved by uncovering the interpretive criteria decision-makers apply when assessing communication channels. Trust in the sender, perceived credibility, depth and relevance of information and access to expert support emerged as dominant drivers of channel evaluation. Interpreted through an H2H lens, the findings show how these factors shape expectations of supplier interaction. While cultural context provides important framing for communication norms and relational expectations, generational dynamics proved more influential in shaping preferences.

Objective 3: To empirically identify and evaluate key influences on decision-makers within a changing industrial communication landscape.

This objective was addressed through an empirical examination of how decision-makers experience communication in practice. The findings demonstrate that trust is not attached to channels alone, but to communicative behaviour and relational continuity. Key antecedents underpinning H2H interaction were identified, including credibility, accountability, contextual understanding and continuity of contact. These antecedents explain how human connection is sustained within increasingly digital interaction environments and how confidence is built in complex, high-risk purchasing decisions.

Objective 4: To develop a holistic framework integrating marketing communication channels and Human-to-Human principles.

This objective was fulfilled through the development of the H2H Industrial Communication Framework (H2H-ICF). The framework synthesises empirical

and conceptual insights to illustrate how communication channels and interpersonal interaction jointly shape purchasing decision-making in the machine-tools industry. It conceptualises industrial communication as a cyclical process linking digital orientation, human validation, proof and fit, commitment, and service continuity. By identifying critical antecedents and structuring them into five practice-oriented pillars, the framework translates H2H thinking into an applied model that offers both explanatory value and practical guidance for industrial organisations.

Taken together, these outcomes confirm that the research aim has been fully achieved. Across Objectives 1 to 3, the associated sub-objectives were addressed through integrated analysis allowing observable communication behaviours, interpretive drivers and underlying antecedents to be synthesised within the H2H Industrial Communication Framework. The study advances understanding of B2B marketing communication by demonstrating how decision-makers in technologically advanced yet relationship-driven industrial contexts construct trust across digital and interpersonal interfaces, while offering a structured, human-centred framework to support effective communication practice in German and Japanese SMEs.

8.3. Contribution to knowledge

This study contributes to the theoretical development of Human-to-Human (H2H) marketing by clarifying how its principles become recognisable within industrial communication. The model proposed by Kotler, Pförtsch and Sponholz (2021) offers a human-centred orientation grounded in authenticity, empathy and responsibility, yet its applicability in complex industrial environments has received limited empirical attention. By examining communication patterns during machine-tools purchasing processes, characterised by technical complexity, long investment cycles, high purchasing decisions with significant financial risk for SMEs and multi-actor structures, this study provides insight into how H2H principles operate as a communicative process within industrial settings.

A first theoretical contribution arises from specifying the Industrial Mindset as an observable expression of human orientation within communication. While the original H2H model conceptualises mindset as a normative orientation, this study identifies two mechanisms through which it becomes visible in industrial practice: human accountability and the human validation of digital information. These mechanisms are consistent with Kotler et al. (2021) but add clarity by showing how decision-makers interpret technical evidence and make sense of investment decisions through human judgement. The Industrial Mindset therefore provides a process-oriented understanding of how H2H values materialise in industrial B2B communication.

A second, closely related contribution deepens this process-oriented understanding by explaining how the Industrial Mindset is enacted across digital and interpersonal touchpoints. While existing H2H literature acknowledges digitalisation as an important contextual force, it offers limited explanation of how human orientation is sustained within digitally mediated communication. Prior studies indicate that industrial buyers rely on digital sources primarily for orientation and comparison (Karjaluoto et al., 2020; Butkouskaya et al., 2020; Adamson et al., 2012; Hänninen & Karjaluoto, 2017). Building on this, the present study clarifies how digital and human elements function together within H2H communication: digital tools support early-stage transparency and information access, while human interaction provides interpretation, contextual judgement and relational meaning. This interplay shows how human accountability and validation shift in emphasis across the purchasing journey, thereby extending the explanatory depth of H2H communication under digital conditions.

Beyond these process contributions, the study identifies three organisational underpinnings that support the enactment of H2H communication in industrial environments. First, drawing on relationship marketing, the findings show that trust emerges communicatively through consistency across channels, visible technical competence and continuity of interaction. Rather than extending RM theory, this positions trust-building communication as a foundational condition for H2H. Second, in line with the industrial network perspective (Håkansson & Snehota, 1995), the study highlights relational communication capability as an underpinning factor that enables shared interpretation and stabilises

interactions within industrial networks. Third, cultural and generational influences function as interpretive layers that shape how credibility, reliability and relational cues are recognised. These contextual dynamics do not modify existing theories but clarify the embedded conditions under which H2H communication unfolds.

Taken together, the study positions H2H as a process of communicative sense-making supported by organisational and contextual underpinnings rather than as a fully formed theoretical model. The concepts of the Industrial Mindset and Industrial Relationship Resilience illustrate this process, and their relationship is reciprocal. Each reinforces the other, and the findings do not indicate a fixed order in which one precedes the other. By explaining how digital transparency and human expertise interact and how organisations create the communicative conditions for trust and stability, the study strengthens the applicability of H2H marketing for industrial B2B environments and provides a clearer foundation for understanding human orientation within complex purchasing processes

8.4. Contribution to professional practice

The practical value of this study lies in supporting industrial organisations that operate in contexts defined by high investments and technical depth which operates in fast changing communication landscape. Its contribution to practice emerges from showing how credibility and trust develop through communication and how human orientation shapes the interpretation of information across digital and personal encounters. The concepts of the Industrial Mindset and Industrial Relationship Resilience illustrate this by showing that accountability and interpretive support strengthen decision related communication. Their relationship appears mutually reinforcing and this open dynamic reflects how organisations develop communicative capability in practice. In this sense, the study provides guidance on improving communication quality and prepares the basis for the framework that translates these insights into applied support for practitioners. For example, when buyers receive digital performance data on surface quality or machining accuracy, they often still rely on sales or service staff to interpret these results in relation to their own workpiece requirements. In many cases, this leads to an invitation to the showroom for a machine

demonstration or a test cut, where digital information becomes tangible through guided expert explanation.

Building on the above the study provides clarification of how organisations can navigate a communication landscape in which all channels remain relevant, yet their influence depends on the way content is shaped and interpreted. The findings show that industrial buyers do not privilege one channel in isolation. Instead, they attribute value to channels that support credibility formation and the development of a coherent understanding of the supplier. This means that the practical challenge lies in understanding how human orientation guides the reception of information across formats. The study contributes to this practical understanding by showing that human centred communication acts as the link that brings digital channels, personal meetings, written information and technical demonstrations together in a coherent and complementary way. This insight supports practitioners because it connects communicative behaviour with the structural realities of the machine-tools industry. Purchasing processes involve high financial responsibility, long planning horizons and significant operational implications for SMEs, which heighten the need for interpretive certainty and reliable guidance. The study shows that organisations strengthen their position when communication provides clarity across touchpoints. Human orientation becomes especially significant when firms adopt advanced digital tools. People place their trust in other people, and in situations with high financial implications, organisations ultimately depend on the reliability of the individuals involved.

