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Organisational Resilience and the Covid-19 Pandemic: Exploring Factors Amplifying the Effects of Organizational Resilience on Swedish Retail Stores**

Abstract

This paper reports on findings from a study of Swedish retail stores, with the aim of discussing the triggers and amplifiers by offering a nuanced perspective on the effects of organisational resilience (OR) of the COVID-19 pandemic on Swedish firms. The study is based on interviews with 28 store managers. Drawing on the concept of organisational resilience, we offer three contributions. First, we empirically and theoretically develop the discussion on triggers of OR. Second, we explain that the positive and negative effects of a crisis on particular firms' OR can be amplified (or inhibited) by certain factors, which we call the amplifiers of OR. These amplifiers include the retail industry sector, store location and type of ownership. Third, we empirically illustrate the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and its restrictions on the retail sector in a Swedish context.

Keywords: Organizational resilience, retail store sector, Coronavirus pandemic, Sweden (JEL: M10, M20 M19)

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely affected many countries and economies (Andersson & Aylott, 2020; Kraus et al., 2020; Ratten, 2021). However, its effects on companies and stores differ. One reason for this difference is that different countries have chosen different strategies to address the pandemic (Boers & Henschel, 2021a, 2021b); another is that the pandemic has affected some industries more than others. For example, industries severely affected by the pandemic and the ensuing restrictions include the restaurant sector (Panzone et al., 2021) and the retail sector (Pantano et al., 2020; Roggeveen & Sethuraman, 2020). Indeed, the retail sector has shown an extreme level of sensitivity to lockdowns and other pandemic-related restrictions (Roggeveen & Sethuraman, 2020). Moreover, there are indications that the effects of the current crisis on firms in the same industry have varied, with some firms even experiencing positive effects while others have experienced a range of negative ones.

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The organisational ability that enables firms to cope with crises such as the Coronavirus pandemic is known as organisational resilience (OR). The term ‘resilience’ is widely used, with differing definitions (Andersson et al., 2019; Korber & McNaughton, 2018; Ljungkvist & Boers, 2016). In this paper, we use a broad definition of organisational resilience (Winn et al., 2011, p. 168): ‘resilience is an organisation’s ability to withstand external harm and to recover from negative external impacts.

The previous literature has discussed the triggers of OR, concluding that this ability is largely activated in the face of large-scale crises, such as the September 11 terrorist attack (Coutu, 2002), the 2008/2009 financial crisis (Pal et al., 2014), or the earthquake in Christchurch, New Zealand (Prayag et al., 2020). However, other researchers have explored a more mundane aspect of OR, in which this ability is triggered by everyday challenges and changes in the business environment (Andersson et al., 2019). Such studies assume that both crises and day-to-day challenges affect firms negatively. We postulate that this is not always the case. While it is likely that some companies will face severe problems that challenge their continued existence, there will also be companies that are strengthened during a crisis.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to discuss the triggers and amplifiers of organisational resilience by offering a nuanced perspective on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis on Swedish firms. This paper reports on a study of retail stores in a small community in Southwest Sweden. The study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021¹. Thus, to fulfil the purpose of this study, we seek to understand how resilient retail stores have been during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on the period from the inception of the pandemic to the end of 2021.

We aim to make the following contributions to the field of OR in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. First, we empirically and theoretically develop the ongoing discussion on the triggers of OR. Second, we explain how the positive and negative effects of a crisis on particular firms’ OR can be amplified (or inhibited) by certain factors, which we refer to as the amplifiers of OR. In our particular case, these amplifiers include the retail industry sector, store location and ownership type. Third, we empirically illustrate the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and its restrictions on the retail sector in a Swedish region. As the study’s findings were conducted while the pandemic was ongoing, they can be considered trustworthy because they do not suffer from retrospective sense-making. The paper continues by developing the concept of OR, discussing the method used in this study, providing and discussing empirical illustrations, and then concluding.

1 In Sweden, the pandemic started in 2020.

Organisational Resilience

The literature on OR is broad and has been reviewed by many scholars who have not come to commonly agreed-upon definitions (Korber & McNaughton, 2018; Linnenluecke, 2017; Winn et al., 2011). Moreover, the concept of OR is not only used within the business and management literature (Korber & McNaughton, 2018; Linnenluecke, 2017) but also in other disciplines (Madni & Jackson, 2009). Furthermore, it is difficult to distinguish OR from other types of resilience, such as entrepreneurial resilience (Branicki et al., 2018; Korber & McNaughton, 2018). In addition, although the concept itself is closely related to the notion of disruptive change, OR has been described as an organisational ability to develop adaptability to continuous, new and unexpected change (Horne & Orr, 1997) in the form of technological discontinuities regulatory upheavals, geopolitical shocks, industry disintermediation, abrupt shifts in consumer tastes, and hordes of non-traditional competitors (Hamel & Välikangas, 2003).

