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Improving B2B buyers' customer experience in the pre-purchase journey

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ABSTRACT

Lappeenranta–Lahti University of Technology LUT

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Improving B2B buyers' customer experience in the pre-purchase journey

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Business-to-business (B2B) purchasing has shifted towards digitization and customer-centricity. Previous research has focused more on studying customer experience along the buyer journey in the context of business-to-customer (B2C) purchasing, considering the entire customer journey. The aim of this study is to increase knowledge of B2B buyers' pre-purchase journey and identify approaches to improve B2B buyers' customer experience in the early stages of the buyer journey.

This qualitative study used a theory-driven content analysis method, conducting fifteen semi-structured interviews with B2B customers who are highly involved in the decision-making process. The objective was to create a detailed overview of factors that influence the early stages of B2B buyers' pre-purchase journey, including identifying buyers' characteristics to be able to create a buyer persona, identifying key stages and touchpoints of the journey, and identifying factors that create value for buyers. The findings provide a valuable overview of how to approach buyer journey mapping and how to improve buyer-centric marketing and sales strategies in the early stages of the pre-purchase journey.

The findings indicate that B2B buyers follow a three-stage pre-purchase journey, which consists of the stages of need recognition, information search, and evaluation of alternatives. Key factors that significantly influence B2B buyers' pre-purchase journey are specific needs, goals, business cases, predefined criteria lists, past experiences, existing knowledge, and accessible internal and external sources of information. B2B buyers' needs are identified from business cases and customers, and needs can be seen as multidimensional. The most critical channels during the decision-making process are search engines, websites, social networks and contact with sales representatives. Companies that provide a seamless and customer-centric experience in the early stages of the pre-purchase journey through enhanced marketing and sales coordination can achieve long-term business success.

TIIVISTELMÄ

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B2B-ostajan asiakaskokemuksen kehittäminen ostopolun alkuvaiheessa

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B2B-ostaminen on siirtynyt kohti digitaalisuutta ja asiakaslähtöisyyttä. Aikaisemmat tutkimukset ovat keskittyneet enemmän asiakaskokemuksen tutkimiseen ostopolun varrella B2C-ostamisen kontekstissa ja ottaneet huomioon koko asiakkaan ostopolun. Tämän tutkimuksen tavoitteena on lisätä tietämystä B2B-ostajien polkua ennen ostopäätöstä ja tunnistaa lähestymistapoja, joilla voidaan parantaa B2B-ostajien asiakaskokemusta ostopolun alkuvaiheessa.

Tässä laadullisessa tutkimuksessa käytettiin teoriaohjaavaa sisällönanalyysimenetelmää, ja viisitoista puolistrukturoitua haastattelua toteutettiin B2B-asiakkaille, jotka ovat osallisena päätöksenteossa. Tavoitteena oli luoda yksityiskohtainen yleiskuva tekijöistä, jotka vaikuttavat B2B-ostajien ostopolun alkuvaiheeseen, mukaan lukien ostajien ominaisuuksien tunnistaminen ostajapersoonan luomiseksi, matkan keskeisten vaiheiden ja kosketuspisteiden sekä ostajien arvoa tarjoavien tekijöiden tunnistaminen. Tulokset tarjoavat arvokkaan yleiskuvan siitä, miten lähestyä ostajan matkan kartoittamista ja miten parantaa ostajalähtöistä markkinointia ja myyntistrategioita ostomatkan alkuvaiheessa.

Tulosten perusteella B2B-ostajat noudattavat kolmivaiheista esihankintamatkaa, joka koostuu tarpeen tunnistamisesta, tiedon etsinnästä ja vaihtoehtojen arvioinnista. Keskeiset tekijät, jotka vaikuttavat merkittävästi B2B-ostajien ostomatkan alkuvaiheella, ovat tarve, tavoite, liiketoimintatapaus, ennalta määritelty kriteerilista, aiemmat kokemukset, olemassa oleva tietämys sekä sisäiset ja ulkoiset tietolähteet. B2B-ostajien tarve tulee asiakkaalta ja liiketoimintatapauksista, ja tarpeita voidaan nähdä moniulotteisina. Tärkeimmät kanavat päätöksentekoprosessin aikana ovat hakukoneet ja verkkosivustot, sosiaaliset verkostot ja yhteydenotot myyntiedustajiin. Yritykset, jotka tarjoavat saumattoman ja asiakaskeskeisen asiakaskokemuksen ostopolun alkuvaiheella markkinoinnin ja myynnin keinoin, voivat saavuttaa pitkän aikavälin liiketoiminnallista menestystä.

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Espoo, 27 May 2023
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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, business-to-business (B2B) marketing has become increasingly more digital and buyer-centric (Edelman & Singer 2015; Marvasti et al. 2021, 126; Terho et al. 2022, 295). Furthermore, when the Covid-19 pandemic took place, the purchasing and decision-making shifted stronger towards digitalization (Donchak et al. 2022; Demand Gen Report 2022). Digitalization has brought different opportunities for marketers to find new ways and actions to find new potential buyers or maintain existing customers (Court et al. 2009; van der Veen & van Ossenbruggen 2015, 210; Lemon & Verhoef 2016; Anderl et al. 2016, 457; Demand Gen 2017, 5; Upreti et al. 2021, 32). Customers are interacting with companies through multiple touchpoints during the buyer journey, and that increases the importance of understanding the buyer journeys towards purchase decisions (Lemon & Verhoef 2016). Digitalization and evolved technology have enabled opportunities for companies to analyse touchpoints that customers are taking in online buyer journeys (Li & Kannan 2014, 40). It is important for marketers to understand customers' behaviors when that can bring higher value to the company and provide important knowledge about where to focus marketing and sales resources, where to optimize marketing costs, and it can help to create higher return on investment (ROI) (Kakalejčík et al. 2019, 47; Marvasti et al. 2021, 126; Upreti et al. 2021, 39). In addition, increasing understanding of customers helps to design and improve customer-centric buyer journeys (Terho et al. 2022, 301).

Changes in B2B buying behavior and increased digitalization have brought challenges for marketers to utilize all the data available for finding effective marketing and sales actions and for providing B2B buyers valuable customer experiences in the pre-purchase journey (Neslin et al. 2006, 95; Anderl et al. 2016, 457; Upreti et al. 2021, 32). Understanding buyer behavior and how they make purchase decisions in the market brings opportunities to design customer-centric buying journeys and tactics that satisfy B2B buyers' relevant business needs and goals (Court et al. 2009; Demand Gen 2017, 5). It is important for companies to shift their focus of following customers' actions more towards shaping and leading the journeys. In addition, the importance of managing the journey's customer-centricity that is seamless, personalized, and innovative has become more central than focusing on selling an offering such as a product. (Edelman and Singer 2015) Companies can drive stronger growth and improve customer-centricity when the customer journeys are aligned with customers' purposes (Cornfield 2021).

1.1. Background

Buying journey has been a popular research topic through the years for increasing understanding of customers buying behaviors and actions through their purchasing process (Li & Kannan 2014, 40; Lemon & Verhoef 2016; Steward et al. 2019, 299). The buying journey has been researched more in the business-to-customer (B2C) context than business-to-business (B2B) and one reason behind that can be seen, its complexity compared to B2C buying journeys. However, B2B buying has transformed through the years and digitalization has brought more opportunities for B2B buyers to search information for their recognized business needs and problems (Court et al. 2009; Demand Gen 2017, 5). When considering the pre-purchase journeys of the customers, buyers' role has shifted to be more demanding and therefore it has forced marketers to avoid pushing the products to customers but instead providing the information that customers are seeking and helping customers to solve their business problems (Meyer & Schwager 2007, 119; Court et al. 2009; Yaghtin et al. 2020, 1007). When a marketer aims to increase the knowledge of customers the analysation and optimization of the buyer journey and its touchpoints can help to visualize and increase the knowledge of customers' buying behavior (Kakalejčík et al. 2019, 47). Marketers interact with customers in various marketing channels and customers can interact in multiple channels along the buyer journey. Marketers face challenges in identifying the most critical touchpoints of customers during the buying journey. Therefore, by increasing the knowledge of the most critical touchpoints it can provide marketing success in a long-term. (Anderl et al. 2016, 457; Lemon & Verhoef 2016)

Marketers are lacking a specific understanding of where customers search information for their business needs which is crucial if the goal for marketers is to be available for customers in the most critical channels at the right time (Broilo et al. 2016, 193). Digitalization has given customers increasing amount of information and channels where to find, engage and demand content with specific information for solving their business problems (Cornfield 2021; Gruner 2021). In addition, digitalization brings opportunities to find more versatile overview of potential vendors, solutions, and channels where to buy products (Gruner 2021). Covid-19 led companies to adapt more digitalization and therefore it increased the importance of content marketing and buyer journeys which became critical as a part of the strong marketing strategy (Donchak et al. 2022; Demand Gen Report 2022). B2B buyers have become increasingly

dependent on online content when searching for potential solutions to their business needs. (Demand Gen Report 2022).

In modern marketing, customers can be seen having a more demanding role than earlier in each buyer journey stage. Customer satisfaction starts at the awareness stage where buyers seek information through various channels to their pre-identified needs (Lemon & Vehoef 2016; Priya 2020, 27). Marketers' task here is to recognize customers business needs and offer relevant content for satisfying these specified business needs and goals (Webster 1965, 371; Bruner & Pomazal 1988, 55; Priya 2020, 27). If customers perceive the content as not useful and helpful the experience provides non-satisfaction (Priya 2020, 27). Court et al. (2009) highlighted two main risks that companies are facing if they do not align marketing effectively with the buyers' journeys. The risks are wasting resources and pushing products on consumers rather than providing meaningful information, support, and experiences that are more helpful for customers decision-making. Companies are wasting resources if they are not findable in the key touchpoints of the journey and not providing relevant information when customers need it. In addition, one of the main challenges for companies is to find and evaluate the most influential channels, that can be called touchpoints, and allocate the marketing actions and resources that influence positively customers towards buying decisions (Neslin et al. 2006, 95; Court et al. 2009; Anderl et al. 2016, 457).

