



## **ATTRACTIVE ELEMENTS OF LIVE ICE HOCKEY MATCH EVENT**

Case of Liiga match events in Finland

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## **ABSTRACT**

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Match events are the most important marketing tool for sports clubs, and a positive customer experience at a match event is extremely important to achieve. People have different expectations towards match events, but largely the same elements affect people's customer experience at match events. Sports clubs must understand that several elements affect the customer experience at match events, and taking care of just one thing does not guarantee a positive customer experience.

The aim of this research is to find out which elements make the ice hockey match event interesting. The research is carried out in the context of the Finnish Liiga and the target group of the research is consumers aged 20-40. It is hoped that the research will help Finnish Liiga clubs to better understand which elements affect the customer experience for the target group in question.

The study was carried out as a qualitative study, where people belonging to the target group were interviewed. The goal was to reach as wide a range of people as possible from within the target group being studied, in order to get as broad an understanding as possible of what makes a Liiga match event attractive. The theoretical basis consisted of customer experience, omnichannel customer experience and elements affecting customer experience in spectator sports. From the results of the study, it can be seen that there is room for improvement, but things have also been done well.

## TIIVISTELMÄ

<b>Tekijä:</b>	Anton Harju
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Ottelutapahtumat ovat tärkein markkinoinnin keino urheiluseuroille ja positiivinen asiakaskokemus ottelutapahtumassa on äärimmäisen tärkeää saavuttaa. Ihmisillä on erilaisia odotuksia ottelutapahtumia kohtaan, mutta pitkälti samat elementit vaikuttavat ihmisten asiakaskokemukseen ottelutapahtumissa. Urheiluseurojen tulee ymmärtää, että ottelutapahtumissa asiakaskokemukseen vaikuttaa useampi elementti ja pelkästään yhdestä asiasta huolehtiminen ei takaa positiivista asiakaskokemusta.

Tämän tutkimuksen tavoitteena on selvittää, mitkä elementit ovat tekevät jääkiekon ottelutapahtumasta mielenkiintoisen. Tutkimus toteutetaan Suomalaisen Liigan -kontekstissa ja tutkimuksen kohderyhmänä on 20-40-vuotiaat kuluttajat. Tutkimuksen toivotaan auttavan suomalaisia Liiga-seuroja ymmärtämään paremmin, mitkä elementit asiakaskokemukseen vaikuttavat kyseisen kohderyhmän osalta.

Tutkimus toteutettiin laadullisena tutkimuksena, missä haastateltiin kohderyhmään kuuluvia henkilöitä. Tavoitteena oli saavuttaa mahdollisimman laaja kirjo ihmisiä tutkittavan kohderyhmän sisältä, jotta saadaan mahdollisimman laaja käsitys siitä, mitkä tekevät Liigan ottelutapahtumasta houkuttelevan. Teoreettinen pohja muodostui asiakaskokemuksesta, omnichannel -asiakaskokemuksesta sekä asiakaskokemukseen vaikuttavista elementeistä katsojaurheilussa. Tutkimuksen tuloksista voidaan huomata, että kehitettävää on, mutta asioita on tehty myös hyvin.

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Helsinki, 19.5.2023

Anton Harju

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## 1. Introduction

Customer experience has become an extremely important concept in the world of marketing. Every product or service provider always aims to create an unforgettable, unique and pleasant customer experience, and this is no different for sports clubs, for example. (Jain, Aagja & Bagdare, 2016 pp. 642-643) Today, creating a superior customer experience can be considered one of the central goals of companies, and professionals around the world have already internalized the concept of customer experience management in their operations, but the concept of customer experience is still relatively new. The sports market is also an extremely competitive market, as sports clubs do not only compete with each other, but they compete against all other leisure activities. (Lucian, 2013, pp. 298-299) Today, there is so much competing entertainment that even sports events have had to be developed to maintain consumer interest, and innovative and exceptional experiences have been found to be important. Sports clubs must therefore understand the events in general, as well as the basic principles of sports events and the elements that affect the customer experience. (Theodorakis, 2014) In particular, Liiga has suffered for a long time with audience numbers, and that is why it is important to understand what Liiga clubs should do to increase audience numbers. However, increasing audience numbers is challenging if Liiga clubs or sports clubs in general do not have up-to-date information on what is expected from their matches and match events. Although not all elements are always under the control of the Liiga clubs, for the most part they can influence the formation of the customer's customer experience - assuming, however, that the Liiga clubs know which elements affect the formation of the customer experience. The aim of this study is to give an answer to this very question and thereby help Liiga clubs in particular to solve their problems with audience numbers and to improve their match events.

A live event is any event where the performer and participants are in the same space at the same time. A live event can therefore be anything from a concert to the theater, from corporate parties to seminars or from sports competitions to private parties. A live event always requires a venue to take place and the event can be organized indoors or outdoors. The event can have several different spaces or areas, but the participants and performers are always in the same space, so to speak. A live event is the basic form of events and they have always been organized. During the pandemic years, the number of virtual events increased greatly, but after the pandemic, live events are again the basic form of the event. However, if done correctly, a



virtual event is relatively easy to organize and thus cost-effective. (Aittola, 2023) Live events in general require a lot of different arrangements, different parties and permits. A live event is a good way to connect people with each other and works well for internal events, for example. A live event is a good place to bring people together. Humans are social creatures and want to share experiences with others of their kind. It's a good option for, for example, celebrating or something else where the fact that people are in the same place at the same time has a big impact. A live event often needs several different parties to take place, there must be a space to organize and often the live event also has something to offer. The event space must also be organized so that it is ready to hold the event, this can be the construction of various stands or other facilitation. (Liveto, 2023)

Events are a great place for a product or service provider to show themselves to consumers and at the same time to physically interact with customers (Kostiainen, 2022). In events, it is extremely important to create the most successful visitor experience possible for each visitor, which is always the sum of several elements (Fauvelle, 2021). The promises and marketing of the product or service providers partly make up the customers' advance expectations per event, and that is why it is extremely important that what is promised is kept. The most important thing is to create a community around the brand where trust is present on both sides. It is important to keep up with the times and keep up with modern trends, while listening to core customers and their needs. (Kostiainen, 2022)

Different cooperation parties that can bring more value to the event for the participants must also be taken into account. These can be various sellers and presenters of various brands related to the event. When there are a lot of people at the event, it is also necessary to consider how they are guided on the spot and how safety is guaranteed at the event. A live event requires the organizer to take things into account both before and after the event. Before the event, you have to make sure that you have, for example, the various permits in order, and of course you also have to reserve a place and different frameworks for the realization of the event. (Liveto, 2023) Especially in larger events, you should take into account what to prepare for and how a large number of people will affect a large area. What different parties are needed for implementation? What things should be prepared for? How do I sell tickets or register for the event? (Aittola, 2023) A live event needs to be dismantled after the event, whether it is for cleaning the place or for a bigger issue, such as dismantling the stands. (Liveto, 2023)

An event is one of the means of marketing communication that can be used to reach the desired target group and influence the target group's image. When planning an event, it is important to remember who the event is being held for. It must also be remembered that the resources reserved for the event and the set goals must be in harmony. By understanding the needs of the customers already in the planning phase, both the visitors and the organizer benefit from the event. A successful organization is one that is best able to define customers' perceptions, needs and wishes and satisfy them in a viable and competitive way. Sufficient time, financial resources and know-how must be reserved for the high-quality implementation of the event. The event organizer must also consider what the content of the event should be, so that as many customers as possible enjoy the event. An attractive and experiential event is created when a person commits to the offered service or product on a mental, physical, intellectual and emotional level. (Uronen, 2011)

The aim of the first chapters is to describe the phenomenon under study, which in this case is an attractive sporting event and how such event can be built. In this thesis the match events of the Finnish Liiga are examined in terms of what people think about them and how these match events should be developed, so that they would be attractive in the opinion of the target group defined later in the study. This research is structured in such a way that the context of the research is presented in more detail and a little background on literature review as to why this research is appropriate and necessary. The current situation of the Liiga in terms of audience numbers and their development will be evaluated, and previous literature related to this topic will be examined. After this, the goal of the research and the research questions to which we will seek answers in this research are defined. After this introduction, we will move on to define the key concepts of the study, the understanding and internalization of which is extremely important from the point of view of the study. Once the key concepts have been defined, the existing theory on the issues related to the research is examined with the help of the existing literature. When the existing theory has been studied enough that the research has a solid foundation, the methodology of the research is defined. After this, the conducted interviews are analyzed based on the presented theory and an attempt is made to find answers to the research questions. Finally, conclusions are drawn from the research and the most important findings are presented.

## 1.1 Context of the Thesis

Context means the publication and contextual context of the text or the phenomenon being presented. Without context, behavior or available information is easily misunderstood and everyone interprets the story, behavior or information from their own perspective. (The Britannica Dictionary, 2023) When we combine this framework presented later in the thesis with the ice hockey match events context, and even more specifically with the customer experience context in sports events, we get the context of this entire thesis (Figure 1). Defining the context is really important in terms of delimiting the research and for the reason that cultures differ greatly between countries and regions. This research focuses on Finnish sports, event and experience culture and the target group of the research is 20-40 year olds, Finnish consumers.



*Figure 1. The context of the thesis*

The research was carried out in the context of the Finnish ice hockey main league, i.e. Liiga. The viewership trend has been decreasing throughout Liiga, but despite its challenges, Liiga is still the most popular sports series in Finland (Sponsor Insight Finland 2022). With improved virtual broadcasts, competition between sports series and other forms of entertainment, and the

increased expectations of consumers, the quality of the customer experience in Liiga match events plays a significant role for Liiga clubs.

## 1.2 Literature Review

In this chapter, we will delve a little more closely into the background of the phenomenon under study and the context of the entire study. Comprehending and understanding the whole entity and the context is extremely important for the final result of the research, that the research knows how to take into account all possible factors and dimensions affecting the phenomenon.

A lot of research has been done around the world on major events in general and major sporting events, and what makes them successful or unsuccessful. On the other hand, Finnish events, and even more specifically sports events, have been studied extremely little, and thus there is not much ready research data, at least from the perspective of this research. Sports events are the most popular events worldwide (Theodorakis, 2014) and the most popular and most watched sport in Finland is clearly ice hockey (Kunnari, 2021). In general, events and sporting events have been studied a lot, but the Finnish market is extremely unique in many ways, and therefore studies conducted in other contexts and environments should be treated with caution. Existing research emphasizes that the arrangements at the sports venue are at the center of customer experience formation. For example, Mullan (2022) specifically emphasizes that the customers present should be taken into account in every way possible, so that the customer experience is positive. This means, among other things, minimizing queuing situations and offering exclusive in-stadium experiences enhances fan satisfaction.

Banks (2018) approaches the formation of customer experience through various alternative channels and elements. Banks (2018) specifically highlights utilizing AI and machine learning to enhance these efforts. This means the utilization of various digital elements in the event, and even more precisely, I try to use technology to identify consumer behavior and thereby develop the event preventively. However, Banks's (2018) research is limited only around digital elements, although it is one particularly interesting element. However, part of the earlier research emphasizes that the customer experience is the sum of several factors and the Sports Club cannot emphasize only one element. Here we get closer to what this research is based on, that is, we aim to find all the elements that have an impact on the customer experience.

The model offered by Richards & Toepoel (2015) on the formation of the event's customer experience comprehensively takes into account all elements related to the event's customer experience, but the special features of sports events are not taken into account in this model. But if we think about the match event specifically from the perspective of the event, this model would offer a good universal starting point for research. Regarding Grönroos' (2001) model, we are in the same situation. According to Grönroos (2001), customer experience consists of expected quality and experienced quality, as well as how well they meet. This would also provide extremely good starting points for research. Theodorakis (2014) provides a model that is based on Verhoef's (2009) customer experience model but takes into account the unique aspects of the sports world. In Theodorakis' model, the whole formed by different elements and the effect of this whole on the customer experience are also considered. All these theoretical models are discussed in section 3.1 and in the same chapter the theoretical framework is also selected that best suits this research.

In this research a term *attractive sports event* is used, and in this case, it means a sports event that audience finds attractive. A sporting event can be considered attractive, for example, because the sport and the individual have a certain kind of emotional relationship, or that the quality of the sports event and facilities is high. (Theodorakis, 2014) An attractive sports event can more specifically be defined as a competition or tournament that appeals to a large audience due to its excitement, high level of competition, and interest in the sport being played. Attractive sports event usually includes for example following factors such as popular and skilled athletes, a captivating storyline or rivalry, and a thrilling and dramatic atmosphere (Theodorakis, 2014). Also, the popularity of the sport in general effects on the attractiveness of the event. As sport that is widely followed and has a large fan base, is more likely to have more participants in the event and is in general, more attractive. Digging even deeper, a lively and energetic atmosphere, as well as a top-notch venue, can greatly enhance the overall appeal of the event. And also, effective marketing and extensive media coverage can help generate buzz and attract a larger audience to the event. The elements presented greatly influence what the consumer expects from the event before the event itself. When the consumer comes to the event, these elements must be implemented in the event itself and after the event, which make the event attractive and bring consumers back in the future as well. By incorporating these elements, an attractive sports event can become a highly anticipated and widely watched spectacle.

As mentioned, a successful sports event is the sum of many factors, and the organizer must be able to manage several different entities in order to achieve the highest possible quality customer experience. Sports clubs' match events are also one of the biggest sources of income, so their high-quality implementation is extremely important for the clubs. Match events are also one of the most important contact surfaces between the consumer and the sports club, and consumers should also be made to return to future match events. Nowadays, especially due to the growth of social media, clubs must focus on offering an uncomplicated customer experience in several different channels. Sports clubs must interact with consumers in several different channels, including in-person in match events, online, mobile, and social media. In match events, you should also focus on providing exhilaration and unforgettable experiences, also outside the game itself. Sports clubs must therefore constantly reflect on their activities and thereby develop their match events, and in addition, they must keep up with the times, which also makes consumers more likely to return to the events. (Theodorakis, 2014)

Audience numbers have been a constant topic of conversation in the Finnish Liiga, especially after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, and many empty benches have been seen in the stands this season as well, despite the removal of Covid-19 restrictions. If the audience readings are compared to the latest corona-free season, which was the 2018–2019 season, the meter shows a minus in most places. It is clear, that every Finnish Liiga team has increased its average viewership since last season, when the Covid-19 restrictions had a harsh effect on the number of spectators. Inflation and the high cost of energy also mean that the public cannot necessarily afford to consume sports entertainment in the old way. (Ikonen, 2023)

At the moment, the combined audience average of the Finnish Liiga clubs is 4,114 spectators and it exceeds the average of the audience goals set before the season by only nine spectators. However, the development has been in a positive direction during the season, because after the first third of the season, the clubs were slightly more than 160 behind their audience target of 4,105 spectators. Even though the audience average of the Liiga clubs' home matches is ahead of the audience average goals set before the season, only six of the fifteen clubs are ahead of their goal. (Oksanen, 2023) As can be seen from the development of audience numbers in table 1, Liiga is on the brink of a big problem, which has not been successfully solved so far. Tampere's teams Ilves and Tappara, as well as HIFK from Helsinki, have been the only teams in recent years to keep their audience average at a tolerable level year after year. In Tampere, in addition to the clubs' long traditions, the new Nokia Arena affects this, while in Helsinki, a large market area facilitates HIFK's operations, and HIFK is also the most valuable Liiga club

in terms of brand value. However, this paints a worrying picture of the other Liiga clubs, and for the entire series, it would be extremely important that the problem could be solved as soon as possible. Several Liiga clubs have fallen badly behind in the development work of their match events, which is now partially reflected in low audience numbers. With the help of this research, Liiga clubs should be able to develop their match events in the right direction, at least in the eyes of the target group that is the subject of the research. The average audience in Liiga has dropped by more than a thousand spectators since the beginning of the 2000s, so now it is the last moments to address this situation. The attached table (Table 1) shows Liiga's audience averages starting from the 2001-2002 season. The trend is clear even though the table does not show all past seasons from this time period, even if audience averages from the missing seasons are available.

<b>Season</b>	<b>Audience average</b>
2001-02	5231
2007-08	5101
2013-14	4974
2017-18	4254
2019-20	4239
2022-23	4114

*Table 1. Liiga audience averages from past seasons (Liiga)*

After the 2012–2013 season, the domestic ice hockey league, or Liiga, was closed for the last time. You can't drop out of the league anymore, and you can't get there by playing. After that, Sport, KooKoo and Jukurit from Mestis have been promoted to Liiga, but through different adjustment procedures and without qualifying, i.e. the promotion has taken place through the so-called cabinet procedure. (Eskelinen, 2021) The closed Liiga has been very prominent in the last seven years and the league has lost its credibility due to the closed doors. Every season the same song repeats itself, the teams at the bottom of the league table give up roughly halfway through the season and sell their best players to the top clubs to possibly fight for the championship. The entertainment ends at that point, the fans disappear from the stands, and the clubs start focusing on the new upcoming season. A very boring system that repeats itself season after season, which at the same time tarnishes the youth SM league as well as the second

highest professional series in Finland called Mestis, not to mention the harm that the annual so-called "clearance sales" do to the brand of the club itself. (Tuokko, 2021)

The match event of Liiga is regulated by:

- Rules of the International Ice Hockey Federation IIHF and the Finnish Ice Hockey Federation
- League competition rules
- The Assembly Act, the Rescue Act and the Law on Law Enforcement Officers, as well as other laws
- Official instructions, regulations and permits
- League safety instructions and fan instructions
- The match manual, especially regarding the completion of the match

Liiga therefore does not interfere with various side activities, except for the advertising that takes place during the game, which may be offered during the match. This gives clubs the freedom to develop their match events as they see fit. (Liiga, 2023) Liiga's mission is to be the most impressive sports experience in Finland and until 2025 is to be a growing and respected pioneer of professional sports in Finland. Along with the Liiga organization, the most important brand ambassadors of the Liiga product are the teams playing in the series and their players. (Liiga Strategia, 2023)

### 1.3 Study goals, research questions and research method

The main objectives of the thesis are providing concrete tools for Finnish Liiga ice hockey clubs on developing their match events to be more attractive for the consumers to attend and how to create omnichannel customer experience in sports context.

Research question:

- *What are the elements of attractive ice hockey game events from 20-40-year-old consumers point of view?*



Sub-questions:

- *How would improving omnichannel customer experience, especially in digital channels, improve the overall customer experience?*
- *How could you improve ice hockey match events with elements from other sports events?*

By answering into this research question and the sub-questions, the main objectives of this thesis can be accomplished. These questions address the problem and research can therefore help to design a strategy on how to build and organize better match events.

The research method of the thesis is qualitative research. The purpose of qualitative research is to examine the object holistically and describe real life (Hirsjärvi, Remes & Sajavaara, 2009, 161). The research is going to be carried out as a case study, which is characteristic of qualitative studies (Metsämuuronen, 2006, 92). In case studies, a case is chosen that has been chosen on purpose, usually the target is a company, an organization or some part of the organization (Koskinen, Alasuutari & Peltonen, 2005, 154). The research data will be collected through consumer interviews, and in addition by analyzing various scientific articles and documents. The interviews will be semi-structured interviews, where the interviewee is told the theme and the discussion is freer after this. Thus, this is the best way to conduct the data collection, as different things or elements can emerge during the discussion. The purpose is to interview university students, university staff and in general local people belonging to the research target group. In this way, a sufficiently broad sample is obtained so that the research can be used at the national level as well.

The research focuses on the perspective of Finnish sports clubs and their capability to organize high-quality and interesting match events from the consumers' point of view. Because there is not much research available on the subject yet, it is interesting to know what consumers think about the current situation and attractiveness of the match events of Liiga teams. The research is limited to Finnish sports clubs because the main data collection method is semi-structured interviews, which would be difficult if not impossible to organize with foreign sports clubs on this schedule.