Consequently, OR can be triggered by different circumstances. External shocks are often presented as triggers of OR (e.g. Karman, 2020; Branicki et al., 2018; Chrisman et al., 2011; DesJardine et al., 2019; Herbane, 2019). For instance, Karman (2020) found that organisations use different mechanisms to stay resilient to weather extremes, which are external shocks in this regard. DesJardine et al. (2019) report that general environmental disturbances – in their case, the financial crisis of 2008 – can trigger OR. Cyber attacks are another trigger of OR (Appiah et al., 2020). Herbane (2019) argues that OR is influenced by variations in formalisation activities, which could be triggered by a crisis such as fire, flooding or the like. Other types of triggers include local crises in specific types of firms – such as small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (Herbane, 2019) or family firms (Chrisman et al., 2011) – and larger structural crises (Ljungkvist & Boers, 2016). In other words, OR can be triggered by many different crises and other factors.

The effects of OR on the firms portrayed in the literature have been largely positive. For example, OR has been defined as a fundamental quality of individuals, groups, organisations and systems as a whole in responding productively to significant change that disrupts the expected pattern of events without engaging in an extended period of regressive behaviour (Horne & Orr, 1997). Furthermore, OR is the capacity of an organisation and its individual members to absorb change without draining organisational and individual energy (Patterson, 1997), as well as the ability of the individual members of an organisation to expeditiously design and implement positive adaptive behaviours that align with the immediate situation, while enduring minimal stress (Mallak, 1998, 1999). The effect of OR is to bounce back from untoward events (Gittell et al., 2006; Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003). A resilient organisation remains stable (or close to stable) in the face of perturbations or is able to return to the equilibrium point quickly after being affected by a perturbation (Smith & Fischbacher, 2009). However, the negative effects of OR

have rarely been discussed, largely due to the methodological issue of finding suitable firms (Korber & McNaughton, 2018).

Finally, the literature has discussed factors that contribute to the positive and negative effects of OR. Common factors include organisational leadership, a strong sense of common values and vision (i.e. a firm organisational culture that creates unity), available resources, communication, and continuous innovation (Bell, 2002; Hamel & Välikangas, 2003; Johnson-Lenz & Johnson-Lenz, 2009; Pellissier, 2011) and employees. However, it has been argued that a collection of resilient individuals within a company does not add up to a resilient organisation as a whole. In fact, such a setup may be counterproductive because strong and resilient individuals may dominate and override the shared vision of others (Horne & Orr, 1997). Researchers have also emphasised the importance of incorporating a component of OR into an organisation's strategic plan (Horne & Orr, 1997), especially regarding the development of systemic, effective and sustainable methods of responding to change (Pasmore, 1994). According to this perspective, it is crucial to identify organisational units with higher resilience and the ability to suggest operational and management changes that can be made in order to develop resilience (Horne & Orr, 1997). Thus, the literature seems to imply that the various internal factors contributing to OR have inherently positive and negative directions.

Consequently, it is important to include particular industries, such as retail – which often consists of SMEs or small units (Table 4) – when studying OR, as there are differences in crisis-response behaviour between industries (Linnenluecke, 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic offers a unique opportunity to study OR, as it has affected all businesses, irrespective of size or industry.

Method

The empirical focus of this paper is on an entrepreneurial region in Southwest Sweden. Sweden is known for its entrepreneurial regions, such as *Gnosjö* and *Sjuhärads* (e.g. Davidsson, 1995; Johannisson, 1990; Ljungkvist & Boers, 2016). Moreover, Sweden has followed a different strategy in handling the COVID-19 pandemic compared with other countries (Boers & Henschel, 2021a, 2021b; Rambaree & Nässén, 2020), making it an interesting and relevant context for discussing the implications of the pandemic.

This paper is based on a study of retail stores in a small coastal town in Southwest Sweden. There are two reasons for this choice of topic. First, retail stores have been directly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020) and the resulting restrictions, such as allowing only a limited number of customers in the store at the same time. Second, the authors of the current paper lecture at a university programme. One of the programmes taught by the authors focuses on retail store management and has a number of local partner stores that cooperate with the programme and support the students in their assignments (e.g.,

by conducting interviews). Thus, the programme provided us with access to store managers from a number of stores in the area, and we chose to study how these local stores had been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. We reviewed prior student assignments to identify which stores students had worked with in their course assignments; some of these stores were already the programme's partner stores (referred to herein as 'partner stores'), whereas others were not (referred to as 'non-partner stores') and had been separately contacted by the students. This resulted in a list of 82 stores (see Table 1), which were then contacted by the authors to enquire about participation in this study.