Digital tools give buyers wide access to technical information, yet the findings show that they still turn to trusted individuals to interpret this information in relation to their own operational needs. The study helps practitioners understand how human accountability and guidance in communication reduce uncertainty and support well-founded decisions in environments shaped by high investments and technical depth. The introduction of the Industrial Mindset and Industrial Relationship Resilience further enhances the practical relevance of the research. These concepts translate the broader values of H2H into conditions that practitioners can observe within their own organisations. The Industrial Mindset shows how shared expectations about communication and responsibility influence the way teams, especially from sales and service, represent their company, while Industrial Relationship Resilience captures the

value of consistency during periods of technological or broader change in industrial environments of SMEs. This dynamic reflects how communicative capability develops over time and helps managers understand how relationships grow stronger through consistent behaviour and shared expectations within an organization.

Generational developments add additional significance to these insights. Younger decision makers engage naturally with digital formats but still attach importance to guidance and personal accountability. This dual expectation highlights why human centred communication remains essential even in increasingly digitalised environments. At the same time, cultural expectations shape what counts as credible and trustworthy communication. For practitioners, these findings underline the need to recognise communication as a contextually embedded capability that develops across teams and markets.

The study also contributes to practice by clarifying the role of pillars and antecedents within the H2H-ICF. The pillars represent the core areas in which communication capability becomes visible, while the antecedents highlight the underlying conditions that enable these capabilities to take shape in daily practice. Together, they offer practitioners a conceptual structure for understanding where communication behaviour originates and how it can be strengthened.

Overall, the practical contribution of this study rests on the recognition that effective industrial communication requires a human centred approach that supports credibility and continuity across all channels. These insights help practitioners understand why H2H is an organisational orientation that guides communication behaviour under conditions of high investments and long term commitments. As purchasing decisions in this sector depend strongly on trust and durable relationships, strengthening human centred communication also contributes to improved commercial outcomes and more sustainable sales development. They further provide the conceptual ground for the H2H-ICF, which consolidates the study’s contributions into a structured form that can inform reflective organisational practice.

8.5. Management implications

The outcome of this study carry important implications for managers in the machine-tools industry and related capital-intensive sectors. They show that communication is not merely a matter of choosing channels, but of developing organisational capabilities that connect digital transparency with credible human interaction. Implementing H2H communication in practice therefore requires coordinated action at the levels of strategy and day-to-day behaviour.

A first implication concerns the strategic positioning of communication. The study demonstrates that decision-makers do not privilege individual channels in isolation, instead, they value coherent communication systems that help them navigate complexity and evaluate suppliers with confidence. For management, this implies that organisations need to design communication architectures in which different communication channels are aligned and mutually reinforced. Managers play a central role in defining communication as a strategic capability that supports long-term relationships.

Second, the findings highlight the importance of human accountability in digital environments. Buyers increasingly begin their search online, yet they still rely on trusted individuals contextualise performance metrics and relate machine capabilities to their own operational needs. This suggests that behavioural expectations for sales and service staff must be explicitly defined and supported. Managers should encourage teams to see themselves as interpreters of technical information and representatives of the Industrial Mindset. This may involve training in consultative selling, active listening, intercultural communication and the ability to bridge engineering language with the customer's production reality.

Third, the study points to the need for closer collaboration between marketing, sales, service and engineering functions. Digital content gains credibility when customers can recognise the expertise behind it and when it is consistent with what they experience in personal encounters. In practice, this requires cross-functional processes for developing and reviewing communication materials, ensuring that online information accurately reflects machine performance and service commitments. Management can support this by creating structures where engineers and application specialists contribute to content, and where

feedback from sales and service teams is routinely integrated into communication planning.

A fourth implication relates to generational and cultural dynamics. Younger professionals in both Germany and Japan expect fast access to information, intuitive digital formats and visual explanations, yet they also value authenticity and responsiveness in personal interaction. At the same time, cultural norms continue to shape what is perceived as credible and trustworthy communication. For managers, this means that H2H communication cannot be implemented through uniform global templates alone. Organisations should recognise that communication styles need to be adapted to different markets and generations, while still expressing a consistent Industrial Mindset. This may involve developing regionally sensitive content, or tailoring advisory formats to local decision-making practices.

Fifth, the increasing role of AI-supported tools requires managerial attention. While this study was conducted before such tools became fully integrated into daily practice, the findings indicate that any technology that accelerates information access also raises expectations regarding accountability. Managers should treat AI-enabled communication as an extension of existing responsibilities. This includes setting guidelines for how AI-generated content is reviewed, how it is combined with personal advisory roles and how responsibility for communication outcomes remains clearly anchored in human actors.

Finally, the study suggests that implementing H2H communication is an ongoing developmental process. Industrial Relationship Resilience depends on consistent behaviour across multiple touchpoints and over time. Managers can support this development by embedding communication values into training and leadership practice. When teams understand that credibility are core elements of the organisational identity, communication quality becomes more robust, even under conditions of rapid technological and market change.

In summary, the management implications of this research emphasise that H2H communication requires alignment between strategy and behaviour. By treating communication as an industrial capability that integrates digital tools with human competence, organisations can strengthen their ability to support customers through complex purchasing decisions and nurture long-term relationships in a

transforming manufacturing landscape.

8.6. Limitations of the study

While this research provides valuable theoretical and practical insights into industrial marketing communication, several limitations must be acknowledged to clarify its scope and contextual boundaries.

Firstly, the study's framing, rooted in a Grounded Theory approach, entailed specific choices that inherently shaped the findings. By focusing on 24 semi-structured interviews with decision-makers and young professionals in SMEs from Germany and Japan, the research sought to capture a nuanced view of communication behaviors in two culturally distinct yet industrially advanced markets. However, this focus limits the transferability of the results to larger multinational corporations or sectors with differing customer dynamics or investment profiles. In hindsight, a more diversified sample across industries could have enriched the understanding of the broader applicability of H2H communication in industrial B2B settings.

