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International marketing

**Engaging customers in the field of sports services: From purchase decision to customer  
loyalty**

**Asiakkaiden sitouttaminen liikuntapalveluiden alalla: Ostopäätöksestä  
asiakasuskollisuuteen**

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## **ABSTRACT**

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The field of sports services has grown rapidly over recent years. Due to the intense competition, it is crucial for companies to know how to engage their customers. The aim of this bachelor's thesis is to study the means a company can use to create customer loyalty, with the main research question being "How can firms lead customers from purchase decision to customer loyalty in sports business?". Customer loyalty is an essential concept to understand, since companies can benefit from it financially, socially and strategically. The topic of the main research question will be explored through sub-research questions concerning influencing purchase decision, service quality and retaining of customers.

Customer loyalty can be achieved through a process starting from purchase and leading to loyalty through significant stages of repurchase and retention. These stages are essential in making customers satisfied and gaining their trust towards the firm. The firm needs to provide services in a way that makes customers satisfied enough with their experience to remain as customers also in the future.

The most effective ways for companies to lead their customers from purchase decision to customer loyalty were found to be related to customer satisfaction, value creation, service quality, communication and employee commitment.

## TIIVISTELMÄ

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Liikuntapalveluiden ala on kasvanut voimakkaasti viime vuosien aikana. Intensiivisen kilpailun vuoksi yritysten on välttämätöntä osata tunnistaa keinoja asiakkaiden sitouttamiseen. Tämä kandidaatintutkielman tarkoituksena on tutkia keinoja, joiden avulla yritys voi rakentaa asiakasuskollisuutta, päätutkimuskysymyksen ollessa ”Miten yritykset voivat johtaa asiakkaat ostopäätöksestä asiakasuskollisuuteen liikunta-alalla?”. Asiakasuskollisuus on tärkeä käsite ymmärtää, sillä se voi hyödyttää yrityksiä taloudellisesti, sosiaalisesti sekä strategisesti. Päätutkimuskysymyksen aihetta lähestytään alatutkimuskysymysten avulla, jotka tarkastelevat ostopäätökseen vaikuttamista, palvelun laatua ja asiakkaiden säilyttämistä.

Asiakasuskollisuus on mahdollista saavuttaa prosessinomaisesti alkaen ostopäätöksestä ja johtaen uudelleen oston ja asiakkuuden kautta uskollisuuteen. Yrityksen tavoitteena on tehdä asiakkaat tyytyväisiksi ja saada heidän luottamuksensa yritystä kohtaan. Yrityksen tulee tarjota palveluita niin, että asiakkaat ovat riittävän tyytyväisiä kokemukseensa pysyäkseen yrityksen asiakkaina myös tulevaisuudessa.

Tehokkaimmat tavat, joita yrityksen kannattaa hyödyntää ohjatessaan asiakkaita ostopäätöksestä uskollisuuteen, liittyivät asiakastytyväisyyteen, arvon luontiin, palvelun laatuun, kommunikaatioon sekä työntekijöiden sitoutumiseen.

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## 1. Introduction

Healthy lifestyle and sports seem to be an increasing trend these days. Consumers are offered broad selections of sport services from group workout lessons to online personal trainer services. There is a lot of competition between organizations in the field, and it is crucial for the companies to know what consumers want and how to engage the customers to make them loyal. Having loyal, committed customers can benefit a company in financial, social and strategic ways (Lovelock et al., 2009). Users of sports services are increasingly demanding, hence, their loyalty towards organizations has become one of the most important achievements to reach for (Nuviola et al., 2012).

Services have become increasingly important to economic development globally. Social changes, business trends and advances in information technology are shaping the markets towards being more service-oriented. The service sector is growing rapidly, and major amount of new jobs are generated by services, making it a relevant field to study. Many leading firms are adding services to their existing selection of offerings and investing in service innovations to provide holistic solutions for consumers. (Kumar et al., 2014; Lovelock et al., 2009)

For marketers, the growing volume and pace of competition is one of the greatest challenges in the field of sports services. The competitiveness between sports organizations leads to differentiation strategies to improve customer satisfaction (Nuviola et al., 2012). Organizations need to make their products and services to stand out from the mass. The strict competition, however, is beneficial for consumers, providing increased alternatives of choice, greater value for money and augmented levels of service (Kandampully & Suhartanto, 2000). According to Kandampully and Suhartanto (2000), in order to gain competitive advantage, marketers can either do price discounts to get low-cost leadership or develop customer loyalty by providing unique benefits to customers.

Because of the broad selection of alternatives, consumers have the luxury to choose from several different sports services the option that best fits their needs. Ironically, this is also one of the biggest problems modern consumers face. They do not have too few choices, but too

many. (Solomon et al., 2016) It is extremely beneficial for marketers to know whether they make their decision based on quality of service, affordable prices, location or the place where their friends go.

Sport marketing is a relatively new and dynamic field, and still trying to find its position in the business world (Tsiotsou, 2016). The amount of different types of services has increased rapidly due to development of technology and social trends. Nowadays, a noticeable social phenomenon of seeking high quality of life in terms of health, well-being and exercise has emerged (Lee, 2017). Combining all these facts together makes purchase decision and customer loyalty of sports services an interesting topic to study.

### **1.1 Research objects and questions**

The aim of this research is to discover what actions sports service providers can do in order to lead customers from making a decision to purchase their service all the way to engaging the customers to become loyal towards the company. The thesis intends to analyze the journey from a purchase decision to customer loyalty from the marketers' point of view. Relevant concepts and theories will be introduced, and a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon will be pursued. The topic of the research is beneficial for organizations in every branch of business, however, the focus is on sports services.

The main research question of the thesis is:

How can firms lead customers from purchase decision to customer loyalty in sports  
business?

To gain understanding of the main research problem, will be studied relevant concepts of purchase decision, service quality and retaining of customers. To support the main research question, have been formed three sub-questions:

What factors have an impact on purchase decision?

How does service quality influence building customer loyalty?

How can firms retain customers?

## **1.2 Research limitations**

Generally, studies regarding purchase decision and customer loyalty have been focusing on purchasing tangible goods. However, the service sector is growing rapidly, and new types of services are being introduced all the time (Lovelock et al., 2009). Services have claimed a huge part of markets practically in every branch of business, making them an interesting topic to explore. Thus, the interest of the thesis has been delimited to focus on purchasing services.

Services are nowadays a part of every possible branch of business one can imagine, therefore it was reasonable to delimit the topic of the thesis to focus on only one branch of services. Sports industry can be divided into sports facility, sports goods and sports service businesses (Lee, 2017). The popularity of different types of health and sport services has been intense over the recent years. With this interest, the topic of the research was delimited to study the purchasing of sports services, and how can sports service providers engage their customers to become loyal.