Table 1. Stores Associated with the Programme

Stores	Interviews	Stores Unwilling to Participate	Response Rate
Partner stores	10	8	55.6 %
Non-partner stores	18	46	28 %
Total	28	82	34 %

Table 1 shows the number of interviews conducted and the category of each store – that is, whether the store was a partner of the university programme or not. Of the 18 partner stores, ten participated in the study, corresponding to a response rate of about 55.6 %. Of the contacted stores that were not official partner stores, about 28 % participated. Taken together, the overall participation rate is approximately 34 % for the initial 82 stores identified. Hence, partner stores were more willing to participate in this study than non-partner stores. Regarding the number of identified stores, some students used stores in their assignments that were outside of the focus area of this study. These stores were disregarded.

Table 2. Store Type

Type of Store	Number
Independent	7
Retail chain store, chain-owned	8
Retail chain store, independent ownership	13
Franchise	2

Table 2 categorises the stores based on whether they are independent, belong to a retail chain or are franchise stores. A total of 21 stores belong to a retail chain. However, of these, only eight are directly owned by the retail chain, while 13 are independently owned by the retail chain.

Context: An Enterprising Community

The community in question is located in the Southwest of Sweden, on the west coast, with approximately 40,000 inhabitants. Research shows that communities driven by a joint culture can be an important context for analysing entrepreneurial

behaviour (Boers, 2020; Davidsson, 1995; Johannisson, 1990; Ljungkvist & Boers, 2016). In this study, we do not intend to make claims about the culture of the community. Nevertheless, there was an enterprising spirit present during the interviews largely related to several ongoing building projects opening up the city towards the waterfront. The community represents a place where the data was collected but claims about the community itself go beyond the scope of this paper.

Industrial Context: Retail

This study focuses on the retail sector, which contains different actors and branches (Benrqya & Jabbouri, 2021). Retail stores often fall under the category of SMEs (Byun et al., 2020; Masurel & Janszen, 1998; Mitchell et al., 2012; Paul et al., 2016). Moreover, in saturated markets such as the US, physical stores seem to be threatened by online stores (Berman, 2019). Some researchers argue that the world of retail will be strongly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Roggeveen & Sethuraman, 2020). Others argue that the pandemic will have severe socio-economic implications (Nicola et al., 2020). However, these articles were written at the beginning of the pandemic, and there are, as yet, a limited number of studies based on more recent empirical investigations. This article offers more recent insights from a study of retail stores in Sweden.

Swedish COVID-19 Restrictions During 2020–2021

Sweden and its measures against the COVID-19 pandemic have been criticised in the international media for being irresponsible, among other criticisms (Giritli Nygren & Olofsson, 2020). Compared with many other countries, Sweden chose a different strategy; rather than having lockdowns, the Swedish government appealed to its citizens' sense of responsibility. Due to the lack of an available vaccine, this strategy was also criticised in the Swedish media (Giritli Nygren & Olofsson, 2020) as it appeared to be a different strategy than other countries that had lockdowns and restrictions. Another significant aspect of the Swedish response to the pandemic was the public role played by the Swedish Authority for Public Health (*Folkhälsomyndigheten*, FHM), which received considerable attention for its (in the beginning) daily briefings on the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic (i.e. deaths), instructions on how citizens should behave and prognoses regarding the future development of the pandemic. The spokesperson of the FHM, Anders Tengnell, became a celebrity among the Swedish public. Some scholars have argued that Tengnell's promotion to celebrity status corresponds to the behaviour of people 'rallying around their flag' in a time of crisis (Esaïasson et al., 2021). However, the FHM and its strategy have also been criticised for a lack of testing and for mainly relying on recommendations and individual responsibility (Claeson & Hanson, 2021).

Data Collection

The data collection combined primary interviews with secondary data. A total of 28 interviews were conducted with store owners and managers, where most of the respondents were both. The authors divided the companies to be contacted, and the interviews were conducted by telephone, Skype or Zoom due to the pandemic (Archibald et al., 2019). Interviews lasted for an average of 30 minutes; the longest interview was 70 minutes long, while the shortest lasted for 17 minutes. Secondary data – that is, the number of employees and annual turnover of each store – was collected from a database (*Infotorg Företag*), which was accessed through the university library. The secondary data made it possible to contextualise the interviews.

Table 3. General Information on the Interviews Conducted

No. of Interviews Conducted	Interview Length	Complementary Data
28	17–70 minutes (average length: 30 minutes)	Annual reports, company websites, press clips

Data Analysis

The data analysis was conducted by the two authors. Interviews were transcribed by a professional transcription company; then, the transcripts were shared for data analysis among the authors. The authors used different tools to store and analyse the data, including NVivo 12 (Alam, 2021) and Taguette (Rampin & Rampin, 2021), an open-source qualitative data analysis tool. The analysis resulted in themes, which were combined with performance data to structure the paper. The stores' experiences with the Coronavirus restrictions were a dominant topic, as the restrictions had an immediate effect on the stores. Based on the stores' varying experiences, we decided to focus on the triggers and amplifiers of OR. We divided the amplifiers into three categories that summarised individual experiences and allowed for further theoretical development: location, retail industry sector and ownership. These three categories explained many of the differences between the stores and the effects the pandemic had on them. A more detailed description and discussion follow in Sections 4 and 5.

