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School of Business and Management

Master's Program in International Marketing Management (MIMM)

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**ROLE OF CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT IN B2B ONLINE CUSTOMER
EXPERIENCE IN TRAVEL INDUSTRY**

Master's thesis 2021

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ABSTRACT

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Digitalization has affected the traditional customer experience as technology has provided new dimensions and created omni-channel customer experience. Customer experience is a large concept and developing it is a way for companies to differentiate themselves from the competition. This study starts by dissolving it to pieces and focuses on online customer experience and how customer engagement can be used as a tool to enhance online customer experience. The aim of this study was to research consolidation between online customer experience and customer engagement in a business-to-business (B2B) environment.

This study was done as qualitative research with semi-structured interviews to form a holistic understanding about the topic. Theoretical background for the study was based on online customer experience, digital touchpoints and customer engagement literature. The findings indicate that customer engagement has a positive effect on online customer experience. Customer engagement can be used to gather customer knowledge and engage customers in the decision making process which will result in more tailored service and that way to positive customer experience and long term customer relationship. In order for companies to achieve this they need to have at least a moderate digital level meaning that they have digital tools, competences and processes to support customer engagement and online customer experience.

TIIVISTELMÄ

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Digitalisointi muuttanut käsitystämme perinteisestä asiakaskokemuksesta, koska teknologia tarjoaa jatkuvasti uusia ulottuvuuksia ja mahdollistaa monikanavaisen asiakaskokemuksen. Asiakaskokemus on laaja konsepti ja sen kehittäminen on tapa, jolla yritykset erottavat itsensä kilpailusta. Tämä tutkimus keskittyy sen digitaaliseen osaan eli online-asiakaskokemukseen ja siihen, miten asiakkaiden sitoutumista voidaan hyödyntää digitaalisen asiakaskokemuksen parantamisessa. Tämän tutkimuksen tavoitteena oli tutkia digitaalisen asiakaskokemuksen ja asiakkaiden sitouttamisen välistä yhteyttä yritysten välisessä (B2B) liiketoiminnassa. Tämä tutkimus tehtiin kvalitatiivisena tutkimuksena, jossa hyödynnettiin teemahaastatteluja. Tutkimuksen teoreettinen tausta perustui digitaaliseen asiakaskokemukseen, digitaalisiin kosketuskohtiin ja asiakas sitouttamiseen. Tulokset osoittivat, että asiakkaiden sitoutumisella on positiivinen vaikutus digitaaliseen asiakaskokemukseen. Asiakkaan sitoutumista voidaan käyttää asiakastietojen keräämiseen ja asiakkaiden sitouttamiseen päätöksentekoprosessiin, mikä johtaa räätälöityyn palveluun ja siten positiiviseen asiakaskokemukseen ja pitkäaikaiseen asiakassuhteeseen. Matkailualalla tämä tarkoittaa valmiiden pakettien tarjoamista ja mahdollisuuden omatoimiseen palvelun käyttöön hyödyntämällä digitaalisia työkaluja ja prosesseja asiakkaiden sitoutumisen ja digitaalisen asiakaskokemuksen tukemiseksi.

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Thank you!

In Helsinki June 2021

Oona Ahlstedt

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1.Introduction

The rising expectations of consumers in goods and services is impacting the business environment of business-to-business (B2B) companies. These expectations change business processes and companies have to make changes accordingly but also generate technological innovations to support it. The changes in business models and value chains can change where, how and to whom customer experience is created (Ilmarinen & Koskela 2015, 70). The importance of the online customer experience for the customer experience is constantly growing, as younger people in particular are accustomed to using digital services. Various services operating in online environments are constantly being used more and thus a large part of the communication between the customer and the company is moving to digital alternatives.

Successful customer experiences might be the path to growth but delivering experiences that produce more B2B sales is more complex. Digitalization has created its own challenges to the mix. Buyers are expecting more and even more improved solutions. Sales channels have become more digital and have less human contact. The online customer experience is the customer's journey with the company through digital channels, from the first point of contact to a long-term customer relationship. A successful customer experience brings recommendations to the company, which increases the customer base and improves the company's profitability. According to an Accenture report (2017) the B2B sector faces higher expectations of personalized experiences and end-to-end solutions. With the right customer experience capabilities, companies can create longer relationships with loyal customers who spend more money and are more forgiving. Hence creating a friction-free customer experience can boost a company's revenue.

The differences between B2C and B2B customer experiences are blurring. When making a B2B purchase customers expect straightforward digital services and more involvement like in their personal purchases. (Gandhi, Jamjoum & Heider 2019) This can mean easy to use services that meet customer's exact needs. This requires companies to deliver omnichannel experiences that are targeted to their customers. The growing global market competitiveness has led to companies' interest in improving customer experiences in B2B relationships as well.

1.1 Research Background

As today's products and services are easier to copy, the impact of customer experience as a factor in competition between companies has gained importance (Doligalski 2015, 59). Customer experience is already recognized as important for a company's core business and is one the best ways to create competitive advantage. According to Filenius (2015) 44% of customers with a good customer experience use the service again, 33% recommend it to others and 14% share their positive experiences on social media. This has made especially B2C companies to invest a lot of resources on building strong customer experience. According to Accenture's report 90 % of companies that they interviewed recognize that customer experience is crucial for companies. Recognizing that customer experience is important is easier said than done. Hence delivering customer experience to create more B2B sales is challenging. (Accenture 2017) To furthermore ensure that Gibbons (2017) wrote that B2B companies are falling behind on customer experience. Why should companies fail to improve something that is so vital for the company? Even though customer experience is a relatively studied phenomenon in the B2C environment, it lacks research in the B2B environment. This can be the reason behind why B2B companies haven't benefited from it. Hence this study can have beneficial contributions for both managerial and theoretical point of view.

Klaus (2014) argues that lately, online customer experience has gained more interest from academic literature and the business world, but McLean (2017) and Ulaga (2018) state that empirical research is still limited, and concept is relatively unexplored in B2B context. However, there is a lot of research concerning the concept of the B2C

environment and certain things are applicable for B2B context as well. As the thesis goes on this fact has been carefully exploited. This thesis' aim is to define the role of customer engagement in online customer experience in the B2B environment.

1.2 Research context

Information technology and the internet have revolutionized the entire travel industry which is leading to the point where the business models and distribution channels are changing. Under competitive pressure new innovations can provide superior quality services, which are more efficient and more user friendly. Travel industry is facing growing global market competitiveness and companies are interested in how they can increase their market share, earn more profits and improve customer experiences. Good customer experience is reshaped by the customer's buying process. (Accenture 2017) Hence strong relationships with B2B customers are becoming more important in the competition.

Well-being travel is one of the fastest growing travel segments. Globally it has grown in a year with over 14 % growth rate. (Business Finland 2017) Travel companies' B2B customers are online travel agencies (OTAs) and travel agencies which don't just pass along a product or service to end-customers. They create value together with the supplier company. These companies together share resources and insights to deliver better customer experience. Earlier travel agencies have used more traditional marketing material and bookings were done on the phone. Agencies participated in travel fairs and met destination representatives in person. Now the industry's attention is focusing on the online environment. (Tfaily 2018)

1.3 Research questions

The goal of this study is to add knowledge of engagement as part of online customer experience in the B2B environment. The preferences of marketers about customer experience are higher because of the customer experience than what marketers face in their personal lives in a B2C environment. Now people shop a lot on Amazon or other e-commerce sites from which gained experiences inevitably shape the expectations for online business at work. Due to the nature of digitization companies offer more digital services to their business customers too. Digitalization brings new possibilities for companies but also challenges. It has created new ways to engage with customers regardless of the channel. If companies can capitalize on benefiting from online customer experience, they can have a major competitive advantage over competitors. In terms of research objectives, it is essential to understand how customer experience is constructed and what factors influence it.

The main research question is supported by three sub research questions. This research aims to answer to the following question:

How does customer engagement influence online business-to-business customer experience in the travel industry?

Sub research questions:

What is B2B online customer experience in the travel industry?

What is customer engagement in the travel industry?

What are the factors that trigger customer engagement in the travel industry?

The lack of academic literature of online customer experience in the B2B environment opens a research gap. There is a need to gain knowledge on what B2B online customer experience is and how it can be used for the company's advantage in the travel industry. The theoretical contributions of this thesis are beneficial for all

companies that operate in the travel industry. However managerial contributions are aimed for the case company. The goal is to provide deeper understanding how the case company can improve online customer experience.

1.4 Literature review

This chapter provides a closer look on what previous studies have been made about the main topics in this thesis. As it has been mentioned above that these main topics are customer experience, online customer experience, customer engagement and touchpoints. Literature review filters existing literature about the subject and summarizes what is already known about the topics. It tries to identify future beneficial research topics. (Petty & Guthrie 2000)

1.4.1 Customer experience

There is quite a lot of research on customer experience in the B2C side and it has multiple definitions by several researchers. Furthermore, the concept of customer experience has evolved through time. Gentile, Spiller and Noci (2007) argue that customer experience is the result of customer interactions with a service, a company or part of its organization. Lemon & Verhoef (2016) even suggests that the term is a mixture of service quality and customer satisfaction.

Although customer experience is considered as important and acknowledged in the academic literature, it still lacks literature focused on B2B (Palmer 2010). Growing competitiveness among companies have sparked an interest in B2B customer experience among scholars in recent years (McLean 2017). Meyer & Schwager (2007) characterize a successful B2B customer experience as “not thrilling one but one that is trouble free and hence reassuring to those in charge”. According to research by Lemke, Clark and Wilson (2011) B2B customers have high expectations and they assume that selling companies understand their needs for using their services. They highlight that the most important factors for improving customer experience is to understand customer needs and the ability to make corresponding changes to meet those needs. On the same lines is Ulaga (2018) who states that enhancing customer experiences is one way for B2B companies to differentiate. However, compared to

existing B2C literature Zolkiewski et al. (2017) note that B2B context needs a more strategic approach.