## 2. Customer Experience

Customer experience refers to the overall impression a customer has of a company or product, based on their interactions and engagement with it. More specifically, customer experience refers to how the consumer perceives the quality of the service or product they receive. Customer experience is an important measure and companies should strive for the highest possible customer experience, because it is good for business. The goal is to create positive experiences that build brand loyalty and get the consumers attend again in the future. (Theodorakis, 2014) The customer's experience at each stage of the product or service journey can impact their overall impression of the brand and drive future behavior, such as repeat purchases or recommendations to others. Companies that prioritize customer experience aim to create consistent, positive interactions that build trust and loyalty. (Xu, 2022)

Customer experience today is the sum of many factors, and customer experience can be affected by, for example, interaction with an organization that sells a product or service, in several different channels. The customer experience can also be affected by interaction with other customers and this aspect cannot be directly controlled by the organization selling the product or service. However, the biggest impact on the customer experience is that the organization selling the product or service can offer an immersive experience to the customer who bought the product or service. The continuation of this is often a successful company. A company selling a product or service should therefore focus not only on excellent service but also on managing the customer experience, precisely by offering unforgettable experiences. (Theodorakis, 2014, pp. 206-207)

Theodorakis' theoretical model of customer experience in spectator sports (2014) is strongly based on Verhoef's (2009) theoretical model of customer experience. Verhoef's theoretical model of customer experience (Figure 2) consists of the following elements; social environment, service interface, retail atmosphere, assortment, price, customer experience in alternative channels and retail brand. Consumer moderators and situation moderators also have an effect in the overall customer experience, but they cannot be directly influenced in any way, they are mainly related to consumers' preferences and personal situation and views. By managing and controlling these elements, it is possible to manage the customer experience and thus create a positive customer experience for as many customers as possible. (Fauvelle, 2021)

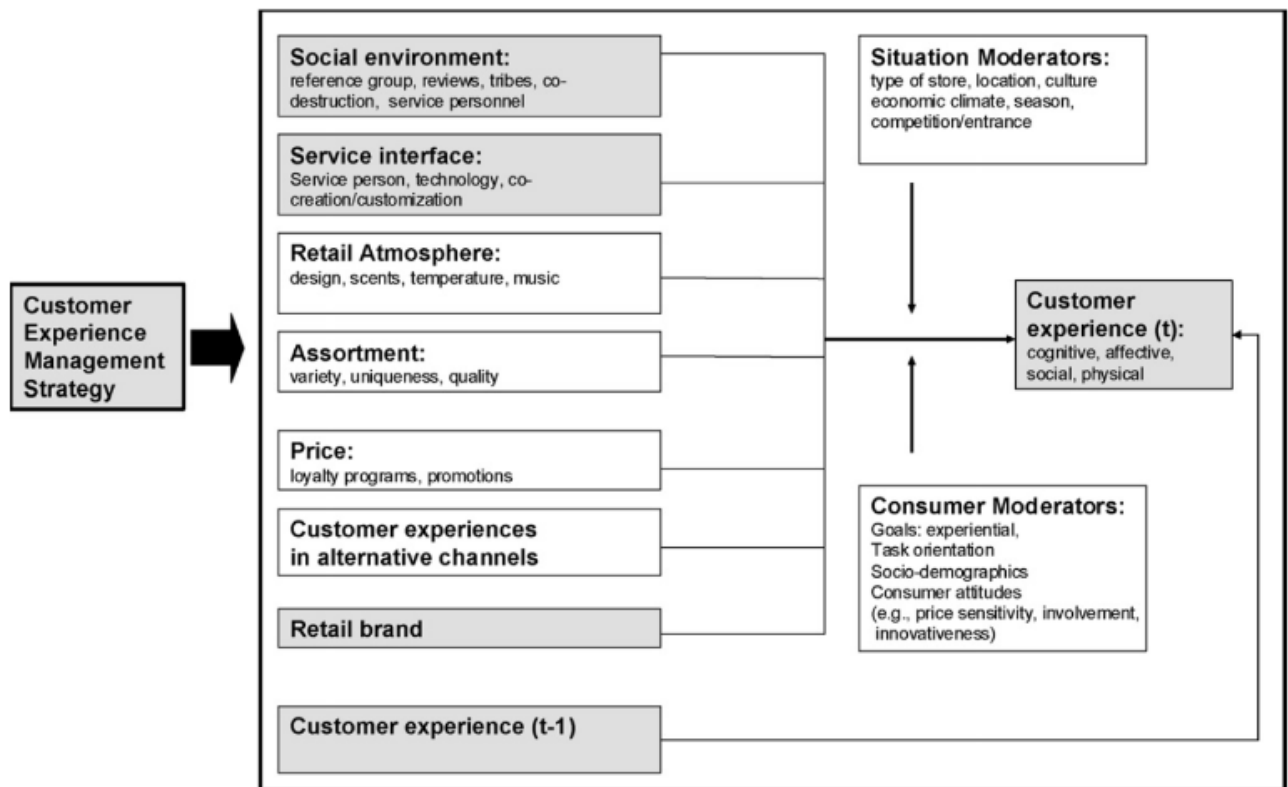


Figure 2. Customer experience summary (Verhoef, 2009)

In the theoretical model of customer experience presented by Verhoef, the first element is the **social environment**. Social environment consists of social forces, such as the reference group in question, various reviews related to the product or service and, among other things, the service received by the product or service provider. The product or service provider can influence the effect of this element in the totality of the customer experience by delivering the product or service they have authorized and by fulfilling the customer's possible wishes regarding the product or service. The second element, i.e. the **service interface**, refers to the platform on which the customer transacts when acquiring a product or service. Whether it is a physical store where the customer service person interacts with the customer or an online store, the experience must be functional, and the brand must be strongly present in the customer encounter. Also, customization and thereby differentiating the product from competing products, as well as especially listening to customers' wishes in the change and development of a product or service, improves the customer experience in both the short and long run. The third element of the model is **retail atmosphere**, i.e. the atmosphere in a physical service point. Concretely, this means different scents, temperature, music as well as the interior and design of the place, the goal of course is to create an experience in line with the brand. Here, too, it's

good to listen to the customers' wishes, but also to make choices that specifically serve the brand itself. The fourth element is the **assortment**, i.e. which possible products, for example, are displayed in the physical location and how extensive or unique the product range is shown to customers. The fifth factor affecting the customer experience is of course the **price** of the product or service, which can ultimately have an extremely large impact on the customer experience, positively or negatively. In other words, if the product or service does not meet expectations or the promises of the product or service provider, the customer experience suffers and vice versa. Pricing can be influenced by various discounts, campaigns or loyalty programs, this can activate the consumer to buy a product or service more often, and this can, however, primarily affect the customer experience positively with the means mentioned above. The sixth element is the **customer experience in alternative channels**, which means the interaction between the customer and the product or service provider in any possible channel or connection. For example, making purchases in an online store or calling the customer service of a product or service provider also affect the overall customer experience. The last, i.e. the seventh element that a product or service provider can directly influence is the **retail brand**. Of course, this means the brand built by the retailer among consumers - the brand is built according to the retailer's own measures, from which consumers then form their own image. In addition to these elements, the customer experience is affected by the previously mentioned situation and consumer moderators. **Consumer moderators** refer to consumers' attitudes and preferences, i.e. for example how sensitive the consumer is to price fluctuations or how involved the consumer is with the brand. **Situation moderators** mean, for example, the location and style of the retailer's store, the general economic situation and the competitive situation in the market. The current season and the prevailing culture in the area also affect the customer experience offered by the retailer. (Fauvelle, 2021)

Customer experience really is the sum of many different factors and elements, and a product or service provider must be able to manage all elements to ensure a positive customer experience for as many consumers as possible. A positive customer experience, and even more precisely repeated positive customer experiences, ensure that the consumer returns again and again to the product or service provider to make a new purchase. Through positive customer experiences, it is therefore possible to build long-lasting customer relationships, through which positive word of mouth (WOM) can be set in motion, which at best brings new customers to the brand. Customer experience is therefore extremely important when thinking about the

financial performance of a product or service provider, especially in the long run. (Jain, Aagja & Bagdare, 2018, pp. 656-658)

## 2.1 Customer Experience in Sports Context

Considering the context of this research, it is extremely important to understand what customer experience means in a sports context and what factors it actually consists of. Theodorakis (2014) suggests that customer experience in spectator sports consists of the following factors: functional elements, outcome elements, social elements, price, customer experience in alternative channels, situation and consumer moderators. These factors are only partially under the control or influence of the sports organization organizing the match event. Sports consumption habits have also changed with improved virtual broadcasts, social media and other new technologies, so fans must be attracted to the venue to watch sports by creating superior customer experiences, and consumers must be interacted with in several different channels. (Theodorakis, 2014)

It has also been acknowledged at the management level of professional sports clubs that nowadays work needs to be done to create attractive experiences, and simply supporting the contribution of fans to create memorable experiences in the arena cannot cover the experience comprehensively. Today, there is so much competing entertainment that even sporting events have had to be developed to maintain consumer interest, and innovative and exceptional experiences have been found to be important. Sports consumption habits have also changed with improved virtual broadcasts, social media and other new technologies, so fans must be attracted to the venue to watch sports by creating superior customer experiences. (Theodorakis 2014)

In sports events, the biggest role is played by the audience and supporters, who create a unique atmosphere for the event by waving flags, performing different choreographies and singing different support songs at the venue. It is therefore important that a sports teams plan a sports event, for example a hockey match, together with supporters, because without supporters, there is no atmosphere at the venue. In addition to that, it is of course important to consider all the other ways to interact with supporters and other potential customers. Interaction therefore takes place both at the sports venue and outside it, and both play an extremely important and large role in the formation of the customer experience. The customer experience of a sports event is

indeed affected by things and elements that are not completely under the control of the sports club. Such things are, for example, the sporting success of the team or the competitive situation in the series in general. The things mentioned above can naturally have a positive or negative effect on the customer experience, and the Sports Club can indirectly try to influence these, for example by acquiring good players for the team. Spectator sports are therefore also in the situation, like other product or service providers, that not all elements affecting the customer experience are under their influence. (Theodorakis, 2014)

## 2.2 Omnichannel Customer Experience

In the theoretical framework of the thesis presented in the figure 5, this concept includes also the element of customer experience in alternative channels. Omnichannel customer experience is the practice of providing a seamless and consistent customer experience across all channels and touchpoints, including in-person, online, mobile, and social media. The goal is to create a unified customer journey, regardless of how a customer interacts with a brand. Consumers often use various channels related to the brand, so the customer experience must be high in all possible channels. (Goulart, 2020)

Omnichannel customer experience has several benefits for both the customer and the company itself. When implemented correctly and efficiently, a seamless customer experience in different channels improves the overall customer experience. The goal is that you reach your customers in a different way, but that you remain on the customer's journey, so to speak, for example during the entire purchase process. The result is that you better understand the needs of the customer and your company, and thus you can take them into account in sales, marketing and customer service. A positive customer experience in different channels leads in the long run to the customer coming back to use your service or buy your product again. According to research, customers who interact with a brand in at least three different channels are almost 250% more likely to buy a product or service offered by the company. In addition to understanding more about your existing customer relationships, you will be able to reach new potential customers more, as you operate in more channels and thus, you will be able to expand your existing customer base. Potential customers will find you more easily and the potential sales process will be more uncomplicated if the omnichannel customer journey is planned and implemented with high quality. (Worxwide, 2023)

The factors mentioned above, if successful and properly implemented, eventually lead to an increase in the company's revenue. At best, a high-quality omnichannel customer journey can almost triple the company's revenue growth. In addition to everything, the omnichannel customer journey gives the company a broader understanding of customers' wants and needs, when the company has more data available for analyzing consumer behavior. At the same time, the company also receives information about potential customers and their behavior. Using this information, the company can develop and optimize the omnichannel customer journey by taking consumer behavior into account. (Worxwide, 2023)

A successful omnichannel customer experience requires a clear omnichannel strategy. Omnichannel strategy has three basic elements, which are data, technology and people. Every organization must have a clear understanding of their customers and their purchasing behavior. The technology must work on several different platforms, while collecting information about customers and their behavior on different platforms. An effective omnichannel strategy requires its own team to ensure that the strategy's measures produce results. The team's task is to monitor results from different platforms, track consumer usage and preferences, and modify or optimize the strategy, or its parts, if necessary, based on the available data. (Goulart, 2020)

### 2.3 Omnichannel Customer Experience in Sport Context

The basis of omnichannel customer experience and marketing, regardless of industry, is the understanding that nowadays consumers interact with the brand by changing the platform during a single transaction. There are several of these platforms, ranging from physical points of sale and shops to the internet and social media platforms. Sports organizations also require an understanding and know-how of omnichannel customer experience and marketing, in order to create unforgettable experiences for their customers. (Richards, 2022)

As mentioned earlier in this study, in order to achieve a high omnichannel customer experience, a company must identify its target group. The same applies to sports clubs. Sports clubs must identify exactly their target group, and tailor all marketing specifically for this target group. When the sports club knows their target group, they can offer exactly the kind of content, information and experiences that activate and stimulate this target group. When a sports club knows their target group and how their target group behaves, they can offer the most seamless customer experience across all platforms where they interact. The success of omnichannel

customer experience also depends on the research and interpretation of information and data available for sports clubs, as well as optimizing all platforms based on the data to improve the customer experience. (Richards, 2022)

When it comes to sports events, it is important to understand that the customer begins to form his customer experience even before the event itself. It is therefore extremely important that the sports organization organizing the event interacts with the potential customer in different channels, even before the event itself, and tries to create the most attractive image of the event. The goal before the event is of course to get the customer to buy a ticket first, after which the customer will most likely arrive. It must be remembered that nowadays sports, and especially Liiga, can be watched from almost anywhere via TV broadcasts, and thus it is easy for the customer to also watch the match at home. The interaction between the customer and the sports organization organizing the match that takes place before the match event must therefore convince the customer that the match event brings him something more compared to if the customer were to watch the match from the couch at home. The sports organization organizing the match event must also not forget the interaction with customers during or after the match event. Throughout the entire customer journey, care must be taken that the sports organization offers a seamless and brand-appropriate customer experience in all the channels it offers. (Cuéllar & Vidgrén, 2022)

Sports consumption habits have changed with improved virtual broadcasts, the rise of new media and other new technologies (Theodorakis, 2014, 206). Today's TV broadcasts are of such high quality that it can even be easier to follow a game in the sport events via TV than on site at the venue. With advanced technology, consumers can watch sports broadcasts anywhere and anytime, which can make a sports fan not want to go to the venue. Theodorakis (2014, 206) has stated that, for example, TV broadcasting contracts have passed the event ticket revenue as a source of income. This may contribute to the fact that the sport clubs' own investment has shifted more to pleasing the home spectators instead of the framework of the event itself. You can get more out of the game when the professional commentator tells you what is happening in the game and, for example, facts about the players and teams. In addition, before the game, during breaks and after the game, experts give tips on what to pay attention to and give their expert opinions to support the spectator experience.



### 3. Theoretical Background

In this chapter, we will explore different possible theoretical models, on which this research is based. Finally, one of these theoretical models is chosen and studied a little more closely. It is important to study different theoretical models in order to find a model that fits the context of this research.

#### 3.1 Theoretical Models for the Thesis

For this thesis, many theoretical framework models have been examined. As a whole, sports events and their customer experience have been studied a lot. Banks (2018) has studied the customer experience specifically related to football match events, and how the customer experience can be influenced with the help of various new technologies. The importance of customer experience in sports extends to other industries, but many businesses struggle to fully understand how to apply technologies like AI and virtual reality. However, there is potential for machine learning to play a significant role in personalizing experiences and creating tailored offers for customers. Using technology can help with developing season ticket packages based on individual preferences and using predictive analytics for financial management. For example, the Italian soccer team AS Roma's have made plans for their new stadium, which prioritize incorporating technology to provide fans with an immersive experience. The goal is to build a broad and global fan base, recognizing that many fans now prefer data-rich video feeds over attending live events. (Banks, 2018) It is challenging to use this as a frame of reference for this research, as the resources in, for example, European football are massive compared to Finnish sports in general. In addition, Banks's (2018) study leaves a lot of dimensions affecting the customer experience with little attention.

Mullan (2022), on the other hand, offers an extremely broad and, so to speak, universal framework that can be used to improve the customer experience on average at every sporting event. Live Sporting events rely heavily on fan participation to generate revenue through ticket sales, merchandise, concessions, and food and beverage. The success of Venues and Sporting Clubs hinges on encouraging fan loyalty and enticing them to return for future events. In general, all the means for improving the customer experience presented by Mullan (2022) can

also be found in Theodorakis' (2014) model, but Theodorakis examines the formation of the customer experience in spectator sports much more deeply. Mullan offers a few traditional methods, such as minimizing queuing situations, creating a special atmosphere in the venue so that it cannot be achieved anywhere else, interaction between the sports club and supporters before and during the match, and additionally rewarding loyal customers with various benefits. (Mullan, 2022) These are perfectly usable methods and all true, but in the end Mullan's (2022) model does not take into account the Finnish sports context or any other possible elements affecting the customer experience. The most important thing at this stage of the research has been to find a theoretical model that fits specifically as well as possible into the context of Finnish spectator sports and takes into account as many different elements as possible related to the formation of the customer experience.

Richards and Toepoel's conceptual model of the event experience (Figure 3), Grönroos' overall perceived quality model (Figure 4) and Theodorakis' framework of customer experience in Spectator sports (Figure 5) were particularly closely examined. Richards and Toepoel's model offered a general model of what the event visitor's visitor experience consists of and what factors make the event attractive. The model focuses on three parts of the event, i.e. the conditions of the event, the core event itself and the outcomes that follow from the event.

In event conditions, this model emphasizes people's prior expectations of the event, i.e. that people expect the event to be, so to speak, something different from a normal event. The party organizing the event must therefore be able to sell the potential visitor an image of how great and unique the event will be. This becomes challenging because people are different and the same factors do not work for all people and do not get all people excited about the event. (Richards & Toepoel, 2015)

The visitor experience at the event itself is affected by two important entities; personal preferences and expectations and the event's facilities and environment. An individual visitor has a certain kind of image of the event as a prior expectation, i.e. what he expects from the event. How well these pre-expectations are fulfilled or, in the best case, exceeded, the more likely the visitor will be satisfied with the event. The event's facilities and environment have a great impact on the visitor's event experience. How conveniently you can do business at the event, how other event visitors interact with each other, or how the event's ancillary services or products complement the core event itself, greatly influence the visitor's event experience.

Arriving and leaving the event and their smoothness also affect this whole and the success of the event in the visitor's opinion. (Richards & Toepoel, 2015)

If the aforementioned areas are successful and the visitor gets a successful experience from the event, it will have a great impact on the future of the same or similar events and the return of the visitor to the events in question in the future. The most important thing is to give the visitor a satisfied experience of the event, which will leave a successful memory of the event, the visitor will speak well of the event to their friends and loved ones, and they are more likely to return to the same events again. A successful event can also bring the brand in question closer to consumers, even outside of the events in question. (Richards & Toepoel, 2015)

Richards and Toepoel's model (Figure 3) offers a model that presents the visitor experience as the sum of many different factors and as a longer multipart process. When this process is successful in all areas, the result is a positive event experience for the event visitor. (Richards & Toepoel, 2015)

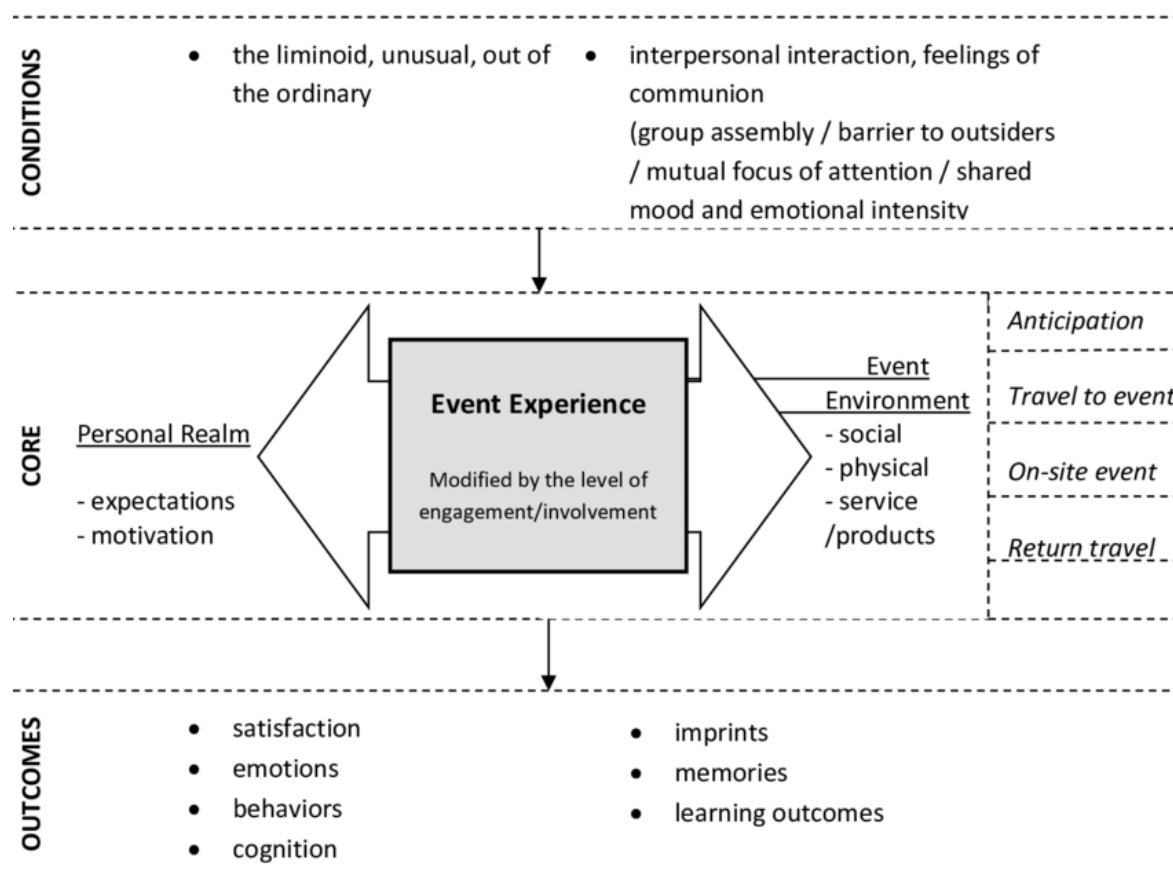


Figure 3. A conceptual model of the event experience (Richards & Toepoel, 2015)