## **1.3 Research methods**

This study is implemented as a qualitative research. The aim of a qualitative research method is to provide a comprehensive and profound understanding of a certain phenomenon (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). A qualitative method is suitable when the intention is to study the meanings of features, attributes and characteristics of the phenomenon with non-numerical data (Saunders et al., 2016). The method uses explanatory and linguistic ways to answer research problems. The most typical ways of collecting data for a qualitative study are interviews, observations, textual analysis and visual analysis. (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008)

For empirical data of the research will be interviewed two managers of sports centers about their ways to make customers loyal. The purpose of an interview as a method of a qualitative



research is to gain as much information about the topics in question as possible and to get a profound understanding of the phenomenon (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). The interviews will be done using a semi-structured interview method. A semi-structured interview is implemented with certain chosen themes and questions based on the themes. The benefit of this method is its flexibility; the questions can be specified and particularized as the interview goes on. The answers of the interview are then transcribed and analyzed in order to get the content in literal form. To analyze the data will be used the method of analysis of content. With this method, the meanings of the text are being searched and construed. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018) Based on the meaningful findings from the analysis of content, the research problem will be construed and the research questions will be answered.

#### **1.4 Literature review**

The concepts of purchase decision and customer loyalty have been studied broadly. Earlier the studies have typically focused in traditional marketing of products. Lately, more studies about the purchase decision of services and loyalty regarding services have emerged. The amount and scope of services has increased significantly over the last years due to developing technology and broadening selection of entertainment applications. (Kumar et al., 2014; Lovelock et al., 2009)

Academic research on customer loyalty has received considerable attention over the years. However, the attention has focused more on measurement issues and correlates of loyalty with consumer characteristics. Dick & Basu (1994) state that many marketers have emphasized loyalty beyond operational measures, such as sequences of purchases, but the loyalty in behavioral theory, such as its relationships with other concepts, on the other hand, requires stronger integration. Although this statement is relevantly old, it still holds true to this date.

As stated before, theories about purchase decision and customer loyalty have traditionally been product-centered. This seems to be the case also with theories about sport marketing. Much of the previous sport marketing literature has taken a goods-dominant logic approach,

disregarding the significance of service literature. Moreover, conventional sport marketing theories have highly focused on firms' value creation, and therefore neglected value co-creation that is shaped among customers' experiences and multiple other factors. (Tsiotsou, 2016)

Previous studies of sports and health services regarding customer loyalty seem to have been more focused on the service quality of sports centers, including customer satisfaction, customer trust, consumption behavior and relationship commitment (Lee, 2017). Though, the theme of service quality of sports centers is highly relevant to this research, because service quality is considered to be the most important factor for firms to resolve financial problems, making the service quality to be one of the most significant factors in engaging customers and building customer loyalty. (Lee, 2017)

There has not been done a study that is equivalent to this thesis. Most studies regarding sports services have their focus mostly on quality of the service. Lee (2017) studied the service quality of sports centers and how does it influence customer loyalty. In addition, similar studies about the quality of the quality of sport services has been implemented by Szabó (2010) and Westerbeek & Shilbury (2003). Nuviala et al. (2012) and Murray & Howat (2002) studied service quality, value and satisfaction of sport organizations and centers.

## **1.5 Structure of the research**

The research is comprised of a theoretical and an empirical part. The research consists of 6 main chapters, starting with introduction. The theoretical part includes 3 chapters: theoretical framework, purchase decision of sports services and customer loyalty. After introducing the main themes and the theoretical base of the study, the empirical part of the research will be presented. The aim of the empirical part is to describe and analyze the qualitative research method, interviews as a data collection method and the findings of the research. The empirical part consists of research methodology and implementation, and findings of the research. Next, the findings of the research will be concluded, and the research questions will be

answered in the discussion chapter. Finally, reliability of the research will be considered, and future research topics will be suggested.

## 2. Theoretical framework

As a theoretical framework for this research is used Cavallone's (2017) model of Four Steps from Purchase to Customer Loyalty. Cavallone's (2017) model exhibits in detail the process from consumer's purchase decision to the point where the consumer becomes loyal to a certain brand, product or service. Cavallone (2017) constructed the process regarding a purchase of a product, however in this thesis, the point of view is more focused on services. Services differ from products with their intangibility, consumption and distribution. The framework of this research will include the special features of services to Cavallone's (2017) model. The process from purchase to customer loyalty includes four steps; purchase, repeat purchase, retention and loyalty, which will be introduced more detailedly next.

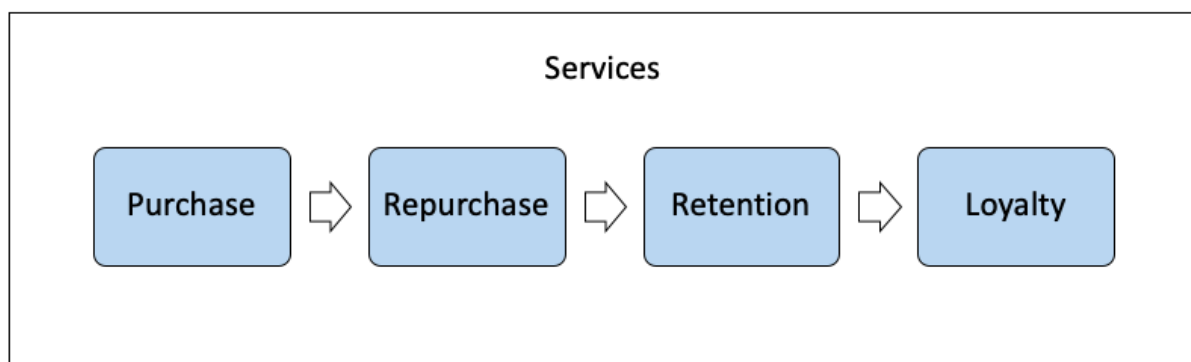


Figure 1. Theoretical framework

### 2.1 What are services?

A service is a process consisting of a series of intangible activities that usually take place in interactions between a consumer and service employees or physical resources of the service provider. Common characteristics of services are that they are intangible activities, produced and consumed simultaneously, and the customer participates in the service production process at least to some extent. (Grönroos, 2007) Intangible activities are something that

cannot be touched or inventoried. Zeithaml et al. (2018, 4) define services as “deeds, processes and performances provided, coproduced or cocreated by one entity or person for or with another entity or person”. Lovelock et al. (2009, 12-13) summarize the definition of a service well: “services offer benefits without ownership”.

## **2.2 Purchase**

Simply, a purchase means “to obtain ownership by paying” (Cavallone, 2017, 21). In service purchasing, on the contrary, the ownership is not passed; intangible services cannot be owned by anyone (Lovelock et al., 2009). A purchase is an act where a person, influenced by their thoughts, suppositions or decisions, gains possession or ownership of certain goods (Cavallone, 2017), or, as better relevance to this study, an act of buying and simultaneously consuming services. A purchase is comprised of two important drivers: the concept of need and the psychological process of constituting the purchase (Cavallone, 2017).

The purchasing process is divided into five different consecutive stages:

1. perception of the need
2. gathering information
3. assessment of the alternatives
4. decision to buy, and
5. consumption and post-purchase evaluation. (Lovelock et al., 2009)

Consumers’ awareness of need can arise from their aspirations; unconscious minds, physical conditions, such as hunger, or external sources, such as advertisements. Realizing they need something, consumers search for information and evaluate the options available. Regarding services, the evaluation of alternatives is more complex because of the absence of tangible elements. Consumers’ evaluation is based on the perceptions of an imaginary value of a service in their mind. Consumers choose the alternative best suiting their needs and execute the actual purchase. Service consumption happens at the same time as the purchase. Often consumers do also the post-purchase evaluation while they are consuming the service. (Cavallone, 2017; Lovelock et al., 2009) For example, when a customer participates in a group workout lesson, she makes perceptions during the lesson about how she feels and whether

she likes the lesson or not.