1.4.2 Online customer experience

Online customer experience is part of overall customer experience but is outlined only to the online environment (McLean 2017). Klaus (2014) states that there is no universally accepted definition of the concept of online customer experience. Also, the term online customer experience hasn't penetrated itself, for example Klaus (2013) uses the term online customer service experience, which he defined as a customer's response to a set of interactions between the firm's online proposition. Rose, Clark, Samouel and Hair (2012) propose a definition for online customer experience as following "psychological state manifested as a subjective response to the website".

Previous studies have researched online customer behavior and level of service quality and customer's perceptions of online customer experience (Klaus 2013) and of the online environment (McLean and Wilson 2016). The importance of customer experience has been studied in the B2C environment and now B2B companies are taking more interest in it because it has been argued to have financial benefits. (Pandey & Mookerjee 2018)

Online customer experience in e-retailing context has been fairly studied. Especially online shopping behavior has generated a lot of interest among scholars. Past research explored the possible outcomes of online customer experience. Rose, Hair and Clark (2011) recognize that re-purchase is one of the desirable outcomes of improved online customer experience. Also, Chiu, Hsu, Lai and Chang (2012) examined the repurchase intentions among online shoppers and identified that enhanced customer experience is the key. Brodie, Hollebeek, Juric and Ilic (2013) recognize that reinforced online customer experience contributes to enhanced brand engagement.

1.4.3 Customer engagement

Digital channels have increased the number of available touchpoints and they enable marketers to have more chances to engage with customers. Additionally, customers have more chances to interact with the company. (Brodie et al. 2013) There is research on customer engagement from a customer's perspective, but it lacks B2B focus. The interest of customer engagement has risen during the last decade (Saunila, Ukko, Rantala 2018). Originally the term engagement indicated employee engagement (So, King, Sparks, Wang 2014). However now Kumar and Pansari (2016) suggest that customer engagement is a multidimensional concept, which includes cognitive, behavioral and emotional aspects. Azer & Alexander (2018) state that customer engagement may be either positive or negative. Cambra, Fierro, Melero-Polo, Sese, and van Doorn (2018) add that positive interactions can boost relationship quality, service usage and financial outcomes.

Brodie et al. (2011) examine the theoretical grounds of customer engagement. They set customer engagement apart from other relational concepts, such as participation and involvement. Several researches have focused on engagement with brands which Hollebeek (2011) is using the term "customer brand engagement". However, he states that the influence of customer engagement on brand experience is yet to be researched with empirical testing. According to Järvi (2018) customer engagement literature can be separated into brand engagement, social media engagement, service-centric engagement, and B2B engagement. This study is focusing on the latter.

Only a couple studies have concentrated on customer engagement in a digital context (Marbach, Lages & Nunan 2016). Cabiddu et al. (2014) identify the significance of customer engagement in the tourism industry. Recently the physical side of customer engagement in the tourism industry has been researched by Fang et al. (2020).

1.5 Theoretical Framework

The purpose of this theoretical framework is to illustrate the concepts of the study as a whole and thereby make it easier to understand. Theoretical framework is presented in figure 1. It portrays the main business functions that are involved in constructing online customer experience and their relationships with each other. The researched concept of online customer experience is the result of how the client has experienced it. To the customer's experience the service/product is affecting the experience as does the company and the client itself. All this is done from the point of view of the travel industry as both the selling and buying companies are in the industry. In this study the client is a business-to-business client. As it has been said before, customer experience is crucial for the company (Ulaga 2018). It's importance within the travel industry is rising because of buyers' high expectations.

Customer and company together built the customer experience. According to Fischer & Vainio (2014, 9), customer satisfaction is positively affected by caring, listening, paying attention, understanding and reacting quickly to things. In addition, it is important to remember to take care of the quality of the service and fulfill the promises made. The relationship between these two parties is the ground the customer experience is shaped on. Visual pictures from the intended framework can be seen from figure 1. To reach the aim of the study literature and academic articles are used to form the theoretical framework for the study.

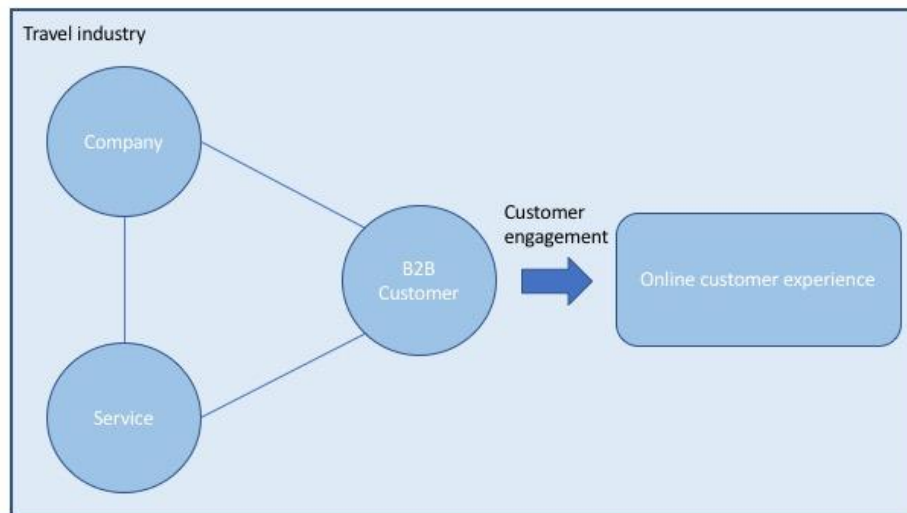


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework

1.6 Definitions

There are multiple definitions for different terms, but this chapter gathers key concepts that will be used in this study.

B2B (business-to-business) is referring to selling products and services between companies.

Online Travel Agents (OTAs) are travel agencies online that might offer a booking website for destinations and accommodations services, such as eBookers.

Customer experience is a customer's internal and subjective response to any direct or indirect contact with the company (Meyer & Schwager 2007).

Online customer experience is created when a user utilizes any device with a digitally produced service to conduct a desired operation or part of it (Filenius 2015, 72). The term digital customer experience is also used in the literature from the same context but in this study online customer experience term is used.

Customer engagement is the interaction of customer's responses between a company or brand during customer journey of touchpoints (Homburg, Jozié & Kuehnl 2016).

Touchpoints are moments when customers interact with the product or company along their entire purchasing process (Rawson, Duncan & Jones 2013) These touchpoints can be advertisements, discussions with other product users or news reports (Court 2009). Customers can go through different touchpoints and their importance for the customer varies (Rosenbaum, Otolara & Ramirez 2017).

1.7 Structure of the study

This thesis will follow the traditional study structure. Thesis will start with introduction to the researched topic and presenting background for the thesis. Also, in the first chapter theoretical framework, delimitations and research questions are introduced. Rest of the thesis is separated into two parts: theoretical and empirical. The entire thesis will consist of five chapters from which chapter two and three are focusing on the theory of the thesis and chapter four and five are dedicated to empirical findings.

Chapter two and three are focusing on building a theoretical base for the topic. The chapter discusses what is already known and researched in the academic literature about online customer experience. In chapter four the focus of the thesis will shift to the empirical part. The chapter four presents used research methodology and explains how data is collected and analyzed and then moves on stating the reliability and validity of the thesis. Chapter five presents the results of the qualitative research and reflects them on the theoretical part of the thesis. In the last chapter conclusions as well as managerial contributions are presented.

2. Online customer experience

Digitalization is affecting every company and industry. In order to stay with the competition or differentiate themselves from the competition they need to keep up with digital development in their services. The development of technology has improved companies' online presence, however customers have higher expectations of the online environment and service quality because of it (McLean and Wilson 2016). This brings us to ponder how customers perceive their experience and how this knowledge can be used as an advantage for the company. Online experience is a way to improve the quality of the whole customer experience and have stronger relationships with its users (Helm 2007). Furthermore, the online environment is only one part of the customer experience. Hence in this chapter customer experience is shortly explained before moving on to examine online customer experience.

2.1 Customer experience

Despite the recent interest in customer experience, it has several definitions in the existing literature. Customer experience is customers' reply to any direct and indirect contact with the company (Meyer and Schwager 2007). All service exchanges, despite their nature, form or channel with the company, create customer experiences (Schmitt, Brakus and Zarantonello 2015; Roelofs 2017). Especially in the service sector, customers can also be a co-creator of their own experience (Lemon & Verhoef 2016). Along the same lines are Heinonen et al. (2010) stating that customer experience is created by customers and their actions. Customer experience is seen as holistic, and that it should be incorporated with the company's other actions. According to Meyer and Schwager (2007) customer experience is shaped by service process, other customers, facilities and interactions with employees. Verhoef et al. (2009) add that customer experience is constructed during information search, purchase, consumption and after-sales activities. Customer experience is formed with the contact of the company directly or indirectly, but not all aspects can be controlled by the company (Lemke et al. 2011; Zomerdijk and Voss 2010). Furthermore, aspects that can be controlled are service interface, sales and marketing communication.

Measuring customer experience serves the strategic purpose of the company by using gathered knowledge to build desirable customer experiences. Service delivery can be modified to be in-line with the overall strategy. (Homburg et al. 2016) Lot of academic literature is about consumer experience and only a few studies concentrate on business customer experiences. Which is odd considering how important one client is in a B2B environment and most of those encounters aren't just one-timers, they are a part of creating a long-term relationship (Meyer and Schwager 2007; Palmer 2010). These relationships are the core of building sustainable competitive advantage. Hence understanding B2B customer experience is vital. Meyer and Schwager (2007) state that successful B2B customer experience is hassle free and is built to minimize customer's required effort. For companies to utilize customer experience, they are required to figure out what customers want by exploring the company's and customer's role in shaping the customer experience.