A second limitation stems from the temporal and technological context in which data was collected. The interviews took place shortly after the COVID-19 period, a time when remote interactions and virtual meetings had reshaped communication routines. At that time, generative AI tools were not yet integrated into mainstream industrial practice. This context suggests that participants' accounts of their information search processes do not fully capture the most recent technological developments in industrial communication. Had the study been conducted more recently, the inclusion of emerging technologies, such as AI-driven chatbots, could have added a layer of complexity to the findings. In hindsight, the study might have benefited from exploring the future potential of these tools, adding more diagnostic strength to the analysis.

Additionally, the study involved two analytically distinct participant groups, senior decision-makers and younger professionals, whose perspectives reflected different organisational roles and stages of digital familiarity. While this generational contrast enriched the analysis by revealing how communication preferences and interpretive practices vary across career stages, the study

remains cross-sectional in nature. As such, it captures these differences as parallel viewpoints rather than as evolving trajectories. A longitudinal design or repeated interviews with the same participants could have provided deeper insight into how communication practices and relational expectations develop over time, particularly as digital tools continue to change.

A further limitation concerns the study's focus on the pre-purchase and purchase phases of the customer journey. While the research explored how communication contributes to trust formation and decision confidence during these stages, it did not systematically address service and after-sales experiences. Given the long life cycle of machine-tools and the critical role of service quality in relationship continuity, the exclusion of these phases limits the full picture of how H2H communication unfolds throughout the customer journey. Future research could broaden the scope to include post-purchase communication, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of how trust and relational dynamics are maintained over time.

Finally, the positionality of the researcher represents another limitation. Conducting this study while holding senior responsibilities within the machine-tools industry provided valuable contextual insights, but it also introduced the challenge of maintaining reflexivity. Continuous awareness was necessary to ensure that my professional background did not overly influence the interpretation of the data or reinforce pre-existing assumptions. A more detached stance might have led to different interpretations or additional insights. Acknowledging this limitation underscores the fact that while the findings are analytically rich, they are contextually situated within my own professional perspective.

8.7. Recommendations for Further Research

Building on these limitations, several directions for future research emerge.

First, future studies should examine how artificial intelligence influences information behaviour and relational sense-making in industrial decision-making. As AI tools become embedded in daily practice, it will be important to understand how they reshape access to technical information, how credibility is

attributed to AI-generated or AI-mediated content, and whether new forms of human accountability emerge or diminish within supplier-customer communication.

Second, future work could adopt a broader and more process-oriented view of the customer journey. While this study focused on pre-purchase and purchase stages, trust and credibility often develop, or erode, during service, maintenance and long-term operational support. Examining communication across these later stages would provide deeper insight into how Industrial Relationship Resilience is sustained or challenged over time.

Third, the findings indicate that generational dynamics may shape communication behaviour at least as strongly as national culture. Longitudinal research following younger professionals as they move into senior decision-making roles could clarify how expectations of responsiveness and authenticity evolve and how these shifts influence organisational communication practices and supplier relationships across industrial contexts.

Fourth, extending the research to additional countries and organisational forms would strengthen its diagnostic reach. Comparative studies across industrialised and emerging economies, as well as across SMEs and large multinational corporations, could reveal how institutional environments, organisational scale and governance structures condition the enactment of H2H communication.

Finally, further research should empirically evaluate and refine the H2H Industrial Communication Framework (H2H-ICF). While this study offers an exploratory, theory-building contribution, future work could adopt case study, survey-based or action research designs to test the framework's components, examine their interdependencies and assess their impact on communication quality, trust development and relationship continuity in practice.

Together, these directions point toward a broader research agenda that moves toward diagnostic validation, supporting a deeper understanding of how human interaction and technology co-evolve in industrial communication and how H2H principles can be operationalised in increasingly complex manufacturing environments.

8.8. Reflections on the research journey

When I began this DBA journey, I was confident in my ability to balance work, study and personal life. Having completed all previous degrees alongside full-time professional responsibilities, I believed I understood time management well. I was aware that such a path would not be linear and that unexpected turns would come, yet I did not foresee how profoundly this experience would reshape my sense of time and perseverance.

In March 2023 I was appointed as a member of the Executive Board of DMG MORI. This milestone brought new strategic responsibility and required me to adapt quickly to a role that involved greater accountability for people across the company, increased travel and a stronger presence in external settings through presentations and keynotes. Balancing these new responsibilities with my research deepened my understanding of time management and reminded me that progress also depends on moments of pause and reflection to keep the energy necessary.

A few months later, life changed profoundly when my mother was diagnosed with an aggressive tumour. Within weeks, she went from being active and independent to someone who needed constant care. I would have never expected how much my family would need me during that time. Supporting her became my highest priority, and I spent nearly every free day travelling to Austria to be by her side. That period taught me that time extends beyond management, it carries meaning when it is shared with those who matter most. I began to see success differently, defined through presence and commitment. Looking back, this experience shaped my understanding of strength and perspective more deeply than any professional challenge could have done.

During this period, I also experienced a change of tutor. The transition required adjustment but soon became a turning point in the development of my work. My new tutor offered valuable guidance that helped me refine the academic direction of the thesis and reinterpret my findings with greater clarity. This experience reminded me that even unexpected changes can open new perspectives and strengthen confidence in one’s own analytical thinking.

These professional and personal experiences shaped the rhythm of my doctoral work. There were moments of intensity and others of pause, yet each

contributed to a deeper understanding of perseverance and purpose. I came to see research as a process that extends beyond generating knowledge, unfolding as a continuous journey of focus and perspective.

One of the most rewarding aspects of this research was the opportunity to engage directly with professionals in Germany and Japan. Speaking with decision-makers and young professionals provided insights that went beyond academic analysis. The conversations revealed how people interpret communication and make decisions in complex industrial contexts. Listening to the next generation offered a glimpse into the mindset of future decision-makers and their expectations toward communication in business relationships. Although I regularly interact with people in both countries in my professional role, meeting these participants as an academic researcher created a new depth of dialogue and reflection. Conducting this study in the two countries I consider my business homes, Germany and Japan, was personally meaningful and intellectually enriching.

This DBA journey has been transformative, reminding me that time finds its true worth when devoted to what truly matters. The idea of Human-to-Human communication has become a guiding principle, grounded in the understanding that lasting trust in any professional or personal context begins with listening and grows through genuine understanding.

8.9. Word Count of this thesis

Chapter	Word Count	Percentage
Abstract	301	0%
1. Introduction	2.406	3%
2. Setting the Scene	3.169	5%
3. Literature Review	21.767	31%
4. Methodology	14.342	21%
5. Findings	7.488	11%
6. Discussion	11.989	17%
7. Framework	3.488	5%
8. Conclusion	4.783	7%
	69.733	100%

Table 34: Word count of this thesis (author)

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Appendix 1

Sheffield Hallam University

Participant Information Sheet englisch

1. **Title of Project**

   Marketing Communication in Manufacturing Industries:
   Future Scenarios for Germany and Japan

2. **Legal basis for research for studies**.