The overall perceived quality model (Figure 4) introduced by Grönroos (2001) is also worth investigating, whether it would be suitable as a theoretical framework for this study. According to Grönroos (2001), a strong brand image is built when the perceived quality meets or exceeds the expectations of the customer visiting the event. The perceived quality of the event is influenced by two factors; the expected quality of the event and the quality experienced in the event. Several factors also affect the expected quality. The marketing communication produced by the event organizer paints a picture for the customer of what kind of event the customer is allowed to expect. There are many types of marketing communication, and it can be received by one potential customer, in several different channels. Marketing communications must therefore be consistent and "promise" the same quality. The sales measures of the event organizer also affect the customer's expectations regarding the event. Sales arguments and materials used in sales should support the image that the event organizer wants to convey to potential visitors. The brand image of the organization organizing the event and the event itself also naturally have an impact on the image of the event by potential event goers. Building a brand image is a longer process, but the most important thing to remember is that all activities related to the events must be in line with the brand, so to speak. Word of mouth affects the potential customer's image of the event and possible participation in the event. If friends, relatives or acquaintances praise the event or the organizer of the event, it is more likely that this potential customer will participate in the event himself. In addition, the customer's image of the event, expectations and ultimately possible participation are influenced by the public relations of the event organizer and also by the needs and values of the potential customer. The values of the potential customer and the party organizing the event must meet, and in addition, the event must fulfill a need of the potential customer, for example the need to experience community or pleasure. (Grönroos, 2001)

In Grönroos' (2001) model, the perceived quality of the event is also influenced by the experienced quality of the event. Experienced quality is affected by two factors; technical quality and functional quality, and these factors are also linked to the brand image of the organization organizing the event and the event itself. Technical quality refers to how the event is implemented and how the event works on a practical level. Functional quality, on the other hand, refers to what actually happens in the event and how high-quality this activity is. For example, in a sports context, technical quality can mean how the practical arrangements of the

event have been implemented (side sales, arrival and departure), and functional quality can mean how high-quality the product itself, i.e. the game on the field, is. (Grönroos, 2001)

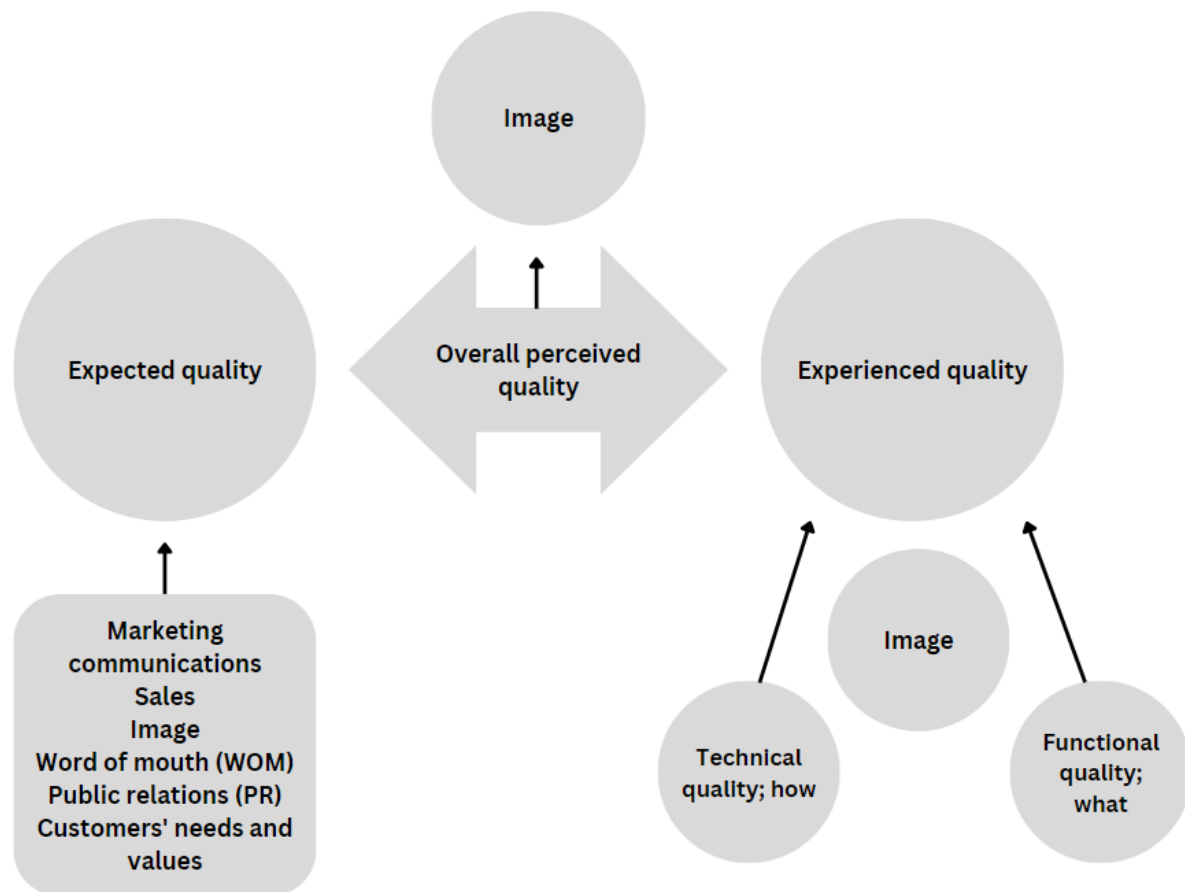


Figure 4. Overall perceived quality model (Grönroos, 2003)

After careful consideration, the framework of customer experience in spectator sports (Theodorakis, 2014) was chosen as the theoretical model of this thesis as it offers the elements that could be implemented into the phenomenon and context examined in the thesis. In addition, this study takes into account the omnichannel customer experience (defined in chapter 2.2) and examines the effect of several different channels on the customer experience as a whole. In this thesis, the general customer experience model is narrowed down to the Finnish sports world, and it is also limited to a specific age group. Like mentioned, the research focuses on consumers aged 20-40 and they do not have to have a previous connection to sports or hockey.

### 3.2 A Framework of Customer Experience in Spectator Sports

In this chapter, we focus on the selected theoretical model in more detail. All the different functions and factors of the model will be reviewed and presented.

The theoretical framework model (Figure 5) chosen for this thesis, includes the following elements: *functional elements, outcome elements, social elements, price, customer experience in alternative channels, situation and consumer moderators*. These elements of the match event conclude on how the consumer feels, if the match event is successful or not and is the customer experience positive, negative or neutral. So, it can be said that the customer experience at a sporting event is the sum of many different factors.

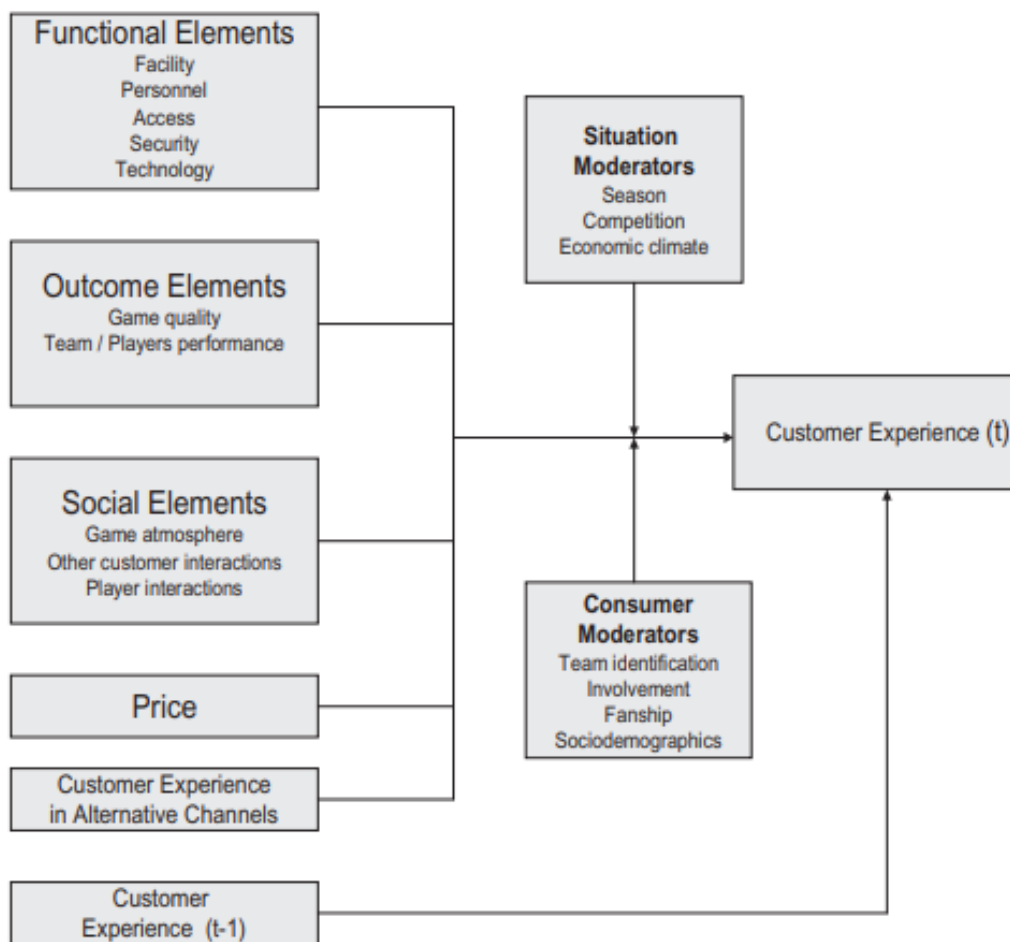


Figure 5. A framework of customer experience in spectator sports (Theodorakis, 2014)

**Functional elements** include such components as the facility, staff, access, safety and security measures, and the technology in use. These factors are almost entirely the responsibility of the organizer of the event, i.e. the hockey club, and thus they can positively influence these factors by investing more resources in them. According to research, the physical environment of the sports consumer, or in this case the spectator, has an effect on the spectator's customer experience. Factors related to the physical environment, such as the design and practicality of the hall, the cleanliness of the facilities, the different sales outlets and their functionality and the seats for the spectators are one of the most important factors in the sports marketing mix. (Theodorakis, 2014, p. 213)

All in all, in the physical environment, i.e. the match arena, etc. can have positive or negative effects on the customer experience. If the match venue is accessible easily and without obstacles, the premises are in a clean condition and designed according to the club's brand, and the environment as a whole is convenient and safe for the visitor, it basically always has a positive effect on the customer experience. (Lucian, 2013, p. 301) On the other hand, if there is no easy access to the sports venue or if it is located a little further away from difficult access connections, the event organizer must offer, for example, transportation to and from the match event. Similarly, the organizer must also take care of sufficient parking capacity for those who arrive at the event with their own vehicles. (Theodorakis, 2014, p. 213)

Sports consumers, i.e. spectators, also appreciate the technology used in the hall, if it is, so to speak, top class. This means, for example, light and sound reproduction technology or, for example, screens used in the arena. In other words, the higher quality and more spectacular technology the sports venue has in use, the more it affects the consumer's opinion and satisfaction with the sports venue. (Lucian, 2013) Technology also has a great influence on the atmosphere prevailing in the match event. This also affects those who watch the match from home or, for example, from a local pub. The good atmosphere transmitted through the TV image or other channels, such as social media, can bring more box office revenue at a later stage, when people want to watch the match on site. (Theodorakis, 2014, p. 213)

It is also extremely important that the staff of the sports venue is trained for their tasks and friendly. However, sports consumers, i.e. spectators, interact with these people the most during the match event. Unprofessional behavior on the part of the staff of the sports venue may spoil the spectator's entire experience of the match event, and thus this particular spectator may not come in the future, and in addition, he may tell his close friends about it. This does not serve

the sports club organizing the event in the short or long term. Related to this, security personnel also play a really important role in a sports event. The visitor must feel safe throughout the event, and this is always the responsibility of the event organizer. Trained and friendly security personnel, who intervene in all abuses, make sure that other visitors get a possible good customer experience from the event. (Theodorakis, 2014, p. 213)

The quality of the game and the performance of the team or the players, on the other hand, belong to the **outcome elements**. Outcome elements are one of the most important elements for spectators, because spectator sports really relies on these factors. This entity is not completely under the control of the sports organization organizing the event, although they can indirectly influence this by, for example, investing in player acquisitions and encounters between supporters and players at the match event. (Theodorakis, 2014) The game itself is also the product that sports consumers, i.e. spectators, buy and they want to see the highest quality and most entertaining game, regardless of the sport. (Lucian, 2013, p. 301)

Game-related factors, such as the success of a team or an individual player, the quality of the game in general, the team's characteristics or the results of recent games, according to the study, even have the greatest influence on how sports consumers, i.e. potential viewers, will behave in the future, i.e. whether they buy tickets to matches (or viewing rights to TV broadcasts) or whether they watch the activities of the sports organization in question in general. (Theodorakis, 2014 p. 213)

**Social elements** in this framework include game atmosphere, other customer interactions and player interactions. Interactions between spectators and interactions between players and spectators are a large part of the social elements complex. The organizer of the match event can try to influence interactions between spectators, but it is not entirely in their hands. One clear way, for example, in the Finnish Liiga, is to influence interaction between spectators, by keeping potential away supporters and home team supporters in different stands. This same thing is implemented in many different sports, around the world. The goal is to minimize verbal or, in extreme cases, even physical confrontations between supporters, which have a negative impact on the spectator's visitor experience. (Theodorakis, 2014. pp. 214-215)

Interactions between players and spectators also have an impact on the customer experience of the sports consumer, i.e. the spectator. The organizer of the sports event can influence this and (Theodorakis, 2014), for example, in the Finnish League, the teams organizing the event organize, among other things, questioning sessions for the team's players, in which the



spectators can participate if they wish. Spectators also get to ask questions in some cases. Here is an example of how it is possible to implement the interaction between the team and the team's players and spectators and make the spectators part of the team. (Saipa Instagram, 2022) Also by bringing the team's star players to the fore, more spectators can be attracted to watch how this particular star player performs. (Theodorakis, 2014, p. 214)

The most important factor of the Social Elements complex is the atmosphere in the arena during the match event. This factor, however, includes the interaction between players and spectators as well as between spectators and other spectators, as well as the interaction between the sports venue itself and the spectators. All of the above has a great impact on the aesthetic experience of the spectator, which largely determines the spectator's experience of the atmosphere in the hall during the match. The organizer of the event can somewhat influence this factor, but the most important factor is the performance of the teams playing in the event. In particular, exciting match events and memorable twists affect the customer experience of the viewer in a positive way. (Theodorakis, 2014, p. 214)

The spectators themselves also play an extremely important role in the atmosphere of the match event, as they are the ones who shout, sing, jump and wave flags in the stands. The organizers of the match event can try to influence the spectators by, for example, competitions organized on light boards, by showing dance choreographies or the lyrics of a popular song on the board, and in addition communicate with the spectators via the announcer. (Theodorakis, 2014, p. 214)

**Price** also plays a major role in the customer experience according to this framework. The price is the most visible factor for the consumer and the price of the product, i.e. in this case the match event, should always correspond to the quality of the product (or service). Pricing should always take into account the total costs of the product to be paid to the customer. In this case, the organizer of the match event must, in addition to the price of the match ticket itself, take into account the possible costs of transportation or arrival at the sports venue, parking, ancillary products such as food and drink, team fan products or possible accommodation at the match venue. (Theodorakis, 2014, p. 215) Prices are also always affected by country-specific regulations regarding taxes. Creating a price strategy is an extremely critical part of a sports club's success. If the pricing fails or the organization does not have a pricing strategy, it always has negative effects on the image of the sports organization and the overall result. (Lucian, 2013, p. 300)

The organizer of match events can directly influence the spectator's customer experience with pricing. Too high a price affects it negatively and can completely prevent a potential spectator from participating in the match event. A price that is too high in relation to the viewer's perceived value for money, i.e. the poor quality of the product in relation to the price, also has a negative effect on the customer experience. (Lucian, 2013, p. 300)

The organizer of match events can also change the price downwards, for example with different campaigns, to improve the customer experience. Among other things, offers related to different seasons (Christmas and other global or national anniversaries) often inspire potential customers to buy tickets to a match event or some other products. The organizer of the match event is also recommended to offer different groups of people, such as students, conscripts or seniors, their own discount on match tickets or other products. These have been studied to have a positive effect on the customer experience and the sports organization's brand in general. (Theodorakis, 2014, p. 215)

Finally, **customer experience in alternative channels** also affects the overall customer experience. Today in general, as well as in the sports world, the customers' customer experience can be affected by the customers' interactions with the sports club or sports organization organizing the match event on other, alternative channels. These alternative channels can be, for example, the internet, social media, a physical store or point of sale, or for example an application. The customer forms his customer experience based on the customer experiences of all platforms, and it is therefore justified to say that a sports club or a sports organization organizing an event should strive to offer as seamless a customer experience as possible in all channels. This customer experience of several different platforms and channels is called the omnichannel customer experience, the effect of which is further explored in the chapter 2.2.

There are also two types of moderators, consumer and situation moderators. **Consumer moderators** include team identification, involvement, fanship and sociodemographics. So it has a big impact on how much the viewer has interacted with the sports club and how important the viewer considers the sports club. Sports club loyalty and customer experience therefore have a correlation with each other, and for that reason a sports club should maintain constant interaction between the sports club and its supporters, to bring supporters of the club closer as a part of the club or a team. In addition, factors such as age, income level and education influence how high-quality a spectator considers a sporting event to be. Therefore, the sports

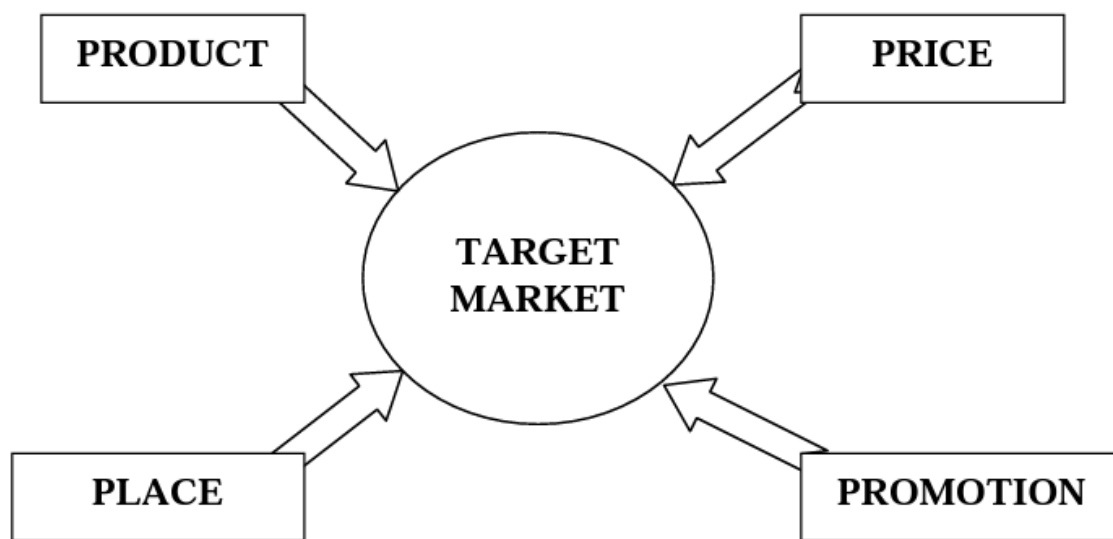
club should also identify its own fan base and try to design and offer an event suitable for this target group, and at the same time try to take into account random customers who do not belong to this target group. These factors are ones that the club can at least indirectly influence. (Theodorakis, 2014, p. 215)

**Situation Moderators** include season success, overall competition and economic climate. These factors depend very much on the region and partly also on the history of the sports club, and these factors are therefore not under the control of the sports club. The non-existent sports culture or the poor economic situation in the area makes it difficult for the sports club to reach and attract potential spectators to the event. The same effect is also had with weak sporting success and a generally poor level in the respective sports series. A sports club can only indirectly influence their sporting success by investing in player and coach acquisitions.

The moderators have an impact on the overall customer experience, but it is sometimes hard to prove. For example, if a team who is high in the standings at the end of the season, and they win their last match, the situation moderators have larger impact positively than they would have with a team who is low in the standings.

### 3.3 Sport Marketing Mix

The Sport Marketing Mix is an entity derived from the traditional Marketing Mix, which consists of *Sport Product*, *Sport Pricing*, *Sport Distribution (place)* and *Sport Promotion* (Figure 6). (Lucian, 2013) This concept is important in terms of research, because all its different factors are implemented in the theoretical model of the research. Researching the concept therefore provides more information about the phenomenon itself and the factors that determine it.