Cornfield (2021) stated that various companies focus on business outcomes rather than fulfilling customers' purposes. Customers' buying journey outcomes can be more effective when the journey experience is customer-centric. Companies need to shift their focus from a journey to purchase more towards a journey to purpose. By satisfying customers' purposes by developing valuable journeys to achieve them companies can increase win rates. In the B2B industry, the journeys are longer and involve multiple decision-makers with varying purposes based on their roles (Webster & Wind 1972, 12; Moon & Tikoo 2002, 293; Cornfield 2021; Mohan et al. 2022, 1). This implies that in B2B buying journeys, it is important to align individual journeys to these varying purposes and at the same time manage the decision-making group's purposes in a multi-buyer journey. (Cornfield 2021)

Designing, managing, and evaluating buying journeys and value-creating factors of potential buyers enhances understanding of their buying behavior characteristics that helps marketers to identify strategic measures and contribute to long-term marketing success (Neslin et al. 2006,

95; Anderl et al. 2016, 457; Upreti et al. 2021, 32). Neslin et al. (2006, 95) highlight other challenges that marketers are facing when the aim is to provide customer-centric journeys such as *"lacking data integration, understanding customers behavior and coordination of channel strategies"*. In addition, companies have issues observing and utilizing the large amount of customer data available to plan strategies and business processes to reach potential customers and achieving business success (Demand Gen Report 2022; Upreti, et al., 2021, 39). Digitalization has affected that online channels tend to be more crowded of the mass of data, and customers can be overwhelmed and lacking time and motivation to go through various types of content unless the content is related to a solution that can solve their business problem and need (Demand Gen Report 2022; Terho et al. 2022, 308; Upreti et al. 2021, 32). The research by Upreti et al. (2021, 32) proposes that B2B marketers should enhance their content marketing seamless continuation with analytics in different digital channels to reduce losing potential B2B buyers. Therefore, marketers should prioritize the development, management, and evaluation of pre-purchase steps by implementing seamless and integrated content marketing tactics along journeys (Neslin et al. 2006, 95; Anderl et al. 2016, 457; Upreti et al. 2021, 32). It is important to establish a presence in the channels that buyers consider most valuable and actively engage in, and continuously increase the knowledge of buyers' buying behavior (Upreti et al. 2021, 32).

To conclude, through the years the importance of digitalization and customer-centricity has grown as a part of pre-purchase journeys. In addition, this raises several questions among marketers. What are the right channels or touchpoints to interact with customers? What type of content do potential buyers perceive as helpful, engaging, and valuable during their pre-purchase journey? How to influence the buyers' when they go towards a purchase decision? How to provide buyers with more valuable customer experience and provide satisfaction in the pre-purchase journey? This study aims to find answers to these questions by finding ways marketers can improve the pre-purchase journeys to engage and guide potential buyers toward the purchase.

This thesis is executed in cooperation with an intelligent power management company that operates globally and mainly in B2B markets. The case company provides versatile power management technologies to various customer segments. Furthermore, the case company has been making a digital shift through the years in marketing and analysing customer buying behavior, and buyer journeys have raised interest and value in marketing. The case company

lacks knowledge of one of its key target groups and thus the aim is to find ways to improve the case company's marketing actions towards this target customer group. Finland is going to be a target market of this study. Pre-defined target group is contractors that are highly involved in the decision-making process in the construction industry. As earlier mentioned, the case company is lacking the needed knowledge of this target group's buying behavior and is facing challenges with recognizing the critical needs, challenges, touchpoints, and content preferences during buyers' pre-purchase journeys. This thesis focuses on finding ways how the case company could improve contractors' pre-purchase journey by increasing the knowledge of their buying behavior. In addition, another aim is to find crucial findings for future improvements in marketing and sales functions by increasing the knowledge of contractors buying behavior and what is their typical pre-purchase journey.

1.2. Previous research

This subchapter aims to give a short overview of the existing academic literature to explore the research topic and based on the existing literature, identify the certain research gap. The subchapter is going to shortly summarize the theories of the literatures that are focused on topics such as buyer behavior, buyer journey, content marketing, and how to observe the value and engaging factors that affect the buyers' pre-purchase journey.

Digitalization through the years offers companies opportunities to better understand buyer behaviors through buyer journeys than ever before (Li & Kannan 2014, 40; Lemon & Verhoef 2016; Steward et al. 2019, 299). B2B buyers tend to have better knowledge of their needs, and they pursue more convenient and personalized experiences along multiple channels. In addition, the Covid-19 pandemic has made a shift that B2B customers value more the hybrid buyer journey with a range of both traditional and online interactions with the company. (Donchak et al. 2022) The buyer journey refers a customer's path of the first interaction point with a company to final purchase and after the purchase actions (Puccinelli et al. 2009; Richardson 2010; Lemon & Verhoef 2016; Stein & Ramaseshan 2016; Kakalejčík et al. 2019, 48; Grewal & Roggeveen 2020). Therefore, the buyer journey can be divided into three main phases that are ***pre-purchase, purchase,*** and ***post-purchase phases***.

According to Steward et al. (2019, 299) research about the evaluation of ***B2B buying journeys*** has transformed and developed through the years. Older journey models discovered that buying organisations utilize highly structured, systematic, and analytical procedures when they make

buying decisions of the products or services. Through the years there has been a shift where different influences, responses, situations, and relationships have an influence on the buying journey. Various research has identified different stages of the customers' decision making and different stages of the buying journey. Different identified buying journey stages are going to be discussed in more detail in subchapter 2.3. In addition, there are differences between buyer journey stages in academic literature as authors defined either the whole buyer journey or were focusing on the pre-purchase journey. Pre-purchase journey stages identified are the following: ***need/problem recognition, information search*** and ***evaluation of alternatives*** (Webster 1965; Neslin et al. 2006; Puccinelli et al. 2009; Court et al. 2009; Richardson 2010; Grewal et al. 2015; Lemon & Verhoef 2016, Stein & Ramaseshan 2016; Kannan & Li 2017). According to Marvasti et al. (2021, 126), marketers need to consider that B2B buyers are going through over half of the buyer journey's digital touchpoints before contacting B2B seller's sales representative. This affects that B2B marketers need to focus on finding methods that can improve the marketing strategies to attract and engage potential buyers in earlier stages of the pre-purchase journey where customers recognize their needs and search for information (Marvasti et al. 2021, 126; Upreti, et al. 2021, 39).

Marvasti et al. (2021, 126) research focused on highlighting techniques on how to find critical stages in the buyer journey that help companies to observe customers' online behavior by using machine learning. The research proposed opportunities, how to improve marketing and sales activities in the buyer journey with machine learning. Whereas Edelman and Singer (2015) developed four key capabilities that managers can use to improve their journeys to be more effective and drive to capture permanent customers. Cornfield (2021) identified that marketers need to identify and consider customers' purposes which helps marketers to develop and operate customers' perceived experiences by achieving customers' purposes. The influence of journeys can be stronger and more effective when journeys are customer-centric and viewed as a purpose-driven path. De Keyser et al. (2020) identified three main ***customer experience*** building blocks, (1) touchpoints, (2) context, and (3) experience qualities. These building blocks can help marketers to understand, design and manage customer experiences throughout the customer journey. In addition, Lemon and Verhoef (2016) defined main categories of customer experience ***touchpoints*** in the customers' buying journey which are *brand-owned, partner-owned, customer-owned,* and *social or external*. Furthermore, Lemon's and Verhoef's (2016) research aimed to increase knowledge of the customer journeys and experiences when customer behavior is continuously evolving and changing. Increasing a better understanding of

these topics, the authors took the historical literature exploration perspective to understand more deeply the customer experience in the marketing field. Stein and Ramaseshan (2015, 16-17) identified seven elements of the *touchpoints* that can give deeper insights of the touchpoints. In addition, Rosenbaum et al. (2017, 144) presented how touchpoints can be visualized as a part of the buying journeys.

A few years ago, content creation and sharing were a practice to differentiate from competition and a way to attract audience with content (Terho et al. 2022, 308). In addition, Holliman & Rowley (2014, 285) identified a clearer definition for **content marketing** that is the following: they define content marketing in the B2B context as actions where *"a marketer creates, distributes, and shares compelling, engaging, and timely relevant content to attract and engage customers in the consideration phase of their buying journey that influences them to make a final purchase".* Content marketing is a tactic to engage customers during the decision-making process (Holliman and Rowley 2014, 270; Terho et al. 2022, 301). Wang et al. (2019, 166) highlighted the importance of emphasizing digital content marketing because it has a positive effect on engaging customers and driving new leads and opportunities for sales. Engaging customers through content is an effective tactic to improve the journeys continuation and attractiveness (Holliman and Rowley 2014, 270; Terho et al. 2022, 308). Terho et al. (2022, 294) research identified the key activities and contingencies that relate to the performance of customer-centric digital content marketing from a B2B context. Furthermore, the research aimed to provide an action-based roadmap that managers can use for effective digital content marketing implementation. In addition, van Doorn et al. (2010, 256) highlighted that different factors can affect customer engagement behavior that can be reflected on buyer journey management and content creation. The factors can be divided into three categories such as customer-based, firm-based, and context-based factors. Customer-based factors are identified as follows: goals, satisfaction, trust and commitment; resources such as time, effort, and money; and perceived benefits and costs. Firm-based factors relate to brand characteristics, reputation, size and diversification, industry and information processes, and usage. Lastly, context-based factors refer to variables such as competitive, political, economic, environmental, social, and technological factors.

Neslin and Shankar (2009, 71) identified a ***multichannel customer management*** process that marketers can use as a frame for designing, developing, and implementing a multichannel strategy. In addition, omnichannel marketing has increased its popularity in marketing industry

(Shankar & Kushwaha 2021, 291; McKinsey & Company 2022; Chung et al. 2022). Multichannel marketing can be seen more focusing on channel and omnichannel increase more customer-centricity approach on channel management and channel integration (McKinsey & Company 2022; Chung et al. 2022). As customer centricity has increased the importance in marketing, marketers need to adapt omnichannel marketing to drive customer-centric experiences in multichannel context (Shankar & Kushwaha 2021, 291; McKinsey & Company 2022; Chung et al. 2022). Businesses are lacking the understanding of customers' ***information searching*** to improve their strategies with this knowledge in situations where customers are seeking information (Broilo et al. 2016, 193). According to Broilo et al. (2016, 193), research has found that customers tend to find information for their needs by considering multiple information sources. Klein and Ford's (2003, 29) research focused on exploring if the previous academic findings in customers information searching process are still relevant in a digitalized world. Customers search for information at the internal level and external level. Internal searching contains information from memory that refers to the information that is gathered over time through external sources and experiences. External searching refers to the gathering process where customers search for different types of information through various external sources. (Klein & Ford, 2003, 30) Marketers need to increase knowledge about how customers seek information and which sources can be seen as playing a key role in decision-making (Broilo et al., 2016, 193). Table 1 displays the key academic literatures of topics that are the most relevant regarding this study.

Table 1 The key academic literatures regarding the study

Author (year)	Theory/Concept	Findings
Webster (1965)	Industrial buying process, B2B buying behavior	Identified a model that divides the buying process to four key segments (problem recognition, buying responsibility, search process, and choice process).
Puccinelli et al. (2009)	Buyer journeys, Customer experience	Suggested specific elements of customer behavior during the buying journey (goals, schema, information processing, memory, involvement, attitudes, atmospherics, affective processing and consumer attributions and choices).
van der Veen & van Ossenbruggen (2015)	Customer journey, Multichannel management	Identified search strategies (convenience, reassurance, information, peace-of-mind) and multichannel management implications for these strategies.