Empirical Results

In this section, we present the positive and negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on the studied retail stores. Here, positive and negative consequences are assessed by the change in the number of employees and in the store's turnover, in comparison with those in the reporting period prior to the pandemic.

Table A1 in the Appendix provides an overview of the studied stores, along with information on their turnover, number of employees and respective changes during the pandemic.

Triggers of OR

In what follows, we present some quotes that discuss the triggers leading to OR during the COVID-19 pandemic. Not surprisingly, the effects of the pandemic hit stores unexpectedly, and the study participants had not prepared for the resulting crisis in any way. As one respondent put it:

It became... All of a sudden, everyone would stay home. Everyone would work from home. No one needed clothes, like [laugh]. No one needed new clothes. So, we noticed it very dramatically there in April, or March, the end of March and the whole of April, then, last year [i.e. 2020].

The respondent continued to describe the effect:

We've done it [continued the business]. Since then, we have kept purchases tight, so we have reduced our purchases. Quite a lot ... costs for warehousing and so on. So that, we have still managed pretty well under the circumstances, I think. (Respondent, store 6)

Another store manager described the negative effects of the pandemic on the store:

Yes, it was, like, just a bang. It was just to try to adapt as best we could immediately and take the measures we could ... Yes, we got help from the property owner [...], for example, with rent relief and, just, as I said, [to] keep costs down. The wage cost is a large cost. We took this furlough. We also had to take the adjustment support. So that we took all the help we could get. (Respondent, store 8)

However, other stores experienced more positive effects. A store manager described the development during the beginning of the pandemic and the development thereafter as follows:

It was a few weeks [during which] you felt that it was quiet and a little emptier [of] people, but then, when we went over to the summer, it became almost the opposite effect. We had an incredible amount to do, and we made huge sales throughout the summer. (Respondent, store 20)

As the two prior quotes illustrate, there was a level of uncertainty at the beginning of the pandemic, during the spring of 2020. However, as several respondents explained and the quotes illustrate, the summer of 2020 was almost back to business as usual, at least for some stores. An explanation given by several respondents was that the city in question is a popular summer destination and, during the summer of 2020, many Swedish people decided to skip vacations abroad and stay in Sweden instead.

Concrete Measures in Relation to the Pandemic

In this section, we report findings showing the resilience of the studied stores. For example, one store owner commented:

We had some issues with the number of people in the store. It was too crowded. Then, we sat up marks in the store, so people could maintain distance from another, and [installed] plastic windows at the cash register. We also bought disinfection spray. We sprayed and washed our hands quite frequently, but it was difficult to get hold of the stuff in the beginning. (Store owner 19)

The owner of a DIY store described some of the measures they implemented, which helped them to serve their customers during the pandemic:

We started free home delivery of material to reduce the number of visitors in the store.

This owner then described further measures that the store undertook internally to protect employees:

To protect our employees and our customers, we tried to find measures to help everyone during this difficult time. We divided ourselves ... so we had two different groups and times for breakfast and lunch. We tried all the different measures ... we had six or seven [people] infected in our company. (Store owner 15)

The manager of a clothes store spoke about the store's activities to reduce the spread of the virus:

It was...first, it was, of course, cleaning. A lot of extra cleaning. Keeping tidy and spraying at the cash register and maintaining distance, of course. (Store manager 7)

These quotes from a few store representatives represent the common reactions of the store owners and managers. Depending on the store size, including the number of employees, the measures that were taken varied slightly; however, all the stores took internal measures related to how the work was organized and how customers were served.

Consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic for the Studied Stores

Here, we illustrate how some stores have been negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The stores categorized into this group – that is, stores that were negatively affected – reported a negative turnover in comparison with the prior reporting period. Of the 82 stores (cf. Table 1) included in the study, two stores closed during the pandemic. However, one chain had two stores, and closed the smaller store. As shown in Table 4, 11 out of 28 stores reported negative turnover figures.

Table 4 reports the results for independent companies with their headquarters in the studied entrepreneurial community. We excluded stores that only had results on the group level, in order to focus on development at the store level.

In total, the eight stores listed in Table 4 employ 144 employees, with an average of 18 per store. However, only two stores have more than nine employees. Taken together, the two larger stores employ 110 employees. During the pandemic, these eight stores in Table 4 reduced their number of employees by a total of nine.