*Figure 6. Sports Marketing Mix (Lucian, 2013)*

The most important part of the Sports Marketing Mix is of course the product to be sold. **Product**, or **sport product** in this context, is defined so that the game or match itself is the core product. In addition to that, the product includes any additional services and the entire match event. The sports organization does not have a direct influence on the game itself, but the sports organization itself can influence additional services and the match event, and through this has a positive effect on the customer experience. A sports organization selling a product or service must make sure that they do not overpromise the consumer something that is not feasible. For example, they can't promise the world's best hockey match or sports event, because the sports organization can't fully influence either of them and, besides, people evaluate the product or service in their own way. However, the sports organization must advertise its own product or service as attractive as possible to potential customers, so that they end up buying the product or service. It is very important that the sports organization identifies its target group and marketing is carried out in a way that activates this target group. (Lucian, 2013, p. 299-300)

In this case, **price** means what the consumer pays for a sports product or service, and the price should always correspond to the quality of the product. When preparing the pricing, in addition to the money itself, the indirect costs of acquiring the product or service should also be considered, such as the time lost by the consumer or the additional costs of travel. All this should be considered in the pricing strategy of the product or service, which ensures that the

consumer feels that he or she is getting value for the money he or she spends. The price is the most visible thing in a product or service to the consumer, and therefore also influences the purchase decision the most. When it comes to pricing, it's worth taking advantage of different offers or possible special pricing for different groups of people, such as students or conscripts. The seller of a product or service should also always consider that various national regulations, such as taxes, affect the price of the product. Factors independent of the seller of the product or service, such as the general economic situation in the region or political factors, also influence consumers and their purchase decisions. Pricing, especially in a sports product or service, plays an extremely important role in terms of the overall result, and with the wrong kind of pricing, the seller of a sports product or service can run into financial difficulties. The seller must therefore find a price that is suitable for consumers and corresponds to the quality of the product or service. (Lucian, 2013, p. 300)

**Sport place** or **sport distribution** means how or where the customer gets the product or service. The sports organization must define the right place for distribution, which means where the potential consumer is or will be. Venue means in this context the place where the sport (event) takes place (arena etc.) or the place where tickets for the event are sold, which can mean physical ticket sales or online sales. Choosing the right place depends on the sports organization's target group, and the most important factor is that the target group can easily access the product or service they want, when they want it. Another important factor is that the target group is reached in places where they go shopping (for example, a grocery store), but are not primarily buying, for example, a ticket to a sporting event. As for the venue itself, it should be within easy reach and otherwise easily accessible. The sports venue must also be functional, clean and safe. These factors mentioned above are directly connected to the customer experience and are also fully the responsibility of the seller, i.e. in this case the sports organization. The more effortless, higher quality and easier the customer experience is, the more likely the potential customer will return and use the product or service again. From the attached figure (Figure 7), we can concretely see how the right place and distribution, as well as high-quality execution of the event, from ticket purchase to the end of the event, affect the customer experience. (Lucian, 2013, p. 301)

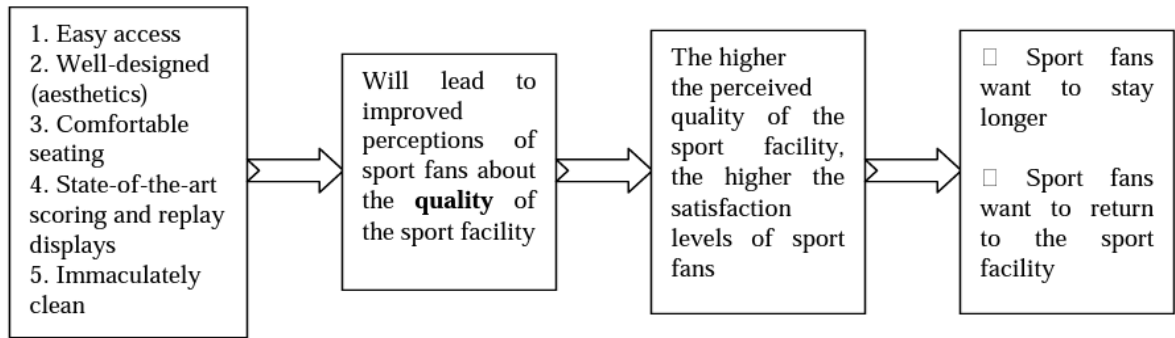


Figure 7. Sportscape Model (Lucian, 2013)

Finally, **promotion** or **sport promotion** in this case means promotion process, i.e. raising awareness of the product or service being sold. In sports marketing, promotion includes all interrelated marketing measures made and produced by a sports organization, which aims to increase awareness of a product or service being sold. The purpose of the promotion is to communicate with potential customers and at the same time present and inform in more detail about the product or service being sold. The way this is done depends on the target group of the sports organization in this case too, i.e. means must be found that stimulates and activates exactly this target group. Promotion is the best and therefore the most important way to communicate with potential customers and, in addition to everything mentioned above, the goal is to create a positive image of the sport practiced by the sports organization. Sports promotion consists of several different factors, which are advertising, sponsorship, PR, licensing, personal contact, incentives and atmospherics. Through all the above-mentioned means, we interact with potential customers, but there are several different implementation methods and they depend on the target group. The most important thing is to find the ways to focus on and how to get the most out of these ways. When properly implemented, promotion increases sales, increases the number of visitors at the sports organization's events and in alternative channels, improves the brand image and increases awareness. Promotion is therefore one of the most important factors in a sports organization's overall result and customer experience. With the help of promotion, the sports organization can build long-term customer relationships and constantly reach new customers

## 4. Research Design & Methods

The purpose of this next chapter is to present the methodology of this study. The chapter introduces the data collection methods used in the study, the data analysis methods used in the study, and defines the reliability and validity of the study.

This study employs qualitative research methodology to gain a comprehensive understanding of the research subject. Qualitative research is a methodological approach that seeks to describe real-life phenomena in their natural setting and is concerned with studying objects holistically (Hirsjärvi et al., 2009, pp. 161). In this study, the subject of investigation is Finnish Liiga teams and their match events, and the research is conducted as a case study. Case studies are often used in qualitative research to gain a deeper understanding of a particular phenomenon or situation by analyzing it in its context (Metsämuuronen, 2006, pp. 92).

The selection of a case study as the research method is appropriate for this descriptive study because the study focuses on Finnish Liiga teams whose operating environments are similar to each other. While elements that make the spectator sport events attractive to consumers can vary across different sports and countries, this research specifically examines Finnish Liiga teams and their match events, where the elements are expected to be relatively consistent. Furthermore, this research is conducted ethically as the participation of interviewees is voluntary, their anonymity is respected, and the research data is kept confidential (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009, pp. 131; Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2000, pp. 20).

The subjective nature of the research subject and the characteristics of qualitative research mean that the intention of this study is not to generalize and verify existing claims and facts. Rather, the focus is on gaining an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Hirsjärvi et al., 2009, pp. 161).

To collect data for this study, 21 consumers from the target group for this research were interviewed. The interviewees varied in age and education level, and some had a background in sports, including ice hockey, while others did not. The aim was to obtain a wide range of opinions as it is a fact that different people see different factors attractive, when considering spectator sport event. In addition to interviews, the author also utilized participatory observation as a research method. Interviews were chosen as the primary data collection method because they provide a means to avoid ambiguities in the interviewees' answers and

also allow for greater depth and accuracy in the information gathered (Hirsjärvi et al., 2009, pp. 205).

All interviews used in the study were conducted as thematic interviews. According to Koskinen, Alasuutari, and Peltonen (2005, pp. 104-108), a thematic interview, also known as a semi-structured interview, is a research method in which the interviewer chooses the questions, and the interviewee is allowed to answer them in their own words. The interview does not proceed through precise, detailed, pre-formulated questions, but more broadly targeting certain pre-planned themes. A themed interview is a degree more structured than an open interview, because in it the topics, the themes, prepared based on previous research and familiarization with the topic, are the same for all interviewees, even though they move flexibly without a strict progression route. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2001, 47-48, 66; Eskola & Suoranta 2000, 86-87.) The theme interview aims to consider people's interpretations and their giving of meaning. Space is given to people's free speech, although the aim is to discuss predetermined themes with all subjects. In contrast to a structured interview, where there are pre-defined questions and answer options, a thematic interview allows for more freedom and detail in the responses. The researcher directs the interview in a general direction but does not completely prescribe or control it.

The thematic interview method was chosen for the study because it allowed for better perceptions of the research topic and the personal opinions and experiences of the interviewees than a structured interview. As Kvale (1996, pp. 130-131) explains, the questions were designed to be clear and easy to understand, motivating the interviewees to speak openly about their personal experiences and feelings. The interview structure was the same or almost the same for all interviewees, but the interviewer could ask additional questions during the interview to clarify answers if necessary (see Appendix 1). The order in which themes are discussed is free, and not all subjects are necessarily discussed to the same extent with all interviewees. The aim is to discuss the themes and their sub-themes quite freely.

The use of thematic interviews in the study aligns with the qualitative research approach, which seeks to study the object holistically and describe real-life as it is (Hirsjärvi et al., 2009, pp. 161). As a qualitative case study, the research aims to increase understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, in this case, Finnish sports clubs (Koskinen et al., 2005, pp. 154). The empirical subject of the research is Finnish Liiga teams whose operating environments correspond almost completely to each other even though there are sometimes



even big differences in the budgets of the teams, the surrounding physical conditions and the market areas. While the elements consumers think make events attractive often vary by industry and country, the research only examines Finnish sports clubs, where the elements are expected to be similar.

Moreover, the research is considered ethical because the participation of the interviewees in the research was voluntary, their anonymity was respected, and the research data was confidential (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009, pp. 131; Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2000, pp. 20). Due to the subjectivity of the topic and the nature of qualitative research, the intention was not to generalize or verify existing claims and facts (Hirsjärvi et al., 2009, pp. 161).

The interviews conducted for this study aimed to facilitate an open and free exchange of ideas between the interviewer and the interviewee. Every effort was made to create a comfortable and relaxed atmosphere in which interviewees felt empowered to speak candidly about their views and experiences. Interviewees were assured that there were no right or wrong answers, and that the purpose of the interview was to gain insight into their perceptions of the research topic. However, it is important to note that the interviewer still played a role in defining the subject areas to be discussed and directing the conversation, thus the discussions cannot be considered entirely equal (Kvale, 1996, pp. 126).

It is worth noting that in some cases, the interviewees and the researcher were former colleagues, which may have facilitated more open and honest discussions. The interviewees were selected randomly and informed that participation in the study was voluntary. Only basic demographic information such as age and gender were collected, and they were presented in the analysis section of the interviews to clarify the sample size. It is relevant to collect this data in order to identify what makes ice hockey match events in Finland attractive to consumers between the ages of 20 and 40. Anonymity was taken into account during the analysis of the research results, which will only be used by the researcher himself. The interviews were conducted both remotely and in-person, and while the answers were not recorded, they were written down. The interviews took place in April and May 2023.

The content analysis method was used to analyze the interviews and identify the most descriptive results possible, as well as the answers to the research questions and the overall research topic. Content analysis involves analyzing written, heard, or seen material to identify recurring themes or patterns (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009, pp. 91-94). It is important to note that the aim of the analysis was not to find generalizable facts, but rather to gain insight into a

medium number of interviewees' personal and organizational perceptions and experiences related to the research topic. Due to the nature of the research, achieving clear objectivity was nearly impossible.

The author's own interpretation played a role in both the interviews and the analysis of the interviews. The author's background and experience in the research topic, having worked in relevant tasks in an environment appropriate to the context of the research, enabled the author to offer a unique perspective and expertise in interpreting and analyzing the interviews.

## 5. Results and Findings

In this chapter, we will discuss and analyze the interviews that were conducted as a method of empirical data collection for the study. The goal of the interviews was to find out which factors make the Liiga match event attractive, according to the target group of the study, i.e. consumers aged 20-40. The information collected in the interviews is compared to Theodorakis' (2014) framework of customer experience in Spectator sports model and the aim is to find out whether the model is suitable for the analysis and development of the match event in this context. We will also take a closer look at the Liiga itself and its conditions in general, which have clearly had an impact on consumer preferences. In the research, it is important to take into account the differences prevailing in Liiga, in relation to financial resources and the conditions of the venues, i.e. the arenas.

In the study, 21 consumers were interviewed, who were part of the study's target group. The consumers lived in different parts of Finland, all in all the following cities were represented; Kouvola, Lappeenranta, Helsinki, Espoo, Porvoo, Kuopio and Kotka, as you can see from the table attached below (Table 2). 30-45 minutes of time was reserved for the interviews and mostly the interviews stayed within these time frames. All interviews were conducted in April and May, more precisely between April 1 and May 5, 2023. The interviewees had really different starting information about Liiga and different backgrounds from following it, which gave this research a good basis and a lot of different considerations, from different perspectives. Although the sample size is small compared to the target group under study, this round of interviews gave an exceptionally comprehensive view of this particular target group.

City	Interviewee gender		Total
	Men	Women	
Lappeenranta	5	1	6
Helsinki	4	2	6
Espoo	3	-	3
Kouvola	2	-	2
Kuopio	1	-	1
Porvoo	-	1	1
Vihti	-	1	1
Kotka	1	-	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>21</b>

*Table 2. The Interviewees*

## 5.1 Liiga

Finnish SM-League (currently just Liiga) is the men's major series in Finland. Liiga was founded in 1975 to replace the old SM-series, which was played between 1928 and 1975. Liiga operates separately from the activities of the Finnish Ice Hockey Association. (Wikipedia, 2022)

When looking at audience numbers, Liiga is the most popular sports series in Finland. A total of fifteen teams will play in the league in the ongoing 2022-2023 season. The number of teams has been the same since the 2016-2017 season, when Mikkelin Jukurit was accepted as a member of Liiga. (Liiga, 2023) After the 2012–2013 season, the domestic ice hockey league, or Liiga, was closed. You can't drop out of the league anymore, and you can't get there by playing. After that, Sport, KooKoo and Jukurit from Mestis have been promoted to Liiga, but through different adjustment procedures and without qualifying, i.e. the promotion has taken place through the so-called cabinet procedure. (Eskelinen, 2021)

Finnish people follow the Liiga matches either on television at home or from, for example, local pub or on site in the arenas. For the past seven seasons, Liiga matches have been played in 14 different cities, as both teams from Tampere, Ilves and Tappara, play their home matches at Nokia Arena and previously in the legendary Hakametsä Arena. Of the six matches in Liiga

opening round at the beginning of the season 2022-2023, only two matches reached more than 3,000 spectators, although the capacities of all arenas are between 4,000 and 13,000. Only 1,610 spectators showed up for Jukurit first home game, and the 4,104 spectators for Tappara home game was low compared to the capacity of the arena and the population of Tampere, which is considered to be the new headquarters of Finnish hockey. There is a great variation between the spectator capacities of the arenas as you can see from the table attached below (Table 3). For example, the Nokia Arena in Tampere can hold up to 13,000 spectators during hockey matches, while the home arena of Mikkelin Jukurit, Ikioma Areena, constructed in 1982, only hold up approximately 4,200 spectators, of which only 2,600 can watch the game sitting. (Liiga, 2023)

<b>City</b>	<b>Arena capacity</b>
Helsinki	8200
Turku	11 820
Tampere	13 455
Lappeenranta	4820
Pori	6350
Vaasa	5000
Oulu	6614
Jyväskylä	4437
Kuopio	5300
Mikkeli	4200
Lahti	5371
Kouvola	6400
Rauma	4500
Hämeenlinna	5360

*Table 3. Arena capacities in Liiga (Wikipedia, 2023)*

In the interviews, it became clear that the conditions of the Liiga club's home arena have a great influence on how eagerly one wants to go there to watch the games. A large number of the interviewees said that if the conditions at the arena in their city of residence or a nearby city

were better, they would go to watch the games there more or at all. Arena conditions were commented on, for example, in the following way:

*“My hometown has relatively good conditions, so it's more comfortable to visit the arena on site”*

*“In my opinion, poor conditions make a sporting event generally less enjoyable. It is significantly more comfortable to watch games in the new Nokia Arena in Tampere than in the Kisapuisto in Lappeenranta, just because of the conditions of the arena.”*

*“The venue's basic amenities, such as toilets and general cleanliness, must be at a good level, and the venue must not be overcrowded. If these have not been successful, it will negatively affect the customer experience.”*

*“The venue must have modern arrangements and technology. For example, sound reproduction and lights must be at a modern level, or else they will worsen your own feeling and so, the customer experience.”*

It can therefore be concluded that Liiga clubs should invest in renovating their home arena, if it is not at the required level. The conditions of the arena had a great impact on the customer experience for the interviewees, and it was also a reason for many not to visit the venue more often or at all. The fact that the Liiga clubs are unwilling to invest in the conditions or it is not possible for some other reason will affect the number of spectators of the matches in the long run, and the effect can certainly be seen in the decline in the number of spectators that has lasted for more than a decade.

The current state of Liiga in terms of the series system was also brought up several times in interviews. The interviewees felt that the current series system limits competitiveness in the series and there are fewer meaningful matches during the season. In the closed series, the problem was also seen that the teams aim only to save money when it is noticed that getting to the playoffs is too challenging or impossible. So, in all its simplicity, teams are selling their best players on to save money on salary expenses for those players for the rest of the season. This has been a common trend in recent years and the teams are trying to use this savings to improve their starting points for the next season. In the eyes of the spectators, there is nothing

interesting, especially in the late season matches of the teams that take these measures. The league and its current state were commented on in the interviews as follows:

*“Too few meaningful matches are played in the league these days, that's why I follow it less myself. The "clearance sale" of players after half a season kills the interest, at least for the teams that use this measure, and the games cannot be watched on site or even on television.”*

*“The matches of a successful team are more pleasant to watch and generally meaningful matches. An open series could contribute to more meaningful matches being played in the League, which are automatically more interesting. The most important thing is that there is always a stake in the game, and it shows.”*

Across the board, it became clear from the interviews that Liiga hockey is not of sufficient interest in this target group, and one determining element was precisely the decrease in the number of meaningful matches, as is evident from the comments. More than half of the interviewees emphasized that the game must be at the center of the match event and the game must be of high quality. Now, however, a clear contradiction has arisen in that the interest value of the games and the level of the game in general decreases when the best players are sold and thus the consumers of the target group do not come because the game is not of high quality or interesting enough. This is one of the biggest structural problems in Liiga at the moment, which should be addressed as soon as possible.

## 5.2 Successful & Unsuccessful Sports Event Elements

In the interviews, we started to find out the likes and preferences of the interviewee regarding what kind of elements sports events generally need to have in order for it to be successful. In the same way, elements that cause the event to turn into an unsuccessful or unpleasant customer experience for the interviewee were also discussed with the interviewees. This theme was intended to approach the context of this research, i.e. the Finnish ice hockey main series, Liiga, and the match events of the Liiga clubs. In the interview, we didn't want to limit the theme to only Liiga match events, because the interviewees had really different backgrounds from

following Liiga, and with this discussion we tried to highlight things that wouldn't necessarily come to mind if we stayed only in the Liiga context.

In the interviews, it came up several times that a successful sporting event is often the sum of the success of many different things and elements. Before the event, the interviewees felt it was important that there would be a lot of hype around the sports event and that the general interest would also be concretely visible in, for example, in the streets or social media. Marketing before the event and its success were brought up several times.

*“Even though the focus of a sports event is the sport itself, it is extremely important that the marketing before and after the event is in order. However, if successful, marketing before the event increases the number of people interested in the event and thus the number of participants in the event.”*

*“In a successful sports event, it is important that the marketing of the event is in order before the event itself and that the event is highly visible on social media. When the event is constantly visible on social media, it immediately makes you feel like you have to go there.”*

*“Without marketing before the sports event, you don't have any advance expectations yourself. This simply reduces the interest of the event.”*

The interviewees thought it was important that the marketing before the sports event would also reach their family and friends, and that a common interest in the sports event would lower the threshold to attend. Almost all the interviewees felt that a shared interest in the sporting event among family and friends is important, because you will probably never go there alone. As an important point regarding the marketing before the event, it was also highlighted that before the event it is necessary to either concretely see or otherwise just feel that there will be a lot of other people there, which in turn would guarantee a better atmosphere.

*“Before the event, the atmosphere and hype must be raised with marketing, for example on social media. The fact that friends and acquaintances like or share someone's post, for example, increases their own interest in the event.”*



*“Small and invisible marketing before the match means a little interest on my part. Greater marketing, which also reaches my family and friends, increases my interest in the event.*

*When we talk about it together, we are more likely to go there.”*

*“The event must appear on social media in advance. The thought comes to mind that friends go there, there's a good atmosphere there, you have to go too.”*

Regarding the marketing that takes place before the sports event, social media and WOM, i.e. word of mouth, were determined to be the most effective channels for this target group. According to the interviewees, if a sporting event is not seen on social media or friends or family do not talk about it, there is little interest in the event, or the event may not even have been heard of.