### **2.3 Repurchase**

The second step of Cavallone's (2017) four steps is repurchase. In this stage, the customer decides to buy the product or service again from the same producer whom they bought from before. To make the purchase again, drives from satisfaction of the first purchase experience and the lack of motivation to change the producer. (Cavallone, 2017) The satisfaction of the first purchase experience is affected by their perceived value of the service they received (Wu & Chan, 2011).

The first significant factor leading to repurchase is customer satisfaction. The customer compares the expected performance of the service to the actual experienced performance, and if the firm complies with the expectations, the customer will be satisfied. (Cavallone, 2017) Therefore, when the customer is happy with his previous experience, he is likely to purchase the same service again.

The other significant driver of repurchase is the lack of motivation to change. The customer doesn't feel the need to explore alternative services. The customer chooses the same service by force a habit. (Cavallone, 2017) This can be interpreted that either the service actually is the best quality of alternatives available, or the customer is satisfied enough to not have the energy to seek other equivalent services.

### **2.4 Retention**

The word *retention* derives from the verb *to retain*, which means "to keep, preserve, maintain or contain". As repurchase is implemented by the customer, retention, on the contrary, is activated by the marketer. (Cavallone, 2017, 31) The marketer's aim is to keep the customer engaged to their brand. This requires a precise understanding of customers and making an effort at establishing relations. Thus, customer relationship marketing plays an important role at the stage of retention. Marketing must create, maintain and strengthen profitably relationships with customers, so that the expected value and the expectations of all parties

are achieved. In addition, companies tend to engage customers by raising barriers that prevent the customer from switching brands. (Cavallone, 2017)

CRR, Customer Retention Rate, is a helpful tool to keep track on customers' actions regarding the engagement to a company or brand. With CRR a company can measure the amount of customers retained or lost each year and compare the number with the total amount of customers. This indicator highlights the fact that the concept of retention explains the behavioral aspect of the consumer, not the cognitive aspects such as appreciation or liking. (Cavallone, 2017)

Customer retention has been proven to make a positive impact on the growth of profit. Cavallone (2017) clearly points out that customer retention can cause increasement in the amount of purchases, reduction of the operative costs, positive word-of-mouth between current and potential customers, and possibility of applying a premium price. These factors together have an effect on the company's growing profits.

## **2.5 Loyalty**

The final step, the goal, of the four step -process is customer loyalty, in which the consumer expresses his cognitive and behavioral loyalty to the company. Customer loyalty is comprised of three components; attitudes, preference and allegiance. Loyal consumer reflects positively towards the brand, purchases the service more and more often compared with alternative same category services and also continues to buy the brand for long periods of time. (Cavallone, 2017)

Consumers' loyal activity draws from their previous experiences and faith accumulated over the period of their relationship with a company, which implies that customer loyalty also identifies the relationship between a customer and the company. The difference between someone who repurchases the same service and an actual loyal customer is that the person is no longer a casual buyer but a potential and profitable partner whose effort can be relied on also in the years to come. (Cavallone, 2017)

Through these four steps towards customer loyalty, firms can achieve competitive advantage and gain financial profit. When consumers reach total commitment towards a company or a service, their attention towards competitors' offers becomes very selective or practically inexistent (Cavallone, 2017).

### **3. Purchase decision of sports services**

The field of sports services is indeed broad these days. Consumers wanting to do sports have to decide from which of the multiple available service provider they purchase. They might need to search for information about the alternatives and have to take into consideration their desires and demands considering the service; whether they choose a sports center based on its location, affordable prices, size, quality or where their friends go.

Before consumers make a decision to buy a product or a service, they evaluate, either consciously or sometimes unconsciously, multiple factors associated to the service. They compare the performance of important attributes of competing service offerings and the perceived risk associated with each offering, developing their desired, adequate and predicted service level expectations. (Lovelock et al., 2009) After this evaluation, which can take a few seconds or sometimes even weeks or months, consumers select the option of the competing offerings and make a purchase.

#### **3.1 Purchase decision**

The modern world offers consumers enormous amounts of products and services from which to choose. Consumers aim to purchase the option best fulfilling their needs and desires. Before an actual purchase, needs to be made a decision on what brand to buy, where to buy it from and when to buy it, among multiple other factors. Sometimes consumers make rapid decisions based on very little information and the decision-making process is almost automatic. Occasionally, a person may spend days or weeks agonizing over an important

purchase, for example a new car or house. Simply, some purchase decisions are more important than others, so they require more effort and evaluation. (Solomon et al., 2016)

When consumers feel the need to buy something, they go through several steps to get to the actual purchase situation, and even after that. Solomon et al. (2016) describe these steps as (1) problem recognition, (2) information search, (3) evaluation of alternatives, (4) product choice and (5) post-purchase evaluation. This is the basic process consumers go through, however sometimes, in very habitual purchases, for example when buying toilet paper, a person might skip straight from problem recognition to product choice without giving any thought to the process.

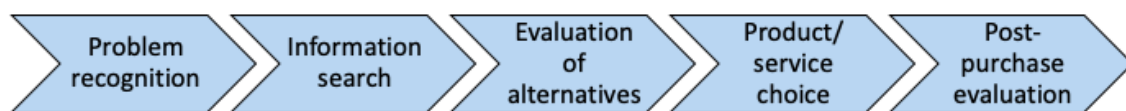


Figure 2. Purchase decision process

In addition to a consumer's own cognitive process, purchase decisions are also affected by situational and external factors. According to Kotler & Keller (2016), purchase decisions can be intervened by two general factors; attitudes of others and unanticipated situational factors. The consumer making a purchase decision can be influenced by another person related to the situation. The influence depends on how negative the other person's attitude towards the consumer is, and whether the consumer is motivated to comply with the other person's wishes. The presence of multiple people in a purchasing environment can make the consumer feel that the setting is more intense (Solomon et al., 2016). This is a significant factor especially in sports services, where multiple consumers often consume the service simultaneously. For example, in gym services or in the audience of a football game the consumers are highly affected by others. Even though having detected a need and planned making a purchase, the situations and circumstances may change. Unanticipated situational factors affecting the purchase decision can be for example sudden changes of consumer's personal finance,



salesperson being aversive or some other purchase becoming more urgent. (Kotler & Keller, 2016)

### **3.2 Sports services**

The sports industry can be classified into sports facility, sports goods and sports service businesses (Lee, 2017). Sport was not recognized as a service product until the 1990<sup>th</sup> century (Westerbeek & Shilbury, 2003). Today, sports seem to be one of the most popular categories of services. Sports services include for example gyms and sport centers, events, clubs, personal and online training. Nowadays many organizations also offer sport equipment for rental, so consumers are able to try out different sports without having to buy the expensive equipment. Sport organizations are highly active on social media and offer more and more broad selection of services. Recently, the competition in the sport and fitness service industry has increased significantly. This forces sport and fitness centers to execute new strategies to enhance competitive differentiation from competitors. One of the most effective ways to enhance the competitive differentiation is improving service quality, because it is in a crucial role due to sports service employees being highly interactive with customers. (Chiu et al., 2019)

### **3.3 Service consumption**

Due to the features of services, the consumption of services differs significantly from consumption of tangible products. Lovelock et al. (2009) introduce a three-stage theory of service consumption. According to the theory, service consumption can be divided into three stages: pre-purchase stage, service encounter stage and post-purchase stage. Each of these stages consist of multiple steps.