Broilo et al. (2016)	Information search, Buying journey	Increased understanding and conducted a framework of consumers decision of information sources in external information search in pre-purchase.
Lemon & Verhoef (2016)	Customer Journey, Touchpoints, Customer experience	Built stronger understanding of customer experience and created a process model of customer journey and experience.
Stein & Ramaseshan (2016)	Customer journey, Touchpoints, Customer experience	Identified elements of customer experience touchpoints (technological, process, customer-customer, employee-customer, atmospheric, communicative, product interaction elements).
Rosenbaum et al. (2017)	Customer journey mapping, Customer decision journey, Touchpoints	Demonstrated the customer journey mapping and key strategy initiatives in each touchpoint.
Steward et al. (2019)	B2B buyer journeys, Buying behavior, Customer journey	Identified B2B buying process waves with themes (transactions, situations, influences, responses, relationships, networks, and journeys).
Becker & Jaakkola (2020)	Customer journey, Customer experience	Conceptual framework for customer experience (includes factors affecting customer experience, key contingencies, and firms' role).
De Keyser et al. (2020)	Customer journey, Touchpoints, Customer experience, Customer experience management	Defined three key building blocks of customer experience and matures of different touchpoints.
Marvasti et al. (2021)	B2B buyer journeys	Observed B2B buyers browsing behavior and underlying stages of buying process (buying states: no-, early, mid and late-funnels).
van Doorn et al. (2010)	Customer engagement, Buying Behavior	Identified factors that influence customer engagement behavior (customer-based, firm-based, and context-based factors).
Brodie et al. (2011)	Customer engagement, Customer experience, Buying Behavior	Indicated general definition for customer engagement. In addition, proposed five fundamental propositions regarding customer engagement.
Grewal et al. (2015)	B2B buying behavior	Extended research of B2B buying challenges and opportunities.
Holliman & Rowley (2014)	Content marketing, Customer engagement	Identified the role of digital content marketing and offered improvements for marketers in B2B context.
Järvinen & Taiminen (2016)	Content marketing, Marketing, and sales alignment	Organisational process that aligns marketing and sales to generate high-quality leads and supports content marketing.
Kannan & Li (2017)	Content marketing, Omnichannel marketing, Touchpoints	Developed a framework that highlights marketing process touchpoints and marketing strategy process in digital context.

Andersson & Wikström (2017)	Content marketing	Identified how B2B marketers can use social media for communication to enhance customer relationships, brand building and sales supporting.
Terho et al. (2022)	Content marketing, Customer journey	Identified key customer-centric digital marketing activities in B2B context and created activity-based conceptualization of digital content marketing in B2B markets.
Neslin et al. (2006)	Multichannel marketing	Identified 5 key challenges in multichannel management and a framework that shows the linkage of the challenges.
Neslin et al. (2009)	Multichannel marketing	Multichannel customer marketing challenges identification, framework that guides companies to make multichannel decisions.

1.3. The aim of the research and the research questions

Previous research around the topic of the buyer journey has been vast +with various approaches around the topic. The buyer journey approach in a business-to-business context can be seen as narrower than in a business-to-customer context. Previous research has focused on different aspects around the buyer journey such as touchpoints of the journey, digital content marketing during the journey, how to find key information sources that are valuable for buyers, and how to increase knowledge of buyer behavior and the journey. In addition, the buyer journey has been researched as a whole journey, but this research focuses only on the pre-purchase journey. This thesis aims to increase knowledge of buyer behavior and how that knowledge can benefit designing and improving customer experiences in pre-purchase journeys in the B2B context. This research is focused on implementing the buyer journey related theories in the case company's context by exploring the key target customer group.

Based on the research aims and goals the following research questions are formed. The research questions of this study have been formed as one main research question and three supporting sub-questions. The main question's aim is to answer the main problem of what is going to be researched.

RQ1: How to improve B2B buyers' customer experience in the pre-purchase journey?

To support the main research question three sub-questions are developed. Sub-questions observe and answer in more detail aspects of the main research problem. Finding ways to improve and develop the pre-purchase journey and marketing and sales actions during the journey, the sub-questions' aim is to provide knowledge of the key target group to conduct the improvements for the journey design. The first sub-question aims to increase the knowledge of the pre-defined target group's key characteristics and variables that motivate and guide them during the pre-purchase journey. The second sub-question helps to identify buyers' key touchpoints in the pre-purchase journey. Finally, the third sub-question's goal is to discover what are the key factors that influence buyers' purchase decisions when buyers are recognizing the needs and searching information for solving their business needs, and what influences the most their purchase decisions in the pre-purchase journey. The three sub-questions are the following:

SQ1: What are the characteristics of B2B buyers in the pre-purchase journey?

SQ2: What are the key touchpoints of B2B buyers in the pre-purchase journey?

SQ3: What are the key value-creating factors that influence B2B buyers' purchase decisions?

1.4. Theoretical framework

Theoretical framework (Figure 1) displays the structure of the theory and demonstrates high-level key concepts and their relationships that are discussed in the research. The framework illustrates the complete buyer journey, with a particular emphasis on providing a more detailed overview of the pre-purchase phase. Buyer journey can be seen as one theory area under buying behavior research. Pre-purchase phase can be divided into two different parts that are awareness and consideration which consist of the three main stages of the pre-purchase journey. The first stage is need recognition where the buyer recognizes and specifies their business need. The second stage is information search where the buyer searches information from different sources to find suitable solutions for satisfying the recognized business need. Finally, based on the information search the buyer is going to evaluate and compare different alternatives. After the buyer has gone through all the mentioned stages, they will make the purchase decision and move to the purchase phase and after that to the post-purchase phase. Customer experiences evaluates along when buyer go through the journey stages.

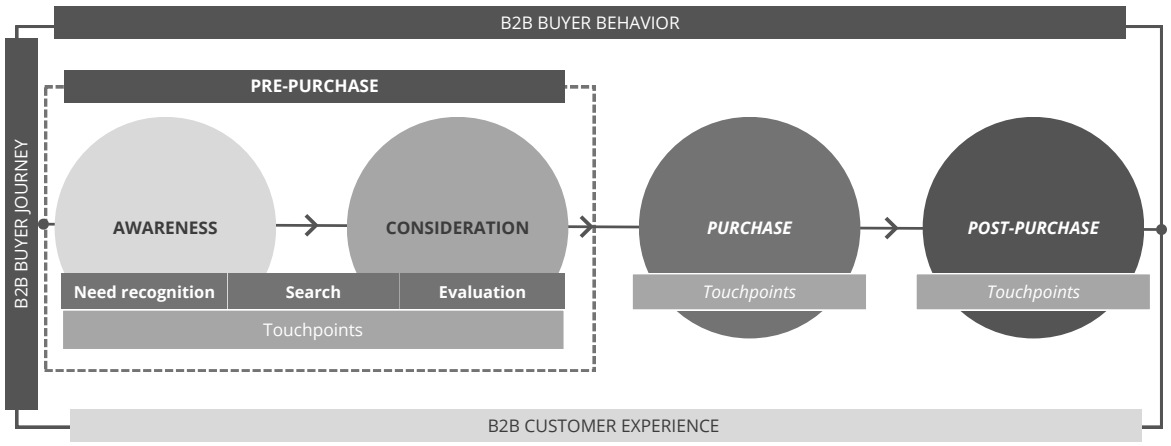

Figure 1 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework highlighted the key concepts of this thesis, which are as follows: B2B, B2B buyer behavior, B2B buyer journey, and focus on pre-purchase journey, and touchpoints. In addition, it is essential to define customer experience in this research due to the fact that customer experience management plays a critical role through the journey. The key concepts are briefly defined in the subchapter 1.5.

1.5. Key Concepts

Within marketing literature, a particular phenomenon is often referred to by various names and defined differently across different papers. This subsection of the thesis aims to consolidate the key concepts related to this phenomenon, provide an overview of the names used, and briefly define those concepts as they pertain to this thesis.

B2B

The term business-to-business (B2B) refers to the business that directs its marketing actions and sells its goods and services to other organisations (Brennan, Canning & McDowell 2020, 6).

B2B buyer behavior

B2B buying can be seen as complex when there is a set of processes and activities that involve multiple stakeholders and touchpoints during the purchasing journey (Grewal, Lilien, Bharadwaj, Jindal, Kayande, Lusch & Sridhar 2015, 193; Mohan, Casidy, Thaichon & Nyadzayo 2022, 1). Furthermore, B2B buying can be regarded as more complex when decision-making involves multiple people, and when in B2B buying the purchasing is not

typically impulsive (Webster 1965, 371; Webster & Wind 1972, 12; Moon & Tikoo 2002, 293; Mohan et al. 2022). B2B buyer behavior is institutionally driven, and the decisions do not take into consideration individually driven motivations when there is more than one individual involved (Grewal et al. 2015, 193; Seebacher 2021, 35). Decision makers behind the organisations can be, for example, buyers of materials or semi-finished products, suppliers, or subcontractors (Seebacher 2021, 35). B2B buyer behavior is mainly based on satisfying their buyers' needs and wants (Grewal et al. 2015, 193-194).

B2B buyer journey (pre-purchase journey)

Customer buyer journeys visually describe a series of events through which customers might interact with a company during its purchasing process (Rosenbaum et al. 2017, 144). The buyer journey encompasses the sequence of steps and interactions customers take, starting from the initial contact with the company and continuing through engagement, ultimately leading to the purchase phase (Richardson 2010; Kakalejčík, et al. 2019, 48). The buyer journey is divided into three main phases which are pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase. Pre-purchase phase is the first stage of the buyers' journey, and it covers the buying path where customer interacts with the company in multiple channels before making the purchase. (Lemon & Verhoef 2016) The pre-purchase journey can be divided into three main steps that the customer makes: need recognition, information search, and lastly the evaluation of alternatives (Puccinelli et al. 2009, 22). In the B2B context, the buyer journey begins with the awareness phase where the buyer business recognizes a business problem and a need. After the need is formed, the next step is information search where the buyer searches solutions from different channels for further evaluation of the alternatives. The evaluation process consists of the evaluation of different alternatives and comparing the strengths and weaknesses of each alternative solution. (Marvasti et al., 2021, 127)

Touchpoints

Touchpoints refer to the interaction points where customers interact with the company in multiple channels throughout the buyer journey (Neslin et al. 2006, 96; Richardson 2010; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Stein & Ramaseshan (2015) defined touchpoints as when customers "touch" any related part of the company, for example the touchpoints can be related to the company itself, brand, product, or service.

Customer experience

Meyer & Schwager (2007, 118) defined customer experience as a response that customers have when interacting with a company. The main focus on customer experience is the quality of caring for customers through interaction with the company, which can be indirect or direct. Indirect contact refers to the interaction that is unplanned for example word-of-mouth, recommendations, reviews, and advertising, while direct contact refers to the customer-initiated interaction for example purchase, use, or service. Customer experience can be defined as a comprehensive concept that encompasses customers' spontaneous, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, sensory, and social reactions and responses to a company-related content or offerings throughout the buyer journey (Lemon & Verhoef 2016; Becker and Jaakkola 2020, 638).

1.6. Delimitations

There are specific limitations that impact the applicability of this thesis results. The first delimitation is that this thesis's context is B2B environment rather than B2C. This delimitation is conducted because the case company is mainly operating in B2B markets and the main target group that is in focus in this study are contractor companies. Therefore, this delimitation can pose challenges if the results of this study are generalized to fit B2C context. In addition, basics of the pre-purchase journey can be used in B2C context for example how to identify the pre-purchase stages and touchpoints but buying behavior characteristics during the pre-purchase journey can be seen as delimitation.