2.2 Online customer experience definitions

Online customer experience is constructed when digitally produced service is used by any device. Online customer experience is customer experience created on a digital interface. (Borowski 2015, Filenius 2015) These include utilizing devices such as computers, tablets, or smartphones. Finding products online or transferring data using a smartphone is all part of the online customer experience. Hence customer experience created and formed online is called online customer experience. Online customer experience is viewed as more than a website's elements. It consists of the company's online presence across channels and online offers. (Rose et al. 2012) According to Klaus (2014) online customer experience is context-specific which leads to having no generally applicable rules that are suited for every industry.

Online stores are an important aspect of the service because even one weak area can negatively impact long-term customer relationships (Rose et al. 2012). Strong customer experience can create competitive advantage, bring more customers and boost sales. Also, online experiences have been identified to be connected with loyalty and re-purchases (Rose et al. 2012; Liu, Pu, Guan & Zang 2016). However, many

companies struggle to design their processes to help create positive customer experiences.

2.3 B2B online customer experience

Online customer experience is more researched in a B2C context but now B2B companies are looking to improve. In B2B the aim is to have long-lasting customer relationships. Even though online customer experience is part of the customer experience, it has its own literature and because of its dimensions it requires its own strategy (Borowski 2015). It requires its own because online and offline customers are different and need different approaching styles. Rose et al. (2011) compared the differences of offline and online environments which can be seen from table 1. When difficulties in the service appear more often the online B2B customers contact the customer service or company employee when compared to B2C customers who simply decide not to use the service in the similar case (Eggert et al. 2006).

	Offline	Online
The amount of personal interaction	Medium - High	Low
Available information	Limited. Intensiveness depends on the format	Comprehensive and intensive
Timetable for interaction	Set by the company	Set by the customer.
Brand display	Wide range of possibilities	Audio-visual

Table 1. Differences between offline and online environments (Rose et al. 2011)

Companies can have several online platforms. The benefit of having a multi-channel environment is that it creates more access to customer insights and customer experience driven behaviour patterns which enable companies to create responding experiences. However, the challenge of great amounts of customer data is producing customer insights from it. (Klaus & Nguyen 2013) Positive side is that collected data is already in digital form and for example with Google Analytics it is more easily spread

among stakeholders. Companies can practice continuous learning from their customers by following what they do on the company's digital platforms, which Leonidou, Barnes, Spyropoulou & Katsikeas (2010) note is worthy of investment and attention.

B2B companies have exploited the online customer experience less than its B2C counterparts (Duboi and Clementino 2017). This can be because of the nature of B2B transactions. Traditionally B2B purchase requires personal contact, each purchase holds higher risk and relies heavily on personal selling. B2B offerings are often tailored to each customer when compared to B2C counterparts, whose offerings are standardized. B2B customers appreciate convenience and fast service furthermore they are starting to prefer self-service channels. (Duboi and Clementino 2017) This leads towards more engaging with the platform and more evolved with constructing the customer experience. With self-service channels reorders can be such as purchasing the same package travel as last time or repeating the same exact orders. This requires less personal contact and negotiations. This saves time and money from both parties. Hence suppliers should focus on digitizing their services to B2B customers as well.

Because B2B decisions include several people, so also online customer experience is formed by a group of users from the company who are not the end users (Hollyoake 2009). As it is in the travel industry, OTA's aren't the end users and their entire customer experience can be purely online. Therefore companies need to take into consideration co-creation of the experience and that there are several people involved with the decision making (Pansari Kumar 2016). When the customer organization is pleased with the whole process together companies can start building long-lasting relationships. B2B companies have less customer relationships than B2C companies but their importance is higher. B2B relationships are more complex and have multiple interactive touchpoints during their journey. (Hollyoake 2009)

On the other hand, online limits service delivery, because some customer problems can't be solved via online (van der Veen and van Ossenbruggen 2015). However, McLean and Wilson (2016) note that if online customer support is needed, customers most often haven't found the solution for their searched information online and hence they might be unsatisfied with the company's online presence. Nonetheless when a

customer is reaching for the company via live chat the company has the possibility to enhance the online customer experience. This can turn a service failure into a positive customer experience. With compelling online customer experience, the company can differentiate itself from its competitors. According to Filenius (2015) successful online customer experience is created when customers' needs are filled with digital service that is corresponding to customer's needs.

Social media is a tool for customers to interact, share and connect and it has received a lot of attention from market researchers (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010). Social media platforms are widely used by companies to interact with consumers, but they are continually used more to connect with business customers too. Digital channels can boost business, communication, processes and add value to customers. These channels make it possible for companies to create interactive and closer customer relationships. Digital channels enable interactive customer listening, participation in product development and customer-specific communication, service and product development. (Merisavo, Vesanen, Arponen, Kajalo and Raulas 2006) All of these strengthen and deepen the customer relationship.

2.4 Antecedents of online customer experience

Factors that B2B companies need to consider when building long term customer relationships are understanding customer needs, ease of doing business, customer knowledge, customization, interactive experience environment, value for time, emotional cohesion and promise fulfilment (Hollyoake 2009; Pansari & Kumar 2016; McLean 2017). McLean (2017) points out that the influence of these components is highly useful to investigate to be able to improve a company's result.

Ease of doing business means that service should be straightforward. This becomes evident when service is used online. It has to be easy enough to use. Interactive environment offers communication ways with the company and support co-creation. Customer centricity is a lot based on gathering customer knowledge and exploiting it and this goes together with understanding customer needs. (Hollyoake 2009) Serving

based on customer needs creates better customer experience and builds sustainable customer relationships.

Especially online components: ease of use, customization, interactivity, engagement became evident in online service. When diving deeped to online environment website credibility, information quality, website aesthetics and flow (Hoffman and Novak 2009; Rose et al. 2012; McLean and Wilson 2016; McLean 2017). Additionally, Zhang, Lu, Wang and Wu (2015) recognize that online channels, images and visual presentations are vital in creating an online customer experience. Website portals are dynamic and provide interactive interfaces for customers to examine offerings.

Therefore McLean (2017) emphasized that especially website credibility and information quality have a high impact on online customer experience particularly in B2B context. Companies can't control how the customer perceives the experience, but companies can try to affect the design that enables customers to have desired experiences (Stein & Ramaseshan 2016). McLean and Wilson (2016) recognize that online services have failed in the past due to lack of interaction with employees.

The internet provides possibilities to interact and engage with the customer (Rose et al. 2012; McLean and Wilson 2016) and technology has created new mediums such as live chat and social network channels (Turel and Connelly 2013). Use of digital tools can lead to entirely new business processes that may improve company's performance (Klaus & Nguyen 2013). These advancements create social interaction and online customer support as well as more reachable.

2.5 Digital touchpoints

Online customer experience is heavily dependent on digital touchpoints. They are customer and company encounters on digital platforms such as search engines, websites and social media. Unconscious encounters are created through communication and brand. These include the customer's feelings, experiences, perceptions and views. Any of these things alone can elevate the customer experience to its peak, but at the same time, one element can cause a negative customer experience. (Ahvenainen et al. 2017, 33–34) Touchpoints are interactions between customers and the product or the service provider (Howard 2007). Touchpoints are

scattered through the buying process (figure 2); they occur both pre and post purchase across channels (Meyer & Schwager 2007; Stein & Ramaseshan 2016). Customers might engage with any of the touchpoints during their entire customer experience. This being said each customer has their own unique journey through their own set of touchpoints that they go through. Depending on the service or customer journey the significance of each touchpoint may vary. To understand the customer perspective of the experience, touchpoints should be explored as they provide access to customer perspective (Stein & Ramaseshan 2016). Each touchpoint has an effect on online customer experience. As it was mentioned earlier (Rose et al. 2012) even a purely constructed sector of the website can have a negative impact on customer relationships. Therefore, designing and managing each touchpoint is crucial. Furthermore Bilgihan, Kandampully and Zhang (2016) state that design of the touchpoints should match the user's expectations and Koivisto (2011,53) reminds that they need constant updating.

However, all touchpoints can't be controlled. Customers may also encounter indirect touchpoints which are unplanned contact between company and the customer (Meyer & Schwager 2007). These can be recommendations of other customers or news articles. Digital touchpoints are touchpoints that are used through any digital device. Straker, Wrigley & Rosemann (2015) argues that online is one touchpoint but it can be debated that even a small section of the website can drive customers away. Hence it could be said that websites include multiple touchpoints. However, the online environment includes other touchpoints than company websites. Touchpoints include smartphone applications, web pages and social networking sites.

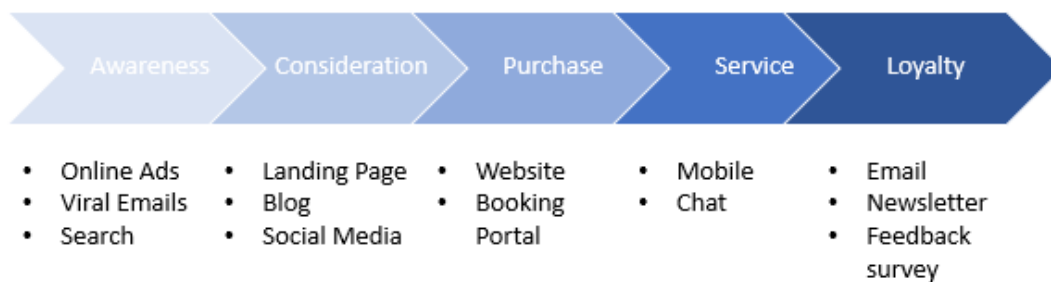


Figure 2. Different digital touchpoints throughout the customer journey

Saffer (2007) divides touchpoints to four categories: environment, objects, processes and people. For example, social media is classified as an environmental touchpoint. However, Lemon and Verhoef (2016) also recognize four different touchpoint categories: brand-owned, partner-owned, customer-owned and social/external. This classification is used in this thesis because of its more applicable to digital touchpoints. Brand-owned touchpoints are customer interactions that are controlled and managed by the company. These entail brand owned media (for example advertising and websites) and brand managed features of the marketing mix (for example service, price, convenience). Partner-owned touchpoints are customer interactions that are designed and managed together or either controlled by the company and its partners. Partners can be ad agencies, distribution partners or communication channel partners. Lemon and Verhoef (2016) note that differences between these categories might be tough to spot.