Table 4. Independent Stores with Negative Turnover in 2020

Store No.	Industry	No. of Employees	Change in No. of Employees	Turnover in 2020 (1000 SEK)	Change in Net Turnover from 2019 to 2020 (%)
6	Clothes	6	0	7590	-17.89
9	Fish trade	30	-4	56 757	-11.37
12	Kitchen	6	0	15 070	-28.49
16	Grocery	80	-4	209 368	-1.42
17	Clothes	9	0	8216	-12.71
18	Clothes, fashion	3	0	7480	-7.66
21	Shoes	6	0	8124	-18.35
26	Clothes, fashion	4	-1	8269	-23.68

Table 4 indicates that the local stores reported an average decrease in turnover of 15.2 % in comparison with the prior year. However, one store had a decrease of 28.5 %, whereas another store only reported a decrease of 1.42 % compared with the year before. It is noteworthy that many of the respondents are owner-managers; that is, they are not only the managers but also the owners of their businesses. Therefore, negative results not only affect these individuals' position but also their – and possibly their families' – assets and income.

On the other hand, the crisis positively affected some stores. As shown in Table 5, 14 stores reported positive turnover figures.

Table 5. Independent Stores with Positive Turnover in 2020

Store No.	Industry	No. of Employees	Change in No. of Employees	Turnover in 2020 (1000 SEK)	Change in Net Turnover from 2019 to 2020 (%)
1	Grocery	7	0	26 778	+12.43
2	Grocery	11	0	44 879	+ 8.43
4	Optician	5	0	8997	+ 10.13
5	Food	7	+1	8675	+ 39.82
10	Book	6	-2	12 588	8.17
13	Grocery	120	+4	438 163	+3.8 (2019)
14	hardware	12	-1	84 910	+ 4.85
15	Electronics	13	0	8250	+ 0.268
20	Bikes	6	0	21 381	+11.88
22	Sportswear	8	0	19 535	+11.53
23	Hardware and plumbing products	8	0	19 569	+16
27	Cosmetics	5	0	6381	+2.29

Two stores reported an increase in the number of employees (+5), and two stores reported a reduction in staff (-3). The average growth rate of these stores was 10.8 %, with a low of 0.268 % and a high of 39.82 %.

Industry Sector, Location and Type of Ownership as Circumstances Amplifying the Crisis Effects

Our results revealed that industry, location and ownership type amplified the positive and the negative effects of the crisis.

Retail Industry Sector as an Amplifier of the Circumstances Triggering OR

The particular retail sector in which a store is active amplified the effects of OR. As shown in Table 4, stores selling textiles, clothes, shoes and so forth faced a difficult situation during the pandemic. One clothes store manager was nevertheless optimistic:

I think that ... We already notice a subdued demand of customer needs when it comes to shopping and the need for new clothes and all this. So, I think that ... As soon as they release the restrictions, I think it will be very good, and the store's sales will increase in the next year. (Manager, store 6)

Another owner of a store commented:

Then, we have probably lost a lot of tourists and stuff. So, this city is a city with a lot of conferences and everything like this before. And they have been absent. (Respondent, store 9)

On the other hand, some stores experienced an upswing during the summer of 2020, as the following quote illustrates:

The city doubled in size during summer, as all Swedish summer guests came. That was a lot ... yes, we also have rentals, and we almost experienced a shortage of rental bikes. (Owner-manager, store 17)

A manager from a gardening tools store also remarked on the positive amplifying effects of the store's retail sector:

It can be said that we are among the industries that have had a lot to do, for which we are humbly grateful for having worked extremely hard. (Owner-manager, store 15)

This quote illustrates how certain sectors within retail experience benefit from remote work recommendations. Working from home led people to make plans for their gardens and homes instead of spending money on travel, for example. Another quote from an owner-manager of a store selling tools and equipment for home repair, home renovation and gardening illustrates this as well:

That was the consequence of [the pandemic] ... home repair took on a brutal speed, with everyone who worked at home. [...] ... but it is clear that it is difficult to differentiate which industry would go well or would go badly in that kind of thing. (Owner-manager, store 16)

In general, stores focusing on sports, interior decoration, outdoor and gardening activities, and home construction experienced more positive results than stores selling clothes, shoes and other apparel.

Location as an Amplifier of the Circumstances Triggering OR

In the interviews, some respondents mentioned their physical store location as an important amplifying factor. More specifically, the results revealed that stores located in the town centre were affected more negatively than stores in the outskirts. The city in question has a traditional city centre with many smaller shops. In the outskirts, newer and bigger shops have been established. One sport store manager explained:

Store X in the city centre was negatively affected, both because we are in the centre and people were not supposed to have 'fun shopping' and [because] there are not as many people in the centre now as before. But then, we also have much older customers. And [that] was a customer group that, in principle, stayed completely inside at first and has done so to a large extent now, later. (Manager, store 22)

A manager of another store in the centre reflected:

When you think of colleagues around town [selling] clothes and shoes and everything, that [have had a] very difficult [time], and restaurants that have struggled unbelievably, we have managed quite well, in fact. (Respondent, store 13)

This store manager considers that stores in the traditional city centre selling clothes and shoes, as well as restaurants, have had difficulties during the pandemic. Another store manager operating in the city attempted to explain the amplifying effect of location:

We are... a little outside the centre and, then, there was not as much movement around [near our store], [...] so, the only thing that made it difficult was, maybe a little, that all restrictions and so on were placed almost 100 % on companies, which had to see to it that they were followed; there was no incentive for people [to go shopping]. (Respondent, store 19)

Other stores – even those in the apparel business – that are located outside the city centre experienced different, more positive, effects. This difference was most apparent in the case of a store manager who was in charge of two stores, one in the centre and one in the outskirts. That manager commented:

So, we had to close the store [in the centre], maybe not just because of Covid. But it helped [the consequences of the pandemic], well, that you want to ... well, hedge the future, if [the pandemic] was going to continue for a long time [...]. And, so, we had a store It was a little smaller with some other assortment there, too, as it was a city store then. (Store 11)

The manager closed the store in the city centre. This had an additional effect on the store located on the outskirts:

It went really well [at the store in the outskirts]. And the advantage was that we could offer everyone from the store in town who wanted to continue [to work for us] a job here. So, we didn't fire any staff associated with [the store in the town centre], but they got an offer to move over here. And we had worked together before. Thus, we were... I was at both places, so we were still a team and knew each other. (Respondent, store 11)

However, the findings add some additional layers to this amplifier. Some store managers did not consider their central location to be a disadvantage, as the following quote tells:

It is a bicycle shop that has been around for a very long time, and we have always been in the central part of the city. (Respondent, store 20)

This shop reported positive figures during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this case, the type of retail sector may have mitigated the negative effects of the location.

Moreover, several respondents reported that their customers have been very loyal during the pandemic, which probably prevented more negative effects:

We are located in a small or medium-sized city with a downtown position, and [our store] has very great loyalty from customers, so you recognise a lot of customers, and many say 'We must shop at [the local] store to save it' so that it has helped very much... Yes, it was probably the case that [our customers] went in person to the stores rather than shopping online. And we hope that it continues. (Owner-manager, store 6)

Finally, some construction projects in and around the town that began during the course of the pandemic may have modified the effects as well. One store manager reported:

I mean, X ... the city is a very nice city, and there is a huge future for the city, with both moving in and construction and so on. I think that, once the tunnel construction is complete and they have finished building what is to happen down in the harbour and so on, so there are incredible development opportunities... (Respondent, store 9)

Type of Ownership as an Amplifier of the Circumstances Triggering OR

Another amplifier revealed by the analysis was the type of ownership. In general, chain-owned or franchise stores performed better than independently-owned stores in our study (see Appendix 1). Such independent stores are often family businesses, as the following quote illustrates:

Today, the company is run by me and my wife. And my stepdaughter has a small part, as a co-owner, as well. (Owner-manager, store 11)

Running a small family-owned business can be challenging, according to this respondent:

We only have three people working. It's me and my mom and dad. We have now been without outside employees for two years. So, all three of us have been working full time, and when the pandemic broke out, it was a concern on many levels – at least, how it would go, especially ... if one of us got sick because we work so closely, and we are family, and we hang out privately together. So, that was probably the first thing that was a bit like this: Well, if we get sick, we have to close. And then, it was like this... You had a stomach ache as well because you did not know what the consequences would be. (Respondent, store 18)

Several owner-managers raised some doubts regarding the crisis and their store's future development:

We bought the company... I have worked at the company for a long time, but we bought this company a month before the Lehman Brothers crash, that is, in August 2008. And then we had the consequence of an air castle that was built then. (Owner-manager, store 19)

A book-store owner-manager described his experience:

Yes, we are franchisees in this book-store chain, so we own our own store and work under their brand. And I am then the owner, together with my sister. We have been around for about 50 years as a store in this city, and it is a family business – an old family business our parents started. We will probably drive on for a few more years as it hopefully is. We are not very old, neither me nor my sister, so ... no, we think it's fun, and we've had some tough years a few years back in time, but now it feels like things are going a little better in the industry. And the city [...] is very positive. There is a big move-in, a lot of new people and a big tourist city this summer [i.e. 2021]. Normally, we see a lot of tourists, but last summer [i.e. 2020] was fantastic, as everyone was home. So, it was a pretty positive feeling. (Respondent, store 4)

One claim that we heard during several interviews with owner-managers of family firms is expressed in the following statement:

I am, then, the third generation, and the fourth generation is in [the store] and working as well. It [our store's survival] is thanks to the fact that the company is so old and that my mother, then, who ran it before me, that she has always been very frugal with expenses. Because ... She put up a savings capital to cope with times like this. (Respondent, store 17)

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to discuss OR triggers and amplifiers by offering a nuanced perspective on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on firms. We understood the pandemic to be a trigger of OR. The focus of this study was on the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the retail sector of one particular location in Sweden. Most of the stores whose representatives were interviewed are small, with fewer than ten employees. Such stores are often very dependent on their owner-managers (Ratten, 2020).