The things that happen at the venue are naturally of the greatest importance to what kind of customer experience the visitor will have from the event. Arriving at the venue should be easy and hassle-free, and you should not have to wait in line for long periods of time. Upon arrival, you should also feel welcome, that is, visitors should be considered on behalf of the organizer. Other practical arrangements are also of great importance at the venue; general cleanliness must be in order, there should be enough food and drink sales points open, enough toilets should be available, and they should be in a clean condition, and movement around the venue should be easy. Before the sport itself, the venue should try to raise the atmosphere among the spectators, and the spectators should also be considered in this respect and be part of the event. According to the interviewees, this would improve the overall atmosphere of the entire event.

*“There should be a good atmosphere on the spot even before the actual sports. Some good show and atmosphere-lifting content that makes you want to go there early to feel the atmosphere.”*

*“Food, beverage and fan product sales points must be open before the actual sports performance. Before sports, it would also be good to have some good activity so that the atmosphere on the spot improves.”*

*“The customer experience can be ruined even before the start of the event itself, if the arrival is not smooth and the practical arrangements are not in order. There should not be a queue on the spot, but the organizer should be prepared for the number of people who are coming.”*

*“The facilities must be in order and the places must be clean, in general it is important that you feel comfortable when you arrive at the venue.”*

The majority of those interviewed were of the opinion that sports must be at the center of a sports event. Sports must be of high quality and have an input that makes it meaningful. Sports can then be supported with some related ancillary program, but if no sports-related ancillary program has been invented, then nothing is needed. An ancillary program not related to sports worsens the customer experience. Some of the interviewees, on the other hand, go there for the atmosphere of the sporting event and the entertainment it offers. At the level of the sport itself, it is not so important for these people, but more that having fun on the spot. Along with sports, the side program and the events that take place in sports should primarily be entertaining. No pattern was noticeable in the interviews, why for some entertainment is more important than sports. The interviewees who thought this was the case did not have any unifying or differentiating background factor that would have revealed during the interviews why they think this way. It can therefore be assumed that it is just a general difference of opinion and the organizing body can respond to this by offering something for everyone, so to speak.

*“The sport itself does not have to be in the center, as long as there is a good atmosphere and the audience is taken into account. The most important thing is the entertainment provided by the sporting event as a whole.”*

*“Of course, sport plays an important role in the whole, but the most memorable thing is the atmosphere at the venue, which is made up of how you feel at the venue and how the audience is included in the event.”*

*“The quality of sports is of great importance. If I think about ice hockey, for example, the game must be fast-paced and there must be a lot of goals in the match, but the match must also remain even until the end.”*

*“Sport is in the center and it should be meaningful. The services and their functionality are of course important, but we go there because of the sport.”*

*“I think the goal of sports is to entertain the public. If the game is not entertaining or if there is no stake in the game, then it is not interesting. It also has the same effect if there are not many other spectators present.”*

Almost all the interviewees were therefore of the opinion that sports must be entertaining and that there must also be some other elements that activate the audience, such as a competition. However, the interviews also brought up the fact that a program that takes place alongside sports is not of interest to everyone, and at worst it can worsen the customer experience. The additional program must therefore be planned and implemented in a reasonable way, so that it does not disturb the people who do not need it. However, the show elements are, according to a large number of people, necessary and welcome, so in this case the organizing parties should take it into account.

The interviewees were asked if they feel it has an effect that they go to a sports event where they and almost everyone else support the same team or athlete and thus belong to the same supporter group. The question sought an answer to whether it matters how the sport itself or the club or athlete in question brings supporters together and how this possibly affects the relationship between the interviewee and the sport, club or athlete. Many interviewees felt that the atmosphere at the venue could be more communal, and everyone would feel that they belong to the same group, but at the same time, a large part was of the opinion that it only brings added value and does not necessarily affect the relationship between the interviewee and the sport, club or athlete. In the opinion of some, this did not matter at all, because they only go there for the sport and things outside of it are of little importance. A few felt that this had a big impact on their own relationship between this particular sport, club or athlete.

*“Belonging to the same group of supporters definitely increases the sense of community in the stands and thus improves the atmosphere at the venue. I enjoy it when all or most of the people present support the same team or athlete.”*

*“I may not feel like I belong to any particular group, even if I support the same team or athlete as others, but this definitely improves the atmosphere at the venue when the rest of the audience is more united.”*

*“It is important in terms of the atmosphere, whether people feel that they belong to the same group of supporters, but the most important thing for me is to enjoy the company of the friends involved and the sport itself.”*

The interviews also sought to find out whether the content or marketing produced after the event has any impact on the visitor's customer experience. A few interviewees brought this issue up and felt that with good marketing after the event, more visitors can be inspired to return or even arrive next time. The most important thing in the content produced after the event is that it conveys the atmosphere that prevailed at the event. However, a large part of the interviewees did not feel that the content and marketing produced after the event had an impact on their own customer experience.

*“With the marketing and content that will come after the event, it's as if you can relive the top moments and definitely feel the atmosphere that was at the event. The right kind of content, where the atmosphere is conveyed, could attract others next time as well.”*

*“For me, the content produced after the event does not add value, because I live and experience everything on the spot, and that forms my customer experience.”*

The interviews also sought to identify elements and things that spoil the customer experience or affect it in a negative way. In general, all the elements that the interviewees felt had a positive effect, if implemented poorly, can also have a negative effect on the customer experience. So the effort was to find elements that specifically have a negative effect and, if implemented well, would not even necessarily be noticed during the event. One element that emerged was the disruptive behavior of other people during the event, which, according to the interviewees, always affects the customer experience negatively. About one third of the interviewees brought up other people's disruptive behavior. The organizer of the event naturally cannot control the behavior of each individual, but according to the interviewees, how you react to disruptive

behavior affects the customer experience. A bad reaction increases the feeling of insecurity in the event, which also affects the customer experience negatively. The same number of interviewees generally emphasized the importance of security measures at the event and in the event area.

*“Disruptive behavior of people, for example the vulgar shouting of supporter groups, considerably weakens my own customer experience. Up to a certain point and within the limits of good taste, confrontation raises the mood, but when you go beyond a certain limit, it becomes tasteless and then the organizer has to intervene.”*

*“The feeling of insecurity at the event significantly weakens the customer experience, and security measures, such as a sufficient number of security guards, must be ensured by the organizer.”*

All the interviewees brought up the bad general atmosphere at the event when talking about elements that weaken the customer experience. In everyone's opinion, this was also the sum of many things, but the biggest of course is that there are too few other people there. Factors such as the non-functioning of points of sale and other services and queues, general untidiness and poor practical arrangements, and also the fact that in Finland you are often not allowed to drink alcoholic beverages in places other than certain places, were specifically brought up as elements that weaken the customer experience. Many interviewees also brought up the interesting issue of how the audience is taken into account in the event. More than half of the interviewees were of the opinion that if the public is not taken into account in the event, no other entertainment besides sports has been arranged for them, or there is no program for them that would make the public part of the event, it has a negative effect on the atmosphere on site and thus the customer experience is weakened.

*“The audience must be taken into account on the spot and they must be offered more entertainment than just sports.”*

*“I personally like it when the audience is included in the event and they are generally made to feel welcome. The audience creates the atmosphere and it's easier to live with the event when you really feel like you're part of the event.”*

*“A bad atmosphere on site spoils the customer experience and you may not want to go again right away. It is important that, in addition to the sport itself, there should be something else entertaining. If the spectators are not taken into account, the atmosphere weakens and at the same time the entertainment value of the entire event.”*

All in all, a good sporting event therefore requires balancing around different factors and elements. The organizer must really understand what the audience wants when they arrive at the event. That's why it's extremely important to know your target audience and tailor the event to suit them. If there is no understanding of one's own customer base, the organizer must conduct research on the matter. It would also not hurt to interact with the audience after the event and look for things that should be improved in the event together.

### 5.3 Liiga Match Events

In the following chapters, we go through in more detail what the interviewees thought about the current state of Liiga and the events of the Liiga matches. These issues are studied in accordance with the elements of research theory. Although all the interviewees had somewhat different backgrounds in terms of following Liiga, they all knew the series and have attended Liiga matches several times over the past five years. The goal was to find out in more detail what is interesting about the Liiga match events, what is done really well in them and what areas of development the interviewees see in them.

#### 5.3.1 Functional Elements

There are big differences between Liiga clubs in terms of financial resources, market areas and conditions where the team practices and plays. It can be clearly seen that the Liiga clubs with greater resources, train and play in better conditions. This could also be concluded from the

answers of the interviewees. Especially the new, nice and modern hockey arenas came up in a positive way during the interviews. They are considered venues where it is much more comfortable to watch matches. This was because the new arenas simply have a much better setting and therefore the potential to produce a more entertaining event. Tampere's new Nokia arena came up many times in discussions. The Nokia Arena's light show before the matches, the cozy and clean environment, the convenient restaurant services and the general ease of arrival and movement in the arena garnered a lot of praise. The same issues were also compared to other new, recently renovated or well-maintained arenas. These arenas were less surprisingly found in the Liiga's largest market areas, i.e. Helsinki, Turku and Tampere. The newly renovated arenas in Vaasa, Pori and Rauma also received praise. Arenas were required to have modern sound and light systems to raise and maintain the atmosphere, clean and practically functional spaces, and extensive restaurant services, which can be found in the aforementioned arenas.

*“Many Liiga clubs have good conditions to watch games. In particular, it's great to watch the games at Nokia Arena in Tampere, because everything works and you can create a great atmosphere in the hall with the help of a light show”*

*“If the arena is old or the milieu is otherwise not inviting and modern, there is no interest in going to see the games that much. In my opinion, this problem prevails especially in smaller towns. Great conditions and generally the fact that it can be seen from the outside that things are done seriously and properly increase interest. This is currently the case in Tampere, for example.”*

*“Inadequate practical arrangements spoil the customer experience, and especially in Liiga, there is a lack of experientiality.”*

*“Bad conditions reduce interest in the match itself. For example, I don't even feel like going to Kisapuisto to watch a game, if Tampere or Helsinki were closer, I would definitely go to the games more.”*

The size or conditions of the arenas alone did not influence how the interviewees experienced the functional elements in Liiga match events. Arriving at and leaving the arena was brought up in a few interviews as factors that can improve the customer experience or leave a bad taste

in the mouth of the entire event. If it takes an inordinate amount of time to get into or out of the arena, it always has a negative effect on the customer experience, according to the interviewees who commented on the matter. A few interviewees also highlighted the fact that when coming to the arena and being there, you must always feel welcome, which the staff working in the arena in particular can influence, positively or negatively. The same interviewees also pointed out that the arena must have adequate security measures and therefore must be able to create a safe atmosphere for all participants.

*“If it takes too much time to get to or from the arena, it's really annoying. In particular, if you have to wait a long time to leave, the whole event leaves a bad taste in your mouth, no matter how the game went.”*

*“The practical arrangements for arriving and leaving the match are not always in order, at least in Lappeenranta. Sometimes you have to wait a long time to get out of the parking lot, for example.”*

*“Liiga matches often have a good atmosphere, but the spectators are not taken into account at times and the feeling is not always so welcoming.”*

In general, however, it was felt that the practical arrangements for sales points and, for example, toilets, were in order in Liiga match events. During intermission, you have time to do what you want, there are several different options for food and drink, and there are enough toilets and they are also in good condition. Being in the arena was felt to be comfortable, because mostly everywhere is clean. Of course, here too the fact emerged that it is still more comfortable to be in newer and nicer arenas even if everything else is fine. However, the fact that you are not allowed to drink alcoholic beverages in the stands, as you can for example in the USA, was brought up as an extremely negative thing. The interviewees stressed that they would not want it to matter, but they believe that if drinking alcoholic beverages were allowed in sports stands, the arena would always have a better atmosphere.

*“The sales point arrangements have always worked well in Liiga matches and I have had time to buy something during the intermissions if I wanted to”*



*“It is extremely bad that you are not allowed to drink alcoholic beverages in the stands during Liiga matches. Even if you don't want it, it certainly has an impact on the atmosphere in the arena.”*

The practical arrangements in Liiga are therefore in a good condition across the board, although there are of course shortcomings in the arrangements, depending on the location. Especially in small towns, where there are not so many resources available, attention should be paid to ensuring that arriving and leaving the arena is smooth, that the arena facilities are always clean and that the public is properly taken into account so that they feel welcome. Municipalities with more resources should, in addition to the above-mentioned issues, ensure that entertainment is produced at maximum capacity for the conditions, so to speak.

### 5.3.2 Outcome Elements

Along with the atmosphere, the level of the game and the performances of the team or individual players were the biggest element that emerged in the interviews for Liiga match events. More than half of the interviewees said that they go to the venue to watch Liiga matches precisely because of the game itself. Although Liiga clubs cannot directly influence how the players representing them or the opposing team perform on the court that night, they can try to influence it by acquiring the best possible players or by motivating their players before matches. In some of the interviews, it was also mentioned that they want to see good players and well-playing teams in the matches. In a few interviews, it was also stated that the level of the game is not so important if the atmosphere in the arena is good - mainly, however, they wanted to see entertaining hockey from good teams and generally good players in the rink. However, in several interviews, it was brought up that the current level of Liiga game is not at a high enough level, in the opinion of the interviewees. This has several consequences. The interviewees say that because of this it is not so interesting to go to the arena, it is preferable to watch competitive series at home or even other sports, the level differences between Liiga teams are too great and the interest is also killed by the fact that too many meaningless matches are played in Liiga - this means that when you can't drop from Liiga to the lower levels, the teams that are out of the playoffs sell their best players and don't aim for anything during the rest of the season, which is also reflected in the level of the game.

*“I go to watch the game on site specifically for the game itself. On the spot, you can follow the game much more closely and you can also see so much more of what else is happening in the rink than you can on TV.”*

*“When I go to watch Liiga matches, I choose a game where I think I will see quality hockey or a lot of good players. I don't go to watch matches at the bottom of the league table, because they often lack the aforementioned elements.”*

*“I don't go to watch Liiga matches very often, because I think the game is not of good enough quality, which reduces its interest. The game is always the most interesting and good players in good teams, this combination is not offered very often in Liiga.”*

*“A better level of the game would attract more people to watch the matches on site. Now I prefer to watch harder series, such as the NHL, at home.”*

*“I go to see Liiga matches, which are interesting in advance and where good players are involved. There are also friends playing in a few Liiga clubs, whose games you must go to watch.”*

A few interviewees also raised their own opinions on how the current level of Liiga could be raised and thus the games would become more interesting. The same interviewees also commented that they only follow bigger matches and, for example, playoffs, otherwise during the regular season they follow Liiga very rarely and focus on other foreign series. For example, something that has been talked about in Liiga circles for a long time came up, i.e. opening the series so that you can drop from Liiga to Mestis and from Mestis to Liiga. This would mean that teams would play meaningful matches throughout the season to avoid relegation. This would also force teams to hold on to their best players throughout the season, and the previously mentioned clearance sales would not be possible. Thus, it would be more meaningful to follow each team and at the same time the whole series.

*“There are so few meaningful matches in Liiga these days that it affects the interest of the entire series. The clearance sales that happen every half way through the season are a disgrace to the entire series.”*

*“I only go to watch a match if there is a stake in it. When there is stake in the game, the game is automatically of higher quality, however, this is not always the case in Liiga.”*

With the level of play being such an important element for this target group, Liiga clubs should ensure by all possible means that their team offers the best possible effort every night, whether the game is at home or away. A good atmosphere or the status of a Liiga club alone will not make this target group become so widely activated that they would like to watch matches more often. As mentioned, Liiga club cannot directly influence how the team and its players perform on the rink every night, but every possible means should ensure that the performance is the best possible.

### 5.3.3 Social Elements

In addition to the game itself and the level of the game, the biggest element that the interviewees pay attention to in Liiga matches is the atmosphere on the spot. According to the interviewees, the atmosphere has an extremely large effect on the customer experience, i.e. the better the atmosphere, the better the customer experience and vice versa. The atmosphere is primarily influenced by whether there are other people in the arena and how many there are. In other words, the more people there are, the better the starting point is for the match event to have a good atmosphere. However, a large number of people or a sold-out arena is still not enough if the audience is not taken into account. In many interviews, it was brought up that in addition to the game, other entertainment should be organized for the audience, for example various competitions or raffles, or in general something else to do suitable for a hockey match. Especially during batch breaks, there should be something entertaining if you don't go to buy food or drink or go to the bathroom, for example. The fact that the audience is taken into account, according to the interviewees' experience, makes them better participate in the game and thus the atmosphere in the arena improves. In the opinion of the majority, an appropriate amount of other entertainment was organized in Liiga matches, but according to the interviewees' experience, there could be significantly more variations - currently, many places always organize the same or otherwise unentertaining activities, which do not offer visitors any excitement or surprises. The interviewees would like to do something different and engaging, which brings energy to the whole arena. On the other hand, according to a few interviewees,

the current activities are quite sufficient, although they are not following them that closely. In a few interviews, it came up that no activities are needed, if they are asked, but they don't mind if there is some activity along with the game, as long as it fits the nature of the event.

*“I go there to watch Liiga matches precisely because of the atmosphere. Simply put, the most important thing in a match is the atmosphere there.”*

*“Liiga matches have their own unique atmosphere at the arena and I want to go there well in advance of the match to get the most out of the experience.”*

*“If the arena does not have a good atmosphere in Liiga match, the match will not be that interesting. I enjoy Liiga matches the most when the audience is strongly involved in the event.”*

*The audience must be taken into account in Liiga matches, as is already done in some cities. In addition to the Liiga match itself, the audience should be offered some other entertainment.”*

*“There must be a lot of other people in the arena who create a better atmosphere for Liiga matches. I personally don't need any other entertainment besides the game itself, but I understand why it is organized. However, it is important that that additional entertainment is suitable specifically for the Liiga match.”*

Everyone interviewed said that they have never been alone to a Liiga match, and they probably never will. Friends have always been there and I thought the Liiga match was a good, slightly different way to spend time with friends. According to the interviewees, this also reduced the importance of the interaction between them and the rest of the audience. The interviewees emphasized that the most important thing is to be able to enjoy pleasant moments with friends. Only the disruptive behavior of other people was felt to have a negative effect on the customer experience.

*“I never go to Liiga matches alone, but always with friends. I enjoy spending time with friends in slightly different ways.”*

*“It's nice to watch a Liiga match with friends and exchange news at the same time. I've never been alone to a Liiga match and I probably never will. When you go to a match with friends, you don't pay attention to other people as much, but we enjoy each other's company.”*

When looking at Theodorakis's (2014) theoretical model, i.e. the theoretical framework of this study, the interaction between spectators and players is highlighted there. In the interviews, however, this was never brought up by the interviewees. Regarding league matches, of course also in generally successful sports events, the interviewees want to follow the teams' star players or top athletes, but its greater interaction was not taken into account as a factor influencing the customer experience. This could be due, for example, to the fact that a certain kind of superstardom is really rare in Finland and often the interaction between players and supporters through various meet & greet-style events is aimed at children and young people and for core supporters, and not exactly for casual spectators. Regarding the general atmosphere at the venue, it was brought up that the audience itself influences the atmosphere of Liiga matches. Supporter groups of the teams were considered the biggest factors here, they bring the most atmosphere in the arena with their cheers. According to the interviewees, a good atmosphere in the arena and the resulting good aesthetic experience increases the probability of coming again and again. In the interviews, it was also brought up several times that possible special matches, campaigns and other similar activities will increase interest in the match and therefore the arena is expected to have a better atmosphere. About half of the interviewees wished that Liiga matches would have theme nights more often or that a specific group of people (seniors, students, hockey families) would be highlighted and the match event would be organized with their needs in mind and for them. According to the interviewees, in this way added value can be created for this particular group of people, a sense of community can be created, and, in addition, there are often more people in the arena and thus a better atmosphere. A few interviews also talked about how the achievements of individual players should be highlighted more and they should be celebrated together with the audience. In one of the interviews, it was also brought up that the performance of the Finnish national anthem before the match already brings a special atmosphere to the match event.

*“When there has been a good atmosphere at a Liiga match or I've seen somewhere that something interesting is happening there, I probably want to go there with my friends.”*

*“There should definitely be more theme nights in Liiga matches that target a specific group of people. This would certainly bring other people from outside this target group, who want to enjoy the atmosphere of a special evening.”*

*“In my opinion, the achievements of Liiga players during their careers or after their careers should be highlighted more specifically in match events. If a player or community member does something great, it should definitely be celebrated with the whole community at home games.”*

*“Special matches always have a special atmosphere that brings more people to the place. I think something as simple as playing the national anthem before the match would add value and involve people more in the event right from the start.”*

It is safe to say that the atmosphere is extremely important to this research target group and the Liiga clubs should definitely focus on ensuring that the best possible atmosphere prevails in the arena every time. Liiga match alone does not bring a large number of people from this target group to the arena 30 times a season, but in addition to the game, something should always happen in the match event that touches, excites and speaks out to those present, even after the event itself. The goal should always be that an individual spectator gets so excited about the Liiga match event that she or he wants to come back the next time as well.

