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MULTICHANNEL CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE MANAGEMENT ALONG B2B CUSTOMER JOURNEY

Examiners: Associate Professor Jonna Koponen
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ABSTRACT

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Digitalization and globalization have raised the competition between companies due to increased accessibility. This has shifted companies to seek competitive advantages from various perspectives even more actively. The multichannel environment fostered by digitalization offers companies numerous ways to interact with their customers. The current research of multichannel customer journeys and experiences is mainly focused on studying how they are forming. Still, it lacks contributions of its management and challenges emerging in the process, which this research aims to supplement.

This qualitative study was conducted as a single case study to gain in-depth information about the topic by interviewing two company representatives working on the topic. Additionally, to define the challenges and opportunities emerging in the process, this study aimed to increase B2B customer experience management knowledge. Interview answers were analyzed and then from which the findings were derived. The findings present a clear picture of challenges and opportunities emerging in multichannel customer experience management. Based on the findings, recommendations for future research are made. The study was conducted in a Finnish IT- and business consulting company and thematic content analysis was used to dissect the findings.

The findings of this study strengthen the conceptualization of the multidimensional concept of customer experience management and portray the identified challenges relating to managing the multichannel customer experience. The findings also emphasize the importance of human-related factors in customer experience management, especially in the service business. The management actions towards positive customer experiences lead to higher customer satisfaction, which fosters higher customer loyalty.

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Digitalisaatio ja globalisaatio ovat lisänneet yritysten välistä kilpailua laajentuneen saavutettavuuden myötä. Tämä on saanut yritykset etsimään kilpailuetuja erilaisista näkökulmista entistä aktiivisemmin. Digitalisaation luoma monikanavainen ympäristö tarjoaa yrityksille useita tapoja vuorovaikuttaa asiakkaidensa kanssa. Nykyinen monikanavaisiin asiakaspolkuihin ja -kokemukseen keskittynyt tutkimus on rajoittunut lähinnä tutkimaan niiden muodostumista, eikä niinkään huomioi johtamista ja siihen liittyviä haasteita. Tämä tutkimus pyrkii täydentämään tätä tunnistettua tutkimusaukkoa.

Tämä kvalitatiivinen tutkimus toteutettiin yksittäisenä tapaustutkimuksena, tavoitteena saada syvällistä tietoa aiheesta. Tutkimus toteutettiin haastatteleamalla kohdeyrityksestä kahta aiheen parissa työskentelevää henkilöä. Haasteiden ja mahdollisuuksien määrittämisen lisäksi tämän tutkimuksen tavoitteena oli lisätä tietoa B2B-asiakaskokemuksen johtamisesta. Haastattelujen vastaukset analysoitiin tarkoin, jonka jälkeen tutkimuksen tulokset johdettiin niistä. Tulokset antavat selkeän kuvan monikanavaisen B2B asiakaskokemuksen johtamisesta sekä sen hallinnan haasteista ja mahdollisuuksista kohdeyrityksessä. Tuloksista johdettiin suositukset tulevaisuuden tutkimukselle. Tutkimus toteutettiin suomalaisessa IT- ja bisneskonsultointiyrityksessä. Aineiston analysointiin käytettiin temaattista sisältöanalyysiä.

Tämän tutkimuksen tulokset vahvistavat monikanavaisen asiakaskokemuksen johtamisen käsitteellistämistä ja siihen liittyvien haasteiden tunnistamista. Tulokset korostavat myös inhimillisten tekijöiden merkitystä asiakaskokemuksen muodostumisessa erityisesti palveluliiketoiminnassa. Johdon toimet kohti positiivisempaa asiakaskokemusta lisäävät asiakastyytyväisyyttä, mikä puolestaan lisää asiakasuskollisuutta.

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In Kauniainen, June 21st, 2021

Maija-Leena Peltomaa

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LIST OF SYMBOLS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AI	Artificial Intelligence
B2B	Business-to-business
B2C	Business-to-consumer
CEM	Customer Experience Management
CX	Customer Experience

1 INTRODUCTION

Companies have shifted their focus more to customers and their needs. Focus on customer needs has broadened the perspective from focusing only on independent transactions between the company and its customers to picturing journeys. Due to the accessibility created by digitalization and globalization, the competition has risen, and firms have started to seek competitive advantages and maintain customer relationships to engage their customers. One way to seek this kind of competitive advantage is to create exclusive customer experience by managing the interactions with the customers. Digitalization has also increased the numbers, and ways firms interact with their customers. The increase in ways to interact with customers creates the multichannel environment in which the firms are currently operating. These interactions in multiple channels are at the end creating the overall customer experience which on the other hand fosters long-term customer relationships. Previous studies (Becker & Jaakkola 2020; Lemon & Verhoef 2016; Puccinelli, Goodstein, Grewal, Price, Raghuram & Stewart 2009; Kuehnl, Jozic & Homburg 2019) have intensely focused on researching multichannel customer experience in the B2C (business-to-consumer) (De Keyser, Verleye, Lemon, Keiningham & Klaus 2020, 447) context and even more specifically on the retail industry, but the B2B (business-to-business) context remains relatively less studied.

This research is conducted as a single case study focusing on customer experience in the case company to study the management of multichannel customer experience and its potential opportunities and challenges in the case company. The study is conducted by interviewing the case company's employees involved with customer experience management. To be able to examine the customer experience management, in-depth interviews are the method of collecting data. The case company is a Finland-based IT- and business consulting company.

This study aims to identify potential challenges and opportunities in multichannel B2B customer experience management and answer the identified research gap. Therefore, this study is conducted from the supplier point of view to understand the challenges and opportunities in customer experience management in the case company. This study also aims to supplement existing studies by providing empirical research of multichannel B2B customer experience

management in different phases of the customer journey. Altogether based on the existing literature and empirical data, this study seeks to identify the challenges and opportunities there are in managing customer experience in business markets. The following literature review provides a clear overview of existing literature around the topic. The literature review introduces what has been said and studied in the academic literature about multichannel customer experience management in the B2B context. Additionally, it presents the challenges and the opportunities identified in managing the overall experience.

1.1 Preliminary literature review

This literature review aims to provide a brief overview of the existing literature about the topic of this study. The review is conducted by reading and getting to know academic articles approaching the issue from various perspectives. The first articles about customer experience date back to 1980, when the concept was initially introduced by Holbrook & Hirschman (1982). Since then, the phenomenon has received much attention from both academics and practitioners. This literature review presents what has been said and studied in the academic literature about multichannel customer experience management and what kind of challenges and opportunities have been identified to relate to customer experience management in the B2B context.

Instead of looking at independent transactions between firms and their customers, both research and practice have started to concentrate on the big picture; the overall customer experience (Homburg, Jozic, & Kuehnl, 2017). Customer experience has become one of the leading trends in marketing, due to which creating, managing, and understanding the customer experience has become more crucial for businesses (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Both research and practice have noted the vital role of customer experience in marketing management (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020). Customer experience is a strategic tool to maintain long customer relationships (Homburg et al., 2017). Customer experience focuses on fostering positive feelings for the customer during the purchase by offering experiences and shifting from materialism to experiential shopping and purchasing (Schmitt, Brakus & Zarantonello, 2015). This shift has not only taken place in consumer markets but also affected business markets. To serve customers better on each platform, firms have started to seek the solutions

for ultimate customer experience. Acquiring new platforms and channels to serve the customers is bringing us to a multichannel environment, which is a topic that involves almost every company operating currently.

Multichannel customer experience

Focusing on overall customer experience over independent interactions has become one of the key topics in marketing both in literature and in practice. The concept of customer experience is rather abstract as it is not only based on the transactions but also formed by the social interactions and relationships (Bolton, McColl-Kennedy, Cheung, Gallan, Orsingher, Witell & Zaki, 2018). Thus, managing the customer experience is not limited to focus on one level in the firm but is instead seen as a cause of the firm's resources such as internal culture, strategic decisions, and capabilities (Homburg et al., 2017). Even if managing customer experience is seen as an opportunity, the complexity of the concept is bringing challenges to utilize it and picture the path to practical customer experience. Witell, Kowalkowski, Perks, Raddats, Schwabe, Benedettini & Burton (2020) have researched the challenges emerging in customer experience management (CEM) from a theoretical perspective via viewing the concept through the customer journey. The multidimensional and multichannel nature of customer experience is creating challenges for managing one. These are the issues analyzed in this study to increase understanding of multichannel customer experience management in different phases of the customer journey. One way to map and visualize the customer experience is to use customer journey by following the customer's buying process (Lemon & Verhoef 2016).

Studies have mainly focused on researching multichannel customer experience management, in consumer setup and more specifically in the retail industry (Berry, Carbone & Haeckel 2002; Puccinelli, Goodstein, Grewal, Price, Raghuram & Stewart 2009; Verhoef, Lemon, Parasuraman, Roggeveen, Tsiros & Schlesinger 2009). Business-to-business (B2B) firms have adopted the idea of customer experience only recently (McLean 2017), which explains the lack of research. Even if it is typical for B2B firms to tailor the products for customers' needs, customer experience offers a broader perspective on firms' resources. Current studies focus on viewing the multichannel environment from the consumer perspective, which gives a solid base for this study to research multichannel customer experience management in the B2B environment.

Managing customer experience

Customer experience management focuses on the customer and brings together value creation for the customer by utilizing the tactical and strategic goals of the firm (Zolkiewski, Story, Burton, Chan, Gomes, Hunter-Jones, O'Malley, Peters, Raddats, & Robinson, 2017). Customer experience management is a concept of marketing management describing the strategic application of the customer experience concept (Homburg et al., 2017). Managing customer experience can be seen as a strategic tool for firms to seek competitive advantages. Adopting experiential marketing, which concentrates on experience, has become more crucial due to the raised competition and value-focused, aware customers (Ceessay 2020). Homburg et al. (2017) identified three primary resources of customer experience management in their framework: cultural mindset, strategic directions, and firm capabilities to describe it as an orientation. The cultural mindset means the shift from traditional customer relationship management and market orientation towards the customer experience mindset. Strategic directions, on the other hand, are covering up the strategic actions towards value creation. Lastly, the firm capabilities cover the capability of shifting the systems for dynamically responding to critical ones. To be able to design, monitor, and adopt the touchpoints between the supplier and the customer. (Homburg et al., 2017).

Studies have identified a research gap in empirical research on customer experience management in B2B settings (Witell et al., 2020). Majority of the definitions and conceptualizations are highly focused on consumers. As mentioned before, to look at the challenges and opportunities that B2B firms are facing in managing the customer experience, it is crucial to understand the elements of multichannel customer experience management.

Customer journey

Customer experience can be examined by creating a customer journey map of the firms' business (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Zomerdijk and Voss (2011) pictured the customer journey through touchpoints, the interactions between suppliers and its customer. Picturing journeys is helping to analyze the customer experiences and find out the areas to be improved (Zomerdijk and Voss ,2011). Due the identified limitations of research in B2B customer experience management, this study is focusing on researching multichannel customer experience management in different phases of customer journey and challenges and opportunities relating to managing a compelling customer experience. As mentioned, this study is

conducted from the suppliers' point of view, focusing on the company perspective. Companies are used to look at the processes through their point of view, internal structures, and departments, making the customer journey mapping challenging, the customer point of view should also be noticed. (Baesens 2017). To create such a model, firms need much information about their customers in which digitalization and big data can be helpful (Santoro, Bertoldi, & Ciampi, 2019).

Digitalization has changed the world, and it has changed the B2B buying process (Steward, Narus, Roehm & Ritz, 2019). Digitalization has brought us to the point that B2B companies have also started to utilize for example social media in different stages of the buying process (Hoda, Vella & Abrat, 2019). Thus, increasing the number of touchpoints across customer journeys. Digitalization has also emerged countless ways for companies to interact with their customers yet also to improve internal communication (Ruiz-Alba, Guesalaga, Ayestarán, Morales & Mediano, 2019). Therefore, in today's business world, companies operate in a multichannel environment. In addition to that, digital has also speeded up the shift from transactional buying and focus on a single transaction to customer journey thinking, picturing various customer touchpoints over different customer journeys in the B2B field too (Steward et al., 2019). Digitalization offers multiple opportunities to companies to utilize innovations to create more compelling customer experiences (Vakulenko et al., 2019). As it appears, digitalization has not only accelerated the customer journey thinking, but it is also offering firms various ways to improve their customer experience. Besides the mentioned opportunities, digitalization offers a multichannel environment, creating both challenges and opportunities in customer experience management regarding data usage and data utilization in decision making (Stone, Hobbs & Khaleeli, 2002).

As noted, the focus on customer experience is arising. Firms desire to serve their customer in the best possible ways, along the number of touchpoints is occurring (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). This, which creates the multichannel environment in which the customer journeys are forming. Instead of including every possible touchpoint into their customer journey map, firms should concentrate on detailing the important ones (Rosenbaum et al., 2017). To define the crucial ones, this research focuses on the challenges appearing in multichannel customer experience management in different phases of the customer journey. Designing a compelling customer journey is critical for businesses as it strongly affects customer loyalty (Kuehnl,

Jozic & Homburg, 2019). Therefore, effective customer journey mapping is raising customer engagement (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

Challenges and opportunities in multichannel customer experience management

Customer experience is a fostering factor of success and competitive advantage (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). The opportunities multichannel customer experience management is offering companies vary significantly. Nevertheless, the multichannel environment is also generating challenges to capture the ultimate value of customer experience management. The following chapter will briefly overview the opportunities and potential difficulties emerging in B2B multichannel customer experience management. Identifying the challenges also gives a solid base for improving the customer experience by turning the challenges into opportunities by tackling the challenges. B2B customer journeys tend to be even more complex than consumer ones since they involve multiple actors and employees in different roles. Therefore, B2B customer experience is more of crossing experiences than a singular simplistic journey (Zolkiewski et al., 2017). Consequently, this study aims to recognize the challenges and opportunities in utilizing customer experience as a strategic management tool.

Witell et al. (2019) have identified five challenges related to B2B customer experience in their study. Challenges the study is introducing are 1. “mismatches in business relationships,” 2. “siloes customer experiences,” 3. “mismatches across the customer journey,” 4. “lack of touchpoint control” and 5. “dynamics of customer experiences” (Witell et al., 2019). As the research of Witell et al. (2019) is entirely based on theoretical knowledge, this study could complement their findings and see if the academically recognized challenges apply to real-life cases in practice. Therefore, this study aims to provide empirical evidence of the challenges and to complete the theory.

B2B customer experience appearing to be rather uncharacterized compared to the interest and value it. Customer experience being at the center of both research and practice in the field of marketing management (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020). The limitation of the narrow conceptualization of customer experience to describe the B2B customer experience are a valid base for studying more characteristics relating to B2B customer experience management. To analyze and acknowledge the customer experience management, it is crucial to picture the customer journey to find the key elements and the possible challenges (Zomerdijk

et al., 2011). Utilizing the innovation in touchpoints can be seen as a competitive advantage (Vakulenko et al., 2019). Studies have identified possible challenges of B2B customer experience management related to mismatches across the customer journey and business relationships and the lack of touchpoint control (Witell et al., 2019); this study aims to examine if these hold true. Customer experience is formed by the interactions between the company and its customers (Homburg et al., 2017), and emotions play a significant part in it (Pandey & Mookerjee, 2018), which is challenging the measurement of customer experience. To recognize the challenges defining the critical touchpoints and acknowledge the problematic ones is playing a significant role.