Another delimitation is that the thesis focuses on the pre-purchase phase of the buyer journey. The reason for the delimitation is that it can delimit the scope of the journey to get deeper knowledge on a specific journey phase. Further two reasons for this delimitation are that the case company has as main challenges to target marketing and sales actions in customers pre-purchasing journey and the company is lacking understanding of the pre-purchase journey of contractors that are the chosen customer segment for this thesis. This delimitation might cause issues in generalization if the aim is to consider the whole journey instead of only focusing on the pre-purchase journey of B2B buyers.

Third delimitation is the target industry as this thesis is focusing on understanding B2B buyers pre-purchase journey in construction industry context. The chosen industry is one of the key case company's customer segments. Therefore, this delimitation might cause challenges if the

results are going to be generalized to other industries that differ significantly from the construction industry's decision-making behavior and habits. In addition, if generalizing the results, it is important to consider that it may not be possible to directly generalize and implement them to each business case and industry. However, it can offer insights and methods on how to improve and provide better customer experiences in the pre-purchase journey in different business environments. Another delimitation can be seen that the thesis is focusing on Finnish markets. The reason for this delimitation is that it will help to keep a specific focus and to reduce the risks that the research becomes too complex or broad. This delimitation can increase issues when generalizing the results to other countries' markets if there are significant cultural inconsistencies with the Finnish culture.

The last delimitation is that the thesis is conducted as qualitative approach which affects the number of interviewees, leaving the sample size relatively small. The reason for this delimitation was to get broader answers and knowledge of contractors' buying behavior characteristics, feelings, and attitudes as well as value-creating factors along the pre-purchase journey. However, this can increase challenges to generalizing results to understand a broader population from different industries which can have different buyer persona characteristics, feelings, and attitudes or value-creating factors.

1.7. Research methodology & data collection plan

The research aim is to gather knowledge and new insights and increase understanding around the pre-purchase journey that helps to achieve improvements in the pre-purchase journey design. The empirical research for this thesis is conducted as qualitative research, because it is suitable when the aim is to get closer to the specified target group and their behavior, experiences, and opinions about the research phenomenon (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2022, 13). In addition, the research aims to achieve findings in a wider context where the focus is on buyer behavior in the pre-purchase journey. Qualitative research methods are the most suitable for achieving the research goals set in this study.

Interviews as a qualitative data collection method was selected because it is effective when the topic of the interview is simple and when the aim is to increase knowledge of a certain target group's opinions, behaviors in different situations, and of why they act in a certain way (Sarajärvi & Tuomi 2018; Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2022). In addition, interviews can be seen as a

flexible data collection method where the interviewer can lead the conversation depending on each situation to achieve the desired results (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2022, 34). The data was collected with semi-structured interviews with themes, and the interviewees were contractors that were highly involved in the decision-making in the construction industry. In addition, the interviewees are or have been the case company's existing customers. Theme interviews' aim is to conduct interviews according to pre-defined themes and add follow-up questions if needed during the interview (Eskola & Suoranta 1998; Tuomi & Sarasjärvi 2018; Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2022). Therefore, semi-structured theme interviews offered opportunities to define themes based on the research questions and theoretical framework. Furthermore, the flexibility that interviews as a data collection method offered was beneficial in this study when the aim was to increase knowledge based on individuals' own opinions regarding the research aspects. The themes followed the pre-purchase journey stages to get in detail information. Furthermore, the themes follow the research questions order that are in line with the theoretical framework. The themes can be identified as the (1) background information and buyer characteristics of the construction projects, and each pre-purchase stages: (2) need recognition, (3) information search and content preferences, and lastly (4) evaluation of alternatives before the purchase. Interviews were done anonymously in Finnish, and they were recorded and transcribed, and after those steps, lastly the interview data was translated because it was easier and more efficient to manage in the analysing process.

After data collection, the transcribed and translated data was analysed by theory-driven content analysis. Theory can support the empirical findings by finding connections between existing theories and empirical findings, but the analysis was not directly based on the theory. Theory-driven content analysis is based on testing existing theories but in a new context and this offers possibilities to find new insights and solutions in the research area to challenge existing studies. (Sarajärvi & Tuomi 2018) In addition, the analysis followed the pre-defined themes. This helped with categorizing the content to ease the exploring of the gathered data and further analysing process. This study's research design and methodology will be further discussed in chapter 4.

1.8. Structure of the Thesis

This thesis structure consists of 5 main chapters. The first chapter presents an introductory of the thesis and it consists of a discussion of the thesis background and finding the research gap.

Furthermore, it discusses previous existing academic literatures and topics that are relevant in this research. The aim of the research and formulated research questions are presented, and delimitations are identified. In addition, the introductory chapter defines the theoretical framework and key concepts of the research as well as the research methodology, and the structure of the thesis.

The second chapter is based on a literature review that explores the B2B pre-purchase journey-creating process by identifying buyer persona characteristics that influence buying behavior. The third chapter continues the literature review discussion, and it consists of B2B marketers' overview of how to find ways to improve customer experience in the pre-purchase journeys, and how to manage content, multi- and omnichannel marketing. In addition, as closure to the literature review existing literature is observed to define what role sales present during the pre-purchase journey.

The fourth chapter presents the research design and methodology, and the entire research process from the data collection to the analysis of the data. Moreover, the chapter presents the methods chosen and used to conduct the research. In addition, there is a discussion about the reliability and validity of the research. The fifth chapter is a presentation and discussion of the empirical findings. Finally, the sixth chapter aims to answer the research questions based on a synthesis of the empirical findings and existing literature. Furthermore, conclusions and a discussion of theoretical contributions are presented as well as managerial implications. Lastly, limitations and suggestions for future research are presented in the final chapter.

2. B2B BUYER PRE-PURCHASE JOURNEY

Digitalization has offered valuable opportunities for companies to reach potential new customers through multiple channels (Anderl et al. 2016, 457). Digitalization has not completely replaced traditional marketing, but marketers' focus has changed from "pushing" marketing content to customers more towards focusing on improving customer-driven touchpoints by gathering knowledge of customer behavior and finding ways on how to influence customers in these touchpoints during their journey (Court et al. 2009). Customer journeys visually describe a series of events through which customers might interact with a company during its purchasing process (Rosenbaum et al. 2017, 144). Customers often interact with multiple company-related touchpoints in various channels along their journey (Lemon & Verhoef 2016). Marketers need to understand customers' behaviors at each stage of the journey and reflect the knowledge to journey design and consider what the customers' preferences are and what goals drive their journeys (Kotler & Keller 2015, 205; Cornfield 2021).

When generating knowledge about customer journeys there can be seen to be three main steps such as (1) identifying and creating buyer personas, (2) mapping the customer journey for a specific chosen buyer persona and lastly (3) analysing the customer engagement in different levels of the journey (Terho et al. 2022, 301). A literature overview has been conducted to follow the highlighted structure where at first it is important to increase knowledge of target customer segments of B2B buyer behavior before mapping the customers buying journey and identifying the touchpoints. This chapter gives a theoretical overview of marketing literature around the B2B pre-purchase journey. The aim is to explore and discuss the pre-purchase journey's different stages that customers go through and what touchpoints can be identified in the pre-purchase journey. This chapter aims to focus more on customer perspective in the pre-purchase journey whereas the next chapter 3 concentrates more on the marketing and sales perspective of the pre-purchase journey for improving journey design, customer journey experiences and engagement along the journey.

2.1. B2B buying behavior

Marketers' role has changed in recent years from company-driven marketing where companies "push" content to customers to customer-driven where customers outreach to companies and do research on potential offerings more individually through digital online channels (Court et

al. 2009; DemandGen 2017, 5). Behind the B2B buying the marketers' task is to support B2B buyers by providing solutions to their customers by solving buyers' business problems whereas in B2C markets the marketers' task is to satisfy customers' personal needs (Webster & Wind 1972, 14; Meyer & Schwager 2007, 119; Yaghtin et al. 2020, 1007). Marketers need to explore and analyse what customers' relevant needs and expectations are in each stage of their purchase journey (Lingqvist et al. 2015). As marketing has been shifting more towards customer-driven marketing where customers are in control of the process, companies need to focus on actively providing information that can help customers to find what they need in each buying journey stage (Court et al. 2009). B2B buying can be seen as more complex than B2C buying as the decision-making process typically involves buying centers that consist of multiple persons with different functional roles and responsibilities, and they go through several touchpoints before making the purchase decisions that meet the business goals and needs at the same time (Webster & Wind 1972, 12; Moon & Tikoo 2002, 293; Mohan et al. 2022, 1). In addition, the increasing complexity of customer journeys forces companies to find ways to adapt measuring of customer attitudes, brand performance in different channels, and effectiveness of marketing expenditures across the customer journey (Court et al. 2009). Lingqvist et al. (2015) highlights that almost 65 percent of the buyers are unsatisfied with the inconsistent experiences in their journeys that affect negatively on decision-making (Lingqvist et al. 2015).

In B2B markets decision-making can be seen as problem-solving because an individual in the organisation identifies a gap between desired and present position. After pinpointing the gap, it is necessary to identify what causes the gap and what can be done to get to the desired position. (Webster & Wind 1972, 14) B2B marketers need to deepen their knowledge of customer behavior and of what characteristics and values affect buyer behavior and decision-making (Court et al. 2009). Understanding different customer segments' needs and desires, expectations, and the industry where customer segments operate through various sources supports customer journey mapping and solves industry-specific challenges (Duran 2018; Lingqvist et al. 2015). Industry-specific challenges include buyers facing laws, urgencies, and different regulations (Duran 2018). According to Almquist et al. (2018, 75), it is important to recognize and analyse buyers' rational and emotional decision-making factors when customers are going through a purchasing process. "The B2B Elements of Value Pyramid" helps marketers to explore customers' value factors that are divided into different levels with value elements. The different levels with value elements are *"Table stakes, functional value, ease of doing business value, individual value and inspirational value"*. The first level titled table

stakes refer to the starting point of the decision-making that can lead to a further decision-making process. The second level, functional value considers more the economic and performance value of the offer. The third level, ease of doing business value refers to overall elements that help with improving business such as operational, strategic, relationship, access, and productivity elements. The fourth level, individual value refers to decision-makers' personal values where career and past experiences can influence the decision. Lastly the fifth level, the inspirational level defines more purposeful elements of the decision. (Almquist et al. 2018, 76)

Webster and Wind (1972, 13-14) stated that organisational buying behavior depends on several goals and decision criteria that can vary over time. Organisational decision-making requires searching for information through multiple sources and B2B buyers tend to generally use six separate channels to interact with a company when going through a decision-making journey. In addition, the decision-making process lasts for an extended period and involves internal relationships. The focus of information searching and researching before the purchase decision is highly important for looking at different specifications of the potential solutions and following a more formal way of buying or procurement process. (Lingqvist et al. 2015) In addition, the evaluation of different alternatives is considered important and different criteria can influence making rational and quantifiable decisions such as total cost of ownership (TCO), pricing, and solution performance (Almquist et al. 2018, 75). B2B buyers tend to value the functionality of the solutions to meet specifications and optimize prices, comply with different regulations, and follow specified ethical practices (Lingqvist et al. 2015; Almquist et al. 2018, 75). Webster (1965, 372) highlighted that buyers tend to focus on factors that are determined by pressures or competition in the market rather than technical and physical aspects of the offers when making buying decisions. These types of factors can be price, delivery time, and performance of a specific vendor. In addition, businesses tend to normally have high switching costs (Lingqvist et al. 2015, 2).