The very first thing that triggers the service consumption process is the awareness of need. The need may arise from physical conditions, (for example hunger and pain), unconscious mind (for example personality and aspirations) or external sources (for example advertisements). The awareness of need will lead to information search. Once a need has been recognized, consumers are motivated to search for information about alternatives. In order to reach a decision, consumers evaluate and compare the alternatives. Tangible

characteristics, such as style, color and sound, can be evaluated before purchase. However, services are regarded as experience attributes, which cannot be evaluated before purchase. For example, live entertainment performances and sporting events have to be experienced to know what it is like. After the evaluation, consumers choose the best alternative suiting to their desires, and make a purchase decision. (Lovelock et al., 2009)

The next stage in Lovelock's et al. (2009) model of service consumption is the service encounter stage. In this stage the customer interacts with the service provider, which is described as the "moment of truth". The customer finds out whether the service exceeds or falls below his expectations. Contact with the service provider can range from high-contact, where customers and service organizations interact throughout the service delivery, to low-contact, where there is very little, if any, face-to-face contact between customers and service organizations. (Lovelock et al., 2009) For example, when purchasing a personal trainer service, the contact with the trainer is the most crucial part of the consumption. On the contrary, when purchasing an online training program, there may not be any contact with the person providing the service.

The final stage in service consumption is post-encounter stage. Customers have now experienced the service. In this stage, they evaluate the service performance they have received and compare it with their prior expectations. The service quality perceptions are influenced by service personnel and the physical environment. Especially in sport service business, the encounters with service personnel and the functionality of the physical environment are crucial in the experience a customer receives. These factors define the customers' evaluation of the service. Also, Westerbeek & Shilbury (1999) highlight the importance of the "place", or the physical environment, of sports services. If customers' expectations are met or exceeded, the customers are likely to be satisfied, which can lead to repeat purchases and eventually to customer loyalty. (Lovelock et al., 2009)

### **3.4 Service quality**

Szabó (2010) defines service quality as the comparison of consumer's expectations with actual service performance. Customers evaluate the quality of services based on their perceptions of the technical outcome of the service provided, the process by which the outcome was delivered and the quality of the physical surroundings where the service is delivered (Zeithaml et al., 2018). For example, a group workout customer will evaluate the service based on his perceptions of the movements of the lesson, how the instructor interacts with the trainees, and how the décor and surroundings of the gym makes him feel.

Zeithaml et al. (2018) have identified and classified dimensions of service quality into tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. These dimensions represent how consumers organize information about service quality in their minds. Consumers expect the promised service to be performed dependably and accurately, and that the service provider is competent, caring and willing to help, give attention and provide prompt service. In addition to personnel and communication, consumers also expect the physical facilities and equipment to be relevant and competent.

According to Lee (2017) the quality of service is one of the, if not the most, important factor influencing customer loyalty. Service quality affects significantly the financial resources of companies. Some factors influencing service quality, and therefore customer loyalty, can be assumed to be employee commitment and service recovery. What comes to sports services, service quality strengthens customers' intention to adhere to exercise, and the intention to adhere to exercise is considered to influence the continued purchase intention of the service (Lee, 2017). In other words, the quality of service influences repurchasing of the service, which influences customer loyalty.

## **4. Customer loyalty**

Lovelock et al. (2009) describe loyalty in a business context as customer's willingness to continue buying from a certain company over the long-term, and also recommending the company's products or services to friends and associates. Customer loyalty consists of

preference, liking and future intentions (Lovelock et al., 2009). Customer loyalty can be viewed as *“the strength of the relationship between an individual’s relative attitude and repeat patronage”*. This relationship is mediated by social norms and situational factors. (Dick & Basu, 1994, 99) Merely returning to purchase a service continuously does not cover the concept of customer loyalty.

According to Kandampully & Suhartanto (2000), there are two dimensions to customer loyalty: behavioral and attitudinal. The behavioral dimension alludes to customers’ behavior on repeat purchases, and the attitudinal dimension refers to customers’ intention to repurchase and recommend. In addition to continuing to purchase a service again, it is expected that the customer is conscious of the choice. *“A loyal customer”* is a customer who repeatedly purchases from the same service provider and who maintains a positive attitude towards the service provider.

Making customers satisfied is not enough to make them return to purchase and improve profits of the firm (Kandampully and Suhartanto, 2000). Firms need to go beyond what normally can be described as good service in order to create customer loyalty (Grönroos, 2007). Loyalty is a long-term attitude and a long-term behavioral pattern, which is reinforced by multiple experiences over time (Gee et al., 2008). Firms must serve customers in a way that they realize that the firm can be trusted in every aspect at all times. Customer loyalty represents a significant basis and opportunity for developing competitive advantage (Dick & Basu, 1994).

Customer loyalty consists of different aspects affected by physical and mental behavior of consumers. Bowen & Chen (2001) suggest three distinctive approaches to define loyalty based on measuring it:

1. behavioral measurements
2. attitudinal measurements, and
3. composite measurements.

*“The behavioral measurements consider consistent, repetitious purchase behavior as an indicator of loyalty.”* (Bowen & Chen, 2001, 213) The attitudinal aspect addresses customers’

emotional and psychological attachment in being loyal. The aspect measures customers' engagement and allegiance towards a brand or company. The third, composite, approach is a combination of the first two dimensions. The composite viewpoint measures loyalty by customers' product preferences, propensity of brand-switching, and frequency and amount of purchases. (Bowen & Chen, 2001)

Customer loyalty is crucial in sports business. Sports is something consumers typically do for fun as a hobby. If they are not satisfied with the service they receive, they can simply quit purchasing the service or switch service providers. When consumers enjoy their free-time activities, they continue to purchase the service and become emotionally attached, thus establishing loyalty towards the service provider. The consumers feel social cohesion in a sport group or place, and the stronger the emotional attachment is, the higher are the attendance and loyalty of the consumers. (Westerbeek & Shilbury, 1999)

#### **4.1 Why aim towards customer loyalty?**

Customer loyalty veritably is a profitable goal for organizations to reach for. Organizations can benefit financially from customer loyalty, as it is cheaper to retain old customers compared to attracting new customers via expensive marketing campaigns. According to Lee (2017, 871) *"management of loyal customers is more effective than attracting new customers, because the former are less sensitive to price changes than the latter"*. Moreover, loyal customers bring more money for the company as their families or incomes grow. Firms often offer introductory promotional discounts for new customers. However, long-term loyal customers are more likely to pay regular prices, or when highly satisfied, even price premium. (Lovelock et al., 2009) A company with large loyal segment may be expected to set higher prices because it has less incentive to compete for non-loyal customers (Kuksov & Mohammad, 2020).