   The University undertakes research as part of its function for the community under its legal status. Data protection allows us to use personal data for research with appropriate safeguards in place under the legal basis of **public tasks that are in the public interest.** A full statement of your rights can be found at: www.shu.ac.uk/about-this-website/privacy-policy/privacy-notices/privacy-notice-for-research. However, all University research is reviewed to ensure that participants are treated appropriately and their rights respected. This study was approved by UREC with Converis number ER44257097. Further information at: www.shu.ac.uk/research/excellence/ethics-and-integrity

3. **Opening statement**

   I would like to invite you to take part in my research project as part of my studies to obtain a Doctorate in Business Administration (DBA) from the Sheffield Hallam University in the United Kingdom.
   The landscape of communication channels is changing fast which leads to a rethinking of customer communication in industrial companies.
   The purpose of this study is to understand which marketing communication channels will be preferred by consumers in the engineering manufacturing industry in Germany and Japan in the future and why.

4. **Why have you asked me to take part?**

   As an owner of an SME company, who has made a purchasing decision in the last three years and using CNC machine-tools in your production, you are an ideal participant to give me first-hand feedback from your own experience in using communication channels to get information about products and technologies.

5. **Do I have to take part?**

   It is up to you to decide if you want to take part. Your participation in voluntary. A copy of the information provided here is yours to keep, along with the consent form if you do decide to take part. You can still decide to withdraw at any time without giving a reason, or you can decide not to answer a particular question.

6. **What will I be required to do?**

You are invited to an interview which will take approximately one hour.

7. **Where will this take place?**

The interview will take place face-to-face at a place convenient for you. In case travel restrictions will be still in place and I could not come tom your preferred location, the interview will take place by video conference, e.g. Microsoft Teams or Zoom.

8. **How often will I have to take part, and for how long?**

You are invited to one interview which will take about one hour.

9. **Are there any possible risks or disadvantaged in taking part**.

There are no foreseeable risks or disadvantages in participating in this research project.

10. **What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

There is no immediate and direct benefit for persons participating in this research. Nevertheless, this study will contribute to support efficient planning of resources in product marketing communication and it could result in new, scientific knowledge, which is useful to both practitioners and other researchers

11. **When will I have the opportunity to discuss my participation?**

A debriefing will be arranged upon request.

12. **Will anyone be able to connect me with what is recorded and reported?**

The recorded tape will be kept at a safe place. Nobody else will be able to have access. All information recorded is confidential. The interviews will be transcribed in written form and any information about you will have a code of letters and numbers which is known only by me. All written and recorded data collected will be locked with a key and will be saved at the University's research store. The data will be analysed for my doctoral thesis and some quotes might be used without any reference.

13. **Who will be responsible for all of the information when this study is over**?

There will be controlled access to research data storage and the university's privacy notice in point 1 gives details about how private data is protected.

14. **Who will have access to it?**

The data will not be shared with or given to anyone expect the supervisors, the doctoral board and/or persons who have signed confidentiality/non-disclosure agreements in

accordance with the Sheffield Hallam University or Munich Business School research policies and standards.

15. **What will happen to the information when this study is over?**

    Raw data will not be kept for longer than necessary and will be deleted and adequately destroyed. Data collection from this project will not be used for additional research.

16. **How will you use what you find out?**

    The study project will be part of my doctoral thesis which will be published. The research might also be published within the academy community and public in form of articles, essays, presentations or public discussions. All data that can be traced back to a person will be deleted and quotes will be anonymised. No identification of research participants will be published.

17. **How long is the whole study likely to last?**

    The research project is planned to run until the calendar year 2024, the data collection might be finished earlier, approx. in Spring 2023

18. **How can I find out about the results of the study?**

    You will be provided with a printed or digital copy of the final thesis upon request.

It is your choice whether to participate in this research or not. Your participation is completely voluntary. In case you would like to withdraw from the study at a later stage, you are free to do so without giving any reasons.

Details of who to contact if you have any concerns or if adverse effects occur after the study are given below.

Researcher/ Research Team Details:

Reseracher: Irene Bader, irene.bader@student.shu.ac.uk Telephone: +49 151 46 259933
Supervisor: Dr. Richard Breese, r.breese@shu.ac.uk , Telephone: +44 114 225 5555

You should contact the Data Protection Officer if:	**You should contact the Head of Research Ethics (Dr Mayur Ranchordas) if:**
• you have a query about how your data is used by the University • you would like to report a data security breach (e.g. if you think your personal data has been lost or disclosed inappropriately) • you would like to complain about how the University has used your personal data DPO@shu.ac.uk	• you have concerns with how the research was undertaken or how you were treated ethicssupport@shu.ac.uk

Postal address: Sheffield Hallam University, Howard Street, Sheffield S1 1WBT
Telephone: 0114 225 5555

Appendix 2

Participant Information Sheet Japanese

参加者向けインフォメーション・シート

19. プロジェクトの名称

製造業におけるマーケティング・コミュニケーション
今後のドイツ・日本のシナリオ

20. 本研究の法的根拠

大学は、その法的根拠に基づき、社会に対して果たすべき機能の一環として研究を行います。データ保護に関し、大学は、**公共の利益に資する公共の任務**を法的根拠として、適切な安全対策を取った上で、個人情報を研究のために使用することができます。参加者が有する権利についての宣言はこちらのリンクをご参照ください： www.shu.ac.uk/about-this-website/privacy-policy/privacy-notices/privacy-notice-for-research. しかしながら、大学は、全ての研究を検証し、参加者が適切に扱われ、参加者の権利が尊重されているかを確認します。本研究はURECによる承認を得ています（Converis number: ER44257097）。
より詳しい情報はこちらのリンクをご参照ください:
www.shu.ac.uk/research/excellence/ethics-and-integrity

21. はじめに

私は英国のシェフィールド・ハレム大学で経営学博士号の取得を目指しています。その一環として実施する本研究へのご参加をお願いいたします。
コミュニケーションの手段は急速に変化しており、その結果、製造業の企業からお客様へのコミュニケーションにも新しい発想が必要です。
本研究の目的は、ドイツ及び日本の製造業のお客様が、今後どのようなマーケティング・コミュニケーション手段を望むのか、またその理由について明らかにすることです。

22. 参加をお願いする理由

CNC工作機械を使用して生産を行う中～小規模な企業のオーナーであり、過去3年以内に機械を購入していらっしゃいます。製品や技術に関する情報を入手するために、何らかのコミュニケーション手段を使用されていますので、ぜひご自身の経験に基づくフィードバックをいただきたく、依頼させていただきました。