2.2. Buyer persona

Webster (1965, 370) highlighted that before defining the buying process of different segments, it is important to consider if inside this specific segment are different subsegments that can have different buying patterns. Defining specific narrowed customer segments that have similarities in their buying behavior and decision-making process is more effective rather than

generalizing buying processes for wide customer segments. Furthermore, segmentation based on channel, product, or situation is not as effective as using people's general characteristics that influence their decision-making behaviors (van der Veen & van Ossenbruggen 2015, 211). Customers buying journey mapping starts with identifying a specific buyer persona (Terho et al. 2022, 301). Buyer personas help marketers to understand their customer groups for tailoring personalized content, messaging, and offerings to satisfy customers based on their specific buying behavior, goals, needs, and desires which can result in valuable sales opportunities at the end (Vaughan 2022; Kusinitz 2022). Buyer persona identification consists of identifying the typical buying behavior, characteristics, key business problems, needs, goals, and motivations by first gathering the needed data of the customer segment (Duran 2018; Kusinitz 2022; Terho et al. 2022, 301). According to Yaghtin et al. (2022, 1858) in terms of buyers' motivations and needs they tend to be goal-oriented. A buyer persona can be identified as a market or a customer segment and it is a representation of a buyer that is identified through existing customer data and market research (Lingqvist et al. 2015; Kusinitz 2022; Terho et al. 2022, 301).

As earlier mentioned in the B2B context there may be buying units or centers involved in the decision-making rather than only individuals who make the final decisions and therefore it makes the formulation of the customers buying journey more complex (Webster & Wind 1972, 12; Moon & Tikoo 2002, 293; Terho et al. 2022, 301; Mohan et al. 2022, 1). In addition, multiple customer data sources help to identify buyer personas to gain an in-depth understanding (Terho et al. 2022, 301). Data sources can be for example internal and external interviews with company representatives or customers, statistics of different communication and marketing channels, and open data sources that can consist of social media platforms where customers communicate or give feedback of company's offerings (Duran 2018; Terho et al. 2022, 301). Large companies with multiple customers can benefit from data-driven research to increase their knowledge of the specific customer segment (Lingqvist et al. 2015). It is beneficial to consider multiple internal data sources that can be gathered from various company functions for example, sales, marketing, logistics, and other functions that operate in the customer interface at some level (Lingqvist et al. 2015; Vaughan 2022). This supports the outcome of defining the real needs and challenges of the customers. Customers finds critical different types of variables that influence the final purchase decisions such as price, availability and delivery times, specific features of the products or solutions, and sustainable solutions. (Lingqvist et al. 2015) Furthermore, by exploring the data sources, what type of content and

messages customers are engaging the most, and how they consume the company-related content it derives insights into what can be problems of the customers (Duran 2018; Vaughan 2022). This helps the company to observe and understand how to solve their customers' challenges with their solutions (Duran 2018).

After gathering data about specific customer segments, the next step is to create the final overview of the buyer persona (Terho et al. 2022, 301). Creating the final overview of the buyer persona needs to cover customers' main business challenges or problems that they are facing, and the business goals and needs which guides and motivates them to make purchase decisions (Duran 2018; Kusinitz 2022; Terho et al. 2022, 301). Defining the customers' top challenges and goals helps marketers to outline and explain more efficiently how they can offer customers a solution to their core business challenges and to meet their business goals. In addition, when creating buyer personas, it is needed to cover the information categories such as geography, demography, educational level, and the main behavior characteristics of how they make decisions and based on what variables. (Duran 2018) It is important to consider that buyer personas need continuous updating because buying behaviors can change over time, and it is necessary to consider if the created buyer persona is too broad or too narrow to give desired outcomes and if the buyer persona might need further evaluation and improvements (Duran 2018; Vaughan 2022).

2.3. B2B pre-purchase journey mapping

Companies tend to focus more on pushing marketing toward customers to increase brand awareness and generate loyalty among excising customers rather than focusing on the most influential touchpoints during the customers' buying journey where potential sales opportunities can be found. This has an influence that marketers and sales can miss or lose important and valuable prospects if they do not identify and attract potential buyers, and buyers might not consider them in the evaluation stage if company representatives have not made actions towards these potential buyers. (Court et al. 2009) The majority of B2B buyers tend to start their buying journey by individually navigating and searching information (DemandGen 2017, 5). Therefore, marketers should focus on understanding the customers' early journey stages by efficiently directing marketing actions to customers' key touchpoints where the influence is maximized for achieving meaningful interactions that can guide customers on their journey to purchases (Court et al. 2009; DemandGen 2017, 5). Digital touchpoints have

increased in importance in buyer journeys as it is an approachable channel for customers to search for first-level information and content to find potential vendors that can provide solutions to their business needs (Demand Gen 2017, 5).

As earlier mentioned, B2B buying typically involves multiple individuals and the individuals go through several touchpoints (Webster & Wind 1972, 12; Moon & Tikoo 2002, 293; Mohan et al. 2022, 1). The survey by Demand Gen (2017) highlighted that in the B2B buying process there are different individuals involved. In addition, the number of individuals involved in the decision-making process can vary along the pre-purchase journey stages. In B2B buying, multiple decision-makers with different roles can provide more comprehensive overall picture of the solution needs and what could be suitable for each business case. Customer journey generally defined is a customer's purchase path or process that a customer goes through by crossing different stages and touchpoints and that creates the overall customer experience (Lemon & Verhoef 2016). After buyer personas have been identified and created the second step is mapping the journey of a chosen buyer persona that refers to personalization as a principle (Lingqvist et al. 2015; Terho et al. 2022, 301). Customer journey mapping starts with defining customers' actions such as identifying the main steps that customers take in their journey (Terho et al. 2022, 301). In marketing literature, there are various definitions of customers' buying journey stages with variations in naming. The following Table 1 represents an overview of the steps from various academic marketing literature:

Table 2 Existing literature overview of customers buying journey stages

Researcher(s)	**identified journey stages**	**Context**
Webster (1965)	1) problem recognition, 2) assignment of buying authority, 3) search, and 4) choice	B2B
Neslin et al. (2006)	1) need recognition, 2) information search, 3) purchase, and 4) after sales service	B2C
Puccinelli et al. (2009)	1) need recognition, 2) information search, 3) evaluation, 4) purchase, and 5) post-purchase	B2C
Court et al. (2009)	1) awareness, 2) familiarity, 3) consideration, 4) purchase, and 5) loyalty	B2C
Richardson (2010)	1) awareness, 2) research, and 3) purchase	B2C

Grewal et al. (2015)	1) information gathering (need identification, search of alternatives, setting criteria), 2) product evaluation/negotiation (set budget, evaluation of alternatives, negotiations with suppliers), and 3) purchase/usage	B2B
Lemon & Verhoef (2016)	1) pre-purchase, 2) purchase, and 3) post-purchase	B2C
Stein & Ramaseshan (2016)	1) search, 2) evaluation, 3) purchase, and 4) post-purchase	B2C
Rosenbaum, Otalora & Ramirez (2017)	1) pre-service, 2) service, and 3) post-service	B2C
Kannan & Li (2017)	1) awareness, 2) familiarity, 3) consideration, 4) evaluation, and 5) purchase	B2C
Grewal & Roggeveen (2020)	1) pre-purchase, 2) purchase, and 3) post-purchase	B2C

As the table indicates there are several studies around the customer buying journey and identified core stages of the journey. Similarities across core stages of the buyer journey from different authors can be identified regardless of whether it is a B2B or B2C context. According to Lemon and Verhoef (2016), the pre-purchase journey is the first stage of the actual customer journey. Pre-purchase phase is where a customer interacts with the brand and company-related content before the purchase decision. In this study, based on the existing literature, the pre-purchase journey can be categorized in three main stages. The identified three pre-purchase journey stages are the following (1) need recognition, (2) information search, and (3) evaluation of alternatives. After the consumer has passed the pre-purchase phase in the journey, they proceed to the purchase phase and after that to the post-purchase phase. Figure 2 presents the pre-purchase journey's separate steps:

Figure 2 B2B pre-purchase journey mapping, adapted from Webster (1965), Neslin et al. (2006), Puccinelli et al. (2009), Court et al. (2009), Richardson (2010), Grewal et al. (2015), Lemon & Verhoef (2016), Stein & Ramaseshan (2016) and Kannan & Li (2017)

Marketers need to view channels where they communicate with customers from the customers' perspective to find key touchpoints and factors that require improvements to deliver customers valuable experiences (Stein & Ramaseshan 2016, 18). After the journey stages are identified, the next step is to identify the key touchpoints and customer segments' main information needs in each stage of the journey (Terho et al. 2022, 301). Mapping the key touchpoints and identifying touchpoints elements helps marketers to increase their knowledge of customers and get valuable insights into the entire buying journey (Stein & Ramaseshan 2016, 17). Furthermore, touchpoints can be seen to have different roles throughout the journey. Touchpoint mapping helps marketers to manage what type of content and information they are offering in each stage of the journey and what factors influence the engagement of the customers and the purchase decisions. (Terho et al. 2022, 301) Touchpoints are discussed in more detail in subchapter 2.3.4.

2.3.1. Stage 1: Need recognition

Figure 2 show that the buyer's pre-purchase journey begins with recognizing a certain business need. B2B buyers can recognize a specific need to solve a certain business problem (Webster 1965, 371; Bruner & Pomazal 1988, 55) or an opportunity for better performance that can raise a specific need (Bruner & Pomazal 1988, 55). Problem recognition can begin by identifying separately a desired state and a dissatisfying present state and how far those are from each other. If these states are far from each other a problem or a need is formed and buying motivation increases. (Webster 1965, 371) Whereas if these states are balanced the consumer can be seen to be in an ideal state (Bruner & Pomazal 1988, 55). In addition, problem recognition can be influenced by the project type for example, if it is a new construction or renovating an existing one (Webster 1965, 371). Marketers need to consider that the B2B buying process can be seen as more rational than impulsive based buying (Webster 1965, 371).

In addition, a business problem or need can be short or long depending on the complexity of the problem or the need (Bruner & Pomazal 1988, 54).

The B2B buying journey begins when someone gets the internal or external stimuli that trigger consumers to recognize a need or a problem (Kotler & Keller 2015, 220). Other literatures defined similarly that B2B buyers' needs can be born in two ways. Either B2B marketers' marketing efforts can stimulate and attract buyers buying motivations by raising buyer's goals and expectations to drive higher satisfaction and performance (Webster 1965, 371; Grønhaug and Venkatesh 1991, 20; Puccinelli et al. 2009, 26). Another way is organisational influences where buyers have a need and pressure to achieve better performance as structurally, individually, and tasks-orientation way (Webster 1965, 371; Grønhaug and Venkatesh 1991, 20; Puccinelli et al. 2009, 26). B2B buyers can recognize needs by seizing environmental factors and getting external stimuli from other buyers, suppliers, competitors, and regulatory forces (Grønhaug and Venkatesh 1991, 20; Kotler & Keller 2015, 220). Kotler and Keller (2015, 220) added that external stimuli triggers can be the result of improvements from different events, commercial materials or talking to a sales representative. In addition, Webster identified factors affect to need recognition, when buyers can experience external stimuli from customers, or internal stimuli from company-level pressures, or personal motivations to increase performance (Webster 1965, 371). Internal stimuli can be for example organisational needs for new resources, improving existing resources, or getting new solutions to replace old ones (Kotler & Keller 2015, 220).