The identified challenges cover up several phases and factors related to customer experience management. The potential challenges were identified with a relatively broad perspective to study the emerging challenges with no pre-expectations. The currently identified challenges are related to connection and control of the touchpoints (Witell et al., 2019; Stone et al. 2002; Bolton et al., 2018), relationship and emotions related factors (Witell et al., 2019; Pandey & Mookerjee, 2018), and practical usage of data (Chatterjee, Ghosh, Chaudhuri & Nguyen, 2019; Stone, Hobbs & Khaleeli, 2002). This study aims to recognize the challenges related to multichannel customer experience management in the case company.

Literature has researched the challenges emerging in customer experience management in a multichannel environment, but the opportunities relate to it have not been identified as clearly as arising challenges. This study aims not only to map out the challenges to overcome but also to seek opportunities in utilizing this phenomenon in strategic management. Overall, the significant gain in using customer experience in strategic management is customer satisfaction and, in the end, customer loyalty (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Thus, focusing on fulfilling the customer needs is centric in customer experience management. One way to do so is to redesign the products and services by co-creating them with the customer (Verleye, 2015). Co-creating is one of the opportunities this literature review identifies in multichannel customer experience management by seeking the core competencies and creating value in multiple ways (Payne, Storbacka & Frow, 2008). There are numerous touchpoints in the multichannel customer experience along the journey where a supplier could create more value for its customer. One way to create value for the customer is by utilizing data to improve the overall experience. Thus, another opportunity in multichannel customer

experience management is practical data usage, which was also mentioned as a challenge. Harnessing data for designing innovations to manage better customer journeys can be seen as an opportunity in multichannel customer experience (Zaki, 2019).

To summarize the issues and eventualities in the B2B customer experience, the following table (Table 1) represents the challenges and opportunities the literature has currently acknowledged. The difficulties identified cover up several phases and factors to create and maintain a compelling customer experience. The potential challenges were identified with a relatively broad perspective to study the emerging challenges with no pre-expectations. The currently identified challenges are related to connection and control of the touchpoints (Witell et al., 2019; Stone et al. 2002; Bolton et al., 2018), relationship and emotions related factors (Witell et al., 2019; Santosh Kumar et al., 2018), and practical usage of data (Chatterjee et al., 2019; Stone et al., 2002). This study aims to recognize the challenges relating to multichannel customer experience management.

The identified opportunities, on the other hand, are somewhat relating to the identified challenges. Therefore, conquering the challenges might as well be seen as an opportunity. However, the opportunities literature has identified are creating value to the customer by co-creating the products or services in co-operation with the customer (Verleye 2015), identifying and concentrating on the core competencies of their business (Payne et al., 2008), and harnessing the data for designing innovation in critical touchpoints (Zaki 2019).

Challenges /Opportunities	Challenges and opportunities recognized in the literature related to CEM	Study
Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mismatches in business relationships - Siloed customer experiences - Mismatches across the customer journey - Lack of touchpoint control - Dynamics of customer experiences 	Witell et al., 2019
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Harnessing data 	Chatterjee et al., 2019
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Measurement in terms of the significant role of emotions 	Santosh Kumar et al., 2018
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Multichannel management 	Stone et al., 2002
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Connectivity of all touchpoints 	Bolton et al., 2018
Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Co-creating value 	Verleye, 2015
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Core competencies 	Payne et al., 2008
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Harnessing data to design innovations 	Zaki, 2019

Table 1 Challenges and opportunities related to multichannel CEM

1.2 Theoretical framework

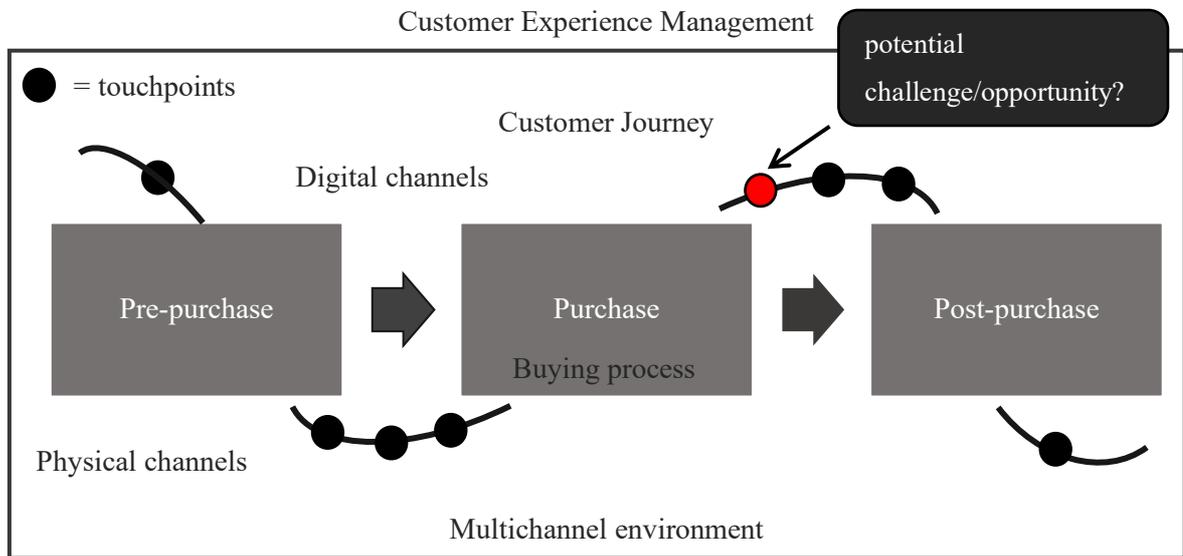


Figure 1 Theoretical framework of the thesis

The theoretical framework (Figure 1) contains the context, central concepts, and study theories. The theoretical framework aims to describe the relationships and relations between them. The context of the study is a multichannel B2B environment. This study includes customer experience, customer experience management, customer journey, multichannel customer management, and industrial buying process, and the theories related to these concepts will be introduced. To examine both the management and arising challenges and opportunities, it is crucial to understand how the elements relating to multichannel customer experience. The theoretical framework describes this from the supplier's perspective to picture the elements forming the customer experience and its management. The framework contains vital concepts such as customer experience, customer experience management, customer journey, customer buying process, and multichannel environment.

The theoretical framework consists of all the concepts that relate to multichannel customer experience management. It is crucial to picture the process to view the multichannel customer experience and the challenges and opportunities in the empirical part. The framework is visualizing the overall environment where the customer experience is forming. It includes the customer buying process through which the customer journey is formed. Since the customer journey involves several channels, it creates a multichannel environment, and these

are the elements supplier can affect customer experience by managing those. The potential challenges or opportunities in the process may emerge in any spot.

1.3 Aim of the study and research questions

The initial goal of this study is to increase the knowledge about multichannel customer experience management in different phases of the customer journey in the B2B concept since the literature is lacking research of managing B2B customer experience. Furthermore, this study aims to identify potential challenges and opportunities in the multichannel B2B customer experience management to answer the identified research gap. Thus, this study also seeks to recognize the potential challenges and opportunities emerging in the process. Accordingly, to the preliminary literature review, the research questions were formed. The research questions of this study are:

RQ 1. “How multichannel customer experience is managed in different phases of the customer journey?”

RQ 2. “What kind of challenges and opportunities multichannel character of customer experience management is generating along the customer journey?”

1.4 Definition of key concepts

To gain a solid understanding of the topics, the following part of this research plan will give precise definitions for the fundamental concepts of this study. The main concepts of the study are customer experience, multichannel customer management, customer experience management, customer journey, and customer buying process. These concepts are defined below.

The customer experience (CX)

Customer experience is customer's reactions and responses to offered stimuli (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020). Customer experience focuses on fostering positive feelings for customers by using innovations to create experiences during the purchase and shifting towards experiential shopping instead of materialism (Schmitt et al., 2015).

Customer experience management (CEM)

Customer experience management is a concept of marketing management describing the strategic application of the customer experience concept (Homburg et al., 2017). Customer experience management is bringing together value creation for the customer and aims to achieve the tactical and strategical goals of the firm by focusing on improving the customer's experience (Zolkiewski et al., 2017).

Customer journey

This study examines the customer experience by mapping the firms' business's customer journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Customer journey is picturing and gathering all the interactions and touchpoints between the firm and its customer to analyze the overall customer experience and seek whether there are improvement areas (Zomerdiik & Voss, 2011).

Multichannel customer management

"Multichannel customer management is the design, deployment, coordination, and evaluation of channels through which firms and customers interact, to enhance customer value through effective customer acquisition, retention, and development." (Neslin, Grewal, Leghorn, Shankar, Teerling, Thomas & Verhoef, 2006, 95).

B2B customer buying process

The industrial customer buying process describes the phases customer is going through during the organizational decision-making process (Webster, 1965), which has evolved from single transactions to journey thinking (Steward, Narus, Roehm & Ritz, 2019).

1.5 Delimitations of the study

This study aims to find out the opportunities and challenges emerging in the multichannel customer experience management in the B2B industry. Defining the elements and factors related to the case company's customer experience is crucial. Since the study is conducted as a single case study, these impacts are not applicable to conclude that these apply to other companies.

This research is conducted as a single case study to deepen understanding of the nature of the multichannel customer experience management and the challenges and opportunities within the case company. This means that the findings and the results of this study are not generally valid as they are based on specific description of the customer experience in the case company. Furthermore, the single case study method delimits the findings to employ the industry in which the case company operates. This delimits the study to focus on the Finnish IT- and business consulting industry. In addition to the limitations caused by the research method, the data collection method delimits this study. The findings are based on interviews which are giving a picture of the multichannel customer experience management as respondents' experiences and interpretations.

1.6 Research methodology

This chapter is presenting the research methodology and data collection plan of the empirical part of the study. First, the research methodology is presented and discussed, followed by introducing a plan of chosen data collection and data analysis methods. The primary purpose of this study is to increase the knowledge about managing multichannel customer experience in different phases of the customer journey.

To deepen the knowledge of multichannel customer experience management, this study aims to identify potential challenges and opportunities emerging in different phases of the customer journey in the case company. To gain information about the nature of the customer experience management, a qualitative research method was chosen. The qualitative research method supports the aim of this study to gain a deep understanding of the multichannel customer experience management in the B2B environment and yet to be able to examine the nature of the possible challenges and opportunities appearing in the process. This study was conducted as a single case study to truly understand the nature of multichannel customer experience management in the case company. The single case study method gives this study opportunity to study multichannel customer experience management in-depth in one firm, which supports the aim of this study.

Since the complex multidimensional character of customer experience the measurement is somewhat based on input-output evaluation than specific scales and indicators (Zolkiewski et al., 2017). Therefore, this study is utilizing the qualitative research method. The qualitative research method allows viewing the multichannel customer experience management from the perspective of employees involved in the process and is based on each experience of it. Whereas quantitative research, on the other hand, typically has pre-assumption and expectations presented in the form of hypotheses (Mat Roni Merga & Morris, 2020), which might be delimiting factors for this study's possible outcomes. This study describes the multichannel customer experience management in the case company, and the potential issues and opportunities related to it emerging in different phases of the B2B customer journey.

The data collection method of this study chosen to be interviews. Interviews support the aim of this study to find out the nature of the multichannel customer experience in a case company. Interview was conducted as group interview and in semi-structured form. This means that the questions are pre-planned, but there are no pre-assumptions for the answers, but the solutions will be based on the experiences and thoughts of interviewees about the matter of this study within the case company (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998). The interview will be organized online, which eases contacting the potential interviewees. The interview includes 22 open questions related to this study's research questions.

1.7 Structure of the study

The structure of this study is organized as follows. The following chapter will introduce a literature review on the fundamental concepts of this study. Initially, the multichannel customer experience concept is presented to create a comprehensive understanding of the related elements and picturing the customer journey. The second part of the literature chapter will view the customer experience as a strategical management tool. Additionally, the chapter will also introduce the industrial buying process and measurements and quality of customer experience as a management tool. Lastly, the literature review will go through the identified challenges and opportunities in customer experience management.

The third chapter will present the research design and chosen methods, which explains the data collection and analysis practices, presenting the information about the case company and touches on the reliability and validity. Finally, chapter 4 will deliver the empirical results of this research and introduce them in more detail in viewing the management of multichannel B2B customer experience, identifying the emerging challenges and opportunities, and concluding with a summary of the revised model of theoretical framework. The last part discussion and conclusion will then present the theoretical contributions, managerial implications, and limitations of the study and present justifications for future research.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review will introduce multichannel customer experience management and related factors in more detail according to the existing literature. This chapter will also comprehensively review the current literature of customer journey concept to create a clear understanding of the topic. This literature review will summarize the crucial factors of multichannel customer experience management and customer journey mapping. Additionally, this chapter will overview the challenges and opportunities that studies have identified to relate to multichannel customer experience.

The development of the B2B buying process has shifted from transactional buying towards journey thinking (Steward et al., 2019). Customer centricity is seen as a competitive advantage; rather than thinking of each transaction as an individual sale, firms have started to view and develop their businesses more customer-centric to achieve this competitive advantage (Habel, Kassemeier, Alavi, Haaf, Schmitz, & Wieseke, 2020). Customer centricity is highlighted by focusing the customer needs on more detail, by understanding and satisfying each customers' needs and wants. In contrast, overall market orientation is more concentrated on broader segments (Sheth, Sisodia, & Sharma, 2000). Customer centricity fosters solution-seeking to fulfill customers' needs and wants, which is improving the firm's performance (Frankenberger, Weiblen & Gassmann, 2013). Therefore, firms have started to focus on customer experiences.

Due to the rising competition, firms have started to seek ways to offer value to the customers and gain competitive advantages. Palmer (2010) introduces an evolution for predicting differentiation based on the study of Christopher, Payne, Ballantyne, and Pelton (1995). The oriented development starts from searching differential factors from tangible product features. The second phase is to differentiate offering service-based benefits. The third step is to seek relationship-based differentiation, and the last step is to base the differentiation on experiential values. This has grown the interest in the experiential offerings and creation of customer experiences (Palmer, 2010). This study will focus on the last step of seeking differentiation through creating experiential value to customers by focusing on customer experience management².

2.1 Multichannel customer experience

The following chapter will give a comprehensive overview of the multichannel customer experience. Customer experience is a rather abstract concept since its' multidimensional character (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Customer experience is capturing all the factors that are leading to the overall experience as the overall occurrence. Customer experience was introduced for the first time nearly 40 years ago by Holbrook & Hirschman (1982), viewing consumers from the experiential perspective. Considering customer relationship from a wider perspective, Lemon & Verhoef (2016, p. 71) have defined customer experience to be "a multidimensional construct focusing on a customer's cognitive, emotional, behavioral, sensorial and social responses" to a stimulus created by the firm and its offerings. These stimuli are covering by firms' goods, services, and relationship quality, which are all related to customer loyalty (Čater & Čaterm, 2010; Kittur & Chatterjee, 2020). The goal of customer experience is to lead to create customer satisfaction (Srivastava & Kaul, 2014) which can be positively related to customer loyalty (Goncalves, Sampaio & Ribeiro Soriano, 2012). Therefore, focusing on these elements of customer experience can offer sources of competitive advantage (Verhoef et al., 2009); as previously mentioned, it is a tool to maintain long-term relationships (Homburg et al., 2017).

Customer experience is a chain of interactions forming the overall experience for the customer (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Thus, customer experience is formed in a multichannel environment through several interactions between the company and its customers. Customer experience can be described as an outcome of all the attitudes, perceptions, and feelings the customer has gone through during the purchase process (Jain, Aagja, & Bagdare, 2017). These cognitions are formed due to social interaction, physical products, and used software (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). So, the emotional, behavioral, and cognitive outcomes result from what has been seen or heard and the development of the overall value chain, which affects the end product or service (Jayaraman & Luo, 2007). As customer experience mainly focuses on creating positive feelings (Schmitt et al., 2015), it is seeing as a strategic tool for maintaining long-term customer relationships (Homburg et al., 2017).