#### 5.3.4 Price

In the interviews, it was discussed how big a role price plays in forming the customer experience of a Liiga match event. At the same time, the interviewees were asked how much they are willing to pay for a Liiga match ticket and, in addition, how much money they are willing to spend on the entire event in general, considering possible travel, match tickets and possible purchases during the event. The price level of Liiga matches is currently 10-55 euros on average, when we talk about a normal ticket, which has access to the match. The price of the match ticket is affected by the seat in the arena, i.e. the better the seat, the more expensive the match ticket. In some locations, in addition to seats, there are also standing places, standing places are invariably the cheapest tickets for the event. The interviews revealed various things that influence how much one is willing to pay for a Liiga match ticket. All the interviewees

said that the seat available with the ticket is important for how much one is willing to pay for it and, afterwards, what kind of experience it leaves, i.e. does the price of the ticket correspond to the seat obtained with it. An overly expensive Liiga match ticket from a bad place has a negative effect on the customer experience. The same, of course, the other way around, i.e. an affordable Liiga match ticket from good seats has a positive effect on the customer experience. Almost everyone also pointed out that the price of a Liiga match ticket should be correlated to the quality of the product and services received. This means that the ticket must not be too expensive compared to the seat as mentioned above, the game itself must be of high quality and entertaining, the entertainment and activities that may be produced along with the game must bring added value to the visitor, the practical arrangements (arriving and leaving the venue, availability of services on site in general, general cleanliness and so on) should be in order and no other problems should appear. Game quality and presets were emphasized in more than half of the interviews. So, in other words, you're happy to pay more for a ticket when it's an interesting and in advance high-quality match. Those interviewed for playoff matches were also willing to pay significantly more, because there is a higher stake compared to regular season matches and thus the game is expected to be of higher quality and more entertaining. Regarding regular season games, the current price level was felt to be too high compared to what the ticket price includes.

*“It has a big impact on where the seats are, what kind of match it is and who is playing against each other - all this affects how much I am willing to pay for a Liiga match ticket.”*

*“If it's a playoff game or some other big game, I can spend more money on the ticket and everything else because of its uniqueness. I'm not ready to pay much for regular season matches.”*

*“I am ready to pay a little more for a high-quality Liiga match and a high-quality match event in general, but there are not many Liiga clubs in Finland that can offer this. The differences in level within Liiga are so great that there will inevitably be matches that you are not interested in watching and you don't want to pay anything for them either.”*

Next, there are two tables (Tables 4 & 5) that show how much money the interviewees are willing to spend on a Liiga match ticket. The tables separate regular season matches and

playoffs or particularly high-quality regular season matches into their own entities. The purpose is to illustrate what the interviewees think about the Liiga's current price level. The default in all cases is a seat in good or average seats.

<b>Regular series games</b>	
Ready to spend on a ticket:	Amount of interviewees:
1-10€	4
11-20€	13
21-30€	3
31-40€	1
41-100€	-

*Table 4. How much interviewees are willing to pay on regular series games*

<b>Playoff or particularly interesting / extremely high-quality games</b>	
Ready to spend on a ticket:	Amount of interviewees:
1-10€	-
11-20€	3
21-30€	12
31-40€	3
41-100€	3

*Table 5. How much interviewees are willing to pay on playoff / extremely high-quality games*

From the tables above, it can be concluded that most of the consumers who participated in the research interviews are ready to spend something between 1 and 20 euros for a seat ticket for a Liiga match in good or moderate seats, when talking about regular season matches. In the playoffs or extremely high-quality matches, it can be seen that consumers are ready to spend a little more money. According to the interviews, the majority would be willing to spend something between 11 and 30 euros to these “better matches”. Considering Liigas’ current price level, the majority of the study's target group is not ready to spend as much money on Liiga match ticket as they currently cost. Only a few interviewees stated that Liiga match tickets



currently have a good price level and they are happy to pay what is currently being asked for tickets.

Next, there are two tables (Tables 6 & 7) that show how much money the interviewees are willing to spend on a Liiga match event as a whole. This takes into account all expenses related to the match event, i.e. possible travel, the match tickets themselves and, for example, shopping at the arena. In this case too, there are two tables, one with numbers related to the regular season and the other with numbers related to the playoffs or particularly high-quality regular season matches. These tables also provide the necessary understanding of how much money the consumers who are the target group of the study are ready to spend on the Liiga product.

<b>Regular series games</b>	
Ready to spend on the event as a whole:	Amount of interviewees:
1-10€	-
11-20€	1
21-30€	6
31-40€	12
41-100€	2

*Table 6. How much interviewees are willing to spend on regular series games match events in Liiga*

<b>Playoff or particularly interesting / extremely high-quality games</b>	
Ready to spend on the event as a whole:	Amount of interviewees:
1-10€	-
11-20€	-
21-30€	1
31-40€	6
41-100€	14

*Table 7. How much interviewees are willing to spend on playoff / extremely high-quality games match events as a whole in Liiga*

The tables above show the same thing as the previous tables, i.e. that the consumers who participated in the study are more willing to spend more money on match events when it is a

better-than-average match (playoffs or extremely high-quality games). Regarding regular season matches, most of the interviewees were ready to spend 21-40 euros for the entire match event. In the playoffs and extremely high-quality games, the majority of interviewees are ready to spend 41 euros or more for the entire match event. When the tables are examined in their entirety, it is clear that the interviewees feel that the Liiga's price level is too high. You can get to the venue for a league match for an average of 10-20 euros, but in this case it is the "worst" seats in the arena or, in some cases, the standing seats. On the other hand, you can get to moderate places for 20-35 euros, and to get to good places, the consumer has to spend at least 35 euros, and at best even more than 50 euros. In the playoffs, the pricing is often a bit more expensive, which means that there are even more euros on top of each of the aforementioned sums. In the interviews, the main reason for the price level being too high was that the Liiga product is not of high enough quality compared to the amount of money spent on it. The few interviewees who felt that the Liiga's price level was suitable, felt that the game is of sufficient quality and that you get value for money when you arrive at the arena. In addition, in relation to pricing, one interviewee pointed out that a new ticket type that would include some VIP treatment or catering, but would not require the purchase of a VIP box, could be welcome. This should be implemented specifically so that the most expensive tickets at the moment would include some small things, such as a drink ticket and a private entrance or something similar.

*“I'm not ready to spend a lot of money on Liiga matches in general, because the League is not a high quality series, especially considering the current prices.”*

*“Compared to foreign series, Liiga is definitely not as high-quality series as a whole. I'd rather watch other series at home and pay for it than go to the venue and pay the expensive ticket price.”*

*“I think the Liiga has good pricing and I get value for my money when I go to the arena. The game is of high quality and you have a good time in the arena.”*

*“Could a new ticket type act as an enticement, i.e. so that the most expensive tickets at the moment would have a little extra that would give you a little better treatment, but wouldn't cost as much as a VIP box. Currently, the price difference between the most expensive ticket and the VIP box is really big, maybe you could get something in between?”*

Pricing should always correspond to the product or service it provides. According to Lucian (2013), the pricing strategy should be built so that the consumer feels that he or she is getting value for the money he or she spends, and in this case, most of the consumers in the target group of the study do not feel that way.

### 5.3.5 Customer Experience in Alternative Channels

One of the major themes of the research was to find out whether, by developing an omnichannel customer experience, especially in digital channels, the overall customer experience can be improved and how this could possibly happen. At the same time, we will find out if this customer experience in alternative channels is one element of an attractive ice hockey game event from 20-40-year-old consumers point of view in this case. The matter was approached in such a way that the interviewees were asked whether the Liiga match event should be supported with digital elements before the event, during the event or after the event, and they were also asked whether this would add value and whether it would affect their decision to participate. In this context, digital elements meant the team's social media channels as well as the mobile application found on every Liiga team, and the content presented in them. Likewise, we found out whether things outside the arena and interaction with the team have a role in the customer experience at the match event. The interviews showed that there is definitely a demand for different consumer activation, digital content and different functions in alternative channels. In particular, digital content addressed to the interviewees and everyone was of the opinion that digital content, for example in a mobile application specifically at the venue during the match, would bring considerable added value to consumers. According to the interviewees, no digital content or any other similar element would likely influence their own decision to participate Liiga match event but would improve the customer experience as a whole.

*“Digital content and consumer activation in alternative channels would definitely be a welcome addition to Liiga match events.”*

*“Content that gets the audience involved in the match event is always welcome and nowadays everything is possible on mobile, so it should be used more to improve the customer*

*experience. For example, game-related lotteries or competitions via the mobile app and the prizes from there could work really well.”*

*“I think the digital content could even attract some people to the venue and it would definitely add value to the match event. For me, it would be a nice addition, but it wouldn't affect my decision to participate.”*

*“Attendees should be offered a holistic experience, where it is important to consider the audience in every channel where they interact with the organizing Liiga club. I would think digital content would be relatively easy to implement and would certainly bring added value to the visitors as a whole.”*

*“Competitions and lotteries specifically on mobile, so that you can participate in them from your own place. It would bring a little extra excitement to the match event and it would be nice to compete with friends, the prize wouldn't have to be anything crazy either.”*

In a few interviews, the use of digital channels was also brought up to facilitate practical arrangements. For example, the mobile application could have the current situation regarding parking spaces or the current situation regarding the queuing situation at different points of sale, so that the visitor could facilitate his own experience on site. In addition, Liiga clubs could create a mobile loyalty system, where points are collected from, for example, attendance at matches, and at the end of the season, the supporter with the most points would receive a prize. This would specifically take into account the core supporters and offer them added value. Although some loyal customer programs already exist in Liiga clubs, they could also be developed, especially with these core customers and their wishes in mind.

*“It would be really convenient if you could monitor, for example, the queue situations at sales points on a mobile device and then choose the place of business accordingly. The mobile application could also be used in other similar cases and it can be conveniently used, for example, to notify about exceptional arrangements.”*

*“It would be a fun idea if Liiga clubs had a loyalty program where you collect points, for example, every time you go to a match or buy a ticket through the application. The*

*application would thus receive more attention and could be used more effectively in marketing”*

The customer experience can therefore clearly be improved using alternative channels as help. However, it is important to remember that, for example, mobile channels should only be used to support the match event and the main focus is still on the fact that the match event and the game itself is in the center and attention is not drawn too much to other things.

### 5.3.6 Situation Moderators

In the interviews, it quickly emerged that situation moderators have an impact on the customer experience of the match event as a whole. Although this entity is not directly under the influence of the Liiga clubs, you can try to influence it indirectly, for example by acquiring better players, so that the team is more competitive and thus other teams also have to react, in which case the whole league becomes more competitive. The Liiga clubs cannot influence the economic environment in the market area, but they can, if possible, offer spectators cheaper match tickets or ticket packages. Through the interviews, it emerged that, in general, there is not much interest in watching the matches of a poorly successful team. Bad success often affects the number of spectators negatively and thus it also affects the atmosphere in the arena negatively. According to the interviewees, the fact that the competition between Liiga clubs is sometimes perceived as uneven and that many meaningless matches are played at the end of the season were also factors that negatively affect the customer experience or even affect the decision to participate in the entire match event. These factors came up in almost all interviews, meaning they can be considered very significant factors in terms of customer experience in Liiga context. In almost half of the interviews, the interviewees also brought up the fact that attractive ticket offers are important for whether to go to the event and often after a good offer, the customer experience remains on the positive side. About one-third pointed out in the interviews that their own financial situation generally affects to what they do in their free time and therefore also has an impact on whether they decide to go to the Liiga match event on site. A tight financial situation, an expensive match ticket and the experience of not getting value for money in the match event is a very bad combination for Liiga clubs.

*“Of course, the team's success during the season has a role in whether one wants to go and see the Liiga match at the venue. For example, I have not been interested in watching Saipa's matches during the last season.”*

*“If the team has not been successful recently or in recent seasons, you may not go to the arena very often. If you go to the arena, you often come back disappointed because there are no people there due to bad success and the atmosphere in the arena is then bad.”*

*“A good ticket offer always inspires you to go to a Liiga match more often, and then you might not look at the event so critically and the customer experience is more often positive.”*

*“My financial situation somewhat dictates what should be done in my free time, although it often depends on what I want to do at that particular moment. If there is a good ticket offer for the Liiga match, then it is preferable to go there.”*

This is a very tricky element for Liiga clubs, as they cannot directly control the customer experience in this area and it still has a big impact on the customer experience of consumers. Liiga clubs should therefore always understand the current realities in the area and with the consumers, adapt accordingly and strive to offer consumers a successful match event in all other areas. It is easier for consumers to appreciate the match event and thus form a better customer experience when the organizing Liiga club has clearly tried to invest in the arrangements of the match event in order to offer the spectators who arrived the best possible match event experience.

### 5.3.7 Consumer Moderators

According to Theodorakis (2014), loyalty to the sports club and the interaction between the sports club and the consumer have a direct correlation with the customer experience. This also came up in about half of the interviews, i.e. the interviewees felt that the stronger the emotional bond and loyalty towards the Liiga team, the more likely they will perceive the customer experience as positive. The fact that there are many people in the arena who support the same team also increases the sense of community and people feel that they belong to the same group

- according to a few interviewees, this has an effect on their own emotional bond with the Liiga club, and according to all interviewees, this improves the atmosphere in the arena, which in turn improves the overall customer experience.

*“I enjoy it when there is a good atmosphere in the arena and it often consists of the fact that the majority of those present support the same team.”*

*“When I go to watch an IFK game, the arena has a special atmosphere when everyone supports the same team. I myself feel that I am a part of the IFK family with others, and in that case I often find the match event to be extremely successful. “*

Theodorakis (2014) also points out that, in the opinion of an individual consumer, the customer experience and the quality of the match event are also affected by the age, income level and educational background of that consumer. In the interviews, there were people with different backgrounds and the dispersion was noticeable. The younger interviewees were originally from a slightly lower income, so they took a closer look at what value they get for the money they spend at the match event. In their case, it was noticeable that they were generally not ready to spend so much money on Liiga matches, because a large part felt that the Liiga product was of low quality. The older interviewees, on the other hand, were ready to spend a little more money and they did not look at the Liiga match event so critically, although they too naturally wanted value for their money. Almost all the more financially stable people felt that the Liiga has a good price level, while all the not so financially stable people felt that the Liiga's match tickets are too expensive. Liiga clubs can try to influence these consumer moderators with effective marketing, by building a strong brand and by offering their core target group suitable pricing and entertainment at the match event. However, this requires a very comprehensive background investigation from the Liiga clubs, if it has not been done.

## 6. Discussions

In this chapter, we continue to focus on analyzing the interviews and try to find things that were the most significant factors in the formation of the customer experience of Liiga match events. The interviews will be analyzed and discussed using the theoretical models used in the research. The goal is also to look for concrete ways that Liiga clubs across the board could strive to develop their own match events, but it must be remembered that not all Liiga clubs have the same problems regarding the customer experience of a match event. The Liiga clubs are in different market areas and in different situations anyway, and they cannot be completely compared to each other. However, it is clear that every Liiga match event has the same rules and elements that affect the formation of the customer experience.

Based on the interviews and based on theoretical knowledge, there is also a lot of good in Liiga match events, but at least as much, if not more, needs to be developed. It is important to remember that a successful match event is the sum of many different elements and Liiga clubs cannot focus on just a few elements. As Theodorakis (2014) mentions in his study, sports clubs must develop the match event holistically, taking all elements into account and this also affects Liiga clubs. According to Theodorakis (2014), the design and general cleanliness of sports venues affect the customer's feelings and behavior. Great and high-quality conditions can at best have an extremely positive effect on the customer experience, as was the case with Arsenal with their new stadium. (Theodorakis, 2014) This has also been seen in this study. There was some variation in the answers regarding functional elements, but in particular new, large and fine arenas received the most praise for their arrangements, while smaller and older arenas did not please the interviewees. Lucian (2013) also highlights the fact that the sports venue should be easily accessible and also in a clean condition. Lucian (2013) emphasizes that this is an element almost completely under the control of sports clubs, which is also extremely linked to the customer experience. Of course, this is a challenging equation for Liiga clubs, because arena projects, i.e. building a new arena or renovating an existing one, are not cheap and no Liiga club owns its own arena, even though they are of course their biggest customers. The functions of the arenas are largely planned with Liiga clubs and according to their needs, so it is often possible to implement arena development projects with the owner or owners of the arena, at least to some extent.



In the interviews, it emerged that the general cleanliness and other practical arrangements are largely in order at Liiga match events, but the somewhat outdated and dilapidated conditions of the smaller and older arenas in particular came up several times. So, this is a problem that these localities should be able to solve in some way to improve the customer experience for this element. If you don't just look at the conditions inside the arena, the interviews brought up the arrival and departure from the arena. In general, arriving and leaving the arenas should be smooth, but this and other similar practical arrangements should be paid very special attention to contribute to a positive customer experience. It often costs nothing or is relatively inexpensive for Liiga clubs. Theodorakis (2014) also talks about how important easy access to and from the sports venue is. According to Theodorakis (2014), arrival and departure should be possible, regardless of whether you arrive on your own or by public transport. In the interviews, no aspect of security came to the fore regarding Liiga match events, while Theodorakis (2014) emphasizes the importance of security arrangements. Disorders are generally rare in Finnish sports culture if compared to, for example, passionate fan cultures in Europe, and this is certainly the main reason why it does not cause concern in the minds of the target group of this study. However, Liiga clubs must also in the future take care that there are no disruptions to order, as they have a negative impact on the customer experience. (Theodorakis, 2014)

Not all elements are directly under the control of the Liiga clubs, and this includes, for example, the outcome elements of the match event. This observation was also made by Theodorakis (2014) in his study. This element is one of the factors that most affect the customer experience, but at the same time, the Liiga club cannot directly influence how the players represent themselves and the Liiga club every night. Liiga clubs also cannot directly influence how high-quality or competitive hockey is in Liiga as a whole, because there are a total of 15 teams in the league, all of which influence the level and competitiveness of Liiga through their own activities. Liiga was said to be too low-level of a league compared to the competitive series, or even competitive sports, available. The budgets of Liiga clubs differ greatly depending on the region and the history of the Liiga club, and that alone puts the Liiga clubs in an unequal position and at the same time distorts the competitive structure, when some have more resources than others. Of course, this creates interesting situations if a smaller organization manages to play particularly well and beat teams that play with multiple budgets compared to them - this is what Mikkelin Jukurit managed to do, for example, in the 2021-2022 season when they finished second in the regular season.

The weak level of Liiga and the lack of competitiveness were the biggest reasons, according to the interviewees, why they don't go to see the matches at the arena or why they prefer to watch the matches on TV. Theodorakis (2014) points out that the results and success of a sports team is the single biggest element that determines consumers' future behavior, i.e. influences their decision to attend a match event. Bad success means less interested people and vice versa. So, this can be read as one of the biggest problems that Liiga is currently struggling with. Lucian emphasizes that the core product in a sports event is the sport itself, i.e. in the context of this research, for example, it is a Liiga match. According to Lucian (2013), the customer wants value for his money and the customer wants to go and see really high-quality sports, so the organizing sports club should make every effort to ensure the highest possible quality product.

According to the interviewees, the lack of competitiveness is directly due to the fact that the Liiga is currently a closed league and in their opinion, the Liiga should definitely be opened. This would help the competition between Liiga clubs and more meaningful matches would be played throughout the season. At the same time, Liiga clubs must find ways to ensure every night that the players on the rink are ready to do their best and at the same time provide entertainment for all spectators. People want to see that the game has meaning and that there is a stake in the game. Although this cannot be directly influenced, Liiga clubs can, with their player and coach acquisitions, try to get together a certain type or style of squad. They can acquire players who follow to the values of the Liiga club and are ready to do their best every day for the Liiga club. When one Liiga club invests in this, others must react and follow them.

The atmosphere of a match event always consists of several elements, but the atmosphere of the match event is only one of the biggest influencing factors on the customer experience according to the interviewees. Theodorakis (2014) also adapts this view and the atmosphere is affected by interaction with other people as well as interaction with the sports venue itself. Most of the decisions to go to the match event are made according to the atmosphere of the match event, previous experiences and the marketing done before the match. The match event must therefore always have a good atmosphere throughout the season and the customer must be left with the experience that he or she got from the match event what he or she went there for. According to the interviews, the match event should also have some other entertainment than the match itself. Many Liiga clubs tried to produce different competitions during intermissions, but mainly the interviewees felt that they did not offer much added value. In many Liiga cities, the same competitions are held year after year, and there are no surprises in the match event. The atmosphere is felt to improve if there are surprises in the match event, the

audience is taken into account and the match itself is entertaining. Liiga clubs should focus outside the rink on the fact that the match event is approached specifically as an event and the events are attended and money is spent on them primarily because people want to have fun and do something that is not normally done. If the match event does not offer a small break from everyday life or is simply boring and predictable, it does not bring any added value to the customer and the customer will probably not come again in the future, at least not very often.