Triggers of OR

Contrary to the results of previous studies and to notions of the effects of OR and its triggers on organisations, we found that the stores in this study have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic both positively and negatively in regard to their turnover. This finding modifies the earlier conception that a crisis affects all firms in the same direction. The pandemic came as a surprise to all the respondents, causing insecurity. The outbreak and consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic acted as triggers, eliciting different behaviours.

The trigger of the pandemic was a disruptive change affecting the entire world (Boers & Henschel, 2021b; Durst & Henschel, 2020; Durst et al., 2021; Kraus et al., 2020). In particular, the retail sector was affected by several consequences of the

pandemic (Pantano et al., 2020; Panzone et al., 2021; Roggeveen & Sethuraman, 2020). However, contrary to some presumptions in the literature, we found that not all the retail stores were affected to the same extent by the pandemic; rather, some experienced an unexpected boom in sales. Thus, the results of this study introduce nuance to the issue of OR triggers and amplifiers, as advised by Linnenluecke (2017). Moreover, the results of our study suggest that a number of factors amplified both the positive and negative effects of the crisis.

Amplifying Factors of the Circumstances Triggering OR

We identified three specific amplifying factors, which we discuss in the following sections. These factors amplified the consequences of the crisis in either a positive or negative way.

The Retail Industry Sector as an Amplifying Factor

Different industries are affected differently by a crisis situation, as illustrated in Tables 4 and 5. We observed that stores belonging to the same sector of the retail industry had similar experiences. In comparison with other countries, where complete industries were temporarily shut down, the Swedish lockdown policy was different, resulting in fewer restrictions for companies. Thus, the preconditions were different in Sweden. Yet, some researchers have suggested that the retail sector, in particular, may have benefitted from the COVID-19 pandemic (Pantano et al., 2020; Roggeveen & Sethuraman, 2020). We provide nuance to this picture based on our Swedish empirical data. Stores serving daily needs, such as supermarkets and convenience stores, have been positively affected by the pandemic. Moreover, stores offering do-it-yourself supplies have also benefitted, as customers began working from home and thus had more time available for such activities.

Location as an Amplifying Factor

In the COVID-19 pandemic, the location of a store has affected the impact the pandemic has had on the store. The restrictions preventing people from assembling in large groups have had severe consequences for smaller stores, as the restrictions were based on the number of customers per square metre. The literature argues that location is an important variable in regard to the crisis and the resulting OR. In particular, store managers from stores in the same neighbourhood have been reported to take similar measures to ensure OR (Herbane, 2019). Our empirical findings reveal the following different consequences in regard to location over time. At the beginning of the pandemic, when restrictions were new and caused uncertainty, smaller stores and stores located in the city centre were at a disadvantage.

Ownership Type as an Amplifying Factor

We also found ownership to be an amplifying factor. Most of the respondents are the owner-managers of small firms, as shown in Table A1 in the Appendix. Often, several family members work in the store, which can be both a burden and a strength (Boers & Henschel, 2021b, 2022). For instance, family firms are said to be more parsimonious due to the intention to continue the business over generations (Carney, 2005). We noted that the owner-managers and salaried managers we interviewed expressed a carefulness towards the pandemic and its consequences due to the uncertainty of the crisis. Family, friends and community are important sources of support during a crisis (Boers & Henschel, 2021b, 2022; Doern, 2016). Thus, family members who work within the same firm can contribute to OR in a way that is not available to nonfamily firms, although nonfamily firms can still draw on support from the community or, possibly, from friends. Thus, family ownership is an amplifier of the effects of triggers of OR.

It is somewhat surprising that the industry sector, location, and type of ownership had such amplifying effects on triggers. The previous literature discusses other factors related to OR, such as available resources, communication, innovation and employees (Bell, 2002; Hamel & Välikangas, 2003; Johnson-Lenz & Johnson-Lenz, 2009; Pellissier, 2011), as well as the incorporation of OR responses in strategic plans (Horne & Orr, 1997). Although we did not find evidence for the latter, as virtually all the respondents said that the crisis was completely unexpected, they were unable to prepare in advance, and they had no plans for such an occurrence (only one store manager mentioned strategic planning on the chain level), some of the previously named factors can be related to our findings.

For example, the type of ownership and resource availability are related in the sense that chain-owned stores and franchises have access to more resources than smaller family stores. Here, 'resources' do not necessarily refer only to financial resources; they also include human resources and crisis response. In terms of human resources, chain-owned stores could more easily transfer employees to stores with a high number of sick leaves, whereas family stores often had to close for periods of time if most of the family members working at the store got sick. In terms of crisis response, the central bodies of chain-owned stores coordinated their stores' responses to official recommendations from the authorities, whereas family stores had to interpret those recommendations by themselves. Still, due to the high level of caution shown by the owner-managers of family-owned stores, the owning families had accumulated a financial buffer that enabled them to handle the crisis.