The multichannel nature of customer experience is related to digital channels and all the interactions between the company and its customer. Emotions also play a significant role in

customer experience and B2B decision making (Santosh Kumar & Mookerjee, 2018). Albeit emotions are not straightforwardly explaining the formed experience, negative feelings might not constantly develop negative experiences, and positive emotions might not always lead to positive experiences (Aikaterini, Hickman & Klaus, 2020). Not only that, but the customers gain emotions created by touchpoints; they also feel discrete emotions that the firms might not be able to impact (McCull-Kennedy, Zaki, Lemon, Urmetzer & Neely, 2019). This embodies the complexity of the customer experience. The complexity of customer experience leads to the fact that qualitative methods measuring the experience often do customer experience measurement is somewhat challenging (Palmer, 2010).

Focus on customer experience is aiming to foster positive feelings along the relationship shifting from materialism to creating experiences (Schmitt et al., 2015). As well as the example of the shift from materialism to experience evolves consumer-based view, overall, the aspects of customer experience have also been studied more in the B2C area; however, the nature of customer experience in B2C differentiate from B2B overall (Österle, Kuhn, & Henseler, 2018). Thus, B2B customer experience differs in a way that business buyers might have made the purchase decision already before meetings. Consumers, on the other hand, might purchase items impulsively. This study is focusing on viewing customer experience from the supplier point of view in B2B business, which delimits to view the concept from that specific aspect. Even if the differences between B2C and B2B have been acknowledged, the forming experiences at the end do not differ that dramatically, as individual employees gain and generate very similar experiences with the customers as consumers in the B2C context (Witell et al., 2020).

Acknowledging the multichannel environment to manage customers is crucial since it is overall creating firm appearance. The multichannel environment covers all; designing, deploying, coordinating, and evaluating the channels used in the firm to interact with the customers. This aims to improve and create customer value through active customer management development, new customer acquisitions, and customer retention. The main benefit of multichannel customer management is creating is long-lasting customer relationships. On the other hand, the challenges have been studied to integrate the data, understand customer behavior, evaluate the channels, resource allocations between the channels, and coordinate strategies. The multichannel environment focuses not only on digital channels but also

physical ones as focusing on customer experience as a customer entity. (Neslin, Grewal, Leghorn, Shankar, Teerling, Thomas & Verhoef, 2006).

Initially viewing the multichannel customer experience picturing the crucial elements and constructs forming the customer experience is helping to develop the management. To manage multichannel customer experience, it is significant to determine whether the customer experience is positive or negative; the customer experience must be measured. Since the multidimensional abstract complex nature (Verhoef et al., 2009) of the concept of customer experience, it is yet challenging to measure. Since the complexity of the B2B buying process (Steward et al., 2019) and the possibility for a separate end user from the purchase process, it makes it even harder to measure the overall customer experience truly. Lemon & Verhoef (2016) conceptualized customer experience as a dynamic process including all the different phases of the purchase process: pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase. This study will also utilize these phases to outline the process. The measurements of customer experience are introduced in more detail later in chapter 2.2.3 Measurement & quality.

Customer experience forms effective, physical, cognitive, social, and sensorial responses and reactions to offered stimuli (De Keyser, Lemon, Klaus, & Keiningham, 2015). These responses and responses to firms' offerings affect customer attitudes and perceptions (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Being able to view the replies more effectively and determine whether those are positive or negative, it is essential to picture a shared understanding of how supplier-managed actions affect these and how these can be measured. These factors also affect customer satisfaction and customer loyalty, which form customer experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Customer satisfaction as a precursor for practical customer experience fosters positive word-of-mouth, increasing profitability and customer retention, and market share growth (Anderson, Pearo, & Widener, 2008).

The elements forming the customer experience are produced and created by the supplier and gained through other related sources such as partners and individuals (Zolkiewski et al., 2017). Thus, these elements can be supplier controlled, or factors outside their control affect the overall experience (McColl-Kennedy, Gustafsson, Jaakkola, Klaus, Radnor, Perks & Fri-man, 2015). These elements, also referred to as touchpoints, are presented in more detail in chapter 2.1.2 Customer journey. This study will mainly focus on firm-controlled and

managed touchpoints since, as stated before, this study aims to research multichannel customer experience management from the supplier point of view.

De Keyser, Verleye, Lemon, Keiningham, & Klaus (2020) conceptualized customer experience from three different factors: touchpoints, context, and qualities. Their study suggests that the concept of customer experience is formed through building blocks, in which each block consists of one factor. The building blocks include the following parts; those touchpoints are having the interaction points between the supplier and its' customer, context embodies environmental-, market-, social- and individual context which are describing situational resources that are available to the customer and the qualities which are reflecting the nature of customers responses and to the answers and reaction to brand/firm related interactions. (De Keyser et al., 2020). Figure 2 is presenting the building blocks De Keyser et al. (2020) defined. These parts of customer experience will be introduced in more detail later in this study.

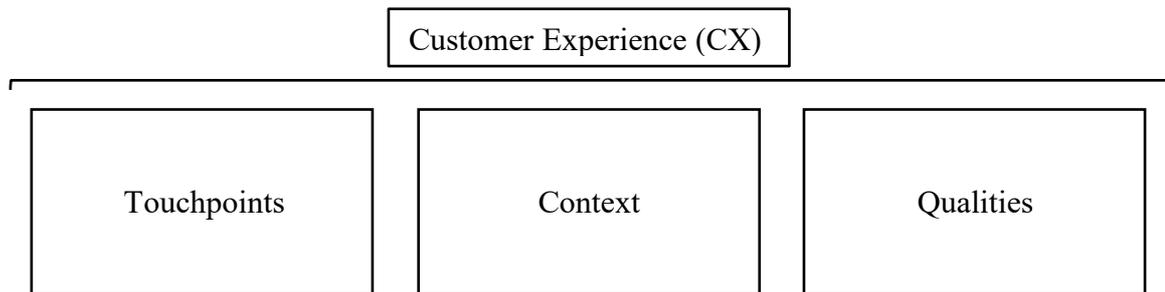


Figure 2 Building blocks of customer experience (De Keyser et al., 2020, 439)

B2B and B2C customer experiences have some significant differences, yet they do have similarities as well. A substantial difference in customer experience between these two fields is that the B2B field has a more strategic approach in creating and managing customer experience (Zolkiewski et al., 2017). The realms forming customer experience remain the same, although the sector as digital, social, and physical factors relate to both experiences (Bolton et al., 2018). Customer experiences in these two fields differ, for example, in terms of perceived value. In the B2C field, perceived value has linked to economic factors and philosophical factors, whereas in the B2B field has been studied to perceive value in mainly economic factors. (Mencarelli & Rivière, 2015). The social realm and, more specifically, social contacts among the customer experience have some similarities despite the field (Witell et al. 2019, 421). However, in B2B, the whole purchase process is the more complex

network of interactions between several people and platforms, whereas the B2C customer experience tends to be more simplistic (Zolkiewski et al., 2017).

Even if the study of De Keyser et al. (2020) is more focused on consumer setup, it provides main characteristics on customer experience. This study will implement and utilize their findings in B2B settings. The similarity of B2B- and B2C experiences has been acknowledged since, in both processes, there are individuals related to an approach that emphasizes the similarity of the incidents (Witell et al., 2019). This study concentrates on studying multichannel customer experience management and possible challenges and opportunities related to it from the supplier point of view. It is crucial to understand all the elements related to customer experience to delimit the potential factors relating to an outcome of formed customer experience. Customer experience is developed throughout the multiple experiences, but it is still not the absolute outcome of these factors but even more (Dhebar, 2013). Thus, positive experiences during the customer experience do not necessarily produce positive overall experiences as an outcome. Likewise, individual negative experiences do not unequivocally lead to the overall negative experience.

2.1.1 Elements affecting customer experience

This chapter will give a brief outline of other factors forming the customer experience. The factors are defined and based on the model by De Keyser et al. (2020) and supplementing it with other related literature. Forming a solid understanding of the customer experience eases to picture the overall multichannel customer experience management and the possible challenges and opportunities rising in it.

The second block after the touchpoints in the customer experience model of De Keyser et al. (2020) is context. Context is formed via four levels, including individual, social, market, and environmental contexts. In each touchpoint, the context is affecting on how individuals are experiencing the stimuli (Thompson, Locander & Polio, 1989, cited in De Keyser et al., 2020). Thus, what kind of customer experience is forming for each customer depends on the context the stimuli are faced. The context in which the firm offered stimuli is experienced can affect the overall customer experience either positively or negatively (McCull Kennedy

et al., 2019). To study the challenges and opportunities emerging in a B2B customer experience management, it is crucial to picture the points that may affect both positively and negatively on overall customer experience. In the following part of the study, the four different levels of context: individual, social, market, and environmental, according to De Keyser et al. (2020).

Viewing first the individual context, which is in the center of context in the model of De Keyser et al. (2020), is referring to the customers' personal monetary state at several touch-points around the customer journey (Sandström, Edvardsson, Kristensson & Magnusson, 2008, cited in De Keyser et al., 2020). According to De Keyser et al. (2020), the importance of individual context has been acknowledged in several studies (for example, Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Sandström et al., 2008) as every person is inherently subjective. This individual context is formed by the following factors: emotional, cognitive, normative, physical, and economic (De Keyser et al., 2020). Manthiou et al., (2020) developed five propositions of emotional factors and their effects on customer experience. According to them, the emotions along the customer journey are not as simplistic as the existing assumptions stated. The propositions included, for example, following claims, positive and negative emotions can co-exist in customer experience, positive or negative feelings experienced through the customer journey do not produce respectively outcome of customer experience, and that the outcome of the customer experience is not defined by individual interactions with one specific employee in the company, the overall experience may differ from that specific pursued situation and the emotional related. (Manthiou et al., 2020). By pointing this out, it is possible to say that from the supplier's point of view, there are always individualistic characteristics affecting the overall customer experience that may not be visible to the supplier and may still affect the outcome of the customer's journey, in B2B setting the emotions to play a crucial role in the customer experience as well (Pandey & Mookerjee, 2018). This also embodies the complex nature of customer experience, yet the individual context is not straight related to management of customer experience, even if the management actions can effect on individual context.

The next concept the study of De Keyser et al. (2020) presents is the social context which describes social-related surroundings such as norms and rules created by social groups (De Keyeser et al., 2020). Social relationships and connections are a major part of buying and

trust-building in B2B, commonly as in the B2C field (Paulssen & Roulet, 2017), and therefore this aspect is also considered to be involved in B2B settings. In the B2B setting, this social concept would also cover the internal cultural mindset of the customer firm affecting the outcome of the overall customer experience, which creates the surrounding rules and norms for the company. These elements on the other hand relate strongly to customer experience management.

The market level context is introducing market-related factors that customers might interact with during the buying process. The market level consists of such actors, competitors, complements, substitutes, and future entrants in the market in which the company operates. From the supplier's point of view, these factors may also impact their customers' experiences. (De Keyser et al., 2020). The last part of the context De Keyser et al. (2020) introduced is an environmental aspect that includes a rather wide group of external factors, for instance, natural, economic, public, and political. The social, market, and environmental factors are not firm controlled, and therefore this study will not concentrate on these but acknowledges their existence and impact on overall customer experience on B2B business as well (Steward et al., 2019). However, emotions, on the other hand, can be fostered by supplier offered actions, and specific emotions have been studied to have a positive impact on customer engagement and brand image (Blasco-Arcas, Hernandez-Ortega, & Jimenez-Martinez, 2016). Giving a comprehensive picture of the factors that relate to the forming of multichannel customer experience but are external and are not straight controlled by the firm is crucial to find out the nature of the formed multichannel customer experience. Even if this study is concentrating on firm-managed actions and touchpoints, acknowledging the external factors related to the challenges gives a chance to manage the customer experience in a way that the firm would be able to seek solutions and opportunities to prevent the possible external factors effecting negatively to their customer experiences.

The last building block introduced by De Keyser et al. (2020) is qualities. They acknowledged that five qualities amplify customer responses and reactions to offered stimuli, more especially the nature of the customer responses and reactions. The five qualities are participation level, dimensionality, time flow, valence, and ordinariness. Each quality is having an impact on the overall experience. (De Keyser et al., 2020) These exact qualities are developed in B2C settings, but this study will utilize the idea and the qualities matching to B2B

settings. For example, considering the participation level, whether it is high or low, might also impact on B2B customer experience, since value co-creation with the customer is one factor in managing B2B customer experience as well (Kohtamäki & Rajala, 2016). The second example whether the valance is positive or negative would also impact the experience in B2B set up and whether the time flow during the experience is short or long refers to how long the experience is under customers judgment (Kranzbuhler, Kleijnen, Morgan, & Teerling, 2018 cited in De Keyser et al., 2020, 442). These factors and blocks building up customer experience might also relate to the challenges of B2B customer experience management.

2.1.2 Customer journey

Due digitalization and globalization have made options more accessible it has increased the competition. It has become crucial to seek competitive advantages via creating value for the customer in every part of the value chain (Jayaraman & Luo, 2007). It is proven that all three: goods, service, and relationship qualities are related to customer loyalty (Čater & Čaterm, 2010; Kittur & Chatterjee, 2020). These things and interactions can be viewed all together through customer experience to view the whole chain of confluences the customer goes through during the purchase or among the overall customer relationship (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Thus, customer experience is viewed throughout the concept of the customer journey, which follows the customer buying process. Picturing the journey is helping to define customer experience-related factors which are crucial for customer experience management.

Viewing customer experience on the strategical level as a firm orientation is giving a solid base for the following chapter presenting a clear picture of tactical and practical elements forming the customer journey and at the and leading to the overall customer experience. To form a complete picture of previously introduced customer experience and the relating elements mapping the interactions is valuable. Since picturing the customer journey is a way to view all the stimuli forming the customer experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Customer journey mapping is a helpful tool for management to understand the customers' experience better (Rosenbaum, Otalora & Ramirez, 2017). Besides this, customer journey mapping is a

functional tool promoting service innovations (Vakulenko et al., 2019). These innovations can be a key to seek a competitive advantage or stood up as the transferring costs for customers. The best way to pursue these kinds of innovations is by using technology (Vakulenko et al., 2019). However, to find the sweet spots for these innovations' firms need to be able to picture a realistic customer journey and define the steps that customers are going through in the buying process to be able to manage the key ones.

Touchpoints are covering all the interactions between the supplier and the customer, not only the firm managed interactions, such as sales, marketing, products, and partner provided information, but also conceivable external interactions with firm related information such as product or service reviews or word-of-mouth, which cannot be controlled or produced by the supplier (Zolkiewski et al., 2017). Touchpoints are introduced in more detail later in the following chapter.

Customer journey is pictured via the customer buying process. Customer journey is gathering all interaction between the supplier and its customer together. Mapping customer journey is a visualization of customer experience to map down all the interactions and transactions related to it. Visualizing customer experience via picturing the customer journey enables one to see all the interactions and different factors related to customer experience in one. This study will also utilize the customer buying process to map down the customer journey to understand and manage the multichannel customer experience in the case company. Lemon and Verhoef (2016) summarized the multichannel journey to form from channels differing in terms of costs and benefits relating to different stages of the customer buying process and having a different role in each step of the process. The management decisions and chosen channels affect the overall experience and the outcome of the channels involved in the purchase process. The channels are related to each other as synergy between and across the different channels creates the overall experience. Used channels might vary between customers as customers differ in terms of perforations and channel usage in different phases of the customer journey. (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016)

Touchpoints

The earlier part of this chapter gives a firm introduction to the overall customer journey concept. As mentioned, the customer journey is formed via touchpoints. The subsequent part

of this chapter will introduce the elements forming the customer journey and in more detail the characteristics of those elements. Touchpoints involve both functional and hierarchical units at each level of the firm, including individuals operating in each level (Witell et al., 2019). The touchpoints differ in terms of nature, control, and the stage of the customer journey (De Keyser et al., 2020). Thus, the customer journey is a functional tool to typify the elements of customer experience. In a consumer situation, the customer journey is simple to picture as the perceived experience is individual, whereas, in the B2B context, there might be several actors involved (Zolkiewski et al., 2017). The owner perspective can also group touchpoints as dividing touchpoints into brand-owned, partner-owned, customer-owned, and social/external owned touchpoints (Vakulenko, Shams, Hellström & Hjort, 2019). However, this study focuses on brand-owned ones since this research seeks possible challenges and opportunities in multichannel customer experience management.