According to Theodorakis (2014), it is extremely important to create an unforgettable experience at a sports venue, so the findings of the interviews support this theory. It is extremely important to create an enthusiastic feeling for the viewer and a lot of positive memories of various elements, such as themes, designs, memorabilia and special events. The most important thing is to produce entertainment suitable for the Liiga club's target audience, i.e. something that brings joy, excitement and fun to the spectators who are in the arena that night. This can be approached through phenomena that are trending at the moment, through traditional themes or through various campaigns where people from a certain target group are targeted to attend the match event and the content of the event can be designed to suit them.

Theodorakis (2014) points out that a positive customer experience can create positive word of mouth (WOM), which is an extremely important element for attracting people to a sports venue. The people in the research target group go to match events with friends and talk about them to their friends, i.e. positive word of mouth is extremely important - the match event must therefore be a positive experience for the customer. Liiga clubs could also strive to create a deeper interaction between supporters and players, as mentioned in Theodorakis's (2014) model. At the same time, the players should also be branded more so as superstars, there should be compelling storytelling around them that people want to follow on a national level. This creates positive hype around the Liiga club, which also moves people to the venue for match events. In general, match events should therefore be special experiences for customers, and the Liiga club and its players must interact with the supporters, so that the Liiga club is perceived, for example, as something that unifies the entire city.

Lucian (2013) emphasizes that the customer should feel that the price meets the quality of the product, which in the context of this study means that the Liiga product is not too expensive compared to its quality. The pricing of Liiga match events caused a lot of discussion in the interviews, most of the interviewees felt that Liiga match events are currently too expensive compared to the product, i.e. the game. Also, the match events as a whole were not felt to be

worth the price of the ticket. In the opinion of some of the interviewees, the pricing was right, but there were not many who answered this way. The price can ruin the customer experience or improve it, and often the effect of the price on the customer experience can be said to be successful when it is not complained about, or it is praised. Lucian (2013) emphasizes that sports clubs should take into account not only the price of the ticket itself, but also the costs incurred, for example, from traveling to and from the sports venue. Theodorakis (2014) also emphasizes that the price consists of many different parts and not only monetary costs. The customer also considers elements such as time and effort when they think about pricing. In pricing in Liiga, you should aim for the prices to be lower on the so-called basic nights, because the goal should be to get as many people as possible to the arena. On special nights and top matches, the prices can then be slightly increased, but not significantly. In both cases, however, the important thing is that the customer experience remains positive, whether it's a so-called basic night or a special night.

According to Lucian (2013), it is extremely important to consider different groups of people and their financial situations in pricing, as pricing has a great impact on the customer experience. Pricing in Liiga should therefore also always consider different groups of people, such as senior citizens or students, and they should be offered a ticket at a cheaper price. Similarly, pricing should consider smaller children or families with children. There are different people, groups of people and families, and suitable pricing should be found for as many cases or situations as possible. In recent years, it has been seen that ticket packages are targeted for families where the price of an individual ticket is cheaper, or student games are organized for students, where the pricing is generally cheaper for students. Such campaigns make people and groups of people feel that they are taken into account and the customer experience is often positive in these cases (Lucian, 2013).

One pitfall, however, is that the core fans are not considered in the pricing. It would be extremely important for the buyer of a season ticket to have access to various benefits in addition to being able to attend every match of the season with a season ticket. However, the core fans are the group of people who make sure that the atmosphere is good, supporters' flags fly and supporters' songs are sung at Liiga match events (Theodorakis, 2014). So, they should definitely be taken into account in pricing and with various benefits. Lucian (2013) emphasizes that sports clubs should also know the local economic situation of their own region and any special features that may affect the ability of customers to pay. Pricing is a challenging issue, but the most important thing would be for the Liiga club to understand the general price level

in its own region and the ability to pay of the target customers. According to these factors, the pricing strategy should be built so that it has a chance to succeed.

According to Goulart (2020), customers are traditionally connected with brands and sports clubs in more channels than just physically at the sports venue. A seamless omnichannel customer experience improves the overall customer experience. In this research, special attention was paid to the omnichannel customer experience, and through the interviews it became clear that positive interaction with the customer in different channels could bring considerable added value around the match event and thus has a positive effect on the customer experience as a whole. In particular, the use of digital elements and content in the match event is still lacking in Liiga, if you compare it to, for example, the world's best hockey league, the NHL. Each NHL club has an application, which has many times the amount of different content compared to Liiga clubs. The applications of NHL clubs also have features that are used specifically in the match event. With the help of the application, games and competitions are organized in which everyone can participate. So many things in general are already possible on mobile at the moment that consumers have invested in their own smart devices, so it is not very wise to miss the opportunity to access the consumer's everyday tool, i.e. the phone.

According to Richards (2022), it is extremely important that sports clubs know their own target group, so that they can create content that interests and appeals to their target group. According to the interviews, merely being able to read the Liiga team's news or browse the standings is not enough reason to download the application, let alone be enough reason to keep the application or follow the social media accounts for most people. Consumers must be constantly activated with various elements to keep them interested, and digital channels are no exception. The content should be interesting, and each channel should have something that is not available elsewhere - that's why different channels are used. In match events, the mobile application should support the match event itself, and a good example of creating added value could be the home team's opening goal bet, the winners of which, i.e. those who guessed correctly, get a drink ticket to use in the application or some other benefit used in the arena. As the interviewees said, this may not influence their decision to attend the event, but it would definitely add value and improve the customer experience.

According to Theodorakis (2014), today's TV broadcasts are of such high quality and entertaining to watch that many consumers decide to stay at home and watch the match. So, this is a great target group that should be targeted with different digital content to attract the

consumer to the sports venue the next time, and because of that, the same elements should also be used for Liiga viewers at home. For example, Liiga clubs could use the same opening goal bet, but as a reward a free ticket or a discount code for the purchase of tickets for future home matches, or why not the same drink ticket to use in the next home match. Competitions are not the only thing that can be used to activate consumers on mobile. For example, a discussion board for people who support the Liiga club or a game inside the mobile application for younger children are great additional content to bring the Liiga club closer to potential and existing customers. If you think about a mobile application, there could also be content that is paid for - for example, a loyalty program that allows you to go behind the scenes. However, mobile elements are so strongly present that they should definitely be used more, whatever the channel is.

Theodorakis (2014) emphasizes that situation and consumer moderators are not under the direct control of the Liiga clubs but are nevertheless influential factors in terms of the customer experience of the match event. Regarding the situation moderators presented by Theodorakis (2014), it turned out that customers are not interested in following the matches of a team that is not successful - this was also a presupposition at the beginning of the research. Liiga clubs should therefore strive to get the team in the best possible condition for each match, and this can be influenced by enhancing and improving daily operations. In the big picture, Liiga clubs must invest in players who commit to the team's activities in all aspects. It can improve the probability that the team will do better during the season. As mentioned, according to Theodorakis (2014), weak competition, for example between teams or in a sports series in general, has a great influence on whether the customer finally decides to go to the sports venue to watch sports. Similarly, this also affects how critically the sporting event is viewed from the customer's point of view.

A large part of the interviewees also felt that there is generally a weak competitive situation between the teams in Liiga, especially towards the end of the season. This is mainly influenced by the fact that the teams' budgets are of different sizes and the smaller Liiga clubs cannot afford to invest so much in quality players. For the rest of the season, the competitive situation is distorted and weakened by the fact that Liiga clubs at the bottom of the standings sell their best players and take junior players with the team, whose level is simply not enough for Liiga. Interviewees stated that this weakens the Liiga's brand image and also affects the interest of each match event and ultimately the customer experience negatively. Liiga clubs must also understand the current economic situation in the region. In a bad economic situation, consumers

are not ready to spend money on Liiga match events, and vice versa in a good economic situation. Even if the situation is not ideal from a business point of view and consumers' ability to pay is weak, Liiga clubs must be able to adapt to the situation with their own pricing. This was also brought up in the interviews, and the interviewees wished for pricing that would target different groups of people.

As Theodorakis (2014) suggests, team identification has a great impact on how critically the customer evaluates the success of different elements in a sporting event. Likewise, the customer's financial situation and age also affect this. The emotional relationship between Liiga club and its supporter creates respect and loyalty towards the Liiga club. This, in turn, basically has a positive effect on the customer experience, i.e. the customer does not necessarily look at the match event so critically. The interviewees feel that the sense of community increases the atmosphere in the arena and that's why it's great to see when the arena is full of people who support the same team. This, in turn, has a positive effect on the customer experience of the match event. People's backgrounds and demographic factors, such as age and educational background, often affect how a customer views a match event - in other words, the same things do not make a match event successful in everyone's opinion. This element is therefore fully in line with the model presented by Theodorakis (2014). The match event must therefore consider all the people in the arena as well as possible and everyone must be offered an equal opportunity for an entertaining match event. In order to succeed, this requires Liiga clubs to have a really good knowledge of their own supporters and what they want from the match event.

## 7. Conclusions

In the following chapters, the entire study and its results will be summarized. We will also answer all research questions and the answers have also been separated into their own tables to facilitate their analysis. There has been an alarming decline in the league's audience numbers over the past 20 years or so, and that is why it is extremely important that the matter be researched in more detail. The goal is also to once again bring up concrete ways for Liiga teams to develop their match events, and in addition to that, we will conclude whether the model formed by Theodorakis (2014) has been a functional theoretical framework for this research. In addition to the research results, this chapter also offers recommendations for future studies related to the topic.

### 7.1 Central Findings

Table 8 shows the main findings of the study related to the main research question. The first and one of the most important things that stood out was the atmosphere in the arena during the Liiga match. The atmosphere must be good and there must also be a lot of other people in the arena. The next and equally important factor is the quality of the Liiga match itself. The match must therefore be competitive and of high quality, and there must also be a stake in it. The research also revealed that interesting matches have a different theme, i.e. the match can for example celebrate the historical achievements of a team or an individual player together with the whole community. It was also considered a particularly important element that the practical arrangements for the match event are in order. For example, arriving and leaving the arena must work seamlessly and efficiently and, for example, queuing at sales points must not take too much time. Regarding the match itself, it should have a lot of pace and entertaining situations, and, in addition, there should be a lot of goals. Pricing is also an important element; it should be attractive and match the quality of the Liiga product. Different campaigns should also be aimed at different groups of people in order to attract them to the arena. The research also highlighted the fact that Liiga clubs should develop digital content that is used in the match to help entertain the audience. Lastly, it is important to strive to create a unified atmosphere in the arena - Liiga clubs must invest in interaction with supporters.



<b>Answering the research question: <i>What are the elements of attractive ice hockey game events from 20-40-year-old consumers point of view?</i></b>	
<b>Functional Elements</b>	Smooth practical arrangements Easy to arrive / leave arena No long queues
<b>Outcome Elements</b>	Competitive match High quality & entertaining match / league
<b>Social Elements</b>	Theme matches Good atmosphere & lot of people Sense of community
<b>Price</b>	Price corresponds quality Campaigns for different groups of people
<b>Customer Experience in Alternative Channels</b>	Develop & utilize digital content Should be used more
<b>Consumer Moderators</b>	Strong sense of community, more likely to have positive customer experience Older consumers more eager to spend money
<b>Situation Moderators</b>	Good quality match improves customer experience Good team performances improve customer experience

*Table 8. Answering the research question*

The development of omnichannel customer experience, especially through digital channels, was felt to be an extremely welcome development target. The research revealed that Liiga clubs do not use enough digital channels in marketing or match events to involve people in the event. In the table attached below is presented the key takeaways regarding the first research sub-question (Table 9). The target group felt that digital content, such as the use of a mobile application, would bring added value to people at the match event, but would hardly affect their own decision to participate in the event. In addition to the people in the arena, Liiga clubs

should also consider the people who watch the match on TV. Content can also be produced for them, which in the best case will bring people to the arena in the future, for example through various benefits. In both cases, the content must be easily accessible, and it must appeal specifically to the supporters of the Liiga club in question. Customers can be informed about various changes or other exceptions through digital content and, for example, a mobile application, which makes it easier for customers to do business in the arena. Finally, attractive content involves people in the event and thereby improves the atmosphere, which in turn leads to an improvement of the customer experience. People want to feel welcome in the arena.

<b>Answering the first sub-question: <i>How would improving omnichannel customer experience, especially in digital channels, improve the overall customer experience?</i></b>	
Gives added value but won't effect on the decision to participate	
	Should be developed and would be a welcome addition to match events
TV viewers should also be considered	
	The content should be easily relatable and approachable and should be targeted at the team's supporters
Information on practical arrangements	
	Would be easier to make people part of the event

*Table 9. Answering the first sub-question*

In connection with the development of Liiga match events, the interviewees discussed what has been done particularly well in other sports and their match events (Table 10). Taking inspiration from sports like soccer or basketball, Liiga match events can introduce pre-game festivities to build excitement and engage the crowd. This could include elaborate player introductions, fan contests, live performances, or interactive activities. While ice hockey does not have a traditional halftime like other sports, incorporating entertainment during intermissions can help maintain the energy and engagement of the audience. This could involve showcasing musical performances, acrobatic shows, or interactive games on the ice - these

elements already exist, but the entertainment value in Liiga matches is extremely low. Borrowing from the fan culture of sports like soccer, Liiga matches can introduce fan choreography, chants, or synchronized displays to create a vibrant and participatory atmosphere. Implementing dedicated fan zones or designated cheering sections can also foster a sense of community and enhance the overall customer experience - this is also done in Liiga, but this activity can definitely be developed even more. Leveraging technology can elevate the customer experience. Implementing big screens for replays, incorporating augmented reality (AR) or virtual reality experiences (VR), and providing interactive mobile apps for real-time statistics and fan engagement can enhance the overall enjoyment of the game - this was one of the biggest areas of development that the study appeared. Collaborating with other sports teams or organizations can bring unique crossover events to Liiga matches. For example, arranging exhibition matches with professional players from other sports, hosting joint charity events, or incorporating elements from popular sports like basketball or football into ice hockey events can generate excitement and attract new fans.

<b>Answering the second sub-question: <i>How could you improve ice hockey match events with elements from other sports events?</i></b>	
Pre-game festivities	
	Halftime entertainment
Fan engagement, building the feeling of community	
	Enhanced technology
Collaborations and crossover events with other sports teams or organizations	

*Table 10. Answering the second sub-question*

## 7.2 Practical Recommendations

Based on the research, it is clear that the customer experience of the match event is affected by many things, which was also expected based on preliminary data and previous research. It is therefore extremely important that the Liiga clubs understand how to invest in all these elements that emerged in the research, and not just one element, in their match events. The

audience averages in Liiga matches have been decreasing for a long time, so the Liiga clubs are required to take measures to increase audience numbers.

The most important thing is to listen primarily to the core supporters of the Liiga club, who see most of the matches. At the same time, other potential customers and their needs and wishes regarding match events must be taken into account. Liiga clubs must understand their own target groups and produce entertainment and content for them - if the Liiga club does not recognize its own target group or their wishes and needs, they must conduct comprehensive consumer research and find out these issues in order to develop the match event.

When we think about this target group and their needs, the development targets are clear. However, it should be noted that Liiga clubs operate with different resources and in different market areas, and not all observations apply to all Liiga clubs. However, there was a particularly clear connection between the poor quality of the match event or the customer experience, and the organization's small resources. Smaller Liiga organizations must therefore implement all possible measures with the highest possible quality and eliminate those elements that cannot be properly implemented. Larger Liiga clubs, on the other hand, should always strive to develop their match events, by introducing new elements and by identifying current trends. Liiga clubs must therefore be constantly innovative, and smaller organizations must focus on optimizing operations, including match events.

Liiga is a joint-stock company, where every shareholder, i.e. Liiga club, has equal voting rights. According to the study, one of the Liiga's biggest problems is that the Liiga is a closed series. Only the members of Liiga, i.e. the League clubs themselves, can influence the series system, and in the long term it would therefore be extremely important that Liiga would be opened. Thus, you can drop from Liiga to Mestis and vice versa, this would definitely bring more competitiveness to the series, which increases the interest of individual match events.

### 7.3 Study Reliability, Limitations and Follow-up Suggestions

Research is prone to mistakes in terms of reliability and validity. Reliability refers to the ability to replicate the same study, while validity pertains to the study's qualifications and accuracy (Hirsjärvi, et al., 2015, pp. 231-233). However, these metrics are primarily suited for evaluating quantitative studies and may not be entirely appropriate for assessing qualitative studies

(Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018, pp. 136-137). Nonetheless, they are still used as aids in evaluating qualitative research.

In the case of this study, its reliability is contingent on the replicability of its results, such as another researcher obtaining similar findings when studying the same subject matter (Hirsjärvi, et al., 2015, pp. 231-233). However, the reliability of this particular study is affected by its qualitative nature and purposive sample. The interviews conducted in the study followed a thematic approach, allowing interviewees to express their own opinions on different themes. Consequently, the discussions varied, and responses did not precisely align with one another. Therefore, if the same themes were explored with a different sample, it might not yield comparable results. Likewise, if a different researcher conducted the interviews, their approach and direction could lead to different outcomes. Thus, the study's replicability using different samples or researchers is uncertain.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that the researcher conducting this study had no affiliations with the organizations being investigated (Liiga series or Liiga clubs). The interviews were carried out independently, which enhances the study's reliability. Additionally, the interviews were conducted in peaceful environments, minimizing potential distractions, and took place in conference rooms or over the phone.

Validity, on the other hand, refers to a study's ability to measure precisely what it is intended to measure (Hirsjärvi, et al., 2015, pp. 231-233). In the case of this study, a qualitative case study was deemed an appropriate method since its aim was to enhance the understanding of a particular topic, rather than generalizing the results (Metsämuuronen, 2006, pp. 90-91). The research questions were successfully formulated, although they underwent slight modifications throughout the study. The theoretical framework aligned with the research questions and provided support in seeking answers.

It is important to acknowledge that the sample size for this study was quite small, limiting the generalizability of the results. Moreover, given that it was a case study, the findings cannot be generalized even to a single organization or industry. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the goal of a qualitative study is not necessarily generalization. Instead, qualitative studies explore individual perspectives on a given topic, striving to identify similar responses within the data. In this regard, this study was suitable for achieving its objective.

In general, Theodorakis's (2014) model is in line with the interviews of the target group, but it is noticeable that in his research he has taken into account a lot of, for example, European

football leagues, which have their own characteristics compared to Liiga. In the future, we should focus even more closely on the characteristic features of Liiga and the Finnish sports context, in order to find out specifically the preferences and preferences of Finnish sports fans. In addition, even with this sample size, there was a slight variation within this target group, and there is definitely variation compared to, for example, another target group. However, it could be seen that the same elements, such as the level of the match itself or the atmosphere prevailing in the arena, were important to all interviewees, but they experienced the current state of Liiga in a different way.

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## Appendix

### Anton Harju Master's Thesis – Interview

1. Gender
2. Residence (where do you live)?
3. How do you spend your free time, what guides your activities (friends, financial situation, etc.)?
4. Which Liiga club do you follow the most/closest? How do you identify with this team (place of residence, friends, etc.)
5. How many times a year / during the season do you go to a Liiga match? How many times a year do you go to (sports) events)?
6. How many times a year do you watch Liiga matches in some other way? How many times a year do you watch events via stream, for example?
7. If you visit or follow, why do you visit or follow? If you don't visit or follow, why don't you visit or follow?
8. Describe a successful sporting event? / What elements do you think are in a good and interesting sports event? Describe a successful event? What do you think are the elements of a good and interesting event? Does grouping affect going to events?

9. Describe an unsuccessful or unpleasant sporting event? / What elements do you think make a sporting event unsuccessful or unpleasant? Describe an unsuccessful or unpleasant event? / What elements do you think make the event unsuccessful or unpleasant?
  
10. How much are you willing to pay for a Ljiga match ticket / sports event ticket?
  
11. How much are you willing to pay for the event as a whole (match ticket, travel, ancillary services)?
  
12. What would make you go to a Ljiga match, what would it require (if you don't normally go, or don't want to go)? / What would make you go to a Ljiga match more often (if you go normally)? What would make you go to a sporting event?
  
13. What elements do you think are missing from the Ljiga match event?
  
14. What do you think is successful in Ljiga match events?
  
15. Should the Ljiga match event be supported with various digital elements, such as material coming to the team's mobile application / competitions organized in the mobile application? Would this affect your participation? Should the sports event be supported with various digital elements, such as material coming to the mobile application of the team/club/event / competitions organized in the mobile application? Would this affect your participation?
  
16. Should it be possible to attend the match event remotely, e.g. from the sofa at home while watching the match via a mobile application, or some other channel? How should this be implemented and how would you possibly like to participate? Would it be possible to attend a sporting event remotely, e.g. from your home couch while watching the match via a mobile application or some other channel? How should this be implemented and how would you possibly like to participate?