When customers repurchase a certain service multiple times, they become more familiar and experienced with the service, so they require less assistance and information. This lightens the service provider's workload, giving them time to help other customers and thus, making profits. Also, customers' word-of-mouth communication is a major benefit for companies; if

they are satisfied with a service, they might recommend it to their friends. (Lovelock et al., 2009) As Kuksov & Mohammad (2020) have also found in their study, loyal customers attract non-loyal customers.

## **4.2 Managing customer loyalty**

After marketers have managed to get customers to repurchase and to become loyal, their work does not finish there. Managers need to be active in order to keep customers loyal. Gee et al. (2008) have identified three main drivers to build customer loyalty; calculative commitment, affective commitment and overall customer satisfaction. Calculative commitment is customers' rational and economic decision making. Customers review costs and benefits, thus adhering to the current brand due to lack of choice for similar services or high-switching costs. Affective commitment is an emotional factor based on trust and reliable relationship with the brand. Satisfaction is the post consumption experience in which customers compare perceived quality with expected quality. To gain competitive advantage, companies should consider both the overall satisfaction of customers and the competitiveness of the companies' services. (Gee et al., 2008)

Dick & Basu (1994) have developed a framework on managing loyalty. The framework consists of 1) determining the loyalty status of a target service in terms of strength of the relationship and comparing it with competing offerings, 2) identifying relevant antecedents and consequences in a given market context, 3) determining the relative impact of antecedent factors and the likelihood of different consequences, and 4) identifying causal variables on which the target is underperforming compared to competitors, from which increases in loyalty may be effected through strategic interventions. The loyalty status can be maintained through these specific marketing inputs. Reminding consumers of past purchases and experiences as well as potential switching costs is critical in maintaining loyalty. Marketers can increase retention with frequent reminder advertisements and vouchers offering for example the fifth time free. Post-patronage satisfaction can be managed for example through "thank you" notes and ensuring that expectations of a customer have been fulfilled. (Dick & Basu, 1994)

## **5. Empirical study**

In this part of the thesis, will be introduced throughout the methodology and the implementation of the research. The research material will be introduced, and findings of the research will be analyzed and discussed.

### **5.1 Research methodology and implementation**

The study was implemented as a qualitative research, using semi-structured interviews as a data collection method. The aim of this study is to analyze textual data in order to gain comprehensive and holistic understanding of the topic in question. The research intends to gain understanding on how companies can influence customers and their purchase processes, to make them loyal towards the company. The specifically delimited phenomenon will be analyzed and universal solutions to this problem will be introduced. Because of this holistic analysis of the phenomenon, a qualitative method is suitable for this research. The qualitative method suits this study, as the aim is to observe the topic and to understand which factors have an influence on it. The outcomes of qualitative research are composed of essential representations of salient findings and can result to new insights and understandings of a social phenomenon. (Saldana, 2011)

Whereas quantitative research method uses numerical data, in qualitative research the data is verbal. Qualitative data consists of textual materials and can be collected by different types of interviews, observations or analysis of case reports or documents. (Saldana, 2011) The most convenient data collection method for this research is an interview. The interview questions are quite structured; for both of the interviewees are sent the same questions. However, if needed, complementary questions can be added in order to complete the answers and to gain better understanding. The interviewees can be asked to explain their responses. This method is called a semi-structured interview. The themes and main questions are already planned, but the structure of the interview may vary. Semi-structured interviews have the possibility that the interviewee can lead the discussion into topics that were not originally planned, but which are significant for the research. (Saunders et al., 2016)

For this research, were interviewed two companies, which both operate in the field of sports business and services. Both are local, private businesses that offer group workout lessons, personal training and gym services. Company 1 (TreeniX) offers also health services such as physical therapy, physiotherapy and magnetic resonance imaging. The selection of group workout lessons TreeniX offers includes pilates, crosstraining, bodycircuit, kinesis and other body care lessons. (TreeniX, 2020a) The focus of TreeniX is more on health and sports services, whereas company 2 (The Voima) is shifting their focus more into creating new, trendy workout lessons and concepts. The Voima offers a broad selection of group workout lessons such as air acrobatics, pole dance, barre, sh'bam, yoga and crossfit. (The Voima, 2020)

The companies were interviewed about their ways of attracting new customers, how they can provide service that makes customers satisfied, how they can keep customers coming back to purchase their services again and how they can increase customer loyalty. The interviews were executed following the interviewees' wishes. The other interview was implemented via phone call, and the other interview via e-mail. 13 interview questions were asked from a manager of each of the sport centers. The e-mail interview provided the answers directly in textual form. The phone interview was recorded, and the answers were then transcribed. The method of semi-structured interviews allowed the possibility of asking additional questions from the interviewees. This was not needed in the textual email interview, but the phone interview was slightly more casual and conversational, with couple of particularizing questions added.

After receiving the answers of the interviews, the content was analyzed by using content analysis method. In content analysis the text is systematically examined to find significant meanings and to understand a phenomenon in a general form. The research material is organized to find important concepts and to answer the research questions. (Saldana, 2011; Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018) The most significant observations of both interviews were highlighted and compared with each other. The observations were then analyzed based on the theoretical base of the research.



## **5.2 Findings of the study**

In this chapter, will be introduced meaningful findings that are relevant for the research. The interview focused on understanding how the companies can get customers to purchase services from them and not from someone else, how they can guarantee a qualified experience for customers and how they can build loyalty among customers.

### **5.2.1 Attracting and retaining customers**

At first, was discussed the means the companies can use to attract new customers. Both of the companies use social media advertising. They advertise their events and new lessons in different social media channels, such as Facebook and Instagram. They also use direct advertising planned by advertising agencies, and at times, they organize campaigns to lure new customers with offers or discounts. TreeniX offers new customers a free visit at their gym and group workout, as they also highlight on their website that they have “the city’s lowest step to begin” (TreeniX, 2020b). Also, in the interview was emphasized that they want to be a place where it is easy for customers to go; where customers can always feel welcomed and not afraid to ask help. TreeniX believes their asset is precisely the low threshold and being close to customers.

Furthermore, word-of-mouth plays a significant role in both of the companies’ marketing. The interviewee of The Voima explains that many of their satisfied customers recommend their services to, for example, their friends, and even bring them along the next time. TreeniX also adduces that they get new customers through their stakeholders and partners. They do collaborations with local companies, which can able consumers opportunities to try out their services through promotions or business relations. Especially for relevantly small, local businesses word-of-mouth marketing through customers and stakeholders is crucially important.