Touchpoints are the spots of interaction and the spots for creating value for a customer along with the customer experience (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2019). Even if there are some differentiating factors in B2C and B2B value creation, there are overlapping factors as well (Mencarelli & Rivière 2015). To be able to view the nature of the touchpoints, it is crucial to sort them to manage them effectively. Lemon and Verhoef (2016) have divided the touchpoints by the stages of the buying process. In their purchase model, they suggest that there are touchpoints relating to pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase phases along the customer journey. In each of these purchase phases, the touchpoints can be divided further (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) in terms of ownership as follows; brand-owned, partner-owned, customer-owned, and social/external touchpoints (Vakulenko et al., 2019). As noted previously in this study, this research mainly focuses on brand-owned touchpoints, which are designed and managed internally and controlled by the firm, and they are fully controlled by the firm and therefore a critical part of multichannel customer experience management.

Touchpoints can be divided based on the owner. Brand-owned touchpoints include all the touchpoints managed, designed, and coordinated by the supplier. For example, websites, advertising, packaging, service, price convenience, salesforce are these kinds of touchpoints. The second category is partner-owned touchpoints, in which the touchpoints are managed, designed, and controlled in co-operation by the supplier and its one or more partners. Additionally, these are not only including channel distribution partners but also, for example,

marketing agencies and communication channel partners. The third group, the customer-owned touchpoints, where customers are external from the company but still related to the offerings, such as customers' own thoughts about their desires and needs or information. The external/social touchpoints, on the other hand, are representing touchpoints that are affecting customer experience but outside of the firm's control. Social media is also included in external/social touchpoints, but researchers (for example, Onishi & Manchanda, 2012) have identified social media to be counted as a firm-owned touchpoint as well. (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) Touchpoints can be divided into categories based on stage and control as previously described but additionally to these, and they can also be divided according to the nature of touchpoint such as whether those relate to human, digital or physical offerings of the company (De Keyser et al., 2020). Thus, the nature of touchpoints includes different dimensions and types. In each category, the touchpoints differ according to whether the interaction is direct or indirect. Examples of direct touchpoints are sales, services, and usage encounters, whereas indirect, on the other hand, could include, for example, word-of-mouth, social media, advertising, and reviews. (Meyer & Schwager, 2007).

In their research, De Keyser et al. (2020) divided touchpoints into three categories in terms of their nature, control, and stage as previously presented. The stage of touchpoint represents the phase of the purchase process the touchpoint is affecting to, nature of the touchpoint describes whether the touchpoint is human, digital, or physical. Control of touchpoints is referring whether the touchpoint is controlled by the firm or not. De Keyser et al. (2020) pictured them to be a block in which each touchpoint category is connected to another. The model (De Keyser et al., 2020, 439) is represented in Figure 3.

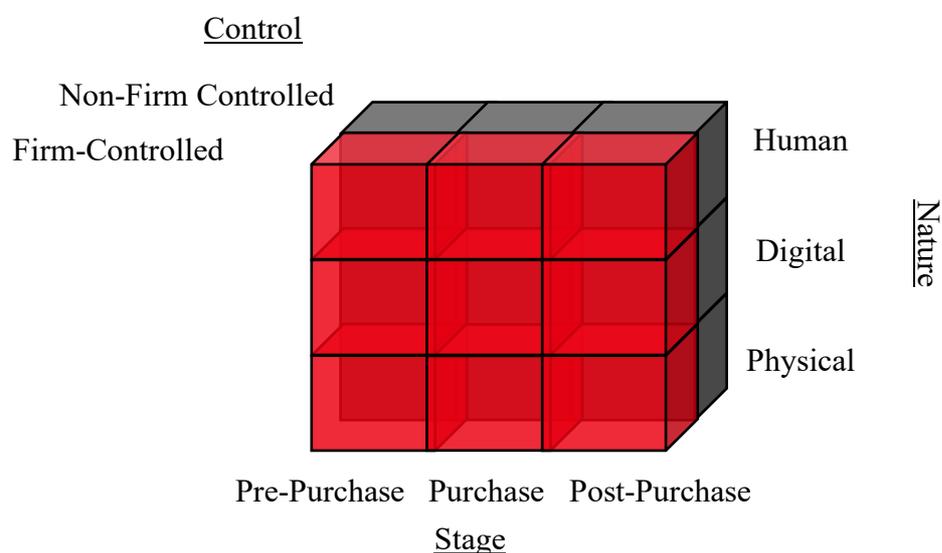


Figure 3 Touchpoint types (De Keyser et al., 2020, 439)

This study will focus on viewing touchpoints as De Keyser et al. (2020) represented. The aim of this study is to picture the multichannel customer experience management and identify the possible challenges and opportunities emerging in customer experience management from the supplier's point of view. Therefore, this study will concentrate firm-controlled touchpoints in which the firm can affect by management actions (highlighted as red in Figure 3). In consumer setups, the customer journey simplifies the traditional consumer buying process from the awareness and need to search and so on to purchase and at the end to the after-sales and loyalty in the post-purchase stage (Gensler, Verhoef, & Böhm, 2012). Where consumer customer journey can be viewed more like a chain of interactions involved in an individual purchase (Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016) in B2B business, it is usual to have several purchases and the buying process ongoing as a circle and rather long process from the early stage of acquiring a supplier to using the same supplier (Steward et al., 2019). Thus, one reason why the purchase process differs is the characteristics of the B2B buying process; whereas consumers might purchase by impulse in a business setup, the buying process is more complex.

2.2 Customer experience management

The previous chapters are giving a clear overview of customer experience, the elements forming customer experience, and the strategical firm-level abilities that are supporting the customer-oriented thinking and by that enhancing the customer experience from the supplier point of view. This chapter will introduce more detail the characteristics of managing the customer experience.

Due to the complex dynamic nature of customer experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2009), but the potential competitive advantage gained through it, managing customer experience is crucial. The concept of customer experience management has been defined as a source of cultural thinking towards the customer experience, strategic precepts for creating and designing customer experience, and organizational ability to constantly enrich the customer experience to achieve and maintain long-term customer loyalty (Homburg et al., 2017). Whereas customer relationship management is more concentrated on knowing the customer, customer experience management, on the other hand, is more concentrated on how the customer thinks

about the supplier (Meyer & Schwager, 2007). Customer experience management is a management approach covering up all the activities of the firm, including firm capabilities, cultural mindsets, and strategic directions (Homburg et al., 2017).

According to Witell et al. (2019), customer experience management in B2B settings is formed by four dimensions: type of business relationship, control of touchpoints, function and hierarchical level, and stage of the customer journey. Zolkiewski et al. (2017) delimit the B2B customer experience management to involve a more strategic approach rather than a B2C context; they also emphasize the importance of measurement as a tool of customer experience management. B2B customer experience typically focuses also on value creation and even co-creating value in co-operation with the customer (Zolkiewski et al., 2017). Each of these elements will be introduced in more detail later in this study.

This study will utilize the conceptualization and the model developed by Homburg et al. (2017) and complement it with other related studies to get a better understanding of customer experience management in B2B settings. The following chapters of this study will introduce the parts of the customer experience management concept of Homburg et al. (2017) in more detail and complement presented views and thoughts by bringing these concepts to apply to the business markets.

2.2.1 Elements of customer experience management

This chapter will introduce the elements related to internal capabilities related to customer experience management. As mentioned before, customer experience management has three ground theories and resources that are major in managing customer experience: cultural mindset, strategic directions, and firm capabilities (Homburg et al., 2017). These factors will be introduced in more detail in the following part of this study and complemented by introducing other related factors and theories to gain a comprehensive understanding of the elements that are fostering effective customer experience management in business markets.

Firstly, cultural mindset is introduced and described how it relates to customer experience management. Firm internal cultural mindset is one factor affecting on overall customer

experience. Cultural mindset is occurring mostly in human-related touchpoints (Lemon & Verhoef 2016). As introduced earlier, the firm-level market orientation is crucial for customer experience management as the overall experience is seen as an outcome of all firm-related human interactions (Urde, Baumgarth & Merrilees, 2013). Rather than concentrating on individual transactions, suppliers should seek a co-operative model to maintain customer relationships. Changing toward a more customer-driven organization, it is crucial to shift the focus of the entire organization, to change all the actions, beliefs, and values to be able to communicate the same level of understanding of desired customer behavior to satisfy the customer needs. (Day, 1994). At the end, customer experience management is not only limited to individual management actions but rather a firm-level outcome for customer-centricity (Homburg et al., 2017). This kind of orientation emphasizes individuals' capabilities and specialization, more specifically, the skills and capabilities of understanding customers' needs and fulfilling them (Day, 1994). Studies have recognized the connection between customer loyalty and positive emotions (Gracia, Bakker, & Grau, 2011). Thus, creating positive emotions during the customer experience is showed to foster customer loyalty. Positive organizational behavior is connected to performance, and at the individual, employee level, the capabilities that have been studied to link to performance are hope and optimism (Youssef & Luthans, 2007).

Homburg et al. (2017, 388) conceptualized the cultural mindset for customer experience to cover three orientations: experiential response orientation, touchpoint orientation, and alliance orientation. These three are covering the firm internal orientation that affects the customer experience, which relates to experiential response orientation. The second one, touchpoint orientation, typifies that firms should have a focus on customer journeys across the whole journey in each stage of the buying process (pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase) and the whole chain should be the base for decision making at every stage. Alliance orientation then embodies the alliance mindset in a way that various touchpoints are aligned in a person's specific context. These factors are forming a solid base for cultural mindset that is fostering customer centricity and overall focus on customer experience in various levels of the firm. (Homburg et al., 2017)

Strategic directions in this study represent the business strategy and organizational structure to support the customer experience management. Homburg et al. (2017, 388) introduced

strategic directions that extend the characters of market-orientation and customer relationship management, which support designing customer experience. These directions are “thematic cohesion, consistency, context sensitivity, and connectivity of touchpoints” (Homburg et al., 2017). The first element Homburg et al. (2017) introduced is thematic cohesion of touchpoints, which is referring to the possible extension main touchpoints are offering on the side of the overall brand. Thus, offering additional content via multiple touchpoints to extend and nurture the brand theme. It communicates certain values and activities to the customers via utilizing several touchpoints. The second element presented is consistency of touchpoints that describes the touchpoints effect to the overall identity of the corporation and its elements evolving in multiple touchpoints fostering loyalty. Third element is the context sensitivity of touchpoints, which in turn describes touchpoint optimization according to each customers situation and perceptions of adding value via specific touchpoint features along the customer journey. The fourth and the last element is connectivity of the touchpoints that is a direction that typifies the seamlessness between the touchpoint regardless of the nature of the touchpoints. (Homburg et al., 2017).

The last resources related to customer experience management according to Homburg et al. (2017) are the firm capabilities to create and manage effective customer experience. These capabilities are major to achieve the advantages represented earlier in this study and to employ the tactical level actions. The capabilities represent resources that are internally developed and hard to duplicate to create competitive advantage (Itami & Roehl, 1987, cited in Day, 1994). Picturing the capabilities gives a solid base for understanding whether the firm possess the capabilities to manage effective multichannel customer experience. As introduced earlier the customer experience can be seen as a competitive advantage, which is why the capabilities are concentrating on fostering competitive advantages from the firm perspective to create, manage and maintain superior customer experience. As mentioned before the base for customer experience to build up these capabilities on is the overall firm level customer orientation mindset to fulfill customer needs and desires (Sheth, Sisodia, & Sharma, 2000). The capabilities are concentrated to create value not only for the customer but also for the supplier firm (Verhoef, 2009, cited in Witell et al., 2019) and this way foster positive relationships to maintain long-term customer loyalty (Homburg et al., 2017).

The main capability on the strategical level is to be able to adapt to customer's needs (Beverland, Napoli & Lindgreen, 2007). This gives a solid base for other capabilities such as innovation capability (Foroudi, Jin, Gupta, Melewar & Foroudi, 2016), strong brand identity (Beverland et al., 2007) and positive employee attitudes, later leading to the overall company culture (Homburg et al. 2017). Day (1994) viewed capabilities from two different emphasis, internal and external. The study (Day, 1994) mapped out factors such as for example, market sensing, customer linking and channel bonding to be outside-in processes, which are capabilities of market-driven organization. On practical level these capabilities effect for example, to order planning, order generation, order entry and prioritization. (Day, 1994).

The previously described capabilities employ on a strategic level, in the following the firm capabilities will be introduced on more tactical level. The following capabilities are related to the customer journey, tactical and practical level of customer experience. Homburg et al. (2017, 388) have identified four market orientation related capabilities to foster constantly renewing customer experience: touchpoint journey design, -monitoring, touchpoint adaption and -prioritizing. These capabilities are in interaction with each other and emerge to be a place to foster innovations (Homburg et al., 2017). The marketing capabilities (Homburg et al., 2017) and the outside-in thinking (Day, 1994) relate to market exploration and exploitation which are studied to create new products (Mu, Bao, Sekhon, Qi & Love, 2018). The benefits hidden in these capabilities are emerging when the capabilities are used to create customer value or building up assets related to the brand (Day, 2011).

Already stated, one of the elements of customer experience management is value creation (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2019) since value is one of the major factors of relationship building (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006). Since value is main in relationship building it explains the major role and importance of human resources in value creation (Chidley & Pritchard, 2014). To build up relationship and engagement between the supplier and its customers co-creating the value is serving both companies involved (Ramaswamy, 2009). Therefore, co-creation is crucial element of customer experience management. The aim of co-creation is to develop products and services to not only serve the customer but also elaborate products and services for problem solving to improve both customers and supplier's business.

Additionally, to previously described elements of customer experience management, Witell et al. (2019) identified customer entity to be one dimension of the customer experience management. Controlling touchpoints is relating to the entity that effects and determines actors upcoming actions (Witell et al., 2019). Understanding the customer entity in B2B context is crucial as in several cases the single transactions may involve several employees and that way effect to the customer entity. In this set up customer entity is referring to factors that are not controlled by the supplier yet are crucial to notice in the customer experience management. More precisely concerning the functional and hierarchical factors of the customer firms. These factors typify how the customer experience should be managed according to the customer's organizational structure. This is relating to the challenge, siloed customer experiences, identified by Witell et al. (2019, 424) that even if it is typical for B2B companies to have fewer separate customers than B2C ones, they still might have several persons with different kind of roles within the organization are involved, which complicates nature overall experience. (Witell et al., 2019)

2.2.2 Customer buying process

The following chapter will introduce the fundamental premises of B2B customer buying process that the current literature has identified. B2B buying process differs from consumer buying process since in industrial markets there are higher risks and accountability involved which makes professional buying more complex (Brassington & Pettitt, 2013). As mentioned before the B2B buying process has evolved through past decades (Steward et al., 2019). This thesis is presenting the process from the different phases research has acknowledged to be included in B2B buying process this eases to picture the customer journey via customer buying process.