## List of Figures

Figure 1. The context of the thesis

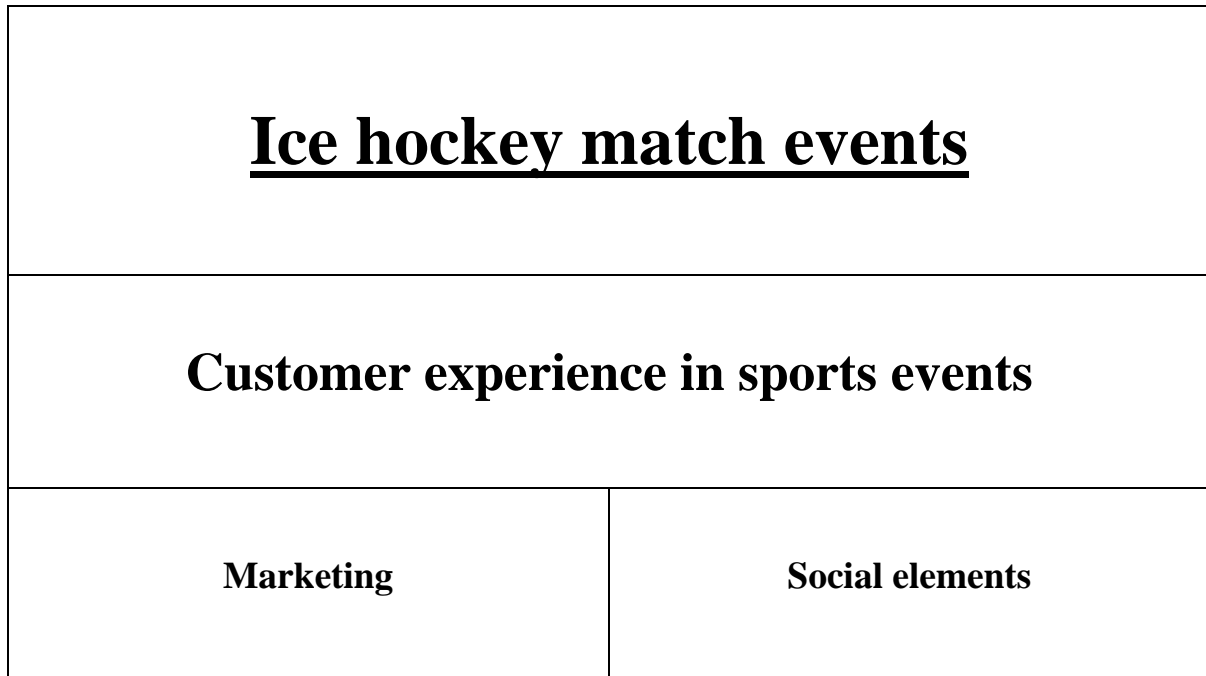


Figure 2. Customer experience summary

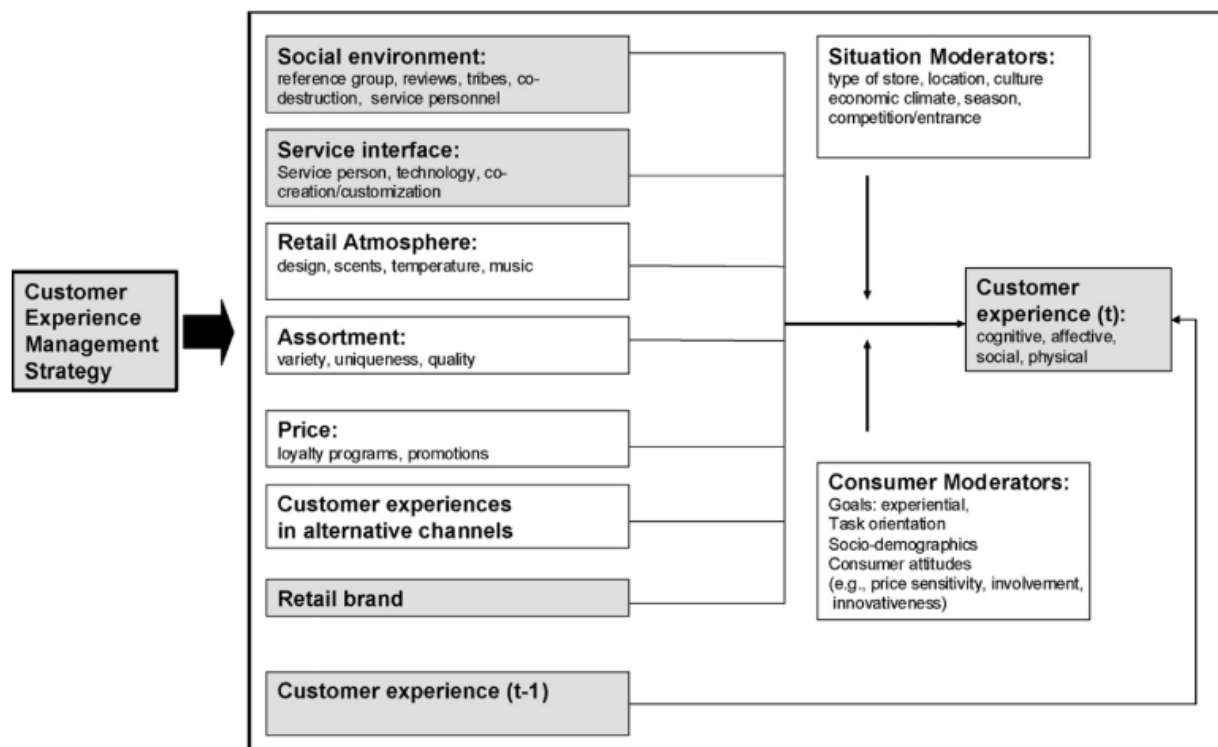


Figure 3. A conceptual model of the event experience

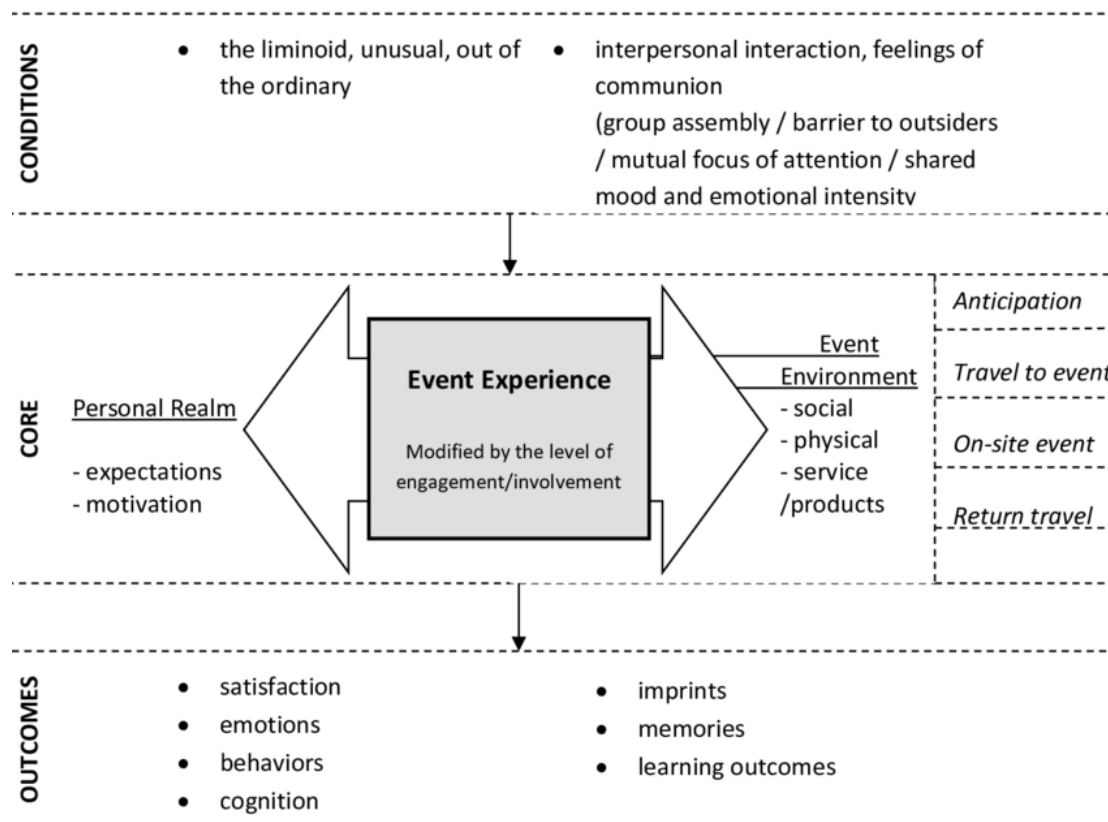


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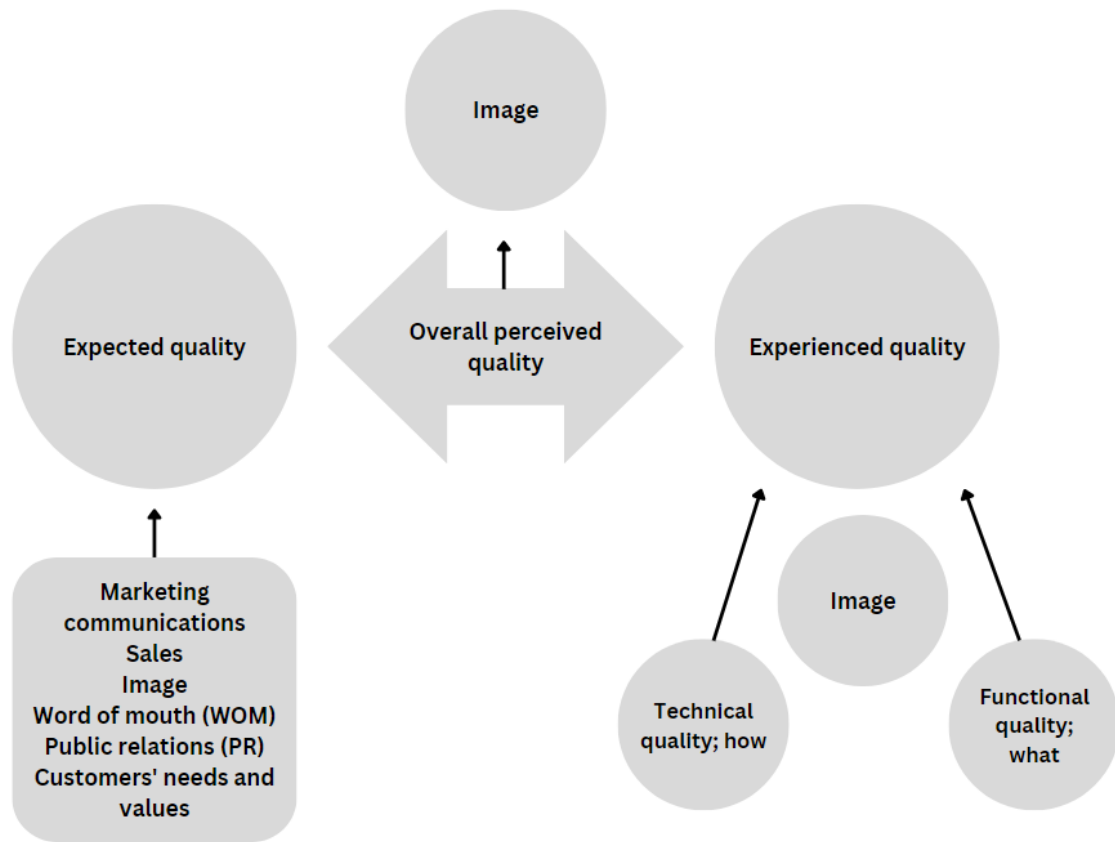


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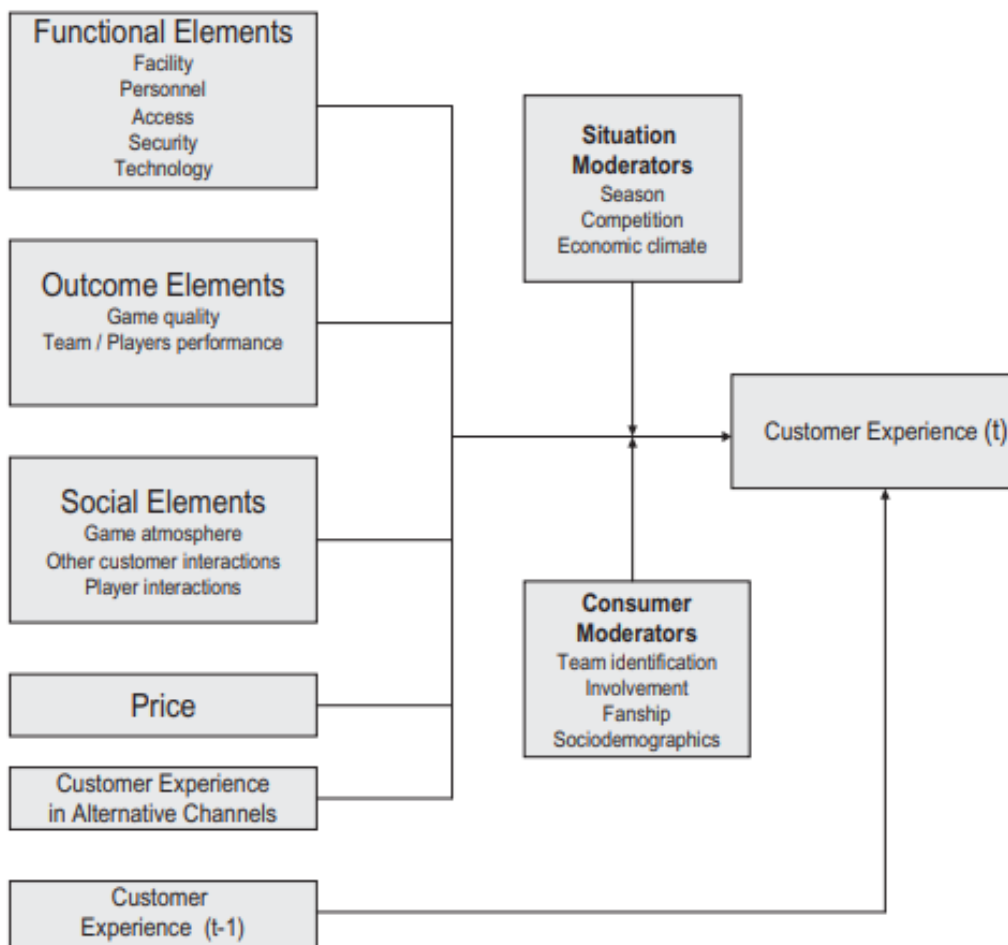


Figure 6. Sports Marketing Mix

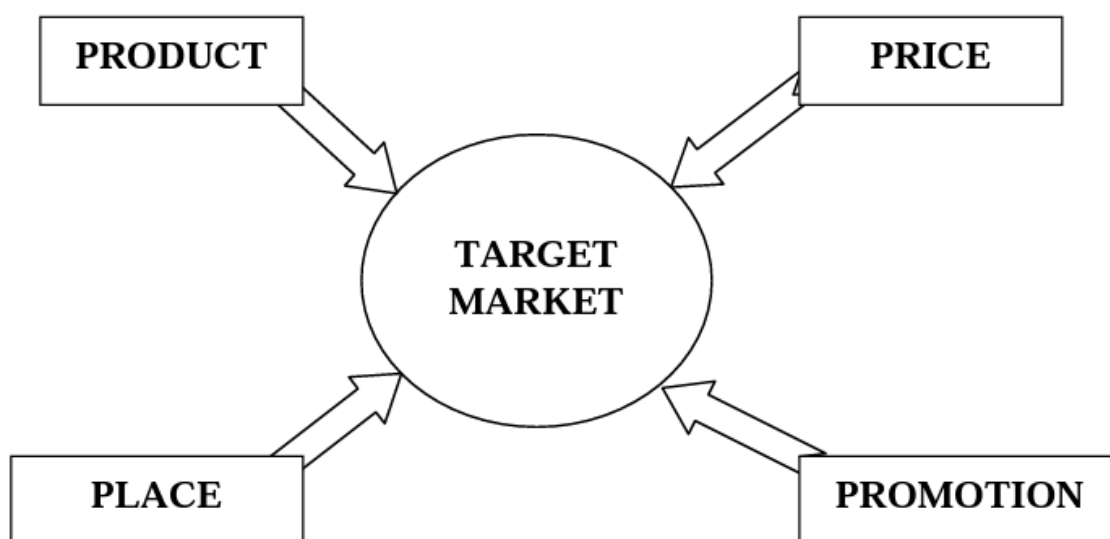
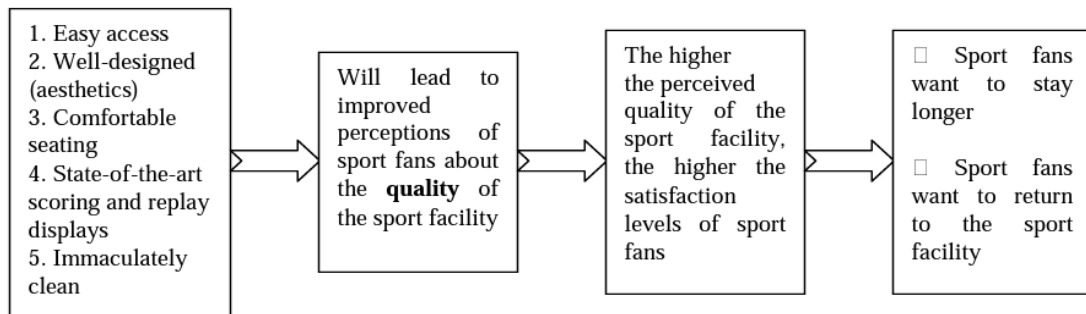




Figure 7. Sportscape Model



## List of Tables

Table 1. Liiga audience averages from past seasons

<b>Season</b>	<b>Audience average</b>
2001-02	5231
2007-08	5101
2013-14	4974
2017-18	4254
2019-20	4239
2022-23	4114

Table 2. The Interviewees

Woman, Porvoo	Man, Espoo	Man, Helsinki
Man, Lappeenranta	Woman, Helsinki	Man, Lappeenranta
Man, Kuopio	Woman, Vihti	Man, Lappeenranta
Man, Helsinki	Man, Kouvola	Woman, Helsinki
Man, Kouvola	Man, Lappeenranta	Man, Helsinki
Man, Espoo	Man, Espoo	Man, Kotka
Man, Lappeenranta	Woman, Lappeenranta	Man, Helsinki

Table 3. Arena capacities in Liiga

<b>City</b>	<b>Arena capacity</b>
Helsinki	8200
Turku	11 820
Tampere	13 455
Lappeenranta	4820
Pori	6350
Vaasa	5000
Oulu	6614
Jyväskylä	4437
Kuopio	5300
Mikkeli	4200
Lahti	5371
Kouvola	6400
Rauma	4500
Hämeenlinna	5360

Table 4. How much interviewees are willing to pay on regular series games

<b>Regular series games</b>	
<b>Ready to spend on a ticket:</b>	<b>Amount of interviewees:</b>
1-10€	4
11-20€	13
21-30€	3
31-40€	1
41-100€	-

Table 5. How much interviewees are willing to pay on playoff / extremely high-quality games

<b>Playoff or particularly interesting / extremely high-quality games</b>	
Ready to spend on a ticket:	Amount of interviewees:
1-10€	-
11-20€	3
21-30€	12
31-40€	3
41-100€	3

Table 6. How much interviewees are willing to spend on regular series games match events in Liiga

<b>Regular series games</b>	
Ready to spend on the event as a whole:	Amount of interviewees:
1-10€	-
11-20€	1
21-30€	6
31-40€	12
41-100€	2

Table 7. How much interviewees are willing to spend on playoff / extremely high-quality games match events as a whole in Liiga

<b>Playoff or particularly interesting / extremely high-quality games</b>	
Ready to spend on the event as a whole:	Amount of interviewees:
1-10€	-
11-20€	-
21-30€	1
31-40€	6
41-100€	14

Table 8. Answering the research question

<b>Answering the research question: <i>What are the elements of attractive ice hockey game events from 20-40-year-old consumers point of view?</i></b>	
<b>Functional Elements</b>	Smooth practical arrangements Easy to arrive / leave arena No long queues
<b>Outcome Elements</b>	Competitive match High quality & entertaining match / league
<b>Social Elements</b>	Theme matches Good atmosphere & lot of people Sense of community
<b>Price</b>	Price corresponds quality Campaigns for different groups of people
<b>Customer Experience in Alternative Channels</b>	Develop & utilize digital content Should be used more
<b>Consumer Moderators</b>	Strong sense of community, more likely to have positive customer experience Older consumers more eager to spend money
<b>Situation Moderators</b>	Good quality match improves customer experience Good team performances improve customer experience

Table 9. Answering the first sub-question

<b>Answering the first sub-question: <i>How would improving omnichannel customer experience, especially in digital channels, improve the overall customer experience?</i></b>	
Gives added value but won't effect on the decision to participate	
	Should be developed and would be a welcome addition to match events
TV viewers should also be considered	
	The content should be easily relatable and approachable and should be targeted at the team's supporters
Information on practical arrangements	
	Would be easier to make people part of the event

Table 10. Answering the second sub-question

<b>Answering the second sub-question: <i>How could you improve ice hockey match events with elements from other sports events?</i></b>	
Pre-game festivities	
	Halftime entertainment
Fan engagement, building the feeling of community	
	Enhanced technology
Collaborations and crossover events with other sports teams or organizations	