2.3.2. Stage 2: Information search

Referring to Figure 2, a B2B buyer first recognizes a business need or problem to which the buyer wants to find a solution to by moving to the information search stage. B2B buyers need to evaluate and specify the goals in the beginning of the search process so that the goals are clear when revised with found information at the end. B2B buyers need to identify the solutions available in the market, and the criteria list which guides the evaluation of different alternatives to make a purchase decision. (Webster 1965, 373) In addition, because of digitalization number of offerings and channels have increased, it has forced buyers to reduce the number of brands that they want to choose for final evaluation stage. However, B2B buyers tend to have existing knowledge, previous experiences, and references of different brands in mind at the beginning of their searching process which can guide the decisions. (Court et al. 2009) The DemandGen

(2017) survey found that 78 percent of B2B buyers dedicate a significant amount of time to researching information and solutions for their certain needs. In addition, 75 percent of the survey respondents used multiple sources during the information search stage. However, Webster (1965, 373) identified that B2B buyers typically have time sensitive projects and time is a major determinant because projects typically have specific schedule dates for when orders need to be conducted and when the solutions need to be in use. Tight schedules have a significant effect on the amount of time spent on the information searching process.

Consumers' information search process typically begins with *heightened attention* that refers to a consumer becoming receptive to different information about potential solutions and seeking information about possible products that can satisfy the need (Broilo et al. 2015, 200; Kotler & Keller 2015, 196). After that the consumer shifts their focus towards *active information search* which indicates deeper dedication to the potential solution for example by reading materials or reviews or asking about experiences through different online sources (Kotler & Keller 2015, 196). Consumers' can seek different level information during a pre-purchase journey depending on the stage, for example the consumer may need information about basics of the solution in the search stage but then needs deeper knowledge of solutions' features and benefits in the evaluation stage and repeats the searching process with new sources (Broilo et al. 2015, 200). Consumers seek information about different solutions from different brands and subsets. After having an overview of offerings from different vendors buyers decide which offerings meets the buying criteria for further consideration. (Webster 1965, 373; Kotler & Keller 2015, 196) According to the research by Van Der Veen and Van Ossenbruggen (2015, 208-209) customers can have different searching strategies for finding the relevant information for their needs. These search strategies' characteristics are categorized as *information seekers, reassurance seekers, peace-of-mind seekers,* and *convenience seekers.* Information seekers tend to base their choices on searching actively for market offerings and deciding based on the searched information. Reassurance seekers need advice and reassurance that guide their information search and support making the decision. Peace-of-mind seekers do not use much time on searching information by themselves and they rather value advise from the sales representatives that have the expertise or from the close network related people that are for example working in the same industry. Lastly, convenience seekers are conscious about what their needs are, but they want to reassure their decision by making targeted specific searches. Webster (1965, 373-374) identified the information searching process that is presented visually in Figure 3. The information searching process typically begins with evaluating the goals for

the information search which highly depend on the recognized needs and pre-defined list of criteria and these factors guide buyers' actions during the process (Webster 1965, 373-374). Secondly, buyers identify and decide what information sources they can use for finding the information needed and the decisions are highly personal and habitual driven depending on the individual (Webster 1965, 373-374; Neslin et al. 2006). Finally, when the used information sources are found, the buyers search a desired number of the vendors and solutions that are suitable for the business needs and the business case to progress to the evaluation of alternatives stage (Webster 1965, 373-374).

Figure 3 Information searching process, adapted from Webster (1965, 373-374)

Consumers value and prefer different types of information sources that supports then to find needed information to make a purchase decision (Kotler & Keller 2015, 196). Customers search information at the internal level and the external level (Klein & Ford, 2003, 30; De Keyser et al. 2020). The internal level contains information from memory that refers to the information that is gathered over time through external sources and experiences. External searching refers to an information gathering process where customers search for different types of information through various external sources. (Klein & Ford, 2003, 30) In addition, Broilo et al. (2016, 205) highlighted that consumers can use multiple different information sources that can be offline or online, or they can use variations of both environments to find what they need to make purchase decisions. Offline sources refer to communications with salespersons, family and friends, events, and different promotional company-related content such as news, articles, advertisements, and external media. Online sources on the other hand refer to websites, search engines, content portals, online blogs, news articles, social media, and online customer services. Kotler and Keller (2015, 196) had similar findings that information sources can be categorized into personal, commercial, public, and experiential. Personal sources can be for example close relatives or acquaintances whereas public sources can be different online sources such as social media, media sites, or rating organisations. Commercial sources can be advertising, emails, displays, packing, sales representatives, and websites whereas experiential sources can be the individual experiences of the brand, or examining, handling and using the product or experiencing the service.

According to Broilo, et al. (2016, 202) consumers tend to have different criteria that influence the information source to be chosen during the pre-purchase journey. Positive criteria that can influence information source to be chosen are that a source needs to be informative and reliable, time efficient, easily understood, and accessible. These criteria are important to consider when the goal is to help consumers with their decision-making process by engaging them to go through the buyer journey stages. In addition, as earlier discussed, van der Veen and van Ossenbruggen (2015, 211) highlighted the different search strategies that can be seen to reflect the motivations of the searchers (information, reassurance, peace of mind, and convenience seekers). Information seekers tend to be self-directed and search information through the internet or from internal sources whereas reassurance seekers explore and use multiple channels to find the information for their needs. Peace-of-mind and convenience seekers tend to be goal-oriented which influences their search habits. Peace-of-mind seekers do not use intensively different channels to find the information needed as they value advice more to base their decision-making on whereas convenience seekers value interactive channels for getting specific information and reassurance from for their decisions. (van der Veen & van Ossenbruggen 2015, 211) TREW Marketing and GlobalSpec survey (2022, 8) indicates that in the technology industry, the most used channels for searching information in the decision-making process are suppliers' and vendors' websites (69%), online trade publications (46%), industry websites (41%), publication emails and newsletters (37%), industry association groups (35%) and vendors emails and newsletters (34%). The channels that are not that popular for the information search process are trade shows, YouTube, print trade publications, social media, and podcasts.

2.3.3. Stage 3: Evaluation of alternatives

Figure 2 represents that evaluation of alternatives is the last stage before the final purchase where the buyer has recognized their need or problem, searched potential solutions from different suppliers and has decided which solutions to choose for the evaluation stage. As earlier mentioned, buyers define business goals based on the need and certain criteria lists that guide their final decision (Webster 1965, 373). Buyers tend to have the most potential vendors and their offered solutions in their evaluation stage and the buyers compare the different offerings to which solution can solve their business problem (Court et al. 2009). Evaluation of different alternatives is conducted by considering already identified goals and criteria (Webster 1965, 374). According to Broilo et al. (2016, 206) buyers' behavior when making decisions

can vary depending on the criteria of a problem or the need that they are facing, personal intentions, search of internal and external information, and their social network. Figure 4 represents the process that B2B buyers go through when evaluating and comparing different alternatives.

Figure 4 Evaluation of alternatives process, adapted from Webster (1965, 375); Kotler & Keller (2015, 197)

At first, buyers qualify vendors that can provide a suitable solution for pre-defined business needs and that are in line with the established criteria list (Webster 1965, 375; Kotler & Keller 2015, 197). In vendor qualification, there can be variables that affect the final decision at the vendor level, such as past positive experiences with the vendor, the vendor is known in the industry, company size, and quality of production. In addition, buyers can have criteria for disqualifying vendors when they consider them too risky, for example if the vendor is new in the market, or if the buyers do not have any experiences with the vendor or its solutions. (Webster 1965, 375) Before the specific evaluation and comparing stage, buyers tend to contact the chosen companies to request quotations of solutions or setting up a meeting with the sales representatives (Demand Gen 2017). The second step is to compare separate offerings based on the set criteria and seek certain benefits and how the offering fits the business case (Webster 1965, 375; Kotler & Keller 2015, 197). When comparing quotations of alternative products there are product-related criteria, for example product quality, delivery time, installation, future maintenance, and the highest acceptable price (Webster 1965, 375). The third and the last step is identified as a comparison of chosen alternatives to each other (Webster 1965, 375; Kotler & Keller 2015, 197). Before the final decision, the decision-making unit will evaluate different alternatives by specifying and ranking solutions' attributes. A commonly used tool for evaluation is a supplier-evaluation model which is a table that includes different attributes and rating scales. The choice of attributes and rating scales varies depending on the buying situation. (Kotler & Keller 2015, 197) After evaluation the purchase decision is made by considering the most suitable solution with a bundle of different attributes and abilities that meets both the criteria and the pre-defined specifications that satisfy the identified business need (Webster 1965, 375; Kotler & Keller 2015, 197). In addition, Kotler and Keller (2015, 223) highlighted that the most important attributes that influence the purchase decisions for

B2B buyers are commonly price, product and service reliability, supplier flexibility, and reputation.

2.3.4. Touchpoints

Touchpoints refer to the interaction points where customers interact with the company in multiple channels throughout the buyer journey (Neslin et al. 2006, 96; Richardson 2010; Lemon & Verhoef 2016; De Keyser et al. 2020). Neslin et al. (2006, 96) research used the term "channel" for the customer contact points. Stein and Ramaseshan (2015) defined touchpoints as when customers *"touch"* any related part of the company and the touchpoints can be related for example to the company itself, brand, product, or service. Similarities can be identified in the Lemon & Verhoef (2016) research that approached journey touchpoints identification by categorizing touchpoints into four different categories: *"brand-owned, partner-owned, customer-owned, and social/external/independent"*. Brand-owned touchpoints refer to the touchpoints that are related to the brand and which the company can control such as advertising, the vendors' website, product attributes, packing, service, price, and contact with the sales representative. Partner-owned touchpoints refer to the touchpoints that are jointly controlled together with the company's one or multiple partners. Customer-owned touchpoints are under the customers' control for example customers' desires and needs that have been recognized at the beginning of the pre-purchase journey. Lastly, social/external touchpoints are other actors such as other customers, third-party sources, environment, and peer influences that may affect the customers' outcomes in their buying journey. According to Stein and Ramaseshan (2015, 16-17) they identified seven elements of touchpoints that are slightly considered similar to the Lemon and Verhoef (2016) identified touchpoints categories. The seven elements are *"atmospheric, technological, communicative, process, employee-customer interaction, customer-customer interaction, and product interaction elements"*. During the buyer journey customers typically interact with multiple different touchpoints that are combinations of several identified elements. Identified touchpoint elements can vary based on the channels and journey stages and all the elements may not arise at each touchpoint. (Stein & Ramaseshan 2015, 18)