23. 参加する義務があるか

本研究への参加は義務ではなく、任意です。このインフォメーション・シート及び協力への同意書は、ご参加いただく場合の控えとして保存してください。また、今後理由を明らかにすることなく、任意のタイミングで参加を中止したり、特定の質問に回答しなくても構いません。

24. 具体的な参加内容

約1時間のインタビューに参加いただきます。

25. インタビューの実施場所

インタビューは、参加者のご都合の良い場所で、対面で実施します。ただし、移動に制限がある場合や、ご指定の場所にお伺いできない場合は、ビデオ会議(Microsoft Teamsや Zoom等)で実施します。

26. インタビューの回数及び所要時間

インタビューは1回、約1時間です。

27. 参加によるリスク又は不利益を受ける可能性

本研究への参加により生じるリスク又は不利益は予見されていません。

28. 参加によるメリット

本研究への参加による即時及び直接的な利益はありません。しかし、本研究は、効果的な製品マーケティング・コミュニケーションの企画を目指していますので、結果として、新しい科学的知識を得られ、研究の実施者及び他の研究者に有益となる可能性があります。

29. 参加決定の前に相談したい場合

必要に応じてご説明します。

30. 録音・記録された内容と個人の特定

録音は安全な場所で保管されます。本研究の実施者以外は誰もアクセスできません。記録されたすべての情報は秘密情報として扱います。インタビューは文字に書き起こし、参加者に関する情報は文字又は数字によるパスワードで保護します。パスワードを知るものは本研究の実施者のみです。取得された書面又は録音によるデータは、鍵をかけた状態で、大学の研究用倉庫に保管します。私の博士論文を執筆するために、データを分析し、参照元を明らかにせずに、一部を引用する場合があります。

31. 研究終了後の情報管理責任者

研究用倉庫へのアクセスは制限されています。個人情報の保護については、大学のプライバシー規程（上記 2.）をご参照下さい。

32. アクセス可能な人物

データを共有又は提出する相手は、本研究の監督者、博士課程委員会、シェフィー

ルド・ハラム大学又はミュンヘン・ビジネス・スクールの研究方針・基準に準じた秘密保持契約書に署名した者に限ります。

33. 研究終了後の情報管理

生データは必要な期間内のみ保管され、削除又は破壊されます。本研究のために収集されたデータを他の研究のために使用しません。

34. 研究成果の使用

本研究は私の博士論文の一部であり、博士論文は公表されます。また、本研究は学術コミュニティの内部又は外部で、記事、エッセイ、プレゼンテーション、公開討論として公開される可能性があります。個人の特定が可能なデータは削除し、引用は匿名で行います。研究への参加者が特定できる情報は公開しません。

35. 研究の実施期間

本研究の実施期間は2024年末までを予定しています。データ収集は2023年初頃までに終了する可能性があります。

36. 研究成果の確認方法

ご要望があれば、完成した博士論文を印刷又はデジタル版で提供します。

本研究への参加は任意です。参加は強制ではありません。今後、研究の途中であっても、理由を明らかにすることなく、参加中止が可能です。

ご懸念がある場合、又は研究後に不利益が生じる場合の連絡先

研究者及び研究チーム

研究者： イレーネ・バーダー irene.bader@student.shu.ac.uk 電話: +49 151 46 259933

監督者： Dr. リチャード・ブリース, r.breese@shu.ac.uk , 電話: +44 114 225 5555**以下の場合はデータ保護担当者に連絡してください：** • 大学によるデータ利用について質問がある場合 • データ保護違反を報告したい場合（例：個人情報が紛失された又は不適切に公開された場合） • 自分の個人情報を大学が使用した方法について不満のある場合 DPO@shu.ac.uk	**以下の場合は研究倫理責任者 (Dr Mayur Ranchordas) に連絡してください：** • 研究の実施方法及び自身への対応に懸念のある場合 ethicssupport@shu.ac.uk

住所：Sheffield Hallam University, Howard Street, Sheffield S1 1WBT
電話: 0114 225 5555

Appendix 3

Participant Consent form German

Sheffield Hallam University

EINWILLIGUNGSFORMULAR FÜR FORSCHUNGSTEILNEHMER

TITEL DER FORSCHUNG:
Marketingkommunikation in der Fertigungsindustrie:
Zukunftszenarien für Deutschland und Japan

Bitte beantworten Sie die folgenden Fragen, indem Sie die zutreffende Antwort ankreuzen

	JA	NEIN
1. Ich habe das Informationsblatt zu dieser Studie gelesen und mir die Einzelheiten der Studie erklären lassen.	☐	☐
2. Meine Fragen zur Studie sind zu meiner Zufriedenheit beantwortet worden, und ich weiß, dass ich jederzeit weitere Fragen stellen kann.	☐	☐
3. Mir ist bekannt, dass es mir freisteht, innerhalb der im Informationsblatt genannten Fristen aus der Studie auszusteigen, ohne einen Grund für meinen Ausstieg zu nennen oder die Beantwortung bestimmter Fragen im Rahmen der Studie zu verweigern, ohne dass dies Konsequenzen für meine zukünftige Behandlung durch den Forscher hat.	☐	☐
4. Ich erkläre mich damit einverstanden, der Forscherin Informationen unter den im Informationsblatt genannten Bedingungen (Interview) zur Verfügung zu stellen.	☐	☐
5. Ich möchte an der Studie unter den Bedingungen teilnehmen, die im Informationsblatt beschrieben sind.	☐	☐
6. Ich bin damit einverstanden, dass die für die Zwecke dieser Studie gesammelten Informationen, sobald sie anonymisiert sind (so dass ich nicht mehr identifiziert werden kann), für andere Forschungszwecke verwendet w[redacted]	☐	☐

Unterschrift des Teilnehmers: _____

Datum: [redacted]2022

Name des Teilnehmers (Druckbuchstaben) [redacted]

Kontaktinformationen: [redacted]

Appendix 4

Participant Consent Form Japanese

Sheffield Hallam University

協力への同意書

研究タイトル：
製造業におけるマーケティング・コミュニケーション：今後のドイツ・日本のシナリオ

該当する箇所に印を付けてください。

	はい	いいえ
1. 私は、本研究のインフォメーション・シートを読み、研究の詳細について説明を受けました。	☑	☐
2. 本研究に対する私の質問に対して十分な回答が得られました。また、今後いつでも質問が可能であると理解しました。	☑	☐
3. 私は、インフォメーション・シートで説明された期限内で、理由を明らかにすることなく、本研究への参加中止が可能であること、また、研究中に受けた特定の質問への回答を拒否しても、研究者による今後の私への対応に変化はないことを理解しました。	☑	☐
4. 私は、インフォメーション・シートに記載された秘密保護が実施されることを条件として、研究者に情報提供することに同意します。	☑	☐
5. 私は、インフォメーション・シートに記載された条件の下で、本研究に参加することを希望します。	☑	☐
6. 私は、本研究のために収集された情報が、匿名化された状態（私を特定できない状態）で、他の研究目的で使用されることに同意します。	☑	☐