Customer-owned touchpoints are out of the company's control and influence. They are driven by customers as part of the overall customer experience. For example, a customer's payment choice is customer-owned touchpoint. Social/external touchpoints are external touchpoints that affect the customer experience, such as independent information source, other customers and environment. The effects of these touchpoints are extensive and can be more influential than advertising. (Lemon and Verhoef 2016)

Homburg et al. (2016) define engagement as interaction of customer's responses to a company or brand during customer journey of touchpoints. Every touchpoint provides a possibility for creating experiences, which can lead to further engagement with the firm (Calder, Malthouse & Schaedel 2009). Touchpoints are spots where the interaction between the company and customer happens. These points can be online or offline. When creating online customer experience the digital touchpoints are necessary to maintain virtual interactions with the company.

According to Lingqvist, Plotkin & Stanley (2015) a B2B customer utilizes six separate channels along their decision journey which include several touchpoints. Clark (2013) adds that seldom customers engage just with a single touchpoint. They consume information from several sources and form their impression of the company based on them. Before making the purchasing decision, customers might experience multiple engagement efforts through several channels (Bilgihan et al. 2016). Kumar and Pansari (2006) suggest that each touchpoint revokes emotions in B2B customers too. This is creating an emotional bond between the company and can help create a superior customer experience.

Hollebeek, Glynn & Brodie (2014) suggest that experience and engagement are two separate concepts but are related to each other. In some cases, customer engagement leads to customer experience. Customer engagement and customer experience both benefit from each other because Nysveen and Pedersen (2014) suggest that to create positive customer experience, needs and co-creation which is possible with engaged customers.

3. Customer engagement

Customer engagement's role in customer experience has become an interest in 2010s (Lemon & Verhoef 2016). Customer engagement has been studied in various fields, for example in organization behaviour literature where it has been studied as employee engagement and in psychology as social engagement, but in marketing as customer engagement. However, according to Kumar and Pansari (2016) customer engagement and employee engagement do share aspects. Brodie et al. (2011) summarize that engagement is a customer's psychological state formed by experiences. Järvi (2018) notes that customer engagement is the level of customers' participation intensity and how they are connected to companies services and its activities. She adds that B2B companies should engage customers on an emotional level. Customer engagement is interactions between company and the customer, offered by the company but chosen by the customer.

Customer engagement has been viewed as a customer's interactive experience (Brodie et al. 2011). Engagement is the cumulative sum of attitude, behavior and connectivity between other customers and company's employees. Customers are a crucial resource for any company, they are the foundation of profit growth. Satisfying their needs isn't enough anymore. Therefore, the company must engage with its customers to keep up with the competition. (Kumar & Pansari 2016) This means boosting customer referrals, requiring customer feedback and interacting in social media. Recently social network channels have been used to engage with both B2B (Chakravarty, Kumar & Grewal 2014) and B2C customers (Kumar 2013). These platforms have higher engagement rates compared to traditional marketing methodologies (Trusov et al. 2009).

Interaction between company and customer presents a possibility for the company to engage with their customers, which is crucial for creating long-term customer relationships (Vivek, Beatty & Morgan 2012). While engaging with customers can be discovered customer knowledge (Kumar and Pansari 2016). Engaging with customers can provide feedback to improve existing service or create entirely new service.

According to Järvi (2018) customer engagement is concluded through reliability, collaboration, communication, offerings, and helping customers achieve goals. These are mainly elements that companies can affect with their actions.

Customers can provide referrals to other customers which are one of the most profitable selling arguments. It's a positive customer experience that can turn customers to company's advocates. (Borowski 2015) In a B2B environment the impact of the interaction between customer and employee is the key component on customer's decisions. Compared to B2C firms where the impact of one single customer is smaller.

When companies are able to measure how customers perceive a product or service experience, companies can detect opportunities for improvement. According to Leonidou et al. (2010) companies are too reliant on what customers will inform and point out the inconsistencies of the service to the companies. This usually occurs in physical stores, Leonidou et al. (2010) points out that online customers don't have the time for it. In an online environment companies should measure how well they meet online customer expectations because all of the digital tools should contribute to the customer journey. This can be done by directly asking online customers their opinions. The pressure of having digital tools has led to the fact that some companies just add digital components without knowledge of how it adds value. They add that often companies add digital components that don't benefit the customer. Companies should invest in services to achieve engagement. Leonidou et al. (2010) highlight that a good approach would be to design a touchpoint that makes a part of the customer journey that customer is already engaging with more easier. This can save the customers time and effort. One option is to simplify a feature of customer journey that customers are engaging by designing a mobile app. For example in a B2C environment, apps can manage customer loyalty points and allow them to place orders ahead of time. In a B2B environment mobile app can allow quick access to booking information and gives the ability to do fast changes.

During the service customers co-create their experience within a certain service context. Customers evaluate their experience according to interactions. Customers are one group of a company's stakeholders which makes them part of stakeholder engagement as well. Greenwood (2007) defines stakeholder engagement as a company's actions that associate stakeholder to company's activities. Stakeholder engagement has everything to do with involving stakeholders to a company's decision-making process. Earlier studies also argue that stakeholder engagement has financial benefits. Stakeholder engagement is crucial for companies to be able to answer and understand customer concerns. Such customer engagement happens in different forms and levels of the company. The amount of customer engagement varies between stakeholder groups. Engagement can be spontaneous from both customer or company. Responding to customer engagement can be ad hoc and in many companies doesn't have a formal structure.

According to Henisz, Dorobantu & Nartey (2014) when companies can utilize external stakeholders, in this case customers, for support in designing services it acts as a key action for a company's financial performance. This way positive customer engagement can enhance both sides' business activities. Innes and Booher (2004) present that authentic engagement with customers increases trust and opens up a possibility for developing joint objectives and solutions. Mathur, Price and Austin (2008) add that strong customer engagement can improve decision making also locally, increase equity and help build social capital for the company. They add that customer engagement presents an opportunity for social learning. Social learning can occur in a moment where customers interact with each other. This can result in enhanced awareness and attitude change. Moreover, customer engagement can enable innovation of new processes and support with developing products and services. (Brodie et al. 2011)

How the whole process forms to be customer experience is the influence of B2B customers' cognition (values, motives, experiences) and outside motivators (market demand, economic pressure, competition). Customer engagement and communication do affect the perception of customer experience.

However, customer engagement is often described in academic literature as an activity that is more than a purchasing situation. Furthermore, several researches

propose that customer engagement is a crucial strategic tool which can boost sales, profitability and create competitive advantage (Neff 2007, Sedley 2008 and Voyles 2007 cited in Brodie et al. 2011; Kumar and Pansari 2016).

According to Kumar and Pansari (2016) customer engagement includes customer purchases, referrals, influence and customer knowledge. Especially in B2B relationships, customer referrals from other B2B customers are helpful. In the travel industry, the influence of consumers is remarkable because the end customers are the ones creating the demand for certain travel destinations. These can be influenced from social media. Hence the social media influence is effective for both B2B and B2C companies. The benefit of customer knowledge is using their feedback and suggestions in the service development process. Additionally, Martín-de Castro, Amores-Salvadó & Navas-López (2016) present that incorporating customers into a company's decision-making process profits all parties. In a B2B environment interaction between customer and employee has a high impact on customer decisions (Kumar and Pansari 2016). There is a thin line between negative and positive engagement. Negative impacts occur when customer relationships face challenges from within or external without having dialogue. (Järvi 2018)

Figure 3 presents common stakeholder groups that companies have. The number of stakeholders varies between companies and industry. The line between stakeholder groups can be unclear (Ahlstedt and Janhukainen 1972, 10) for example company board and company employees. In this figure only the travel industry is considered. According to stakeholder theory the basic assumption is that companies need stakeholders in order to do business. In B2B customer engagement this applies.

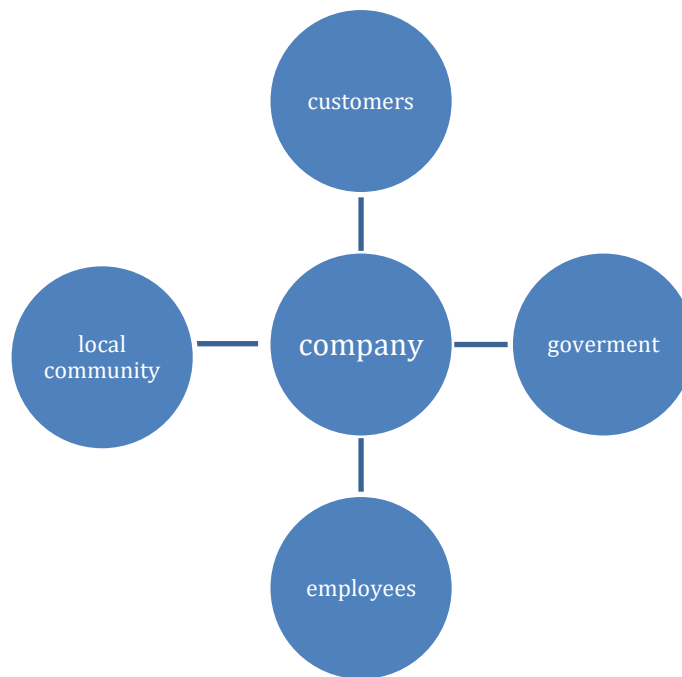


Figure 3. Company's stakeholders

Post et al. (2002) remind that all stakeholders should be considered and managed, although their importance may vary to the company. Some customers might need more attention which could be dependent on the phase of the customer relationship. Johnson, Redlbacher and Schaltegger (2018) argue that the customer segment doesn't have influence on customer engagement. But dividing companies to groups based on importance could help when discussing customer engagement. Nonetheless, they noted that companies that are value-oriented do affect the customer engagement. In this research value-oriented companies have sustainability values and family-run operations.