According to Rosenbaum et al. (2017, 144), touchpoints are typically visualised horizontally in customer journey mapping. In addition, touchpoints typically follow the main stages of journeys. When implementing buyer journey mapping it is needed to identify and develop a horizontal axis that describes customers' relevant touchpoints that they might take during their

journey. Cornfield (2021) argued that instead of touchpoints journeys need to focus on customers' need-points because customers do not follow linear series of touchpoints but rather customers follow more their preferences, impulses, urges, and whims. By seeking and understanding customers' key need-points marketers are likely to maintain engagement and positive experiences with the customers throughout the customer journey. After finding the most relevant touchpoints of customers in each stage based on data and knowledge of the customers, it is necessary to develop a vertical axis that describes relevant strategic practices in each touchpoint that aim to ensure customers' experiences and to lead to customer satisfaction. (Rosenbaum et al. 2017, 145-146)

3. CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE IN THE PRE-PURCHASE JOURNEY

In customer journey management it is important to understand the journeys and how to manage customer experiences throughout those journeys (Grewal & Roggeveen 2020, 3). It is critical for companies to shift their focus from the approach of following customers' actions to shaping and leading the journeys. In addition, the importance of managing the journey's customer-centricity so that it is seamless, personalized, and innovative has become more central than focusing on selling an offering such as the product. (Edelman and Singer 2015) Gaining a comprehensive understanding of customer experiences and journeys equips marketers with valuable insights on effectively managing journeys and identifying value-creating factors that has an influence and guides buyers to make favorable purchasing decisions. (Grewal & Roggeveen 2020, 3). It is important to view the journeys outside in from the customer's perspective to get the entire picture of the customer experience throughout the journey (Stein & Ramaseshan 2016, 18). In addition, understanding the entire journey with different stages and touchpoints from the customer perspective helps to manage and find the key marketing and sales actions in different stages that enhance customer experiences and provide customer satisfaction (Stein & Ramaseshan 2016, 18; Grewal & Roggeveen 2020, 3). Marketers need to recognize and understand that customers are not always following linear journeys (Grewal & Roggeveen 2020, 4; Cornfield 2021).

This chapter focuses on marketing perspective of how to improve buyer journeys of customers in order to provide continuous and comprehensive journeys and valuable customer-centric customer experiences in multichannel context. In addition, this chapter observes how to improve channel integration and valuable content marketing that satisfy customers' business needs, goals and preferences that are considered important in journey designing. Lastly, there is presented what is the sales role in the pre-purchase journey, and what selling tactics can be useful and beneficial to provide meaningful customer experiences. In addition, finding the right tactics to influence positively customers buying journeys can result in the opportunities to be in the minds of the customers in each stage of the decision-making journeys (Neslin et al. 2006, 95; Anderl et al. 2016, 457).

3.1. Customer experience

Understanding the definition behind customer experience can provide marketers with an overview to gain a clear understanding of how to manage journeys (Grewal & Roggeveen 2020, 3). Customer experience is based on customers' responses when they have indirect or direct contact with a company and the response can be internal or subjective. Direct contact happens in purchase or service situations, and contact is often initiated by customers whereas indirect contact refers to situations when there are chance encounters with depictions of a company's products, services or brands. Indirect contact can be, for example, different advertising, recommendations, reviews, word-of-mouth (WoM), blogs, and news articles. (Meyer & Schwager 2007, 118) Lemon and Verhoef (2016) defined customer experience as *"a multidimensional construct"* that focuses on customers' varying responses during their customer journey where they interact with customer-related touchpoints. Customer potential response types in the interaction points can be formed as *"cognitive, emotional, behavioral, sensorial and social"*. In addition, van Doorn et al. (2010, 259) found similarly that consumers' cognitive, behavioral, and attitudinal consequences are responses for customer engagement behavior. Becker and Jaakkola (2020, 638) defined customer experience as *"customers' non-deliberate, spontaneous responses and reactions to offering-related stimuli along the customer journey"*. In addition, customer experience is seen as a dynamic and iterative process that begins from the pre-purchase phase all over to the purchase and the post-purchase phase (Lemon & Verhoef 2016). According to Becker and Jaakkola (2020, 641), marketers' role in providing customer experience is to design, manage and monitor a range of customer stimuli that have an influence on the entire customer experience development. De Keyser et al. (2020) identified three main building blocks for customer experience, (1) touchpoints, (2) context, and (3) experience qualities. As discussed in subchapter 2.3.4, touchpoints refer to interaction points between a consumer and a brand. Context relies on internal and external resources that are situationally available for the consumer. Lastly, experience qualities encompass the attributes that describe how customers perceive their interactions with the company. The building blocks can help marketers to understand, design and manage customer experiences throughout the customer journey.

In managing the customer experience, it is important to consider and understand the ability to measure and monitor customers' responses and reactions toward the company's offerings by noticing customers' variety of attitudes and perceptions (Lemon & Verhoef 2016). Customer satisfaction is the final goal that all companies seek because the more satisfied a customer is

the more likely the customer does repeat buying behaviors and stays loyal to the company which therefore leads to higher sales and profits in the long-term (Priya 2020). Lemon and Verhoef (2016) identified customer satisfaction as a component of customer experience that is based on customers' evaluation of the perceived experience. Customer satisfaction can be seen as a climax of a customer experience (Meyer & Schwager, 2007, 118). Customer satisfaction can be defined as a result of comparison of customer expectations and the actual delivered performance (Meyer & Schwager 2007, 120; Lemon & Verhoef 2016). Customers reflect new experiences by comparing them to previous experiences. In addition, customers' expectations are influenced by their previous experiences, market conditions, rivals, and personal situations. (Meyer & Schwager 2007, 118) In order to find ways to increase customer satisfaction in the pre-purchase journey, it is important to observe and analyse what are the factors that create customer value, which can affect customer satisfaction and guide the purchase decision (Priya 2020).

3.2. Multichannel management

Companies' goal is to strategize itself to get its brand at the top of consumers' minds to be one of the options in the customer evaluation stage before the final purchase (Court et al. 2009; Kotler & Keller 2015, 197). As digitalization has brought more channels for the customers to seek information and consume content from, digitalization has shifted buyers searhing behavior more towards multichannel-oriented searching (van der Veen & van Ossenbruggen 2015, 210). Furthermore, digitalization and the increased number of online channels have given opportunities to shift company oriented one-way type communication more toward two-way conversation between the company and customers (Court et al. 2009). Multichannel information seeking has increased in recent years and marketers need to find the right channels where to assist key customers effectively to satisfy their needs (van der Veen & Van Ossenbruggen 2015, 210-211). Multichannel distribution in marketing is considered critical for firms' competitiveness in the market (Zhang et al. 2022, 310). Marketers need to pay more attention to finding key information sources where their customers are interacting and searching information and based on the knowledge plan and improve marketing strategies and ways to effectively manage multichannel marketing (van der Veen & van Ossenbruggen 2015, 210; Kotler & Keller 2015, 197). Multichannel marketing can combine distribution channels such as online websites, search engines, social media, content portals, online blogs, mobile apps, shops, and catalogs (Broilo et al. 2016, 205; Zhang et al. 2022, 310). Multichannel

customer management refers to the marketing functions that drive customer-centricity, and it is defined as design, deployment, coordination, and evaluation for enhancing the customer value by acquisition, development and retention of customers (Neslin et al. 2006, 96). In addition, marketers need to consider omnichannel marketing as a part of multichannel management as omnichannel marketing goes beyond multichannel marketing (Shankar & Kushwaha 2021, 291). In addition, existing literature argues that multichannel is seen more as focusing on the channel presence to broad audiences without channel linkage whereas omnichannel is a more customer-centric approach that aims to drive customer experience and channel integration both in online and offline channels (McKinsey & Company 2022; Chung et al. 2022). Neslin and Shankar (2009, 71) identified a multichannel customer management process that marketers can use as a frame for developing and implementing a multichannel strategy (Figure 5).

Figure 5 Multichannel management process, adapted from Neslin & Shankar (2009, 71)

The multichannel management process begins with customer analysis that aims to develop customer segmentation based on customers' preferences, responsiveness, and growth in the channels (Neslin and Shankar 2009, 71). This is in line with other existing customer journey literature that indicated that segmentation and increasing customer buying behavior knowledge is an important foundation for certain marketing strategy designing practices (Webster 1965, 370; van der Veen & van Ossenbruggen 2015, 211; Terho et al. 2022, 301). Targeting different customer groups and understanding their behaviors and needs helps marketers to provide valuable information and messages to the right audience. Therefore, it is important to consider that consumers may prioritize different sources and content even if they belong to the same consumer segment. (Broilo et al. 2016, 207) In ddition, van der Veen & van Ossenbruggen

(2015, 211) highlighted that understanding customers' channels and purchasing behaviors during their purchasing process helps marketers to find the right actions and tactics for multichannel customer management. Almquist et al. (2018, 80) highlight steps on how marketers can increase their knowledge of customers' needs and value-creating factors. The steps are the following: (1) explore how company's offerings are performing in the eyes of customers against competitors, (2) discuss with customers and take customer feedback into consideration, (3) identify needed improvements and define actions, (4) test them with customers, and (5) re-evaluate improvement actions after implementation. In addition, Puccinelli et al. (2009, 16) highlighted different factors that can influence buyers in their journeys and that marketers can take into consideration when increasing understanding of customers. These factors are (1) goals, schema, and information processing, (2) memory, (3) involvement, (4) attitudes, (5) affect, (6) atmospherics, and (7) attributions and choices.

Marketers need to understand buyers' objectives and criteria that affect the evaluation process when they deepend their knowledge about different vendors and solutions (Court et al. 2009). Analysing and following the customer-level data of customers' decision-making process, what channels they use, what resonates for them to engage with content, and what business purposes, goals and needs they have, is an important starting point for effective marketing strategy development (Neslin et al. 2006, 96). It is important to understand different characteristics that influence buyers' decision-making behaviors as those can vary based on individuals and some of them can be more self-oriented and some of them value getting advice during the decision-making. In addition, as identified in subchapter 2.3.2 information search has different strategies based on the individuals because some individuals can be exploratory when searching for information whereas others might have a certain goal to search a solution for (van der Veen & van Ossenbruggen 2015, 211).

Based on customer segment identification and analysis the next step is to plan and develop a multichannel strategy (Neslin & Shankar 2009, 72). When designing multichannel strategies, it is beneficial to consider omnichannel marketing tactics to drive comprehensive customer experience through multiple channels and to ensure the continuation of the journey by channel integration (Neslin & Shankar 2009, 77; McKinsey & Company 2022; Chung et al. 2022). Briedis et al. (2021) identified three omnichannel strategies for marketers to consider commerce, personalization, and ecosystem. In commerce, the focus is on providing superior purchasing experiences through different offline and online channels. Personalization refers to

tailoring, targeting, and driving integrated cross-channel engagement. Lastly, ecosystem refers to channel integration based on customer business needs and preferences.