Academics have identified the customer buying process to be formed through five different steps: 1. consider, 2. evaluate, 3. buy, 4. loyalty loop and 5. new journey (Edelman & Singer, 2015 cited in Steward et al., 2019, 293). The evaluation of customer buying process from transactions to this stage have been fostered by digitalization and increased number of online channels. This factor has also provoked more competition between the suppliers since options are not limited to geographical area anymore. This emphasis the importance of

customer experience thinking since the buying process is also described throughout the journey concept. (Steward et al., 2019)

Buying process is also traditionally described through three phases; pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase from which the customer journey is forming (De Keyser et al., 2019). From the five phases introduced by Steward et al. (2019) the first two consider and evaluation are part of the pre-purchase, buy is the purchase phase, and the loyalty loop is affiliates in both purchase and post-purchase phases and in case of loyalty loop form new journey would be involving the purchase phases again. Due the model of Steward et al. (2019) does not employ the post-purchase phase it is supplemented with the model of touchpoints in different phases of buying process by De Keyser et al. (2019). Therefore, due this limitation this study will utilize the model of De Keyser et al. (2019) in picturing the buying process.

The change in the B2B buying process has evolved from thinking and focusing on individual transactions to view the trait a bit deeper as customer relationships, networks, and journeys (Steward et al., 2019). Thus, firms first started to manage relationships, then viewing their customers as networks and present focusing on the overall customer experiences. Business relationships involve different actors in both supplier and customer firms (Steward et al., 2019). Even there is a shift towards a focus on relationships, yet the traits may vary from transactional buying to relation buying (Homburg et al., 2017 cited in Witell et al., 2019). However, even if the focus has shifted, it does not mean that not the transactions matter, yet the studies have noted that the perspective has rather grown from only focusing on transactions to now view the net of each interaction as a whole customer journey (for example, Steward et al., 2019; Witell et al., 2019). Relationships are not only monitored by the supplier side but also from the customer perspective as buyer-seller relationship (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006), which makes it an important factor and crucial to maintain for the supplier.

Different types of business customers will require different types of management actions, and the customer journeys differ in terms of relationship type as well. Thus, if the customer relationship is transactional, it tends to be short-term and relational relationships, on the other hand, tend to be long-term relationships. (Witell et al., 2019). These relationships may also differ in terms of profitability (Lindgreen, Palmer, Vanhamme, & Wouters, 2006).

2.2.3 Measurements and quality

One main part of multichannel customer experience management is measuring the customer experience. Current studies have mainly focused on measuring consumer customer experience which is why this study will utilize and complement business measurements with the existing scales and measures from B2C context. Limitation to utilize B2C measure to business customer experience is that the approach is rather not that strategic but more of an input-output approach (Zolkiewski et al., 2017). Existing studies in B2B field have concentrated to measure the outcomes (Zolkiewski et al., 2017), customer experience management impact on brand equity (Biedenbach & Marell, 2010), brand experience, service provider experience and post-purchase experience (Kuppelwieser & Klaus, 2021).

Since the complex character of customer experience, it is not simplistic to measure. As mentioned before the goal of customer experience is to foster customer satisfaction (Srivastava & Kaul, 2014) which after all relates positively to customer loyalty (Goncalves, Sampaio & Ribeiro Soriano, 2012). Thus, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty are two outcome based measures that customer experience management is aiming. Furthermore Zolkiewski et al. (2017) have identified the importance of strategic approach to outcome-based measures to rather seek for a value co-creation via customer experience than just input-output relating measures preferably in B2B settings. In the setting of this study the measurements are chosen to be the ones that are controlled by the supplier. Since this study does not include customer perspective, which brings some limitations to measures as well. When studying the internal supplier perspective, it is challenging for example, to view measurement elements such as word-of-mouth, even if it is one factors relating to customer experience measurement (Klaus and Maklan, 2013).

Klaus and Maklan (2012) introduce EXQ scale, which identifies factors that effect on the quality of customer experience. Since this is qualitative study, this study will not utilize Klaus & Maklan (2012) the EXQ scale itself, but rather utilize the outcomes of their study. The factors Klaus & Maklan (2012) identified to relate the dimensions of experience quality are product experience, outcome focus, moment-of-truth, and peace-of-mind. These four factors have later studied to have remarkable and positive impact on the marketing related outcomes such as loyalty intentions, customer satisfaction and word-of-mouth (Klaus &

Maklan, 2013). However, these studies (Klaus & Maklan, 2012; Klaus & Maklan, 2013) focus on consumer customer experience. Although, the characteristics of their concept (Klaus & Maklan, 2012) have been revised into B2B settings (Kuppelwieser & Klaus, 2021). However, this study will not utilize this scale, yet it has been acknowledged to exist.

2.3 Emerging challenges and opportunities in multichannel customer experience

The following chapter will present currently acknowledged challenges and opportunities emerging in the multichannel B2B customer experience management. This chapter will present in more detail the challenges and opportunities introduced in the Table 1. In this chapter the challenges and opportunities are also presented accordingly following the theory to connect the elements of the multichannel customer experience. The case company of this study is yet in the implementation phase with the customer experience management which is why the challenges emerging in the early phase of implementing and managing the implementation of customer experience are crucial for this study.

As mentioned, implementing customer experience should be firm level approach, which is the first challenge that this study assumes in customer experience management in B2B supplier firms. To possess this cultural mindset across the business units and human related touchpoints might be a challenge yet necessary action (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Thus, each employee involved to the customers buying process is affecting the outcome of formed customer experience so the firm level market-/customer-orientation and desire to differentiate (Palmer, 2010) are crucial to be able to create effective customer entity (Urde et al., 2013). This challenge has been acknowledged for example, by Witell et al. (2019) identifying challenge to be mismatches across the customer journey and mismatches in business relationships. This challenge relates to both creating and managing but it is extremely crucial when implementing the customer experience to firm functions.

On the other hand, to get a whole picture would be to combine the qualitative and quantitative by harnessing the available data of customers by using the CRM system (Kennedy, 2006). This might be challenging as CRM systems are not yet developed to process the data and employ AI (Artificial Intelligence) (Chatterjee et al., 2019). However, even if harnessing

the big data to manage customer experience is proven to be working (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2019). Improving the customer experience does not always necessarily include measurements or customer data but focuses more on creating customer journeys that bring value to the customer (Zolkiewski et al., 2017). This makes the evaluation of customer experience challenging. Firms need to be able to recognize the challenges and the negative impacts and the opportunities and potential positive impacts along their customers' journey to improve the overall experience.

Another challenge related to customer experience management that B2B suppliers might face is the level of understanding the building blocks of the customer experience (De Keyser et al., 2020) and ability to utilize each to reach more sufficient customer experience. Earlier chapters of this study describe these building blocks (De Keyser et al., 2020) in detail and the elements of customer experience those are covering (touchpoints, context, and qualities). To be able to design effective customer journey each building block is crucial which is why it must be noted (De Keyser et al., 2020) and neglecting one of those might be an arising challenge in a customer experience creation. Thus, the overall ability to understand the customer perspective and intention to create customer more value for example, via utilizing innovation is critical spots.

Overall challenge from the supplier perspective in creating effective customer experience is assumed to relate the complex multidimensional nature (Verhoef et al., 2009) of customer experience. This challenge has been notified in several studies (Witell et al., 2019; Bolton et al., 2018; Stone et al., 2002) since the connectivity of touchpoints in multichannel environment is crucial part of managing an effective customer experience.

Challenges relating to managing customer experience are quite a like challenges emerging in the phase of implementing as many of the identified challenges deploy in both situations. However, management issues listed in the Table 1. are for example connectivity of all social, digital, and physical touchpoints (Bolton et al., 2018), harnessing and utilizing data to design ways to improve the current experience (Chatterjee et al., 2019) and lastly the rest of the management related challenges identified by Witell et al. (2019) lack of touchpoint control, siloed customer experience and dynamics of customer experience.

The challenging measurement of customer experience since its multidimensional nature (Lemon & Verhoef, 2018) is also related to experienced emotions appearing among the customer experience and the issue of how to measure them (Santosh Kumar & Mookerjee, 2018). As mentioned earlier in this study certain emotions do not necessarily lead to certain outcomes, as positive emotions do not lead to positive outcome of customer experience and the equivalent with negative emotions (Aikaterini, Hickman & Klaus, 2020).

The opportunities relating to the multichannel customer experience management, on the other hand are not as identified as clearly as the potential challenges in the literature. Overall, as mentioned customer experience management is offering significant chance to increase customer satisfaction and by that improve customer loyalty (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Thus, investments on the customer experience management are improving the chances to create the previously presented loyalty loop in the customer buying process. To attain this customer centricity is crucial.

Re-designing the products or services in co-operation with the customer co-creating them to serve customer need better is example of this opportunity (Verleye, 2015). Creating value for the customer in diverse parts of the value chain is seen as a competitive advantage (Jayaraman & Luo, 2007). This is one of the potential opportunities' literature has identified to create core competencies by utilizing value creation to produce effective multichannel customer experience (Payne, et al., 2008). The multichannel customer experience overall is offering various touchpoints and potential opportunities to utilize this. In the age of digitalization one major way to improve customer experience is to utilize data to improve processes and overall experience by designing innovations along the customer journey (Zaki, 2019). Thus, one opportunity in utilizing the multichannel customer experience management is to design more effective products and services via greater data usage, which was also mentioned as a challenge.

3 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

This chapter is presenting the design and methods of the empirical part of this study. First the research design is presented and discussed. Following by the introduction of the case company and explanation of chosen data collection and data analysis methods. After presenting the methods of this study detailed analyses of data collection will be presented and explained. Finally, after presenting the data collection methods and practice, the reliability and validity will be analyzed.

3.1 Research design

The following, empirical part, of this study is presenting the research design. The part will also reason the chosen research methods. The aim of this study is to generate better understanding of managing multichannel customer experience in different phases of the customer journey in B2B field. To picture the management actions and potential challenges and opportunities emerging on the way the qualitative data type was chosen to support the aim to clarify the process. The qualitative data of this study is based on the experiences of each employee as the data and the information was gathered from the persons involved to the management process. Since the complex multidimensional character of customer experience measuring is rather based on input-output than certain scales and indicators (Zolkiewski et al., 2017). Therefore, this study is utilizing qualitative research method. To answer the research questions about how the multichannel customer experience is managed in different phases of the customer journey in the case company without pre-assumptions. Qualitative research method leaves room for reviewing the theory and empirical data separately and at the end completing each other's whereas quantitative research on the other hand has pre-assumption and expectations presented in a form of hypotheses (Mat Roni Merga & Morris, 2020).

This study is conducted as an exploratory qualitative research by using single case study method. This study answering the research questions starting with "how" or "what" is supporting the exploratory research approach as it is used to gain insights of the topic of interest (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2016, 174). Qualitative research method is the best research

approach for data in nonquantitative form (Saldaña, 2011), which supports the aim of study to research nonquantitative factors such as the nature and the character of multichannel customer experience management in different phases of customer's journey. Qualitative research corroborates the aim of this study to research multichannel customer experience in B2B market, which is still rather abstract concept. Case study method has potential to deal complex situations (Baxter & Jack, 2008) and since the overall complex character of customer experience this is form of qualitative research is chosen to be the research method of this study.

Single case study method gives a solid base for representative research and is suitable method when studying certain phenomenon in-depth in a unique case (Baxter & Jack, 2008). As this study is focusing to study multichannel customer experience management in the case company in-depth to gain better understanding about the typical characters of B2B customer experience management. In addition to that this study aims to identify potential challenges and opportunities rising on the way, which also is strongly connected to the case company and to the industry they operate, which also emphasis the uniqueness of this case. Moreover, case study is ideal research method when research question is tightly attached into situation (Farquhar, 2012). For this study this also applies since this study is focusing to research the multichannel customer experience management and the touchpoints relating to the customer buying process of the case company in the monetary state. Studying the nature of the challenges and opportunities emerging in multichannel customer experience management in business markets single case study enables to orient specifically to the issues emerging in case company and to understand the character of multichannel customer experience in the case company.

To create a solid understanding around the topic of this research, this study is using interviews as data collection method. For qualitative research interviews are the most common procedure for data collection (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998, p. 86). Interviews were chosen to be the data collection method to be able to gain strong in-depth understanding about the characteristics of the multichannel customer experience management within the case company. Additionally, to data collection this study is utilizing existing literature and employing its current insights and understanding about the multichannel B2B customer experience in different phases of the customer journey.

This study aims to provide comprehensive outcome by combining the existing insights with the empirical data gained by interviews. Therefore, this study follows abductive research strategy which is a qualitative research method (Awuzie & McDermott, 2017). Abductive research strategy is reasoning to the best possible declaration of some phenomenon by combining the empirical results with the theoretical framework (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). The conducted interview and the collected data are processed and analyzed with the acknowledged limitations of this study for example, since this is a single case study the result employ only particularly on this one firm within the consulting industry. Abductive research strategy support this, as it is not aiming to provide new theory since the research approach is not qualified for that but rather to generate most favorable explanation of the phenomenon (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012).

3.2 Case company

This chapter is presenting the introduction and information about the case company. The information is based on the Interview X with two company representatives, which are presented in the table 2. The case company is a SME operating in IT consulting business in Finland. The case company has been operating 15 years within the industry and is currently employing 65 persons. Turnover of the company in 2020 was 5,3 million euros. Business of the case company is based on solution selling specialized for marketing and sales consulting. Solutions and consulting the company offers are based on the digital platforms provided by their principal. The case company has rather lately deployed the customer experience management and the process is still in the implementation phase. The interviewed persons are in responsible position in improving and developing systems in customer experience management

The interviewees estimated that the case company is serving roughly over 100 business customers in Finland in the year 2021. The company is aiming to gain growth through new customer acquisitions every year and has strong focus on new customer acquisition. Interviewees described company's current strategy to be each year gaining the last year overall turnover from existing customers present year and grow by acquiring new customers on top of that. Interviewees mentioned focusing the customer experience to be part of the

company's strategy as well and the customer value creation is highly important. Therefore, managing customer experience is crucial for them and improving the overall customer service is main.

Compared to some competitors the case company is rather small which is limiting some opportunities to offer customers exclusively working consultants, yet each employee is typically working on several projects. According to the interviewee's typical customer of the case company is a mid-sized company with turnover varying from 10 million euros to 100 million euros. The customer segments vary from family businesses to small, listed companies. This is limiting factor in terms of the project budgets which on the other hand is leading to the fact that the resources to allocate several employees to focus exclusively on one consulting case is challenging. Therefore, customer experience management is crucial to be able to produce exceptional customer experiences despite that same employee operating multiple accounts concurrently.

In the case company there are clearly divided organizations or business units within the company which are operating quite individually yet are related to each other and work in a close co-operation. The business units defined in the Interview X are sales organization, delivery organizations and maintenance organization. This organizational structure is giving a solid base to understand the customer experience. Managing customer experience is rather new strategic approach for the case company which is why the process is still in the creation and development phase. Interviewees are the ones who are actively and closely working on the implementation of the customer experience which is why they were selected to be interviewed for this study.

3.3 Data collection

The following chapter is presenting the data collection methods and practices of this study. Initially this study introduces the theory which is a comprehensive overview of the current literature and studies in multichannel customer experience. The overview on literature was done by using several databases. The main resource used for searching literature and different data bases is LUT Primo, LUT University's academic online library. As mentioned

previously the data collection method in this study is interviews. To support the nature of this study the interview was arranged as semi structured, as the research questions were planned beforehand, yet they were open questions so that there were no pre-defined answer options (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998, p. 63). The interview was conducted as group interview on Google Meet, online conference call system. According to Saunders et al. (2016, 417) group interview is a semi structured interview including two or more participants. Two company representatives participated to the organized interview. Due the case company has recently adopted the customer experience management concept findings are based on the experiences and thoughts of these two responsible company representatives. These two are the key persons in the company that are actively developing solutions towards better customer experience and working on improving the overall customer experience management.