Differences between B2B and B2C are that the customer spends time on the purchase and relationships between buyer and seller. B2B companies are dependent on each other which makes it more complicated. (Webster 1978) In B2B customers opinions hold greater power which adds pressure to companies (Haddock-Fraser and Tourelle 2010). Kumar and Pansari (2016) discovered that customer engagement's impact on companies' performance is stronger for B2B companies than for B2C companies. Thus it can be said that customer relationships are important.

Companies are part of a network and connected to several customers. These networks provide exchange of resources and can be used to share knowledge. Stakeholders can include suppliers, employees, government, customers or other groups that have an interest in a company's activities (Clarkson 1995, 106). Each customer has its own decision-making processes and has different perceptions. This presents an opportunity to learn and opens new opportunities. Customers can drive change with their actions. This can be positive such as climate change issues or negative. When customers have different perceptions it might lead to conflicts. (Calton & Payne 2003) Identifying different types of customers is crucial for companies to establish customer engagement. Based on this, customers can be categorized and put into groups based on their importance to companies activities. (Freeman 1984)

The concepts of customer engagement and customer experience came together in the 2010s. Now it has become part of the strategy of companies as it is considered the highest level of customer management. (Kumar & Pansari 2016) Earlier the customer engagement focus was more reactive than proactive towards customer experience. Now companies should have a more proactive approach to ensure sustainable competitive advantage. Customer engagement helps to add customer value through touchpoints (Lemon & Verhoef 2016). These include social media conversations, negotiations between sales representatives and other employees.

Building a customer centric approach to engage customers in all possible touchpoints supports the value creating process by being proactive (Pansari & Kumar 2016) Benefit from having engaged customers is increased trust which leads to customers being more willing to share information with the company (Hollyoake 2009). This results in cooperation that benefits both parties. Companies can discover customer insights, understand customer needs better and engage with customers accordingly. The goal of customer experience is to build long term customer relationships. When adding to it the customer centricity that services pursue is the aim of relationship marketing. Customer engagement is delivering for these dimensions. By personalizing customer interactions and building emotional connections with the customers. In the value co-creation process this highlights the role of the customer which has a positive

influence on customer experience. (Lemon & Verhoef 2016) Creating positive customer experience and having engagement with the customers can extract value for the company. In an online environment to create customer engagement companies need to provide an environment for customer engagement to contribute to online customer experience. Digital touchpoints provide this kind of wanted environment.

4. Research methodology

The aim of this chapter is to describe and explain the applied method of the whole study. Also, presenting the research approach, the data collection techniques, the sample and the data analysis. To conclude the chapter the validity and the reliability of the research will be discussed.

4.1 Methodology

This study is done according to a qualitative research methodology because of the nature of the studied phenomenon. The most used data collection methods in qualitative studies are interviews, observation, inquiries and information that is grounded on different documents. All of these methods can be used at the same study, separately or combined. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009, 71) There are two research methodologies: qualitative and quantitative. The difference between these types is the aim of study. Quantitative study's aim is to achieve statistical generalizations and qualitative study's aim is to portray a certain phenomenon or occurrence and gain understanding and give theoretically meaningful interpretation for it. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009, 65, 85; Hirsjärvi, Remes and Sajavaara 2009, 176-177) The two methods can be distinguished from each other, but they are not opposites of each other, so it is possible to use both of them at different stages of the study in the same study (Alasuutari 2011, 32). But for this study only qualitative research method is used.

Qualitative research method enables the researcher to form a holistic understanding. There was no preliminary hypothesis for this research, which means that the researcher wasn't testing a certain theory in the study (Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puuniekka 2006). Qualitative method suits the study when the researcher wants to gain knowledge about the topic or natural situations can't be experimentally arranged (Metsämuuronen 2008). In a thematic interview, the questions may be modified at the same time as the interviewee says things, because sometimes something becomes apparent before the issue is discussed. Thus, the questions may be asked in a different order, and the wording of the questions may change as the interview progresses. The aim is to find relevant answers to the research problem and to get as

much information as possible about the subject of the research (Alasuutari 2011, 73–75, Hirsjärvi et al. 2009, 225).

In the study, a theory based on things found in the literature backgrounds the collection of information and helps in making the analysis. Since the sample to be examined in qualitative research is often relatively small, the purpose is to interpret and understand rather than generalize or explain. Recurring things are searched for in the material. The study uses a semi-structured interview with predetermined themes to be discussed. The themes are based on theories, concepts and issues central to the research. (Hirsjärvi et al. 2010, p.225).

Reporting is based on descriptions, direct quotes and experiences. It is not intended to assume anything predictable or to create hypotheses. The aim is to find a new kind of information and understanding of the research topic. In the case of analysis and interpretation, the researcher is given freedom and flexibility in analysis and interpretation. Based on the interviews, the researcher gets a lot of information relatively quickly, but the analysis requires more time than the analysis of the numerical information. Ethical issues related to the collection and disclosure of data must be taken into account. In qualitative research, it is typical to collect material that allows for several different perspectives. (Alasuutari 2011, 84)

4.2 Data Collection

The data was collected as primary material with the sole purpose for this study. The benefits of the interviews are seen as their flexibility, as the interviewees can tell about the topic themselves and the interview can be adapted to the interviewee. (Hirsjärvi et al. 2009, 204-206) Particularly flexible is the semi-structured interview which Hirsjärvi et al. (2009, 208) describe as an intermediate form between an interview and an open interview. In a semi-structured interview, the interview proceeds within the framework of pre-selected themes and is aided by pre-planned questions. Questions can be open, their format is irrelevant, and they can be asked in the order you want. The aim is to find relevant answers to the research problem. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009, 75; Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2009, 47-48) As this thesis will be a qualitative research conducted by using semi structured theme interviews. The questions were formed based on the theoretical part. Where main topics were examined and explored. The aim of the

interviews is to provide insights to the research question and gain a deeper understanding of digital customer experience.

The research material for empirical analysis was gathered from interviews with representatives of chosen B2B customer organizations which operate in the travel industry. The study involved four persons with different backgrounds and positions in the organizations. The background of the interviewees can be seen from table 2. As background knowledge was asked how many destinations the organizations had in their portfolio, because it gives an idea of how many B2B customer relationships they have and have experience from. Destinations are the companies that offer accommodation services, for example hotels. These can be either in Finland or abroad. When companies have more destinations in their product selection it results in having more companies to engage with. Three of the interviewed companies had travel destinations abroad which makes them have experience from international companies.

	Title	Work experience in the travel industry	number of travel destinations	Size of the organization
Interviewee 1	Account Manager	4 years	20	<25
Interviewee 2	Sales Manager	10 years	5	<25
Interviewee 3	Business Manager	15 years	35	>25
Interviewee 4	Sales representative	2 years	20	>25

Table 2. Background of the interviewees

Potential interviewees were chosen by contacting them directly by email. When they expressed interest to participate, interview time was individually agreed. The interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams because of pandemic recommendations to keep the physical distance. Even though in the beginning the idea was to interview customers from all over the world, Finnish companies were chosen because it was assumed that their standards would be similar together and could be more easily compared. Interviews were conducted between February and April of 2021. Interviews didn't require any preparation from the interviewees. All of the interviews were recorded with permission for later analysis. The interviews were not translated to English except the parts that will be used as quotes in the empirical part. The questions were made in English but translated for the interviews. After the interviews, answers were categorized according to the main themes of the thesis and gathered together under sub headers. This was to analyze the answers but with the aim was to find main points and answers to the research problems.

4.3 Reliability and validity

According to Bryman (2012) one of the downsides of qualitative research is that results can't be generalized which is a result of the context. The aim of this study isn't to find results that can be generalized rather than add knowledge of the phenomenon. Hirsjärvi et al. (2009) add that having quotes from the interview improves reliability. Which is done in this thesis. These quotes are translated from Finnish to English which might decrease the reliability because some things might change their meaning but having the researcher herself speaking both languages help keeping the meanings similar during the analysis phase. When research data is collected through interviews the relevance of the researcher becomes more significant. This includes interaction and interview skills which make an impact on the progress of the interview and level of deepness to the answers. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2009) In this research interviews were similar compared to one another and all were given the same time to ponder their answers.

Given that there are only four interviewees and four different organizations it limits the research because their experience from different online services varies. Also that the company sizes vary leads that online customer experience can be shaped by a bigger group of people.

5. Analysis & Findings

The goal of this chapter is to analyze the conducted interviews. From the interviewees' companies one only did business in Finland and others had international companies in their repertoire. In the travel industry the competition is high and the number of competitors is limitless. To analyze the answers they were gathered together and hence there are some subheaders to make it easier to follow. We start analyzing the interviews with answers to the sub research questions that were: What is B2B online customer experience in the travel industry? and What is customer engagement in the travel industry? and What are the factors that trigger customer engagement in the travel industry?

B2B online customer experience

Interviewees were asked to define what is an online customer experience. This was asked from their organization's point of view, which was in the theoretical part stated to be slightly different from online customer experience in a B2C environment. Some of the interviewed started comparing the customer experience to their own life. From this it can be said that the line between B2B and B2C is extremely narrow.