Triggers' and Amplifiers' Effects on OR

In the prior sections, we discussed triggers and amplifiers, which had both positive and negative effects on OR. It is noteworthy that the effects of these amplifiers and triggers are not unidimensional. Instead, the effects can go in different directions.

For instance, the retail industry sector is a matter of choice, and in principle, it is possible that stores change their sector (Igami, 2011). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, online trade has received an upswing (Dannenberg et al., 2020), which we also found indication for in our study, which, however, was outside the scope of this paper. Moreover, the retail market is not static but dynamic. In the particular city studied, a new quarter is under construction, which will lead to new top-notch and high-street locations of interest for several store managers. Also, the appearance of new types of stores, such as pop-up stores (Henkel & Toporowski, 2021), will have an influence on the future development of the local retail industry. Lastly, there will also be changes in store ownership, which can influence the choice of location, e.g. online vs. stationary. As several stores are family-owned, the owning families will have to face the question of succession sooner or later, which can also have a direct impact on the continuity of the stores (Gabriel & Bitsch, 2019). In addition, we noticed that several store owners reported having saved money, which allowed them to survive the Corona crisis. However, with the current crises in regard to high energy costs, increasing interest rates, and inflation due to the war in Ukraine, new challenges are lying ahead for many store owners.

Conclusions

The paper offers the following contributions. First, we have expanded the discussion on the triggers of OR, as suggested by Linnenluecke (2017), by empirically showing that the effects of a crisis on particular firms can be both negative and positive. Moreover, our study shows a variation in regard to factors amplifying the effects of the crisis, such as the retail industry sector, location and ownership; this leads to our second contribution – namely, that we have expanded the current knowledge on OR triggers by explaining that some factors may interact with the trigger and amplify the positive or negative crisis effect on the firm. In our particular case, the amplifiers were a particular industry (i.e. the retail industry sector), the physical location and the type of ownership. Our third contribution is that we report findings from Sweden, a country with a specific approach to handling the COVID-19 crisis. In general, our findings suggest that stores belonging to different sectors have been affected differently, which aligns with the findings of other studies that report varying impacts of the pandemic (Boers & Henschel, 2021a; Durst & Henschel, 2020; Durst et al., 2021; Kraus et al., 2020).

Limitations and Outlook

This study was conducted in one region in Sweden, which limits its empirical validity for other regions. Nevertheless, we argue that these findings are relevant to other contexts in Sweden, as well as in other countries. Entrepreneurs and managers can learn from these findings and compare them with their own experiences.

Although we have found that the effects of OR triggers on firms can be amplified by certain factors, there are indications that the amplifying effect of at least some of these factors can be modified by other factors. In our case, the location amplifier was somewhat modified by the type of retail, customer loyalty and local construction policies. This notion opens up a future research avenue on how amplifiers interact with each other and what other factors might modify the amplifying effect of certain factors.

Finally, an interesting observation from this study relates to performance, which we measured in terms of change in turnover and number of employees. There is an ongoing discussion in the literature on growth (Achtenhagen et al., 2010; Davidsson et al., 2013), and future research could examine more specifically the relationship between growth and organizational resilience.

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Appendix 1: Stores with Representatives Interviewed in This Study

Table A1. Stores Included in This Study

Company / Store	No. of Employees	Change in No. of Employees	Turnover in 2020 (1000 SEK)	Change in Net Turnover from 2019 to 2020 (%)
1	7	0	26 778	+ 8.43
2	11	0	44 879	+12.43
3	10	—	36 487 (2019)	a)[Merger in 2019]
4	5	0	8997	+ 10.13
5	7	+1	8675	+ 39.82
6	6	0	7590	-17.89
7*	42*	-10	93 592	-36.49*
8*	678*	+26	2 448 094	+ 13.1*
9	30	-4	56 757	-11.37
10	6	-2	12 588	8.17 **
11*	588*	-99	1 706 701	-15.25*
12	6	0	15 070	-28.49
13	120	+ 4	438 163	+3.8 (2019)
14	12	-1	84 910	+ 4.85
15	13	0	8250	+ 0.268 **
16	80	-4	209 368	-1.42
17	9	0	8216	-12.71
18	3	0	7480	-7.66
19*	151	+ 27	486 173	+17.93*
20	6	0	21 381	+11.88
21	6	0	8124	-18.35
22	8	0	19 535	+11.53
23	8	0	19 569	+16
24*	268*	-12	841 706*	+17.25*
25*	365*	-44	1 051 357*	+1.27*
26	4	-1	8269	-23.68
27	5	0	6381	+2.29
28*	213	-8	479 046	-2.2*

Figures for 2020 not available due to merger of company. Figures for the studied store are not available. *Stores belong to a chain with its headquarters outside of the studied area. The results are taken from annual reports and thus may be distorted, as they may cover more than just the individual store included in this study.

** Broken statement of accounts