The structure of the interview follows the research questions. Interviews are designed to gain information and produce comprehensive understanding of the topic within the case company. The interviews are conducted with the persons that are working on the topic to gain valuable information about the multichannel customer experience management within the case company. The interviewed persons work in the management level positions within the case company and have 1–2 year experience in working in management. The interviewee 1 is responsible in marketing and sales management and interviewee 2 on the other hand responses on conceptualization of the services and change management within those. The following chart Table 2 summarizes the basic information of the interviewees.

<i>Interview (place)</i>	<i>Interviewee</i>	<i>Position in the case company</i>	<i>Working experience in the case company in years</i>	<i>Management experience in years</i>	<i>Duration of the interview</i>
<i>Interview X, 21.5. (Google Meet)</i>	Interviewee 1	Chief Commercial Officer	3,5 years	2 years	1h 17 min
	Interviewee 2	Chief Product Officer	6 years	1-2 years	1h 17 min

Table 2 Interview information

Interviews were designed to answer the defined research questions of this study and to complement the existing research gap in the B2B multichannel customer experience

management. Interview included 22 open questions, 2 questions of general information about interviewees and the background information about case company and then 20 detailed questions related to the research questions and topic of this study. To produce proper outcome, it is crucial to define the background information to generate proper analysis of the current state of multichannel customer experience management within the case company. The interview questions follow the structure of the study and follow the research questions accordingly by generating a clear picture of each issue this study is examining in the case company.

3.4 Data analysis methods

Analyzing the qualitative data gathered via interviews is commonly started by transcribing the interviews from spoken to written form of data. This is helping the further analyze of the data. (Saunders et al., 2016, 416) The arranged online interview was recorded with the permission of the participants and later the record was then transcribed into piece of text. The recording was done by utilizing two different devices to secure the recording of the interview. The transcription of the 1 hour 17-minute interview is in the written form 15 pages and 7282 words.

Transcribing the audio records of the interviews was done by the research herself. This helped to get a proper picture of the topic in the case company and helped to view the data set better to produce analysis. The transcribing was done carefully by editing off all the unnecessary content from the interviews, such intermediate utterances and filler words were cut off in this part of the research to create more comprehensive piece to analyze. The interviews were conducted in Finnish, so the transcribing and the observations were also done in Finnish and then later translated to English. After this the data was reviewed several times to deepen the understanding of the matter.

For conducting the analysis of the qualitative data there are often used several different methods (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998, 197). For qualitative research thematic analysis is often done in the first place (Saunders et al., 2016, 579). Initially this study is also utilizing the thematic analysis first to create overview of the topic in the case company and analyze the matter.

After carefully oriented with the material and gaining clear overview of the data the thematic analysis was made. The interview questions were already divided into themes according to the research questions which helped the thematic analysis. The RQ 2. was further divided into two themes by separating the challenges and opportunities into their own themes.

Since this study is conducted as an abductive research it means that the method is to combine the findings of the empirical part with the existing theory and literature. To embody the theory and empirical part the following chart will give a clear picture of how each research question is relating to the presented theory and which part of empirical part of the study relates to each. The Table 3 will enable to view the overall meaning of each part of this study and how they are related to each other.

<i>The aim of this study</i>	Research question	Related theories	Related empirical parts
<i>The initial goal of this study is to increase the knowledge about managing B2B multichannel CX in different phases of customer journey</i>	RQ 1. How multichannel customer experience is managed in different phases of customer journey?	Multichannel customer experience management, customer journey, customer buying process	Chapter 2.1 & 2.2
	RQ 2. What kind of challenges and opportunities multichannel character of customer experience management is generating along the customer journey?	Multichannel customer experience management, customer journey, customer buying process	Chapter 2.3

Table 3 The information structure of this thesis

3.5 Reliability and validity

The reliability of the research is meaning the transparency of the analysis that are made from the data, that the analysis conducted from the data would be similarly made by other researchers (Saunders et al., 2016, 726). The findings of this study could be examined by another researched but worth to note that the interviewees were intentionally chosen since they are closely working on the matter and familiar with the topic. The results might have been

different if different persons would have been interviewed. Also, the findings of this study are based on interviewees experiences, interpretations and point of views of this matter in the case company which is reliability limiting factor as well. The interview situation is always interaction between two people which also limits the reliability.

The validity of the research is to extent the data collection methods to be able to measure what were meant to measure. Validity is also standing for the nature of the finding whether they hold true what they claim or not. Since this study is conducted as a single case study the validity of the findings is strongly attached to the case company and the industry they are operating. Single case is more narrow approach of the phenomenon compared to the multi-case research where the phenomenon would be analyzed in several companies possibly operating in different industries which would lead to more general applicable findings. This research is studying the manner in depth in this company and the single case study method is suitable for that, even if it brings some limitations applying the findings.

4 EMPIRICAL RESULTS

The following chapter is presenting the results of the empirical part of this study. The findings of the empirical part of this study are the results of thematic analysis. Initially, the results according to the multichannel customer experience management in the case company are presented, more detail how the management of multichannel customer experience differs in different phases of customer journey. This part is related to RQ1. and the first theme of the study. Then the possible challenges and opportunities emerged in the management of the customer experience will be explained. This part relates to RQ 2. and includes two themes. Lastly this part of the study will give an overarching summary of the empirical result overall by presenting revised model of theoretical framework based on the findings.

4.1 Managing B2B multichannel customer experience along the customer journey

The following chapter presents the results of the empirical part of this study around themes related to research question RQ 1. The results are based on the Interview X. This chapter will deepen the understanding by introducing the characters of case company's customer experience management, and how is customer experience managed in multichannel environment in different phase of customer journey. The multichannel environment is also accessed in each stage to understand the element affecting management of customer experience.

The analyzes are fully based on the research material gained throughout the Interview X and are results of conducted analyzes. The first theme is focusing to create an overview of the customer experience management in the case company. Within the case company the customer experience management is formed throughout three different organizations, all these organization relate to the customer in some part of the process and therefore affect to the overall customer experience. The findings will be presented accordingly to each stage of the buying process and the multichannel environment together with the customer experience management actions in each stage are viewed. To notify both interviewees were adding that the customer experience is core of the business, yet the process is still in the implementation phase.

As mentioned in the theory chapter 2.4 the customer journey and its management are based on customer's buying process. To ease the customer journey picturing the interviewees were asked to describe their main touchpoints in the customer journey via utilizing the stages of customer buying process as well. The customer buying process is described to include the pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase phases but the interviewees noted that their customer buying process differs a bit from this assumption.

We have one phase more. When the customer has bought the service there is the phase when the customer has not received the service or product yet. So, in our business the buying process forms in the following way: pre-purchase, purchase, delivery, and maintenance/post-purchase.

- Interviewee 1

Based on this the analysis around the first theme was build up accordingly to cover up the channels forming the multichannel environment in each stage and to review the management actions done in each step. The management actions are viewed in the context of multichannel environment and examined through the channels involved in each stage. In the interview there was one question to deepen the knowledge about how the customer experience is forming in the company which emphasized the channels and interactions involved to customer experience. The channels and interactions differ greatly depending on in which phase of the customers buying process is involved. There are various channels used in the first phase in the sales organization business unit such as salespersons of the company and its principal, social media channels such as LinkedIn and Twitter, events, different fairs, seminars and webinars and face-to-face meetings. These are the interactions between the sales organization and the customer in the beginning of the buying process.

The main channel in new customer acquisition is our principal which includes different size sales units in their own organization. So that their salespeople would contact us to build up projects and offerings for customers in co-operation. And then the other channel is LinkedIn where we aim to puff up and create different messages for the market, then there is Twitter where we share content and now new channel is also Club House. One major event of the year is the event abroad organized by our principal where we fly our main customers and potential customer. We have similar event organized in Finland as well including seminars and workshops. Then we participate other fairs. We also have self-organized seminars and

webinars which are one kind of breakfast events. In addition to these there are face-to-face sales meetings and online meetings such as Google Meet. Those are the main channels in sales.

- Interviewee 1

The definition of multichannel environment of the company is currently strongly related to the sales organization and covers the channels related to sales and marketing. The environment interviewees described creates multichannel ambience and the company utilizing both digital and physical channels in their operations. From the customer experience point of view the definition of the multichannel environment remains lacking the other two business units and their definitions for the multichannel.

The third business unit, delivery organization involves considerably less channels to interact with the customer. The differences between the business units and the overall number of channels involved with interaction with the customer embodies the customer experience management in each stage. For delivery organization the channels are rather involving communication with the customer whereas the channels related to sales organization relate also to marketing and attracting leads.

Well, if we view the delivery part now it is good to understand that our customer base is rather different than in most of this sized companies, the main client is operating in mid-size market which limits the budgets for the projects. Therefore, we have limited to have one to three persons involved in each project and each employee involved has typically two to three projects at the same time which is good to understand. Therefore, we have no opportunity to serve each customer exclusively employees to sit with them fulltime, but the face-to-face communication and meetings are major in this part of the process. The other main channel in this part of the process is a chat such as Teams or other similar platform to ease the communication with the customer. Then after delivery we have application maintenance team, this kind of support service for maintenance which on the other hand is using email as a main channel for the tickets.

- Interviewee 2

This exemplifies the process forming the multichannel customer experience in the case company. There are various channels, factors and elements relating to management of the overall

experience in the company. In addition to visualizing the complex nature of customer experience this is also embodying the multichannel environment firms are currently operating. Multichannel environment somewhat differs in terms of the phase of the customer journey or customer buying process. The channels involved narrow down as the customer journey proceeds. The first stage of customer buying process, the pre-purchase stage has considerably wider range of channels is involved. Therefore, the first stage of the buying process also involves several management actions according to customer experience.

After interviewees had described the elements and factors of the customer experience and defined the multichannel environment by sketching the customer journey and the customer buying process, they were asked to describe how the customer experience is managed in these previously mentioned channels and touchpoints with the previously described relating elements and factors. After getting clear understanding of how the multichannel customer experience is forming in the case company it eases to view the management actions related to it.

The case company is currently, 2021, still implementing the customer experience concept and it is limited who are participating to manage the customer experience now. This far customer experience management is concentrated on executive team of the company.

The whole executive team is part of managing the customer experience. And then there are out team leaders who take part as well.

- Interviewee 1

The first stage of the buying process is the pre-purchase stage which covers marketing and sales actions. In this stage the channels vary greatly since the business unit utilizes strongly both digital and physical channels. Digital channels in this part of the process cover blogs, webinars, website and social media and physical channels on the other hand are strongly related to the sales representatives both inhouse employees and partner and supervisor employees.

By utilizing the expedients of sales and marketing we are aiming to get customer purchase. There are various ways to do so, for example we can create a guide or create

videos explaining our services, we use blogs and organize seminars. We have various channels that we are utilizing to get customers to find us and to create needs for those customers. We have several digital channels, face-to-face confluences, we have telephone channels, printed materials and of course we utilize platforms like Google, Facebook and LinkedIn in marketing.

- Interviewee 1

The management actions in this phase in the multichannel environment related to previously mentioned channels include several actions. First management action is to create value to the customer from the very beginning of the buying process. To communicate this value the communication between the touchpoints should be seamless and the forwarded message should typify the upcoming events in later phases of the customer journey. Also communicating the common value with external salespeople is key to improve the overall customer experience. Management actions relating to customer experience done to do so relate strongly also to communication and close planning in weekly meetings with each actor involved in sales and marketing.

With the salespeople of our principal, we have started to improve the communication and service with weekly meetings and build up concrete plan how we will run the cooperation. Then we have this analysis in our sales team if the potential customer did not end up buying us that we actively gather feedback to improve our services which helps our salespeople to identify where to improve. We also aim to be proactive in this and understand the customer to avoid the situations where the customer states that this service was inferior.

-Interviewee 1

The next phase of the customer buying process is purchase stage. The purchase stage in the case company is also involving sales actions and salespeople and this stage is where the product or service is customized to customer's needs. Relevant channels in this phase of the buying process are the meetings between the supplier and its customers. The channels used involve communication channels such email but strongly relate to face-to-face meetings, so in other words physical channels. The management actions in this phase of the journey relate strongly to the education of the employees and level of know-how to generate value to the customers business.

The main actions are those licenses to sell and licenses, to be able to prepare for every event and situation where we meet the customer in a way that there is nothing to criticize.

- Interviewee 1

Other management action in this the purchase phase is related to actively gather feedback and manage the process according the received feedback to design better services and by that to create value to the customers. Actively collecting feedback gives the company management an opportunity to react and to improve overall customer experience.

Yes, the feedback goes straight to teams also to the management team and the negative feedbacks are directly processed, this gives us great opportunity to react and improve our business.

- Interviewee 2

Managing customer experience in the delivery phase of the buying process also relates to company cultures, education, and know-how of the employees. The channels used in this phase are like the channels used in the purchase phase, as they are covering physical channels, in meetings which are straight related to employees and digital channels to easily communicate such as slack channels or chats. The actions done to manage customer experience, in this phase of customer journey, relate to fostering the customer service spirit to have strong desire to help customers, implementing similar concept as license to sell to delivery phase as license to deliver to maintain the quality and educate people.

In our company culture we have strong customer service orientation, and everyone understands the importance of customer service. But what are people's tools to deploy this into service that is what we aim to improve with for example "license to sell" concept. And other is the practicing culture to become better.

- Interviewee 2

The last phase of customer buying process in the case company was the maintenance/post-purchase phase. In this phase customer experience is formed through out email, since it is the only channel used in this phase. In the maintenance phase management actions aim to improve communication since the transparency is a big part of this phase and critical element

forming customer experience. To improve this case company is also gathering feedback to be able to manage this stage via customer data. The theory part, chapter 2.3.2 introduces measurement of customer experience, which is part of the customer experience management as well. Interviewees were also asked how they have set the targets and measuring the customer experience. They answered about the targets and the customer experience measurement as follows.

We have not set any specific targets, or our turnover is the target that we are aiming to reach overall, to gain the overall turnover of the previous year from existing customers this year.

- Interviewee 1

The interview had created quite strong picture that the customer experience management within the case company is aiming to increase customer satisfaction and yet the theory defining the customer satisfaction to be the initial goal of customer experience (Srivastava & Kaul, 2014) and by this improve customer loyalty (Goncalves et al., 2012). The interviewees were asked clarifying question that based on the interview if the goal for customer experience management is to improve customer satisfaction, interviewees answered as follows.

Yes, it is aiming to improve customer satisfaction, to reduce the turnout.

- Interviewee 1

Even if the company has not set target for customer experience management it had transpired that they are yet gathering data and information about their customer experience, so the question was aiming to reconcile who the data is processed and analyzed. The next question was to deepen the understanding of the measures and measurement tactics used to track the quality of customer experience.

Currently we have not defined customer experience, but we are working on the questionnaires to have them sent out with full volume and start to measure customer satisfaction in all these different streams, sales, marketing etc. This is not yet rolling, and it is major step towards it. The other major is "license to sell" which we do measure, and which should noticeably improve customer satisfaction.

- Interviewee 2

These are also part of our bonus plans to have set goals for our salespeople that they know how to make certain things.

- Interviewee 1

More like leading and lagging indicators that if you do have license to sell it should at the end lead to better customer satisfactions. Not only to measure customer satisfaction but also to measure the things that lead to it.

- Interviewee 2

The next question was the last questions regarding the customer experience management within the case company. Since it had turned out that the channels differ quite much in different parts of the customer buying process between different business units the next question was aiming to deepen the understanding of how does the multichannel environment effect to customer experience management and connectivity of these channels.