参加者の署名： 刀口々良茂樹 **日付：** 2023.1.16

参加者の氏名（ブ [redacted] HIGEKI [redacted]

連絡先： 愛知県碧南市 [redacted]

[redacted]

研究者の氏名（ブロック体）： Irene Bader

研究者の署名： _____

研究者の連絡先：
Irene Bader, Pöckinger Strasse 15, D-82340 Feldafing, Germany, mobile: +49 151 4625 9933

同意書とインフォメーション・シートの写しを一緒に保管してください。

Appendix 5

Interview Guide example – Phase 1 interviews

General:

1. Concerning purchasing decisions, are you the only decision maker in your company?
2. Who else is involved in making purchasing decisions?

Communication Channels – current use:

1. How do you get information about products and technologies?
2. Which communication channels are important for you and why?
3. Do you use communication channels differently now than in the past (last 3-5 years)?
4. How did this change and why?
5. What is important for you when using a certain communication channel and why?
6. Which information about a product / technology are important for you?
7. Are you satisfied with the information you get? What you like / dislike?
8. How do you search for relevant product / technology information you are interested in?
9. What do you like and dislike about the communication channels you use?
10. In your opinion, how should certain communication channels change?

Perspectives:

1. Do you think product information will change in the future/ next 10 years? Why?
2. What might change when looking for products / technology in the next 10 years?
3. Do you see a tendency of which information might be more important to look at (future / in the next 10 years)?

Closing:

4. Is there anything concerning this topic we have not talked about?

Appendix 6

Interview Guide example – Phase 3 interviews

General:

1. How long is your working experience?

2. Are you involved in purchasing decisions in your team or from your manager?

Communication Channels – current use:

3. Where do you get information from and how do you communicate – why and why not?

3.1. Social media like facebook, Instagram, linkedin or any other?
3.2. Google search or any other search engines?
3.3. Company homepages direct search?
3.4. Brochures – print or online?
3.5. Magazines – print or online? Product specific magazines
3.6. Email newsletters?
3.7. Printed post mailings?
3.8. Exhibitions, Events?
3.9. Any other channels?

4. How do you communicate with colleagues or business partners? Why?

   For example: emails, Line, Whats app, Teams,

5. What is important for you …

5.1. …when you look for information? (technical information or business relevant information)
5.2. …when you communicate with colleagues or business partners?

6. How important are relationships for you in the business environment?
7. How important is trust for you in the business environment?

8. Do you see any differences in communication between you and elder colleagues? What do you recognise?

Future perspectives:

9. Please imagine: (in 10 – 15 years) you are in a manger position and need to make a purchasing decision, (e.g. a machine or an automation solution)…

9.1. …how will you get information?

9.2. …do you make this decision alone or do you involve somebody else?

9.3. …to whom do you talk?

9.4. …how do you search for information?

9.5. …through which channels do you get information?

10. How important will relationships be in the future?

11. What do you think about metaverse?

12. Do you think AI will influence our purchasing decisions and how we get information in the future?

Alternative questions:

13. How do you think this channels will develop in the next years:

13.1. Social media like facebook, Instagram, linkedin or any other?

13.2. Google search or any other search engines?

13.3. Company homepages direct search?

13.4. Brochures – print or online?

13.5. Magazines – print or online? Product specific magazines

13.6. Email newsletters?

13.7. Printed post mailings?

13.8. Exhibitions, Events?

13.9. Other channels?

Closing: 14. Is there anything concerning this topic we haven't talked about. Anything to add?

Appendix 7

Sample Interview Transcript (extract) – Japanese Research Participant

TRANSCRIPTION FILE: Stage 3_17

Interview partner: J_Z_M_ (P13)
Type: *online*
File Length: *0:46*

[…] #00:00:09-6#
I: My first two questions are very general. I would like to know: How old are you and how long is your working experience? So for how long are you in business already and how long are you working? #00:00:26-7#
(–translation–) #00:00:43-3#
P13: I am now 25 years old and I started working four years ago. #00:00:48-7#
I: If you consider purchasing decisions, are you involved in doing purchasing decisions when it comes to machines or automation? #00:01:02-3#
(–translation–) #00:01:36-7#
P13: Yes. Currently I work as area sales manager in [company] and my responsibility is to purchase machines from [company] and sell them to our customers. So I have the authority or the right to make a purchase decision of machines from the factory to the customer. #00:01:56-7#
I: Okay, great. Thank you very much. Now I'm very interested about how you communicate and how you get technical information on machines and automation solutions. So my first question here is: Where do you get information from and how do you communicate? And also a little bit, why and why not? So what are the channels, the communication channels you are mainly using when it comes to technical information? #00:02:32-2#
(–translation–) #00:03:34-8#
P13: In general, I get information, technical information from company home pages. Direct search. 3.3 in your questionnaire or 3.4 'brochures'. The sales manual provided by [company]. #00:03:50-3#
I: Okay. And what about social media? Do you look at social media? And I'm not only talking about [company] products or the products you are purchasing and selling, but maybe also other products around machines and automation solutions or technology. Do you use any other communication channels to get information? Let's start with social media like Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn or any other. #00:04:31-1#
(–translation–) #00:05:12-4#
P13: I sometimes look at Instagram to get official information about tools. Some of the tool manufacturers provide technical information on Instagram. #00:05:28-9#
I: (...) Why do you like Instagram and not any other social media channels like, for example, Facebook or LinkedIn? Do you use LinkedIn? #00:05:44-2#
(–translation–) #00:06:16-2#