In addition to getting new customers, was discussed how the companies can influence consumers to purchase services exactly from them, and to keep existing customers continuing to purchase from them. The Voima believes their asset is their unique facility and services,

that is not offered by any other sports center in the area. Their group workout lessons are one-of-a-kind, and they keep developing them continuously. The unique service concept is also brought up later on the interview. They have found the courage to leave behind “the classics”, and to create their own modern offerings. The broad range of unforeseen, trendy sports services creates competitive advantage compared to other sports centers. Distinctive services are The Voima’s key in creating value, which is something a company needs to have in order to attract customers. Value is what consumers pay for and what they expect to receive in return. Value can be seen as the consumers’ assessment of performance of the service, based on their perceptions of what was received and what was given in exchange. (Murray & Howat, 2002)

*“We practically have a “department store of sports”, where a customer can do multiple different sports under the same roof (and payment).”*

Furthermore, employee commitment is a great asset in The Voima. The owners and the employees of the organization love what they do, and do it with all of their heart, and the customers can surely feel that. The employees share the company’s values and express the values through their work. Employees’ emotional investment in the organization increases the overall performance of the organization (Chiu et al., 2019). This can be seen in both of the interviewed companies’ activity and values, since they both emphasize the importance of their human resources and committed employees.

### **5.2.2 Service quality and customer loyalty**

The following theme of the interview was how the companies can guarantee qualified service and satisfied experience for customers, and what means they can use in order to build customer loyalty. The Voima has a pattern of criteria they use in recruiting instructors and coaches. The Voima requires certain professional capabilities and keeps educating the employees according to their quality standards. The company invests in service quality, making sure to offer customers constant, competent and homogeneous service. Customers’ expected service needs to be exceeded or at least responded to.

*“By continuous educating we guarantee strong expertise to drive our work. In addition to making customers feel secure, it creates reliability towards the purchased service.”*

The feelings of security and credibility increase customers' trust towards the company and thus, increase customer loyalty. The Voima emphasizes their down-to-earth attitude and being approachable, caring and inspiring. The employees are being themselves and bring out their personality in their work, for example in instructing group workout lessons. It is important for them to be the first to offer new, unforeseen services. At times, The Voima arranges special activity nights for customers, which can increase the customers' feeling of belonging. The feeling of social cohesion is an essential factor in making customers satisfied with the company, and building loyalty between the customers and the company.

*“We always highlight personality and aim to bring out the best potential of each of our employees.”*

TreeniX also tends to keep a constant level on their services. They are transparent and introduce clearly what they offer and how they act. They want to be open and upfront with their customers, which creates trust between the company and its customers, and is a way towards customer loyalty. As Hall & Brogniez (2001) argue, “When you share your plans with your (perfect) customers, you are actually offering those customers a unique opportunity to provide their feedback and support. And that in turn engenders their loyalty.” Being transparent and communicating reciprocally with customers engenders customer loyalty. TreeniX believes that the best way service quality can be indicated for customers is by letting them try out the services. As stated, service quality is purely dependable of customers' evaluation compared to their expectations (Szabó, 2010).

### **5.2.3 Communication**

Another considerable theme of the interviews was communication. Communication can be internal, consisting of communication inside a company; between co-workers, and external,

including communication with customers. As the focus of the research is on the means firms can do to influence their customers, the discussions concerned external communication. As introduced before, The Voima aims to be reachable and close to its customers. It is important for the company to take customers' hopes and wishes into consideration. The managers tend to react to feedback rapidly. They listen to their customers and aim to solve any problems the customers have. These actions are significant in creating customer satisfaction. The owners and managers of The Voima do not only take care of the strategic management of the company, but they also take part in instructing group workout lessons, personal training and educating employees. They work "on the field" and communicate closely with their customers, gaining insight of strengths and weaknesses of the company's actions, which can then be developed and improved. Because of the employees' and managers' intensive interaction with customers, the way these employees behave towards the customers is crucial in the perceived levels of service quality, satisfaction and repeat purchase behavior of customers (Chiu et al., 2019).

Very similar findings were made out of the interview with TreeniX. The company aims to be easily approachable and close to its customers. Customer satisfaction is necessary for the company. They listen to their customers opinions and take their wishes into consideration. The managers tend to answer customer feedback rapidly and more importantly, thoroughly. Typically, the feedback is managed electronically, however at times, they might even arrange a phone call or a meeting with the parties concerned. Every case is dealt individually and with care. This points out their high employee commitment to offer the best possible service for customers. With TreeniX, every customer is an individual, and the employees truly want to know the customers. It is important for the company to not to treat customers as a mass or a crowd, and this is what separates the company from larger, national chain organizations.

In addition, TreeniX sends their customers a newsletter every month, introducing upcoming events, schedules and campaigns. To actually track how successful different types of advertisements or messages are, companies can use different indicators. TreeniX does monitoring about their marketing actions. They track metrics to follow statistics on how well their advertisements reach consumers. This is really beneficial on actually gaining numerical

statistics on how well does the company's communication influence consumers and how can the company develop the communication.

## **6. Discussion**

In this part, will be discussed and analyzed the findings of the research. The findings of the interviews will be integrated with the theoretical aspects, and the research questions will be answered. The purpose of this research was to understand how firms can influence consumers' decision-making and thus, the process of building customer loyalty in the field of sports business. In this qualitative research, two managers of sports centers were interviewed in order to provide an answer to the main research question "How can firms lead customers from purchase decision to customer loyalty in sports business?". To solve the main research problem, were created three sub-questions. These will be answered first, to understand the factors and themes forming the main research question.

The first sub-question was "What factors have an impact on purchase decision?". The purpose of the question was to gain understanding of the means that affect consumers' purchasing decisions and how firms can use these means to attract customers. Purchase decisions are influenced by the decision-maker's cognitive processing, and by social and external situational factors (Solomon et al., 2016; Kotler & Keller, 2016). Consumers' previous experiences and their evaluation of similar services consumed before shape their preferences regarding the purchase. Their earlier experiences define the level of motivation they have for searching information about alternatives. In addition to consumers' internal processing, purchase decisions are affected by external factors, such as the physical environment. The findings of the study indicate that it is beneficial for sport centers to highlight their unique and qualified facilities, in order to gain conspicuousness among consumers. Westerbeek & Shilbury (1999) support the findings by arguing that sport service facility is one of the most essential elements in marketing and distributing a sport organization.

Moreover, consumers' purchase decisions can be socially influenced. Friends and family can give their recommendations and opinions. Especially in sports, presence or absence of co-

consumers can affect a consumer's perception about the situation of purchase (Solomon et al., 2016). Participation in sports is a social process in which consumers may interact with each other (Szabó, 2010). The consumer might base his or her purchase decision on the amount of other trainers. All these factors combined together determine the consumer's mood and judgement about the situation; which alternative to choose and when to purchase it.

How can firms then use these means influencing purchase decisions profitably? Consumers' cognitive processing is something firms cannot really adjust, but they can tend to influence consumers' thinking. Firms can continuously remind consumers about their services by advertising. They can arrange campaigns to attract consumers with cheaper prices or a free workout at the gym. Sometimes, either situational factors cannot be controlled by the firm. However, firms can pursue to prevent any situational interference from occurring. The facility needs to be contrived in a way that trainers have enough space, even though there would be overcrowding.