“Online customer experience starts from web surfing. In the travel industry very rarely do travel destinations companies contact you first. Online customer experience on the business side might not ever end. Or it does when the business between the companies part ways.”

“Online customer experience is communication on digital services.”

Online experience was recognized to be customer experience on a digital surface which supports the theory that it consists of the company's online presence (Rose et al. 2012). Online customer experience was also seen as continuous that never ends except in cases where business ends. It was relatively hard for some interviewees to separate when customer experience is online and when offline meaning customer experience has a whole. Online customer experience is part of customer experience. In the travel industry for the companies their customer experience might only consist

from online customer experience. Hence it's important to separate these for companies to know which part they need to focus on. Online customer experience was seen as a holistic subject that comes together after the counter is over or one booking is completed and is the sum of a lot of things. Hollyoake (2009) mentioned that B2B customer experience can be experienced by a group of people. This was also emphasized in the interviews when interviewees pointed out that more than one person can be in contact with the company. Typically the payment part was done by a different person than the reservations.

The online environment should help customers with their intentions and save time. Especially in a B2B context, but this is depending on the situation and which platform is used. The patience of the customer is also dependent on matters such as urgency. This can have an effect on instructiveness.

When asked to describe a good and bad experience. Mostly good experiences were when nothing went wrong. In B2B the customer experience doesn't need to be extraordinary, it just needs to work. As Meyer and Schwager (2007) said the experience needs to be friction-free and minimize the company's effort.

“Mostly our online customer experiences have been positive. When nothing goes wrong and it is easily done. It's positive.”

But online customer experience can also be swayed to the negative side more easily as it is positive. Because if a customer doesn't find something that they are looking for they might feel disappointed or something doesn't work. Negative experiences most often occur when a website or portal isn't working. Usability is affecting the online customer experience (Rose et al. 2012). Great usability was seen as easy to use and work efficiently. Bad usability caused frustration and correlated with negative customer experience.

“Most about the portals I appreciate when they are straightforward and simple.”

Even though many of the interviewees called for advice from the selling company when they faced problems. This was in the cases where they have done a lot of business with the company. But on the contrary all of the interviewed people always preferred confirmation from the purchase through electrical ways. Two of the interviewed people stated that it's important to have confirmation right after the purchase has been made

for it to feel completed and that the customer purchase was successful. This enhances customer experience and adds trust. Completing the process by yourself can improve customer experience as it was stated in the theoretical part that a customer is part of creating her or his own customer experience and when it's created themselves it's more likely to increase the customer experience.

Rose et al. (2011) pointed out that aesthetics are an important factor. Among the interviewees most preferred were pictures. Pictures can be also used as marketing material by the customer company. Even so, one company offered a professional photographer to shoot the location. Interviewees stated that videos and photos were the best way of showcasing the destinations and were the most convincing factor.

“Professional photographers help both sides and that’s why it was perfect because it gives both of us business. Everybody wins.”

“When we are selling to our own customers the pictures are most appreciated. They give a better understanding about the destination.”

With the help of images, videos, new dimensions can be brought to the customer experience and such (Rose et al. 2012; Hoffman and Novak, 2009). Zhang et al. (2015) recognize that online channels, images and visual presentations are vital in creating an online customer experience. Images can be used to create different emotional states as well as show exactly what it looks like in the destination. In this case, it is very important that the images are real images and that the image does not give a wrong impression. Very valuable images are authentic pictures taken by customers on the spot, in which case people who have used the service in the past also recommend the services. As McLean (2017) stated, data quality is of great importance. In this case, the quality of the images and videos has a significant impact on the digital customer experience. With the help of videos, you can immerse yourself in the atmosphere and even walk through the landscapes in advance and experience what kind of experience or experience it is possible to achieve. This makes it much easier to recommend the service or sell the service to your own customers.

Like Zolkiewski et al (2017) note that B2B context needs a more strategic approach. This is one way to add more depth to the customer experience and thus stand out from the competition. In Addition Brodie et al. (2013) recognize that reinforced online customer experience contributes to enhanced brand engagement. In which case a good customer experience is combined with the brand in question, and then the customer thinks that a well-known brand guarantees a great digital customer experience, making transactions easy and meaningful and successful quickly and effortlessly.

Digital touchpoints

Digital touchpoints where the customers interact with the company vary between customers. Touchpoints that were mentioned were encounters via email, searching information from company websites, chat service and booking portal. In the travel industry booking portal is an extremely important touchpoint. Interviewees stated that when this doesn't work properly it causes frustration and uncertainty.

Reviews are highly regarded and appreciated. In the travel industry consumer reviews are helpful for B2B customers as well. They portray how popular and well managed the destination is.

“We follow customer reviews and of course it's better if there are many. These are good when making sure for example if the destination is as high end as our customer wants. Some places have different meanings for the word luxury so photos and reviews are a good way to see that.”

B2B customer references could be a valid point but in the travel industry they were not seen as that important; actually consumer reviews were seen as more valued. But one interviewed noted that references by larger companies such as Aurinkomatkat were appreciated. After a visit companies can ask reviews from client companies' end-customers. This way both companies get feedback.

None of the interviewees had responded to any feedback from digital services but answered to more traditional ones. B2B customers have high expectations and assume that selling companies understand their needs for using their services (Lemke et al. 2011). This can be the result of lack of feedback and not following how online

customer experience is formed. This cap could be narrowed with acquiring feedback and finding out that the service is actually serving the needs of the customers.

Employees' IT-skills become evident in online platforms. Based on the interviews older employees are struggling with that. Clear introductions were seen as important when it comes to using digital platforms. Perhaps an instruction video could be useful.

Aesthetics are important considering the reliability of the site. When pages were described as pleasant they added trust to the company and this way increased customer experience. Unpleasant design made respondents cautious of the page and even suspicious of the company. This can lead to customers finding another option. Aesthetics is also depending on how known the company is, when the company is known customers are more likely to forgive unpleasant aesthetics. New companies should invest in clear and good aesthetics because it increases trust and makes customers more likely to engage with the company.

For the interviewed an imaginary situation was created to make them ponder on crucial factors that they would need to know beforehand. Also an interesting fact was what makes them interested in the destination. Most of the interviewed stated that travelling fairs was their most preferred way of contacting companies or finding new destinations to their repertoire. Interviewees stated that mostly they look at information initially themselves before contacting the company. But the idea of researching the destination comes from different sources i.e. consumer.

B2B companies are lagging with online customer experience (Gibbons 2017) also interviewees ponder about why it is and that some companies don't have digital service portals. Lack of modern digital tools is seen as old fashioned. The difference between companies is clarified from the size of the companies. Lot of travel companies are small and don't have resources to have all digital platforms. In today's market all of the travel industry companies should offer at least websites and an Instagram account. Facebook and Instagram are the new yellow pages.

“Some companies don't offer a reservation portal or all of the changes for reservations need to be done over the phone. Some destinations have outdated pictures and it can be seen that they are taken from 2005. It feels ancient.”

Digital platforms are crucial for example for customers to be self-reliant.

“I rather do booking changes myself because then I can be certain that names and numbers are written correctly.”

B2B customers want to be able to make certain things by themselves. These tasks are making changes to their booking.

“I prefer to make reservations from platforms where the service works properly and is easy to use. If the booking portal doesn’t work I contact the company by email but for easy questions like where can I find my previous bookings a live chat would be nicer. We keep destinations in our repertory if everything works as promised. Enough of bad outcomes might result in ending the business relationship”

It was identified that emotions do impact online customer experience (Klaus 2013, Rose et al. 2012). With B2B clients this is less and interviewees stated that they have more patience to find out or wait for the answer. This could be because the purchase doesn’t involve as much emotion than in B2C purchase. When the site doesn’t work as promised or is hard to navigate increases the amount of contact with the company which will increase workload. When the number of contacts rises it is definitely a sign that the platform doesn’t work properly.

Customer engagement

When something goes wrong it usually ignites engagement. Which isn’t a good thing.

Interviewees said that they are more likely to forgive mistakes and contact the company if they knew a person from the company. This necessary didn’t have to be a person that they had met rather have emailed before. Also, they felt that even if they would have totally different problems they would rather interact with the same person. According to them this saves time. Online services have failed in the past due to lack of interaction with employees (McLean and Wilson 2016). For companies to overcome this challenge they have to create customer relationships if not in person, online. Customers are more likely to engage with the company when the company is engaging with them.

“I will contact the company if I have questions about the service.”

“Usually our company ignites the engagement rather than the company contacting us.”

When asked about digital engagement ways all of the interviewed mentioned email and online booking system. These activities usually include adding traveller information, making changes and cancelling the booking. Paying the booking came up half of the interviews. Engagement level between these activities varied.

Email divided opinions regarding it being a communication channel. The reason for this is that companies receive a lot of email, and it gets easily lost in the email traffic. Therefore, a platform that would hold all of the required documents such as reservation numbers could be held in one place. This would make it easier to control.

Digital engagement was seen as necessary in all of the cases but also seen as supporting activity. Personal contact was preferred when matter was urgent. But digital engagement was seen better because it's not tied to time or place. The basics were expected to be available on digital platforms. B2B customers appreciate convenience and fast service furthermore they are starting to prefer self-service channels. (Duboi and Clementino 2017).

“Sometimes digital service doesn't provide all options and personal contact is necessary.”

Another thing to rise from the interviews was that during corona companies have stopped communication. Which was seen as a negative but also understandable because of the state of the industry. Furthermore, contacting the customers with a newsletter when the destination opens would be a good idea.

“Digital services still shouldn't be 100% self-service. Personal contact is always appreciated.”