P13: As for LinkedIn, I do not use LinkedIn. I use Instagram to get a wide range of information, not only limited to technical information. And I know a lot of people who are using Instagram around me too. #00:06:34-6#
I: Hmm. Okay. So when you say people around you are using Instagram, does it mean that it is important for you to do similar things like other persons? Are you looking at other person's way of using communication channels? #00:06:53-5#
(–translation–) #00:07:46-8#
P13: (...) Yes, I certainly pay respect to people around me who are using Instagram. That is also associated with my private hobby. I am working as area sales manager, but my hobbies are cars and motorcycles and usually car lovers and motorcycle lovers like machine-tools and related industries too. And for that purpose, I use Instagram to send or post information from my side or to share information proactively. #00:08:21-2#
I: Okay. Thank you very much. And what about other social media channels, for example, Facebook or TikTok? Is there something you are using as well? #00:08:33-1#
(–translation–) #00:08:48-1#
P13: I do not use Facebook nor TikTok, but I use Twitter or X. #00:08:56-4#
I: Ok. And why not Facebook or TikTok? And why Twitter? Can you tell me a few reasons of your way of using such communication channels? #00:09:03-6#
(–translation–) #00:09:36-2#
P13: I do not use Facebook and Tik Tok because I am not following the latest trend, or I was a bit late in catching up. But Twitter and Instagram are available from sometimes ago and I could catch up at that time, so I still continue using them. #00:09:53-1#
I: Ok. And for example, Instagram is more with pictures and videos and Twitter is more with words. What do you prefer? #00:10:13-0#
(–translation–) #00:10:34-6#
P13: I use Twitter for some years now, and you can also post pictures or videos on Twitter. And I prefer sending longer text when I use Twitter. #00:10:51-2#
I: Okay. I understand. Let's go to other communication channels. Is there something you prefer? For example, you mentioned brochures. Does it mean brochures and information online or print? #00:11:08-6#
(–translation–) #00:11:49-4#
P13: According to the company's instruction to use online brochure, it's my role to use online versions first. But when I visit my customers and show the product information in the factory, I use printed versions too. #00:11:54-8#
I: And what about you personally? Because I'm very much interested in your personal view. For example, you said you are very dedicated to automobile, and car manufacturing, motorcycle. When you want to get information, technical information in your private life, do you use print or online? What do you prefer? #00:12:29-0#
(–translation–) #00:12:51-9#
P13: I will look at online information only because I get information quickly. #00:13:06-7#
I: Okay. You mentioned also using the home page. So I guess you mean the company home page or any other suppliers home pages. What is important for you when you look at home pages or online information? #00:13:24-7#
(–translation–) #00:14:05-1#

Appendix 8

Sample Interview Transcript (extract) – German Research Participant

TRANSCRIPTION FILE: Stage 1_4

Interview partner: 4_*G_C_M (P4)*
Type: *online*
Date of Interview: *21.12.22*
File Length: *00:39*

German		**English**
I: Ich würde das Interview aufnehmen, wenn das für Sie in Ordnung ist. Hier auf dem Gerät. Dann kann ich das nämlich über Weihnachten schon anfangen auszuwerten. #00:00:08-9#		I: I would record the interview if that's okay with you. Here on the device. Because then I can already start evaluating it over Christmas. #00:00:08-9#
P4: Ja, ja. #00:00:09-8#		P4: Yes, yes. #00:00:09-8#
I: Dann fangen wir mal an, oder? (P4: Ja.) Für mich als Einstieg: Sind Sie bei sich im Unternehmen der einzige Entscheidungsträger, wenn es zu Kaufentscheidungen kommt bezüglich Maschinen-Automationslösungen oder allem, was irgendwie mit der Technik zu tun hat? #00:00:28-8#		I: Let's get started then, shall we? (P4: Yes.) For me to start with: are you the only decision maker in your company when it comes to purchasing decisions regarding machine automation solutions or anything that has to do with technology in any way? #00:00:28-8#
P4: Ja. Ich sage mal rechtlich gesehen bin ich natürlich nicht der einzige Entscheidungsträger. Aber wir besprechen das natürlich viel mit den entsprechenden Personen, die das dann hinterher auch umsetzen müssen. Das ist ja auch wichtig. #00:00:41-2#		Yes, I'll say that legally I'm not the only decision-maker. But of course we discuss this a lot with the corresponding people who then also have to implement it afterwards. That is also important. #00:00:41-2#
I: Ja. Also auch Maschinen-Bediener zum Beispiel? Werden die bei ihnen auch in einen Entscheidungsprozess mit einbezogen? #00:00:46-4#		I: Yes. So also machine operators, for example? Are they also involved in a decision-making process? #00:00:46-4#
P4: Maschinen-Bediener eher nicht. #00:00:48-2#		P4: Machine operators rather not. #00:00:48-2#
P4: Aber sonst Vorarbeiter oder Qualitätssicherung… Solche Personen halt. #00:00:56-9#		P4: But otherwise foremen or quality assurance... People like that. #00:00:56-9#
I: Ja. #00:00:57-7#		I: Yes. #00:00:57-7#
I: Okay. Und Sie haben weniger als 52 Mitarbeiter, richtig? #00:01:02-1#		I: Okay. And you have less than 52 employees, right? #00:01:02-1#
P4: Ja. Etwas über 20 Leute nur. #00:01:06-8#		P4: Yes. A little over 20 people only.

		#00:01:06-8#
I: Ja. Das ist super. Das ist genau meine Zielgruppe. Perfekt. Das sind die spannenden Unternehmen, wie ich finde. #00:01:11-8#		I: Yes. That's super. That's exactly my target group. Perfect. Those are the exciting companies, I think. #00:01:11-8#
P4: Ja. #00:01:13-6#		P4: Yes. #00:01:13-6#
I: Ich komme jetzt mal ein bisschen in das Thema rein. Da möchte ich ein paar Fragen stellen. Wenn Sie jetzt zum Beispiel sagen: „Okay, wir müssen jetzt Investitionen planen oder wir möchten eine Kaufentscheidung treffen.“ Wie erhalten Sie die Informationen über die Produkte, die Technologie oder die Lösungen bzw. über das, was es da gerade so gibt am Markt? Wie erkundigen Sie sich oder wie starten Sie mit dem mit dem Thema, um sich zu erkundigen? #00:01:38-5#		I: I'm going to get into the topic a little bit. I would like to ask a few questions. If you now say, for example, "Okay, we need to plan investments now or we want to make a purchase decision." How do you get the information about the products, the technology or the solutions or about what is currently available on the market? How do you inquire or how do you start with that to inquire? #00:01:38-5#
P4: Eigentlich würde ich sagen, wir starten so, dass wir uns erst mal den Ist-Zustand in unserem Betrieb anschauen, wie er jetzt ist. (I: Ja.) Und dann geht es ja viel darum auch für uns eine Verbesserung in der Produktion zu erzielen durch eine Investition. Eine Erleichterung für die Mitarbeiter oder höhere Teile-Ausbringung. Das sind oft so die Ziele, die man mit der Investition verbindet. Oder Kunden. Eine engere Kundenbindung ist auch oft ein Thema. #00:02:17-8#		P4: Actually, I would say that we start by looking at the current state of our company. (I: Yes.) And then it's a lot about achieving an improvement in production for us through an investment. A facilitation for the employees or a higher output of parts. These are often the goals that are associated with the investment. Or customers. Closer customer loyalty is also often an issue. #00:02:17-8#
I: Und wenn Sie sagen, Sie haben diesem internen Prozess abgeschlossen. Alles ist okay. Sie wissen jetzt, was Sie brauchen, oder was Ihnen weiterhilft. Wie gehen Sie dann vor? Also, wo holen Sie sich die Informationen, was es gerade so gibt am Markt? #00:02:34-6#		I: And when you say you have completed this internal process. Everything is okay. You now know what you need or what will help you. How do you proceed then? So, where do you get the information, what's available on the market right now? #00:02:34-6#
P4: Ähm, ja, ich würde sagen, dadurch, dass man ja immer in dem Thema drin ist, hat man die meisten Informationen eigentlich schon parat. Das nimmt man ja gar nicht so bewusst war. Man informiert sich ja ständig oder man kriegt Informationen von den Herstellern zwischendurch. So wie bei [company]. Da ist es ja auch so, dass da Journale verschickt werden an die Kunden und da ist man eigentlich ja doch immer mehr oder weniger im Thema schon ein ganzes Stück weit drin. #00:03:04-8#		P4: Um, yes, I would say that because you are always involved in the topic, you actually already have most of the information at hand. You are not so consciously aware of it. You constantly inform yourself or you get information from the manufacturers in between. Just like at [company]. They also send journals to their customers and you are always more or less already familiar with the topic. #00:03:04-8#
I: Ja. Also das heißt, wenn Sie sagen, Sie		I: Yes. So that means when you say you get