Along with advertising, campaigns and functional facility, it was found from the interviews that word-of-mouth marketing is an effective way to influence consumers' purchase decisions. Consumers consider other consumers' opinions as more believable than promotional activities of firms (Lovelock et al., 2009). Attitudes of others is a significant factor affecting purchase decision (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Before making a decision, consumers may ask opinions from their friends, who then recommend the brand they have been satisfied with. This emphasizes the fact that customer satisfaction is indispensable. Consumers' opinions cannot always be affected by firms, but firms can pursue to benefit from the word-of-mouth. Firms can have satisfied customers provide positive comments that will encourage more word-of-mouth. Firms can organize exciting campaigns to get people talking about the services the firm offers. Especially "bring your friend for free" campaigns encouraging customers to persuade others to join them to use the service are effective. (Lovelock et al., 2009) The findings of this research supported Lovelock et al. (2009) very accurately with beneficial use of word-of-mouth.

The second sub-question of the research was “How does service quality influence building customer loyalty?”. Multiple researchers have found that there is a positive correlation between service quality and customer loyalty. The aim of this sub-research question was to explore what impact service quality actually has on creating customer loyalty within sports services. As Lee (2017, 871) found in his study, “*service quality acts as a factor strengthening the intention to adhere to exercise, and the intention to adhere to exercise is considered to influence the continued use intention of a sports center*”. Thus, service quality plays an important role in the continued use of a sports center. The findings of the research suggest that by offering qualified service, can be created security and reliability for customers, keeping them attached and wanting to continue purchasing the service. The feeling of reliability and the repurchasing contribute becoming emotionally attached to the company, therefor becoming a loyal customer.

Service quality is the dimension customers evaluate due to the absence of tangibles. Customers cannot rely on technicalities of a product, so the intangibilities of the service, such as quality, become the features consumers base their trust and reliability on. The findings of the research suggest that firms can create service quality by educating their employees, bringing out their personality and being transparent. Firms need to offer customers experiences that make them satisfied. Being open and easily approachable creates trust between the firm and its customers, which can lead to customer loyalty.

According to Murray & Howat, (2002, 26) “*satisfaction is a consequence of service quality*”, and also directly related to future purchase intentions of customers. In addition, both Szabó (2010) and Oman et al. (2016) state that customer loyalty is one significant outcome of service quality. Service quality influences customer loyalty positively, and this fact has been supported also by multiple previous studies (Lee, 2017). These findings can be illustrated in a continuum represented below.



Figure 3. Continuum from service quality to customer loyalty

To conclude the answer to the sub-question, good service quality creates satisfied experiences for customers, thus wanting them to remain as a customer of the company and to keep purchasing their services. This repeat purchase patronage and commitment to the brand then builds up into customer loyalty. The customers become so satisfied with the company and their service that they do not seek alternatives.

To explore the retention of customers more deeply, was formulated the third sub-question “How can firms retain customers?”. Keeping customers committed to the company is an essential part of building customer loyalty, hence this question was studied to understand the process of the main research question. Regarding actions to retain customers, themes that were raised in the interviews were value creation, customer satisfaction, employee commitment and communication with customers. Companies can create value for customers with unique services that differ from other sports services in the area. It is important to stand out from the mass and display clearly what the firm offers. To succeed, a firm needs to gain competitive advantage compared to its competitors in the field. This advantage can be reached with unique resources and knowledge on how to use the resources beneficially. Dubey et al. (2013) supports the findings of this research by stating that few of the most beneficial factors on creating success are uniqueness, value creation, knowledge, human resources and being customer-oriented.

Employees being committed, truly caring about their job and educated properly transmit reliability, authenticity and competence behalf of the company. It is important to listen to



customers and communicate with them. Experienced handling of customers' complaints increases repurchases (Oman et al., 2016), and hence retention. Customers feel they can rely on the company and its services, so they want to retain as customers. The high involvement of employees in the service consumption situation is a special feature especially in the field of sports services. Customers also actively participate in the service production, which requires a close relationship and high level on involvement between the service provider and the customers. (Szabó, 2010) Furthermore, customer satisfaction plays a major role in keeping customers retained. The key is to provide a service that fulfills customers' expectations. Repurchase intention depends on how consumers evaluate services and what is their attitude towards the specific brand. Their attitude towards the brand consists of the value they have received from previous transactions. (Oman et al., 2016) Customers evaluate the received experience based on their needs, and decide whether to retain as a customer of the company.

Covered the sub-questions throughout, a concluded answer to the main research question "How can firms lead customers from purchase decision to customer loyalty in sports business?" can be deduced. Based on the findings of the research, the most significant factors influencing customer loyalty are customer satisfaction, value creation, communication with customers and employee commitment. An important factor behind value creation and customer satisfaction, and thus, influencing customer loyalty, is service quality. Supporting the findings of this research, Oman et al. (2016) found in their study that customer satisfaction is positively connected to quality services and added value to customers. Firms need to make sure their services and their customer service are qualified and competent. Firms can create quality with for example competence customer service, unique resources and qualified tangibles, such as equipment and facilities. With service quality, can be created value for the offering. The firm needs to create value which equals a customer's expectations and what is given to the customer. A customer expects a certain quality from the service they purchase. If their expectations are fulfilled, they will likely become satisfied with the experience.

Other significant influencers of customer loyalty are employee commitment and communication. These were found to be beneficial ways to become close with customers and gain their trust. Customer interaction and encounters with frontline employees represent the

unique features of services. Since intangible benefits of services depend heavily upon employees interacting with customers, organization's human resources are a necessary part of creating value. (Charni et al., 2020) The findings of the research suggest that employee commitment can be a great advantage for companies to stand out. Employees' personality, attachment and effort can improve the overall performance of organizations. Customers seem to be more satisfied and trusting towards organizations which employees are easily approachable, dedicated to their work and make effort in communicating with and listening to customers.

Creating and implementing a qualified, high-valued service is not enough to gain consumers' interest and customers' trust. Even if consumers understand what the idea of the service is, they may find it hard to tell the difference between offerings from other suppliers. Companies need to clearly and noticeably communicate what their offerings are about. They can highlight for example their employee qualifications, professionalism, quality of equipment and facilities. (Lovelock et al., 2009) In addition to promoting and advertising services and providing information to potential customers, communicating with existing customers is one key element in building customer loyalty. This interactive communication includes for example customer feedback and complaints. Findings of the study indicate that listening to customers' wishes and opinions is a way, especially for smaller companies, to show uniqueness and caring, therefore boosting satisfaction. When a company "reasons together" with its customer about how the service processes and activities can best be supported, the likelihood of mutual understanding and commitment developing between the service provider and the customer increases (Grönroos, 2007).

Situations where services are consumed are affected by multiple external and internal factors. Hence, a service performance does not always match the consumers expectations. Feedback and complaints are a significant part of organizational communications. "No service firm can deliver service that satisfies all customers 100 percent of the time" (Lovelock et al., 2009, 340). Thus, it is crucially important to handle complaints of customers properly and respectfully. By promptly and correctly solving a problem a customer has, can prevent the customer on changing service provider. Sometimes it is needed to give a refund or

compensation for the customer to make him or her satisfied again. Resolving complaints satisfactorily increases the change of the customers involved remaining loyal (Lovelock et al., 2009).

To illustrate the findings of the research and the answer to the main research question, the main factors influencing customer loyalty can be seen in Figure 4 below.