Service centricity is basically customer-oriented (Le Meunier-Fitz-Hugh et al. 2011) and the sales module is customer centric in the end. Right service delivery creates a channel for continuous engagement and communication which enhances customer

centricity with its features. Online module enables efficient two-way communication with all around the world easily.

“I have responded to some of the feedback but they were about how the accommodation was or how the activities were.”

Communication

First thing that came to mind for almost all interviewees when talking about engagement was communication with the company. Its most obvious way of engagement.

Also purchase frequency rose as one of the topics. It can be stated that customer relationships based on purchase activity could be categorized. Customers that bought frequently were in contact with the company by their initiative. Customers that bought once a year felt that they would like to see a newsletter about what is new at the destination.

“For some destinations we don’t have clients too often. It would be nice to have knowledge if something has changed. We do get an email if the booking portal has changed but that’s all.”

In the travel industry booking portals are usually run by third party companies. Hence asking them for data on how company clients are using the service could be valuable intel.

Interviewees pointed out that a lot of customers still prefer calling than having an online chat when they face problems online. Which could be a result of the age of the interviewed people. Most of the interviewees were above 40 years old. Younger people tend to prefer working on online orders. This can be because they have gotten used to everything being online. They are more likely to try longer and contact the company via online.

“I help my coworkers if they have a problem with the online service. Sometimes it’s just as simple as that they can’t find something.”

Even though it was earlier mentioned that most interviewees preferred calling, it burdens the company. Phone calls are good to uphold the customer relationship but in some cases the problems that the customers are facing should be solved online. It should be easy to engage with the company for example via chat.

Mobile applications were seen as useful and easy to use to follow travel destinations, but for purchasing purposes desktop environments were seen as more practical. This can be because the desktop feels more professional and official. Also, one interviewed person raised security concerns on mobile devices and thus she is using booking portals only on desktop devices. Easiness to engage with mobile phones could be because it is always accessible and easy to use. Two of the interviewed pointed out that the engagement level depended on what they were doing. Tasks that required attention were made on desktop devices and if problems occurred they were more likely to contact the company. But when tasks required less attention, a mobile environment was preferred.

“Covid-19 has been awful but now we are seeing light at the end of the tunnel. Some destinations have offered virtual tours that have been a positive surprise.”

Positive customer experience encourages customers to use the service again. Like Ulaga (2018) states that enhancing customer experiences is one way for B2B companies to differentiate.

“Engagement with services that are easy to use is much more nicer to use and perhaps I’m more willing to buy more side services”

Also Rose et al. (2011) recognized that re-purchase is one of the desirable outcomes of improved online customer experience.

Social media engagement

Social media engagement is common in the travel industry. Almost all of the interviewed said that they follow travel markets on their private social media accounts. Which usually means following by mobile device. Social media makes the engagement spontaneous.

“When making a booking and purchase I prefer a desktop computer. But I know that among travel guides mobile applications are trending. Social media I’m using on my phone.”

Customers even though they are B2B customers follow companies on their personal social media. Even people that aren’t responsible for social media in their company. This makes them follow the company the same way as a consumer. This makes travel companies' jobs easier because they don't have to have different accounts for B2B customers. This also means that customers are following it also in their free time. Interviewees stated that they preferred Instagram from all of the social media channels because of the pictures. Also tagging was seen as a useful way to promote destinations. Customers are using social media channels to engage as a consumer makes them hard to spot from the crowd. Interviewees noted that they like and comment as a consumer but when the post is co-operation or their intent is to promote, they do it from a company account. This is led by the principle that cooperation has to be profitable for both parties. Both have to get something out of it. Smaller travel companies use bigger destination channels to boost their sales and get more recognition. Most of the interviewees said that social media is a helpful tool to estimate the destination.

“Yes, I use social media as an aid to find out more about the destination. With the company social media account we try to follow all of the destinations. It’s a person who has the account so I follow on my own account only a couple of the destinations. I feel that I get updates on what happens in the destination on social media. ”

“I don’t follow any of the destinations on my own account but I know that our company account does.”

Engagement on mobile devices was more on the personal side. Interviewees considered that they get destination updates on social media channels which they usually don’t get from the company itself. Good thing is that companies can update their company clients and consumers at the same time. But companies have to acknowledge that not all of the customers follow them on social media or even if they do they might not visit the platform too often. Interviewees said about their usage of social media that some of them engage with the company on social media with private accounts and also on their free time.

Based on the interviews, a lot of information about the destinations is consumed by employees' free time while on social media. Social media is a sufficient way of spreading information. Also, it's cost efficient. It works both on B2B and B2C customers. The threshold to engage on social media is low and its boundaries between business to customer is fading.

“Sometimes I bump into a beautiful destination via social media or see that a friend of mine has visited an amazing place. These are good references to business clients as well. Even though most budgets are different. “

Form of social media is changing. It isn’t just looking and liking what your friends do, it's also consuming information even though the user doesn’t realize it. Thus, the action of B2B and B2C mix smoothly with each other. Now Instagram pages could be said to have must have, because pictures present evidence and add reliability of the destination but also can add value. In the future younger employees search for information completely differently. They use social media as their main source of information. Good aspect of social media is that it spreads the information fast and is accessible on all of the devices. By being active on social media it encourages customers to be as well.

Co-creation

McLean (2017) highlights that quality of information has a great impact on online customer experience and that online customer support is crucial. This is important when a person is looking for information, in which case it is very important that the information is correct and any additional information provided is up to date and is not recent years or even older. Especially when the customer makes the reservations themselves online, it is imperative that all the information is correct. If, in the event of a booking, the customer encounters a challenge or cannot find the information they need, there is a clear need for help from customer service that can help the customer immediately. If the customer does not get help with their problem then the booking will be interrupted and it may be that the customer in question is looking for the same service on another operator's website and will not return. This is shown also in the interviews. Interviewees implying that when they encounter a problem they would prefer chat over email when matter is urgent.

“If I can’t find something from the booking portal, I don’t look for it too long. I would rather contact the company. Usually via email, but chat would be better. Especially when matter is urgent.”

Like Lemon & Verhoef (2016) state that customers can also be a co-creator of their own experience and can upload their own images and videos to the online service, which allows the customer to obtain information about the services online from several different angles.

Meyer and Schwager (2007) mentioned that customer experience is shaped by service process, other customers, facilities and interactions with employees. In an online environment interaction with employees is mainly from chat or email. This limits the interaction because both sides might not be on the same page. Online customer experience is constructed when digitally produced service is used by any device (Filenius 2015). The digital customer experience depends on what device is used. Similarity in service cross devices makes the service more united and clearer. In this case, it is important to make sure that the customer experience is just as pleasant to use on any device. All of the interviewees mainly offered digital services on desktop

devices but recognized that employees on-site are using mobile applications. One interviewee added that mobile applications are perfect when a company tries to decrease the use of paper. Also the perk of mobile application is that it

“I know that among travel guides mobile applications are trending.”

“Mobile applications transfer data quickly and make it accessible wherever you are. You don’t have to carry a laptop or printed paper.”

Also Heinonen et al (2010) stated that customer experience is created by the customers and by their actions. Customer engagement highlights this because it requires actions from both sides. McLean and Wilson (2016) recognize that online services have failed in the past due to lack of interaction with employees. So it is especially important to get employees committed to communicating with customers and motivate them to develop digital customer service together with customers. One way is to activate real-time chat using a chat service, for example. This could help start a conversation and thus lower the bar to engage. Digital platforms provide several places for customers to interact and engage (Rose et al. 2012; McLean and Wilson 2016). Different channels offer different things such as online customer support and social interaction. Multi-channel environment creates more access to customer insights and customer experience driven behaviour patterns which enable companies to create responding experiences (Klaus & Nguyen 2013). Companies should still remember that it's not efficient to be on all available channels if they are poorly constructed and upheld.

Moreover, in the future, the possibilities are endless and only the imagination is the limit of what kind of customer experiences can be created digitally. Already, as a result of the Pandemic, several companies have created new services and virtual tourism in particular has taken great strides. For example, companies have purchased virtual trips for their own employees with personal day programs. These are a much cheaper option than taking the entire department on an actual trip. However, the end result can be very pleasant and not all people are always willing to go on a physical journey either due to lack of time or family relationships, for example.

6. Discussion & Conclusions

In the theoretical part, the theories on online customer experience, engagement throughout purchase decision making processes and differences between B2B and B2C experiences were discussed. These included online interactions and different touchpoints that are a part of the experience. B2B customers go through several touchpoints during their customer journey. Each of these points enable the possibility for engagement.

Because the Covid-19 situation has pushed certain business areas and has been tough for traveling it still pushes businesses to be innovative which results in new innovations especially on the digital side. But for the travel industry it has an impact in decreasing business. Now companies are bouncing back and focusing on customer relationships is more important than ever. Digital advancements can mean the way businesses use more remote working, and this has forced employees to get familiar with i.e. Teams or Skype. Even after the pandemic this can continue as a trend that negotiations are being made online. Hence the online customer experience value is rising in the future. Therefore, investments made now are paying off in the long run.

With communication, collaboration and helping customers to achieve their goals customer engagement can be achieved. Both parties benefit from customer engagement. Engaged customers receive more tailored service which improves online customer experience and results in more satisfied customers.

Even though the thesis focuses on digital customer experience in the interviews it became clear that online customer experience is definitely something that companies need to focus on. This pandemic might have boosted the development towards growing digital engagement that would have happened over time but slowly. Especially when gathering information, digital platforms' importance is rising. Along with traditional marketing, companies should have digital services as customers are expecting them. These include having interactive maps, newsletters and destination presenting. Especially traditional travel fairs are fading and now all around the world

companies are interested in adding destinations to their portfolio. Presentations, notably visuals, are key and can be presented via Zoom or Teams.