It is managed by different kind of plans in marketing we do have annual and half year plans for the content. And these contents are delivered in a way that we have people from the delivery organization to create the written content and to present on the videos, create the webinars so that they know what we communicate to the customers. Then when we make a deal or sign a contract, we have one kind of a transfer meeting where sales organization transfers the project to the delivery organization. The other way to maintain this common understanding are the user stories. The systems are built up based on these user stories from which the customer can view how the system should work and whether it delivers the aimed features.

- Interviewee 1

By these meetings the case company is aiming to avoid the mismatches between the touch-points to maintain the same customer experience throughout the process. Since there are several people involved this is creating challenges to do to. This is critical for the case company since there is the transfer phase from the sales organization to delivery organization. User stories are one way to communicate the desired factors and features seamlessly through the whole process which decreases the change of miscommunication.

In the delivery organization it is crucial for us to have these user stories and that they are predefined and that every single project follows this funnel so that there are those certain spots where we aim to make sure the quality and customer satisfaction and customer experience according to the delivery part.

- Interviewee 2

Pre-purchase	Purchase	Delivery	Post-Purchase/ Maintenance
<i>Creating value to the customer relationship</i>	<i>Education and skills of employees</i>	<i>Company culture</i>	<i>Level of know-how</i>
<i>Co-creating value</i>	<i>Harnessing data for decision making</i>	<i>Level of know-how</i>	<i>Company culture</i>
<i>Touchpoint connectivity</i>	<i>Co-creating value</i>	<i>Education and skills of employees</i>	<i>Touchpoint connectivity</i>
<i>Managing the communication between the touchpoints</i>			

Table 4 Multichannel customer experience management actions in the case company

The findings according to the first theme, how the multichannel customer experience is done in the case company in different phases of customer journey, are presented in Table 4. The case company is currently implementing the customer experience concept into their business which yet leaves some processes rather generous. Yet there are many management actions that have been done towards better customer experience and the multichannel customer experience is managed throughout different kind of actions in each business unit. The targets of the managing customer experience and the measurements remain still outcome based which is usual. Even if not defined internally in the case company the research material showed that by managing multichannel customer experience the case company is aiming to increase the customer satisfaction. The findings indicate that overall, the multichannel customer experience in B2B field is managed through data by basing the decisions on actual feedback from the customers of the company. In customer experience management according to the results communication both internally within the company but also externally with the customer play major role, so the connectivity touchpoint matters. Additionally, one factor that came up from the findings was the company culture that seemed to be focus on several stages of the buying process in terms of customer experience management. The

know-how and education of the employees was also one major thing in managing multichannel customer experience relating to physical channels and touchpoints.

4.2 Challenges and opportunities in B2B multichannel customer experience management

This chapter is presenting the empirical results and finding of the remaining themes of this study regarding the research questions RQ 2. The challenges and opportunities were also viewed from the supplier perspective relating to management of customer experience.

It occurred that the challenges are related to the knowledge and competence of the employees, whether the expectations of the customers are exceeded or not, utilizing the data and overall change management and lastly the intertwining of everything.

First challenge I would say is whether we exceed the customers' expectations or not. This is the first challenge. When people are busy it is critical if they have enough time to use for these and prepare for the meetings. Then the other affecting factor is whether the employee is aware of what is good enough that where is the standard to surpass.

- Interviewee 1

For us big challenge now is the change management to get these processes implemented to verify the level of know-how and to tie everything together. This is crucial because the knowledge for the employee education is gained through the projects. So, we must be able to utilize the data. As mentioned, we have rather small teams working on cases compared to our competitors and the challenge is to have knowledgeable employees to maintain the quality, but we must locate juniors to work on these projects as well since we have no capacity to serve seniors in every project.

- Interviewee 2

Employee know-how is one challenge which interviewees mentioned several times. The know-how is firm internal capital and effects on quality level. In customer experience management it is not only to employ competent people but also to locate them in certain roles. The interviewees acknowledged some challenges to relate specifically to the multichannel nature of the customer experience. In the multichannel environment the challenges seem to

relate to know-how of the employees, the change of contact person along the process and overall communication between departments and people.

It has caused problems on this industry. It is common issue in the IT industry that the corporation hires mainly IT people which are good consultants, but it does not mean that they understand anything about business or business developments. The customer does not always know how to improve their business when the consultant is there to help but if the consultant does not see the opportunities in business development, they are not able to offer more value to the customers business. We should aim to explain our customers how the business is running and how the system improves the business.

- Interviewee 1

And yet the transfer process from the sales organization to delivery organization should be done with a certain process to ensure that it happens strongly with the same template and then the same when the project shifts from delivery to maintenance. But this is anyway always a risk since the employee who has been contact person before has to transfer the knowledge of the customer also to the other person. This is strongly attached to the communications and whether people understand these conversations right. And the communication tends to always go wrong.

- Interviewee 2

The multichannel environment is provoking challenges in miscommunication and know-how which seemed to be the biggest challenges appearing in the process. Since the business is based on selling services, it is obvious that the business is strongly connected to the human related factors. These are the spots that are related to improvement points, so the interviewees described concrete points to be improved.

Well, it is that, that our IT-employees could understand the business better to maintain the quality. It should not matter which our consultant is working on the project but that the quality would always be the same, that's the second thing to improve. Third is that the collaboration with our principal would work in a way that they can trust all our salespeople and consultants.

- Interviewee 1

In the delivery it is the delivery model or delivery process as in the sales and maintenance units as well. To assure the quality level and the measurements the data should be harnessed

to track the deviations to the quality rate. We have major ongoing things according to these but if we can successfully manage the change that is one big question.

- Interviewee 2

So, the improvement points of the case company's customer experience are focusing on the identified challenges. The same issues as know-how in business consulting, the regular quality, seamless delivery process and change management rise in the improvements as in the challenges. These challenges can also be seen as opportunities and the interviewees described the opportunities to relate strongly to previously described challenges.

To get the process running and well managed it offers various opportunities to sell existing customer more if the satisfaction would be higher, they would be willing to purchase more. If we would succeed in previously mentioned processes, it would be huge potential for us.

- Interviewee 2

The successes of customer experience management in the case company relate to the challenges as well. The actions that have been done are this far already generated improvements in terms of regular quality and employee's know-how.

The successes this far relate to implementation of "license to sell" -concept which improved the performance of our salespeople and yet it has helped new employees to on board smoothly and they have been able to sell faster than before even better than our old salespeople.

- Interviewee 1

Probably the account handling is one of the things that have decreased the turn out so that we have been able to sell more.

- Interviewee 2

The challenges and opportunities emerging in the customer experience management in the case company seem to relate to each other. The challenges are seen as potential spots to improve their services. Table 5 is presenting the challenges the findings of this study identified.

Identified challenges related to multichannel customer experience management

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Failing to deliver extra ordinary experiences to exceed customer expectations</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Poor utilization of data</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Lack of management the implementation of customer experience/Lack of change management</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Lack of connectivity in intertwining everything together</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Lack of educated employees and employee know-how</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Miscommunication between the touchpoints</i>

Table 5 Identified challenges relating to multichannel customer experience management

4.3 Summary of the results and revised theoretical framework

To conclude this chapter is presenting the summary of empirical findings of this research. Initially the overall customer experience is forming in the case company is forming through various touchpoints and have several different ways to start. The company has lately just implemented the customer experience management in their strategy which explains that they have not yet defined the customer experience internally yet some actions towards better customer experience have implemented.

The complex nature of customer experience evolved in the case company as well. The multichannel environment in the case company is not only formed through various channels to communicate. Multichannel environment also involves three different business units and separate employees in each. Yet the customer experience is formed through each business unit and is created through overall outcome of these interactions. The customer buying process of the case company is not straight forwardly forming through the three phases the theory part of this study introduces but has four steps instead, pre-purchase, purchase, delivery, and post-purchase. This forms the customer buying process in the case company and effects on customer experience management as well as the buying process is dividing the operations into business units.

The challenges and opportunities this empirical part identified are strongly relating to touchpoint connectivity and the human communications, also harnessing data was mentioned to be seen as a challenge. The challenges the interviewees described are all actions that they

are aiming to implement, and the implementation is one challenges as well. In the early stages of creating customer experience the implementation and change management plays major role. The process is important part of the business in all three business units so that identified to be a problem as well.

The following model is presenting the findings of the empirical part of this study in revised model of the framework. The framework is based on the three business units through which the customer buying process is forming. In B2B buying process it is usual that along the process progresses the contact person shifts which is creating challenges to maintain the same customer experience in each stage. The framework also describes the multichannel environment through which the customer experience is forming, there are various touch-points existing even if only some of them belong to one customer's customer journey. The framework is embodying one possible hypothetical customer journey. The number of touch-points in the framework is not accurate but aims to typify the relation how they are divided between the purchase stages and on the other hand the divide between the digital and physical channels. After the post-purchase phase, the customer either turns out and ends the customer relationship or re-purchases. This is depending on whether the outcome of the customer experience, the customer satisfaction, is positive or negative.

The outcome is not directly proportional to the events of the customer journey, it might be that negative events produce positive outcomes and vice versa. Red color in the framework is identifying the critical spots of the customer experience, which are related either the challenges or opportunities. The critical points are involving service-related factors to create customer value through touchpoints but also human related factors in points of changing the contact person internally effecting the overall customer relationship.

Customer Experience

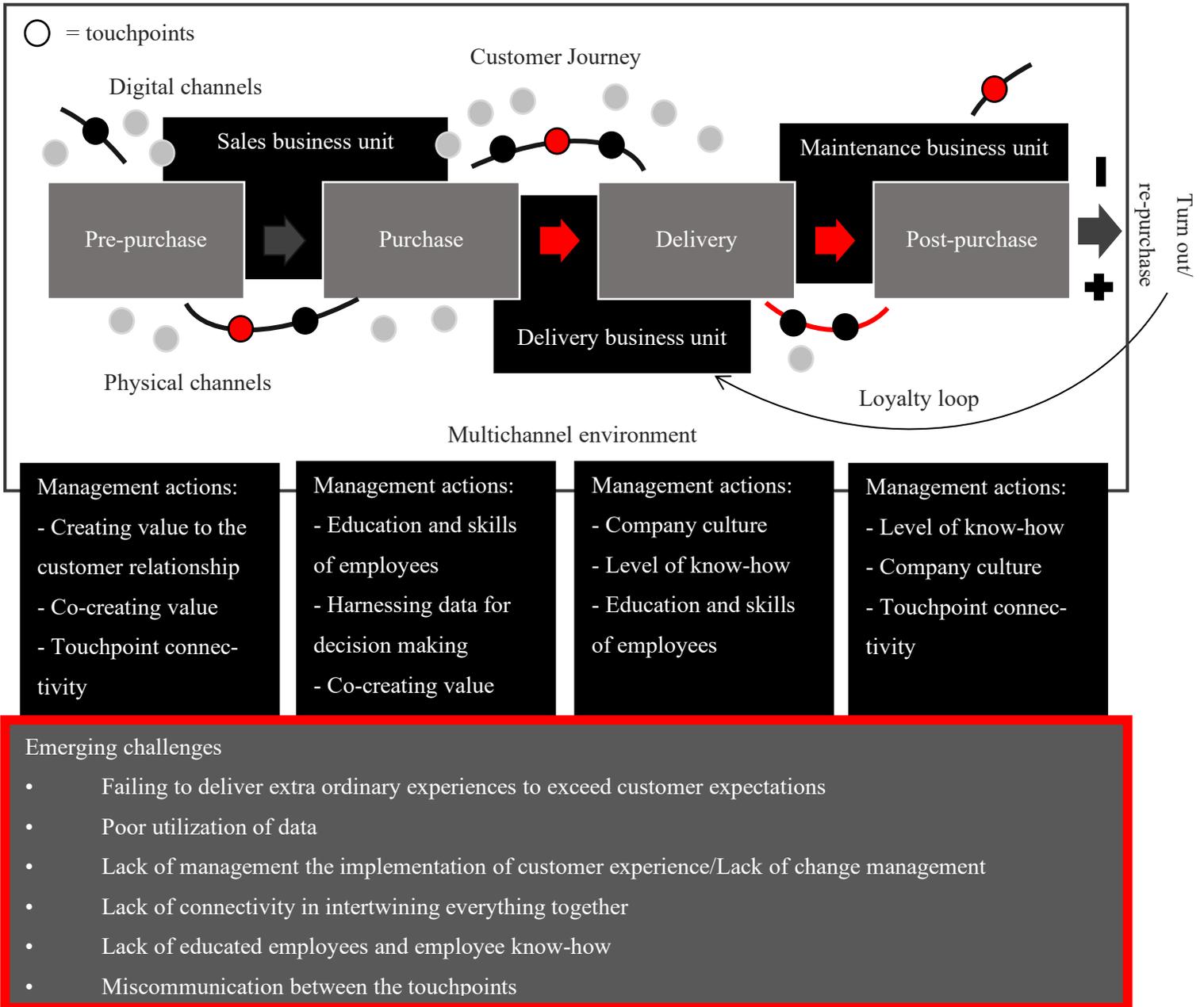


Figure 4 Revised model of theoretical framework

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this study was to increase the knowledge about B2B customer experience management in the multichannel environment. This study also pursues to identify challenges and opportunities arising in the multichannel customer experience management. The current literature has only limited implications on B2B multichannel customer experience management. This chapter is presenting the discussion of the empirical results and conclusions of this study. In this chapter the empirical implications are reviewed in terms of existing literature and discussed in terms of theoretical accuracy. This chapter will present the theoretical contributions of the study, followed by the managerial implications. After these the limitations and suggestions for future research are presented.

This study identified the research gap in the research of challenges emerging in the customer experience management (Witell et al., 2020, 428) and yet also to complete the narrow research on B2B customer experience management. The findings of this study support the conceptualization of complex nature of the multidimensional customer experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) from management perspective. The result also implicates that the argument of all three: goods, service, and relationship qualities are fostering the customer loyalty (Čater & Čaterm, 2010; Kittur & Chatterjee, 2020), since the findings identified conquering the challenges being related to maintain long-lasting customer relationships. The results strongly communicated the role of service and relationship qualities. Thus, the findings of this study indicate the critical points of customer experience to relate to serving customer and maintaining the relationship quality. This study identified four different stages relating to customer experience management in the B2B customer buying process; pre-purchase, purchase, delivery, and post-purchase, whereas theory is mainly describing the buying process throughout the three excluding the delivery phase (De Keyser et al., 2019).

5.1 Theoretical contributions

This study is contributing existing literature more evidence on a rather lightly researched topic. New evidence this study is presents to existing literature is relating to the challenges emerging in customer experience management. Based on the finding of this study the

identified challenge of providing extra ordinary customer experience by exceeding customers' expectations is new contribution to the existing literature. Initially the findings of this study are completing and strengthening the theories of multichannel customer experience management along the customer journey. This study also contributes evidence on challenges and opportunities arising in the multichannel B2B customer experience.

According to the first research question this study which was researching on how the customer experience is managed in the case company. The findings of the study show there are major differences of how the customer experience is forming between different phases of customer journey, which also requires different management actions in each stage. It is clearly shown that in the early stages the customer experience is strongly relating to the digital touchpoints and has less physical or human touchpoints whereas the purchase and delivery phase on the other hand are more actively utilizing the physical meetings to deliver the desired quality. The post-purchase phase on the other hand is again handled through online channels. Findings establish that in this case the customer experience management is involving different types of touchpoints in different phases of customer journey. Whereas literature on the other hand identifies generally all the channels to be involved throughout the process (De Keyser et al., 2020).