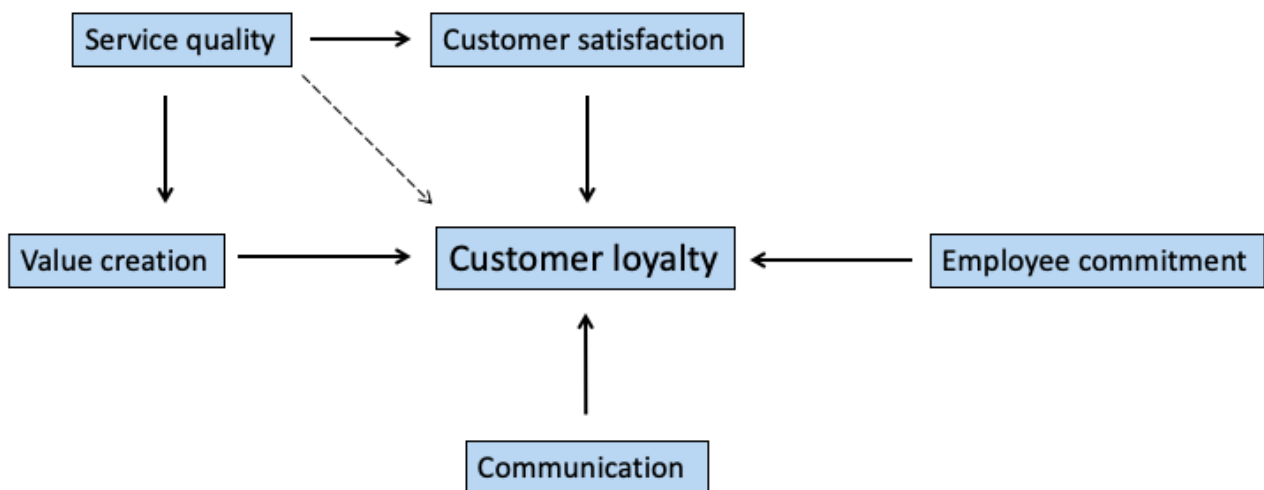


Figure 4. Factors influencing customer loyalty

## 6.1 Conclusions

The competition between organizations in the field of sports services is heated. It is crucial for the organizations to understand the most effective ways to attract customers, to keep them retained and to make them loyal. It is more affordable for organizations to retain existing customers than to attract new customers with expensive advertising campaigns. Because of the demanding consumer markets, consumers' loyalty has become one of the most important achievements for organizations to reach for. Pursuing customer loyalty is beneficial for organizations financially, socially and strategically.

Purchase decisions of consumers are influenced in numerous ways by environmental and social factors. Firms can aspire to affect these factors by reminding consumers about their

services, organizing campaigns and preventing distractions from occurring by arranging their facilities and other functions proficiently. Making consumers' purchase situations successful and effortless can increase repurchases. If the consumers are pleased with their continuous purchases, they will probably remain as a customer of the firm and not proceed on seeking alternative service providers. This increases the customer retention percent of the firm, and therefore is beneficial for the firm's economy. Retention of customers can lead to customers being more loyal towards the firm they have been satisfied with. Loyalty in business context means customer's willingness to continue purchasing from the firm over the long-term and recommending the services to friends and family.

The findings of the research indicate that most significant factors having an impact on customer loyalty are customer satisfaction, value creation, service quality, communication and employee commitment. All these factors share similar impacts and seem to connect with each other. Good service quality affects highly on customer satisfaction and value creation. Customers expect to receive competent service and value for the offering, and by performing at the expected level, firms can make their customers satisfied with their experience. Actions of committed employees and their communication with customers were found to have high relevance with building customer loyalty. According to the research, customers appreciate firms which employees make effort in relationships with customers by communicating with them and listening to their opinions.

## **6.2 Reliability of the research**

The purpose of a qualitative research is to formulate a comprehension of a phenomenon based on findings of the research material. From the findings, can be formed a universal understanding of the topic. (Saldana, 2011) The research was conducted based on interviews of two managers of sports centers. The findings can be considered reliable, since they both are professionals with several years of experience in their field of business. The answers of both interviews were quite similar and highlighted similar themes. However, the amount of interviewees is relevantly small, and the findings are based on their personal opinions and experiences. Despite the professionalism of the interviewees and the in-depth vision of the

topics, the small amount data is debatable to make generalizations of. Furthermore, the other interview was implemented via e-mail and other via phone, as following the interviewees wishes. With e-mail, the interview had more time to think about the answers compared to the phone interview.

This research was delimited to study the themes within the sports services industry. The findings can be generalized, however, it is needed to take into consideration that the behavior of consumers may vary between different types of industries. With the sports service sector, is needed to take into consideration the fact that consumers partly act as producers in the consumption situation and often interact with the service provider. Consumers themselves may cause changes in the consumption situation, regardless of the provider's actions.

The main themes of the research, such as purchase decision and customer loyalty, have been studied broadly for a long time, by multiple different researchers. The researchers have found similar findings, despite their differing use of definitions of concepts. Thus, the theory base of the research can be considered relevant and reliable.

### **6.3 Opportunities for future research**

The findings of this research are based on the interviewees' own opinions and insights. To get a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, research material could be collected by observation. It could be beneficial to actually "go inside the company" to observe the use of different marketing actions in practice. In addition, a quantitative study could be implemented in order to gain numerical facts about which actions are veritably most effective in building customer loyalty.

It is important for organizations to know what means to use and how to use the means beneficially in marketing. This research was implemented from the companies' point of view. Additionally, it would be useful to carry out a research investigating the topic from consumers' point of view. This would bring deeper insight and understanding on how consumers behave and how can companies influence the behavior. Since the competition in the global

marketplace is intense and the importance of customer loyalty is constantly growing, businesses need to adopt a customer-centric vision (Gee et al., 2008).

Exploring the numerous previous studies regarding the themes of this research, was found that researchers have slightly differing meanings and definitions for some concepts. This appeared for example in some studies with the concepts of emotion, feeling and mood. Consequently, more in-depth researching could be done about the researchers' differing use of definitions. The different meanings of concepts could be compared and examined what kind of impact they have on studies. In addition to differing meanings of concepts, some connections and correlations between related concepts vary. For example, several studies evidence that customer satisfaction, service quality and customer loyalty are positively connected with each other. However, it is not quite clear which one is the consequence of which. This is something that would be beneficial to clarify within future studies.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1. Interview questions

1. In what task do you work and how long have you worked in this company?
2. What means do you use to get new customers?
3. How do you influence customers to purchase services precisely from you?
4. How do you retain the existing customers from not changing service provider and to keep purchasing your services?
5. How do you guarantee customers service quality and a satisfied experience?
6. What means do you use to make customers loyal to your brand?
7. What kind of information do you have on your customers? How do you benefit from this information?
8. What is your competitive advantage to bring value in engaging customers?
9. What challenges have you encountered regarding engaging customers? How can you answer the arisen challenges?
10. How do you handle relationships with customers and external communications (e.g. feedback)?
11. Have you targeted your marketing for different groups/segments?

12. Have you any shortcoming in your marketing that still needs improvement?

13. Can you think of anything else to add relating to service quality or customer loyalty?