6.1 Theoretical Implications

This chapter evaluates if the theoretical findings support the empirical findings that were presented in earlier chapters. The results are reviewed by answering the main research question:

How does customer engagement influence online business-to-business customer experience in the travel industry?

To be able to answer it. It was divided into sub-questions that needed to be answered first. These sub-questions were:

RQ1: What is B2B online customer experience in the travel industry?

RQ2: What is customer engagement in the travel industry?

RQ3: What are the factors that trigger customer engagement in the travel industry?

Answer to RQ1 one was mainly formed based on theoretical findings. Online customer experience is customer experience which happens on any digital device (Borowski 2015, Filenius 2015). It consists of the company's online presence across channels and online offers (Rose et al. 2012). Even though it is part of the customer experience in the travel industry the entire customer experience can be only online. Empirical findings supported it that it happens online and it is the result of different dimensions such as ease of use and interactivity. Findings highlight that it's a never ending process unless business between companies ends. It is a learning process that needs constant updating.

The literature suggests that online customer experience is context-specific (Klaus 2014) which leads to having no generally applicable rules that are suited for every industry. Empirical findings supported it by highlighting that the difference in online experience between B2B and B2C in the travel industry is thin. Theories present that

B2B online experience isn't just based on one person and empirical findings suggest that in smaller travel companies it is.

B2B online customer experience's aim is to create service that flows and can be personalized at each touchpoint across different channels. This doesn't mean that every touchpoint needs to be customized. The goal is to create superior customer experience and long term customer relationships.

Answer to RQ2 according to theoretical findings is that customer engagement is customer's interactive experience (Brodie et al. 2011). Empirical findings suggest that in the travel industry engagement is mainly emails and chat. Customer engagement can be spontaneous or well planned. Either way companies should be prepared. Based on empirical findings customer engagement differs between destinations and size of the company. Some companies have one person handling all of the customer engagement and others engagement is divided based on tasks.

RQ3 is mainly answered in empirical findings that suggest that customer engagement is often started by the customer. Compared to theoretical findings where companies should foster customer engagement to even create customer engagement. Based on the interviews customers expect companies to engage more and offer digitally advanced tools to do so. Interviewees stated that when searching information or when something goes wrong are the most common reasons to engage with the company.

To answer the main research question, findings suggest that customer engagement and online customer experience have an effect on each other. The effect goes both ways. Engagement leads to positive online customer experience. Additionally, positive customer experience nurtures engagement. Engagement provides an opportunity for co-creation. Empirical findings suggest that in order for companies to create long-lasting relationships customer engagement is vital.

Customer engagement creates social learning from the client which leads to customer knowledge. This is understanding customer needs and makes it possible to tailor services for each customer. Communication moves information between parties and creates the possibility to go through concerns. Based on empirical findings, customer engagement can be spontaneous but requires effort from both selling and customer company. As we have learned that experiences are co-created with the customer. All

of this fosters a positive online customer experience which itself impacts on customer engagement. Based on literature satisfied customers are more likely to share information with the company. However empirical findings indicate that B2B customer engagement occurs especially when something is wrong. This highlights that engagement turns a possible negative experience to a positive. This is illustrated in Figure 4.

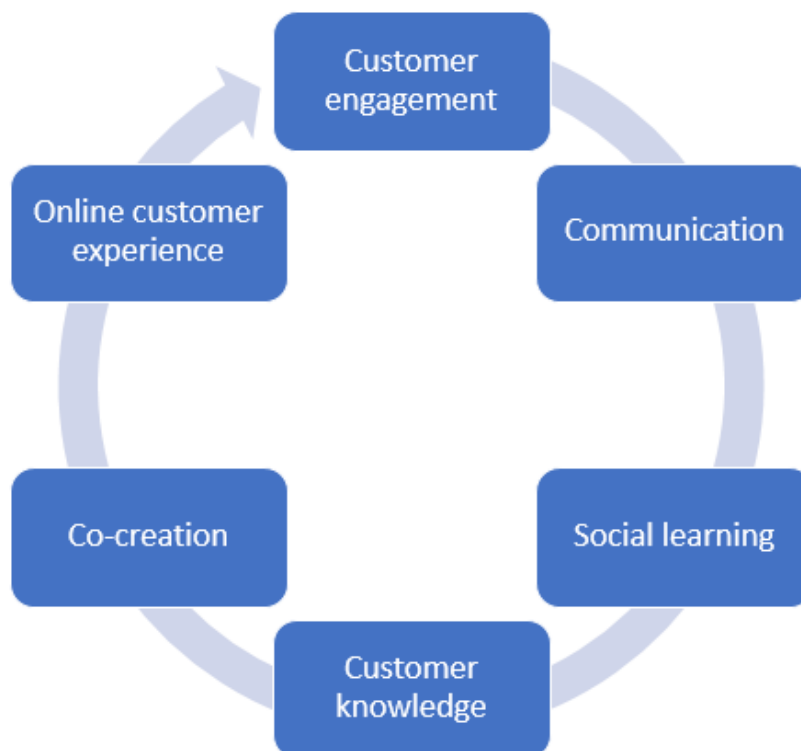


Figure 4. How customer engagement influences on online customer experience

There aren't many studies on how engagement affects customer experiences. The constructs are separately studied. But this study shows that they have connections and are even dependent on each other. The results support Hollyoake (2009) that engaged customers have more trust and are willing to wait for the answer longer. Earlier study (Lemon & Verhoef 2016) that customer engagement adds customer value. This study agrees that touchpoints act as elements where to engage and that can turn a negative experience to positive.

6.2 Managerial Implications

The goal of this chapter is to provide insight for businesses on how to improve online customer experience with engagement in a B2B context. As it was discussed earlier based on the findings online customer experience is heavily influenced by customers themselves and engagement has a significant role on it. The industry is changing to more digital in terms of communication. Therefore, the focus of the companies should be creating hassle free communication. This could mean engagement tools to interact more frequently with the customers.

Digital customer experience is part of the customer experience and based on findings a lot of companies have some work to do to update their digital services. For example chatbots could be useful during the booking process. New digital services are increasing but still email is considered the most effective and reliable communication channel. In the future customer service personnel will be expected to perform the role of consulting when they are more often asked questions where the answer isn't found online because more research is done by customers themselves. However, developing digital customer experience is helpful no matter the industry.

Companies need to be presented on several platforms as online customer experience relies heavily on digital platforms . Furthermore they need to be well managed. Empirical findings emphasized that communication is key even when business with the company is low.

Customer experience should be designed to be supporting the business. Both sides of the customer experience benefit from positive experience and hence it should be seen as investment worthy. Companies should invest in the future on mobile apps and online development. Furthermore, social media channels serve both B2C and B2B customers and their impact constantly rises especially when future B2B employees see these as self-evidence.

Based on the interviews the factor that creates negative experience is long answering times and if tools don't work properly. Also, the personal connections made it easier to result in bad experiences but also made customer contact more easier when problems surfaced. In a B2B context this is a good thing.

Gathering data of digital activities is still quite low in the industry, but with the booking process done digitally it offers a way to store data easily and real time updating. It just needs to be converted to bring value to the company. Digital platforms offer sales representatives tools to manage clients effectively and target their sales actions to specific audiences. Digital services should be easy to use and their best quality is that they can be used no matter the place or time. Managing customer relationships, the significance of video negotiation can grow.

This research is from the viewpoint of the travel destination, how they can improve customer experience on their online platform that they offer. This provides helpful insights for marketers and sales representatives. The findings can be used to create better platforms and content, to understand customers better and maybe classifying customers to sections. This way marketing functions could be targeted. Of course there are a lot of differences between travel industry companies and bigger companies that have resources to develop their online customer experience and have more engagement. This means that key takeaways from this research should be carried out according to resources that vary between companies.

Based on empirical findings companies have significant differences regarding digital tools. Some companies offer a variety of tools and some are lacking behind with no online customer experience at all. It is worthy to mention that resources between the companies vary as well and not all companies can uphold CRM-systems and marketing automation.

6.3 Limitations and future research

This study especially in the findings section focused on the travel industry and limits the results possibility to utilize another industry quite slim. The number of interviews was limited which might lower the reliability and possibility of making generalizations based on the results of the study. With the current pandemic situation, it could be interesting to do a comparison on how it has actually changed the engagement and communication in the industry. One limitation is that the interviewees weren't using the

same services, but every client has their unique online customer experience anyway. However similar factors can be detected. This study was conducted with only Finnish companies which limits that this study can't be used in other countries' clients.

In the study was mentioned value creation and customer journey. Customer journeys' interest in academic literature has gained more interest (Følstad & Kvale 2018). Hence future research could examine how customer value is created throughout the customer journey in a B2B context. This could potentially include how customer journey's are formed and how customer experience is delivered from it. Digital technologies make omnichannel customer experiences possible. Thus it is the future how the digital platforms are developing with their customers when added artificial intelligence to improve customer experiences.

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Appendix 1.

Appendix 1: Interview questions

Background information

Role in the organization

Size of the company

Work experience in the industry

Number of destinations in the repertoire

Interview questions

How would you define online customer experience?

What does customer experience mean to you?

Does the experience affect your customer relationship?

What factors/elements do affect customer experience? Positive or negative?

Describe a good online customer experience? Bad experience?

Have you responded to company feedback about online customer experience?

What are the external factors that may affect your decision making?

Which digital channels do you use when engaging with the selling company?

Do you utilize social media?

In which cases do you contact the company?

How would you describe your engagement with selling companies?

What kind of engagement has been useful for you?

What are the factors that make you engage with the selling company?

Which devices do you use to engage with the company?

How would you describe the communication between your companies?

Would you say that engagement makes a difference to customer experience?
How?

Do you have something else that you would like to talk about concerning the subject?