kriegen so Informationen, beispiel Journale. Gibt es dann irgendwelche anderen Kommunikationskanäle, die für Sie wichtig sind oder wo Sie sagen: „Mensch, da schau ich auch mal proaktiv rein oder das wird mir zugespielt.“ Ich denke mal an einen Email Newsletter, um ein Beispiel zu nennen, oder Internet… Wie wie spielt das eine Rolle? #00:03:27-6#		information like that, for example journals. Are there any other communication channels that are important for you or where you say: "Man, I'll take a proactive look at that or it'll come to me". I'm thinking of an email newsletter, to give an example, or internet... How does that play a role? #00:03:27-6#
P4: Das Internet ist natürlich auch wichtig. Oder ist natürlich in den letzten Jahren immer wichtiger geworden. #00:03:32-4#		P4: The internet is also important, of course. Or has of course become more and more important in recent years. #00:03:32-4#
I: Ja. #00:03:33-1#		I: Yes. #00:03:33-1#
P4: Und da kann man natürlich auch schon mal was für sich finden. Was ähnliches vielleicht. Wir machen das ja sehr häufig produktbezogen, die Investitionen. Und da hat man natürlich schon mal im Internet die Möglichkeit, sei es jetzt auf der Herstellerseite oder über YouTube, sage ich mal, – da sind ja auch ganz viele Kunden oder Anwender, die da ihre Sachen veröffentlichen – und auch natürlich über den entsprechenden Vertrieb, dass man sich da noch mal rückversichert. #00:04:08-8#		P4: And of course you can find something for yourself. Something similar, perhaps. We very often make product-related investments. And of course you have the possibility on the Internet, whether it's on the manufacturer's website or via YouTube, I'll say, - there are also a lot of customers or users who publish their things there - and also of course via the corresponding sales department, that you can reassure yourself. #00:04:08-8#
I: Ja. #00:04:09-7#		I: Yes. #00:04:09-7#
P4: Und da dann mal ein Gespräch führt. Gerade jetzt war ja für uns neu, bei der letzten Investition, die Automation. Weil die Maschinen an sich, bei denen gibt es eigentlich weniger Überraschungen, da ist man ja eigentlich… #00:04:26-6#		P4: And then we have a conversation. Right now, automation was new for us, with the last investment. Because the machines themselves, with them there are actually fewer surprises, you are actually... #00:04:26-6#
I: Ja, da ist man eigentlich durch, richtig? #00:04:27-8#		I: Yeah, you're actually through there, right? #00:04:27-8#
P4: Ja. Irgendwo immer up to date sein. #00:04:30-3#		P4: Yes. Always be up to date somewhere. #00:04:30-3#
I: Das heißt, wenn Sie zum Beispiel sagen Hersteller-Seiten oder Internet. Suchen Sie dann explizit auf Ihnen bekannten Hersteller-Seiten? Oder gehen Sie da auch über Suchmaschinen oder über Verbände? Geben Sie mir da mal bitte ein paar Information zu, welche Kanäle da für Sie wichtig sind oder wo Sie sagen: „Mensch, da habe ich gute Erfahrungen oder da kriege ich eigentlich immer das, was ich brauche oder		I: That means, for example, when you say manufacturer sites or the internet. Do you then search explicitly on manufacturer sites that you know? Or do you also use search engines or associations? Please give me some information about which channels are important for you or where you say: "Man, I've had good experiences there or I can always get what I need or at least information there. #00:04:57-2#

Informationen zumindest.“ #00:04:57-2#		
P4: Ja. Ich glaube, dass wir schon eher auf den Hersteller schauen. Man hat sich ja irgendwie mit der Zeit auch mehr oder weniger auf einen Hersteller eingespielt. Ich glaube, das ist für kleinere Betriebe vielleicht auch eher eine wichtige Entscheidung, weil man dann natürlich in der Folge auch nur einen Ansprechpartner hat. #00:05:29-2#		P4: Yes. I think that we look more at the manufacturer. Over time, we have more or less become accustomed to one manufacturer. I think that is perhaps also a more important decision for smaller businesses, because then of course you only have one contact person. #00:05:29-2#
I: Also der Ansprechpartner ist schon wichtig für sie, wenn ich das da raus höre? #00:05:33-0#		I: So the contact person is already important for you, if I can hear that? #00:05:33-0#
P4: Ja. Ich glaube gerade jetzt bei kleineren Firmen könnte ich mir vorstellen – also bei uns zumindest weiß ich das – ist es wichtiger. Zu sagen, wir nehmen jedes Mal einen anderen Hersteller… Das würde nicht unbedingt einen Vorteil bringen für uns. Das würde ich eher als Nachteil ansehen. #00:05:53-5#		P4: Yes. I think especially now with smaller companies I could imagine - at least with us I know that - it's more important. To say we take a different manufacturer every time... That wouldn't necessarily bring an advantage for us. I would see that more as a disadvantage. #00:05:53-5#
I: Ja. Also auch persönliche Beziehungen als Stichwort ist da wichtig, dass man sagt, man hat diesen einen Ansprechpartner, wenn etwas ist. #00:06:01-4#		I: Yes. So personal relationships are also important, that you say you have this one contact person when something happens. #00:06:01-4#