Customer experience management has been conceptualized by Homburg et al. (2017) as a source of cultural thinking per customer experience, utilizing strategic rubrics to create and design customer experience and the overall organizational ability to unceasingly enrich the customer experience to achieve and maintain long-term customer loyalty. The findings of empirical part emphasize this, the management actions towards better customer experience construct these elements and for example the "license to sell" embodies this in practice. The other characteristic of B2B customer experience management literature has acknowledged is the value creation and co-creating value for the customer's business. Finding also indicate that this typical character of customer experience management in B2B field.

Customer experience management is based on three ground theories: cultural mindset, strategic directions, and firm capabilities (Homburg et al., 2017). Based on the findings of this study the cultural mindset occurred to be one major element, which might be reasoned by the consulting industry and service business which overall is centralized on human

capabilities. The findings also corroborate the importance of the customer orientation of the company overall, which is the outcome of human related interactions (Urde et al., 2013). The findings are also showing that the argument of Homburg et al. (2017) according to customer experience management to cover all the actions and be firm level orientation towards customer centricity appears in practice as well.

As the results of this study indicate the overall customer experience is formed via several interactions, and despite the individual positive or negative interactions do not necessarily produce corresponding customer experience yet after negative interaction such as reclamation the results identified potential for positive customer experience when properly handled. This is noteworthy according to customer experience management as the management actions are in key if the employees are aiming to end up with positive customer experience. The results showed that intention for re-purchase increased in these kinds of situations, accordingly with literature which has acknowledged the linkage between positive emotions and customer loyalty (Gracia et al., 2011).

The findings according to the four contexts of strategic directions: thematic cohesion, consistency, context sensitivity and connectivity of touchpoints towards customer centricity are embodying the theory of Homburg et al. (2017). The findings corroborate the content creation in various touchpoints to extend the brand, the touchpoints having effect on overall corporate image, optimizing the touchpoints to each customer, which evolves specially in delivery phase of customer buying process and lastly the seamless connection between the touchpoints which appeared also from the findings as part of customer experience management.

The last part related to customer experience management the literature introduces to are firm capabilities (Homburg et al., 2017). The findings of this study followed partially the capabilities that have defined to relate to fulfil customer's needs the current research has acknowledged. These capabilities are such as capabilities to innovation capability (Foroudi et al., 2016) and strong brand identity (Beverland et al., 2007) did not occur from the research as strongly as the importance of positive employee attitudes (Homburg et al., 2017). This might be due the fact that yet the research limitations according to the case company which is still

in the implementation phase with their customer experience management and has not set certain targets or goals for it.

However, as Zolkiewski et al. (2017) argued the measurement of B2B customer experience is rather outcome based than input-output approach and the findings of this study corroborate this fact indeed. The findings of this study show that the customer experience measurement is based on measuring the customer satisfaction and leading indicators. The other measurements current literature has acknowledged are brand equity (Biedenbach & Marell, 2010), brand experience, service provider experience and post-purchase experience (Kuppelwieser & Klaus, 2021). From these the findings typify the importance of brand building and service provider experience since the results show clear focus on not only how the customer's see the brand but also the brand experience towards principal and the co-operation with them to serve customers better. Yet the findings project that the goal of customer experience to foster customer satisfaction, as well as the literature indicates as well (Srivastava & Kaul, 2014).

This study was aiming to identify challenges related to managing the multichannel customer experience. Findings corroborate the challenge of implementing the concept to existing strategies and policies of the company, the change management was clearly one major challenge emerging from the findings. This challenge has been somewhat equally identified by several studies through the connectivity of touchpoints in the creation phase (Witell et al., 2019; Bolton et al., 2018; Stone et al., 2002). The connectivity of the touchpoints was also one of the challenges, intervening of the overall customer experience that emerged also from the findings.

The theory has identified the challenges to relate mismatches in business relationships which was found also from the results of this study as the finding emphasized the importance of communication with the customer and exceed customer expectations. The other challenge occurred in the findings of this is the employee know-how, education, and preparation which is relating the channel identified by Witell et al. (2019) lacking touchpoint control. The other challenge the findings identified is harnessing data to improve customer experience, this challenge emerged in theory as well as Santosh Kumar and Mookerjee (2018) argued that the measurement of customer experience is a challenge since its' strong relate to emotions which are hard to measure and demonstrate, yet crucial to be able to improve customer

experience and to manage the elements related to it. The findings of this study noted the challenge of producing extra ordinary customer experiences by exceeding customers' expectations

The findings of this study indicate that failing to deliver extra ordinary customer experiences by not being able to exceed customer expectations is one challenge appearing in multichannel customer experience management. By utilizing innovations, the customer experience management can foster emotions and through that to offer deviant customer experiences. As the findings described the opportunities existing in strategic customer experience management are relating to the identified challenges. By overcoming the challenges of the process and gaining the benefits of customer experience management can be seen as an opportunity. The summary of theoretical contributions of this study are presented in Table 6.

Research question:	Related literature	Findings of this study
RQ 1. (Theme 1) How multichannel customer experience is managed in different phases of the customer journey?	<i>Verleye, 2015</i>	<i>Creating value to the customer relationship</i>
	<i>Witell et al., 2019</i>	<i>Touchpoint connectivity</i>
	<i>Urde et al., 2013</i>	<i>Education and skills of the employees</i>
	<i>Zaki, 2019</i>	<i>Harnessing data to design and manage CX</i>
	<i>Homburg et al., 2017</i>	<i>Maintain of customer centric company culture</i>
	<i>Witell et al. 2019</i>	<i>Level of know-how</i>
RQ 2. (Theme 2) What kind of challenges multichannel character of customer experience management is generating along the customer journey?	<i>Chatterjee et al., 2019</i>	<i>Utilizing data to design and manage CX</i>
	<i>Stone et al., 2002</i>	<i>Implementing the customer experience, change management</i>
	<i>Witell et al., 2019</i>	<i>Intertwining everything</i>
	<i>Witell et al., 2019</i>	<i>Miscommunication/mismatches in different phases of customer journey</i>
	<i>Witell et al., 2019</i>	<i>Employee know-how and capabilities</i>
	<i>New implication</i>	<i>Providing extra ordinary experiences by exceeding customer expectations</i>
RQ 2. (Theme 3) What kind of opportunities multichannel character of customer experience management is generating along the customer journey?	<i>New implication</i>	<i>The opportunities are directly derived from the challenges since overcoming the identified challenges is the main opportunity</i>

Table 6 Theoretical contribution of the study

5.2 Managerial implications

This study delivers implications for managers according to the ones working with multi-channel customer experience management in B2B field. Due the shift in B2B buying process the transactions have shifted towards journeys and buying has evolved to be value based. One way to create customers value is utilize customer experience. This research focused particularly to study customer experience in service business, more specifically in consulting industry. The following managerial implications are giving valuable information for managers operating in consulting business.

Implementing customer experience orientation to the firm business is requiring change management. As it turned out from the findings of this study the human recourses are the main source of creating effective multichannel customer experience in service business. Companies should focus on communicating the targeted customer experience internally and ensuring that employees are operating accordingly to complete in implementation and creation phase successfully. It is crucial for management to define the elements of the customer experience internally so that each corporation level is aiming to achieve the same outcome. Executives should also focus on ensure seamless communication internally and externally, to avoid mismatches between touchpoints and to ensure the touchpoint connectivity. Educating people is another crucial factor, to maintain the consistent quality when each employee has equal skills to serve the customers. Managers should invest on employee's education by offering inhouse education concepts like "license to sell" to conquer identified challenges relating to skills and know-how and standard quality.

Utilizing customer experience as a strategic tool is assigned to increase the customer satisfaction, which on the other hand is improving the customer retention. Customer satisfaction is the outcome-based measure the customer experience management is aiming. However, since the complex character of customer experience there are also challenges emerging in customer experience management. Managers should consider identifying emerging challenges since they are affecting the outcome of the customer experience and by overcoming the existing challenges they turn into opportunities. In the service industry, more specifically in consulting the challenges are strongly related to human touchpoints which is highlighting the importance of organizational behavior. The findings of this study indicate that positive

organizational behavior is improving the performance. The other challenge appeared to be the education and know-how of the employees. Managers should overcome these challenges by focusing on educating employees to different situations and give several tools to utilize to improve the performance.

It is key to identify the challenges to be able to overcome those since the findings of this study recognized the main opportunities to relate overcoming the challenges. By overcoming the challenges enables to reclaim the overall potential of customer experience to increase the customer satisfaction and improve the customer loyalty. To be able to achieve the gains of customer experience, creating and implementing the concept to existing practices and standards is challenging itself. There are several factors to notice and adapt to customer-orientation which is making the implementation phase complex. Yet the findings of this study emphasize the gains of strategic customer-orientation despite the complex nature of it. Table 7 is summarizing the managerial implications of this study.

Managerial implication of the study

Companies should focus on change management by communicating the targeted customer experience internally and ensuring that employees are operating accordingly to complete in implementation and creation phase successfully.

Executives should focus on ensure seamless communication internally and externally, to avoid mismatches between touchpoints and to ensure the touchpoint connectivity.

Managers need to acknowledge and to overcome the existing challenges in customer experience management since the findings embodied overcoming challenges to turn into opportunities eventually.

Managers should invest on human related touchpoints by educating employees to build up the skills and know-how of which are the key to build up customer centric company culture.

Table 7 Implications for management level

5.3 Limitations and future research

The limitations of this study leave room and open several opportunities for future research. Initially the single case study method is approaching the issue from narrow perspective which leaves gap to research this same topic with multi case research method to gain comprehensive information about this topic. The limitations single case method is bringing are relating to the chosen company, single case method is limiting the results to deploy to this

specific company and its' surroundings and the industry it is operating. This study is limited to B2B service business and more specifically to IT- and business consulting. Therefore, the results of this study cannot be generalized. Additionally, to the research method interview as data collection method is creating limitations as well. The conclusions are based on how the researcher herself understood and interpreted the interview material. The material was also translated from Finnish to English which may have effect on the made observations.

Other limiting factor is the narrow sample of this study. The respondents were chosen in terms of the best knowledge about customer experience and implementation process within the case company, yet it limits the results and findings of this study to be gained through the experiences and comprehension of these two individuals. Another limiting factor is that interviews were conducted as semi-structured which might have led to that some important factors might have been unintentionally left out from the answers. Questions of the interview were designed before the company and the industry was known; therefore, the questions are rather universal. However, the findings of this thesis establish the conceptualization of multichannel customer experience in B2B field. This study provided limited information about the challenges related to multichannel B2B customer experience management, yet the research gap still exists due the limited approach of this study. Also, the future research could approach the challenges emerging in multichannel customer experience management by comparing the emerging challenges between different industries and conceptualize the industry related typical challenges.

This study did not measure the success of multichannel customer experience management or outcomes of certain implemented function to improve customer experience. This leaves room for the future research to go more into detail about the outcome in different channels and the implemented innovations. Even if digitalization is increasing the number of digital platforms the findings of this study establish the importance of offline channels as well and human related touchpoints. This study identified the influence of organizational behavior to customer experience, yet this study did not employ concepts of organizational behavior which yet effect the customer journey. This is one view for future research to study the factors related to organizational behavior which are crucial in terms of producing superior customer experiences.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 Structure of the interviews (English & Finnish)

Background information

Tell about yourself:

1. Who are you? How long have you been working in the company, leading experience in years, industry the company is operating in and the size of the company (turnover and employee number)?
2. Tell about your positions and your responsibilities?

Research question: “How multichannel customer experience is managed in different phases of customer journey?”

Interview questions:

1. In what role are you working in the company and how is your position connected to customer experience?
2. How do you determine customer experience, multichannel environment and customer journey in the company?
3. Please describe, how does customer journey form in your company?
4. How does customer experience form in your company? What kinds of channels and interactions are involved?
5. Which touchpoints of the customer journey are the most critical in terms of forming customer experience?
6. How are the most critical touchpoints edited in order to improve customer experience?
7. Please describe what is multichannel environment in your firm?
8. In your company who are participating managing customer experience. (If only few in which roles they work)
9. Is customer experience part of your company's strategy, is it orientation covering all the levels of the company?
10. What kind of means or ways do you use to effect on customer experience?
11. How do you aim to impact on customer experience in your daily work?
12. What kind of targets have you set for managing customer experience? Do these targets differ in terms of phase of customer journey?
13. Do you measure the outcomes of customer experience management?
14. How do you manage multichannel customer experience in your company?

Research question: “What kind of challenges and opportunities multichannel character of customer experience management is generating in different phases of customer journey?”

Interview questions:

15. What kind of challenges have you faced in managing customer experience? Do these challenges relate to specific parts of customer journey?
16. What kind of challenges emerge since the multichannel environment?
17. What improvement points there are in your customer experience?
18. How about what kind of opportunities? Do these opportunities relate to specific parts of customer journey?
19. What kind of challenges have you already overcome?
20. Is there something you would like to add?

The interview questions (in Finnish)

Taustakysymykset:

1. Kerro itsestäsi, kuka olet? Kauanko olet työskennellyt yrityksessä, johtamiskokemus vuosina, yrityksen toimiala ja koko (liikevaihto ja työntekijämäärä)?
2. Kerro työtehtävistäsi ja vastuualueestasi?

Tutkimuskysymys: ” Miten monikanavaista asiakaskokemusta johdetaan kohdeorganisaatiossa asiakaspolun eri vaiheissa?”

Haastattelukysymykset:

1. Missä roolissa työskentelet yrityksessä ja miten työsi liittyy asiakaskokemukseen?
2. Miten määrittelette asiakaskokemuksen, monikanavaisuuden ja asiakaspolun yrityksessänne?
3. Miten asiakaskokemus muodostuu, mitä kanavia ja kohtaamisia siihen yrityksesänne liittyy?
4. Miten yrityksenne asiakkaan asiakaspolku muodostuu (ennen ostoa, oston aikana ja oston jälkeen)? Mitä kohtaamispisteitä siihen sisältyy?
5. Mitkä ovat kriittisimmät pisteet asiakaspolulla asiakaskokemuksen muodostumisen kannalta?
6. Miten kriittisiä kosketuspisteitä muokataan asiakaskokemuksen parantamiseksi?
7. Mitä monikanavaisuus on?
8. Ketkä yrityksessänne osallistuvat asiakaskokemuksen johtamiseen? (Jos vain muutama millaisissa rooleissa nämä henkilöt ovat?)
9. Onko asiakaskokemus osa yrityksenne strategiaa, onko se koko yrityksen kattava orientaatio?
10. Millaisilla keinoilla pyritte vaikuttamaan asiakaskokemukseen?
11. Millaisilla keinoilla itse pyrit työssäsi vaikuttamaan asiakaskokemukseen?
12. Millaisia tavoitteita olette asettaneet asiakaskokemuksen johtamiselle eri asiakaspolun vaiheissa?
13. Mittaatteko asiakaskokemuksen johtamisen onnistumista? Jos juu, miten mittaatte asiakaskokemusta asiakaspolun eri vaiheissa?
14. Miten monikanavaista asiakaskokemusta johdetaan yrityksessänne?

Tutkimuskysymys: ” Minkälaisia haasteita ja mahdollisuuksia asiakaskokemuksen monikanavaisuus aiheuttaa sen johtamiseen asiakaspolun eri vaiheissa?”

Haastattelukysymykset:

15. Minkälaisia haasteita olette kohdanneet asiakaskokemuksen johtamisessa asiakaspolun eri vaiheissa?
16. Millaisia ongelmia monikanavaisuus aiheuttaa?
17. Mitä kehitettävää asiakaskokemuksessa on?
18. Entä millaisia mahdollisuuksia asiakaspolun eri vaiheissa?

19. Millaisia onnistumisia?
20. Haluatko vielä lisätä jotain?