The third step in the multichannel management process is channel design which covers the identification of channel functions and channel integration based on the knowledge of customers' needs and what channels customers perceive most useful (Neslin & Shankar 2009, 77). Marketers need to consider how customers choose the channels and what their needs and preferences for choosing certain channels are (Neslin et al. 2006, 102). It is important to consider and identify what is the purpose of each channel as different channels can be used for different purposes, for example seeking new customers or serving current customers. The fourth step in the management process is to implement the planned multichannel strategies and channel designs. (Neslin & Shankar 2009, 77) In addition, marketers need to consider providing seamless cross-channel messages and journeys to increase customer-centric omnichannel marketing in a multichannel context (Chung et al. 2022).

The final step is to evaluate the performance by observing channels and customers separately (Neslin & Shankar 2009, 71). It is important to regularly assess how buyer persona characteristics or behaviors change over time and consider whether the identified buyer persona is perceived as too broad or too narrow, which can negatively impact the effectiveness of marketing tactics. (Duran 2018; Vaughan 2022). The increasing complexity of buying journeys forces marketers to find ways to measure customer attitudes, brand performance in different channels, and effectiveness of marketing actions across the customer buying journey (Court et al. 2009). In addition, Lemon & Verhoef (2016) highlighted that the customer experience can be measured and monitored by following a variety of customers' responses, reactions, attitudes and perceptions toward the company's provided offerings and content. Multi- and omnichannel marketing tactics can be evaluated by analysing gathered data such as integrated cross-channel data, customer data, and content performance measurements (Briedis et al 2021). In addition, tracking and analysing customer engagement towards company-generated or produced content over time is one of the critical principles of journey facilitation. Marketers can follow different interaction measures such as website visits, customers' paths through the website, views, downloads, and clicks. In addition, building a customer lead scoring model can help marketers to track engagement and the path towards sales. (Terho et al. 2022, 301)

3.3. Customer engagement through content marketing

Marketers need to increase the knowledge of their customer segments before they can understand customers' real and relevant needs and provide the customers with valuable content (Holliman and Rowley 2014, 269). Content marketing is a tactic to engage customers during the decision-making process (Holliman and Rowley 2014, 270; Terho et al. 2022, 301). Wang et al. (2019, 166) highlighted the importance of emphasizing digital content marketing because it has a positive effect on engaging customers and driving sales opportunities. In addition, engaging customers through content is an effective tactic to improve the continuation and attractiveness of the journeys (Holliman and Rowley 2014, 270; Terho et al. 2022, 308). Brodie et al. (2011) define customer engagement as a multidimensional concept that can vary in its cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions depending on the specific context or stakeholders involved. Customer engagement has different aspects as it can be emotional, intellectual, physical, or spiritual. Generally, engagement type can vary based on the level of connection with the environment and customers' participation during the journey. (Zomerdijk & Voss 2010, 69) van Doorn et al. (2010, 256) highlighted that customer-, firm-, and context-based factors can affect customer engagement. *Customer-based factors* are identified as follows: goals, satisfaction, trust and commitment, resources such as time, effort and money, and perceived benefits and costs. *Firm-based factors* are related to brand characteristics, reputation, size and diversification, industry and information processes, and usage. Lastly, *context-based factors* refer to variables such as competitive, political, economic, environmental, social, and technological factors.

Engaging customers through content is effective after companies have first mapped the customer journeys of the chosen customer segment (Terho et al. 2022, 301). Marketers need to shift their view in content marketing more towards helping and supporting customers with content rather than simply keep a product-driven view that has been seen more in traditional marketing (Holliman and Rowley 2014, 269). Holliman and Rowley (2014, 285) define content marketing in the B2B context as actions where *"a marketer creates, distributes, and shares compelling, engaging, and timely relevant content to attract and engage customers in the consideration phase of their buying journey"*. In addition, Wang et al. (2019, 160) highlight that content marketing activities can be either in-person situations, for example face-to-face meetings with customers, interacting in events or online webinars and virtual conferences, or sharing brand-generated content on a website and other channels. Content marketing has a

positive effect on bringing potential leads for sales. According to Terho et al. (2022, 300-302), after increasing knowledge of customers buying behavior and journeys the next step is to build a content portfolio based on the customers' needs and preferences along the journey. Furthermore, the content portfolio should consider the synergies of the content paths and linkage between the content and the journey. It is critical to design and manage purposeful linkage between interrelated content that offer customers a seamless content path through the different channels in the journey which generates deeper knowledge about specific topics or themes. In addition, in the awareness phase the content should help buyers to frame their business problem and then when buyers shift more towards consideration the content should support buyers in solving the framed business problem. Creating and implementing customer-centric content portfolios in practice can increase customer engagement and continuation during the journey. In addition, engaging buyers through the content marketers should consider three key activities: (1) increasing content visibility organically in digital channels, (2) considering the relevancy of the content based on what the buyer persona perceives useful and valuable, and (3) motivating and guiding buyer personas forward on their journeys towards the conversion. TREW Marketing and GlobalSpec survey (2022, 19) found out that the most used content is different product-specific content such as datasheets, CAD drawings, product demo and overview videos, white papers, tutorials, and how-to videos, webinars, and product configurators. Less frequently used content formats were different case studies, trade publication articles, on-demand webinars, in-depth blog posts, and ROI calculators. Figure 6 gives an overview of potential B2B marketing delivering channels and content types.

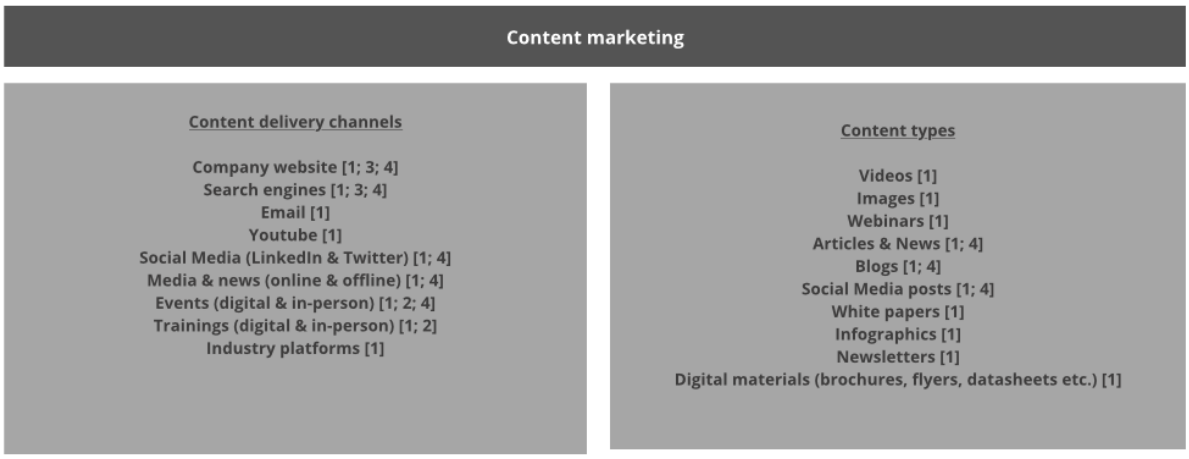

Figure 6 Overview of potential B2B marketing delivering channels and delivered content types, adapted from [1] Järvinen & Taiminen 2015, 170; [2] Wang et al. 2019, 162; [3] Terho et al. 2022, 301; [4] Broilo et al. 2016, 205

In the pre-purchase journey, it is crucial to customize and personalize the content messages to align with the needs and preferences of the target audience, and to ensure seamless integration across various channels (Briedis et al. 2021). Marketers need to focus on providing information and content in both offline or online sources that consumers perceive relevant and valuable during their buying journey. In addition, marketers need to focus on findability of the content so that customers can find the needed information without getting overwhelmed or confused (Broilo et al. 2016, 207). Based on Demand Gen's (2017) survey of B2B buyers, the results state that 75 percent of the respondents agreed that one significant impact that affected the final decision of the winning vendor was that vendor provides high-value content. Marketers and sales need to focus on having a strong performance in the customer evaluation stage where their customer needs help to get deeper knowledge with valuable content and different solution-related tools that can help with decision-making (Court et al. 2009). The survey by Demand Gen (2017) found that 89 percent of the respondents agreed that if a vendor provides valuable content that shows the real benefits and values that buyers will get by choosing their solution it makes it easier to explain the final measures of return of investment (ROI) and build a business case for the upcoming purchase (Demand Gen 2017).

Marketers can consider in their content strategies to focus on enchasing organic content visibility via search engines (Kannan & Li 2017, 29-30; Terho et al. 2022, 302). Search engines can be used both as organic listings and as paid search listings (Kannan & Li 2017, 29-30). Organic content visibility refers to focusing on the channels where customers can naurally find company-related content when conducting information searching (Terho et al. 2022, 302). Customers acquire information about solutions by searching online with their searching criteria and keywords and this can be beneficial, and therefore companies need to focus on search engine optimization to improve their organic content findability (Kannan & Li 2017, 29-30; Terho et al. 2022, 304). After knowing the key keywords that customers use for information searches it is important to match all the content with customers' search queries and keywords. n addition, it is important to consider the delivery of essential content, which means that the delivery of content must be individual and relevant to the customer group at each stage of the journey. (Terho et al. 2022, 304)

It is beneficial for B2B marketers to use social media to attract different stakeholders in different channels, and to provide different communicative messages depending on the channel and the target audience (Andersson & Wikström 2017, 1103). In addition, the company can

consider improving its findability and attendance systematically in various other digital channels where its customers participate (Terho et al. 2022, 304). Andersson and Wikström (2017, 1105) stated that in the B2B context, the most used social media channels are LinkedIn, Facebook, and YouTube. LinkedIn can be seen as beneficial if the goal is to attract a large audience and target new customers. In LinkedIn, the content that offer characteristics such as problem-solving, thought leadership, and industry and technological trends can be seen as valuable in the B2B technology industry (Andersson & Wikström 2017, 1105; TREW Marketing & GlobalSpec 2022, 9). Facebook can be seen as providing more brand-related content in a more informal aspect. YouTube is beneficial for sharing video content to show for example more detailed presentations of products and solutions or presenting product functionality in practice (Andersson & Wikström 2017, 1105). The research results by Terho et al. (2022, 304) indicated that company representatives can boost findability by sharing company-related content on personal accounts in social media channels to boost social selling and company presence. In social media channels, Andersson and Wikström (2017, 1105) suggested that the content and messaging is recommended to be more general and targeted to broader audiences at first. Customer feedback is important to follow and analyse because it gives insights of what buyer persona values and needs in content or channel and that can be considered as a reference on content or channel development. Marketers can use social media channels as separate tools such as seeking tools, product information support tools, and learning tools in a B2B context (Andersson & Wikström 2017, 1103). Customizing content based on the customers' needs can help to improve marketing content to bring more value for customer. Content that supports customers learning more about the solution is seen important, for example providing visual presentations of the product, and dynamic online tools that can support customers to see which solutions can satisfy their problem. (Court et al. 2009) Blogs can be seen as beneficial for the specific targeted audiences that are more experienced readers and seeks in-depth information about a specific topic that can be, for example, product- or company-oriented (Andersson & Wikström 2017, 1105).

Tracking and analysing customer engagement toward company-generated or produced content over time is related to the principle of journey facilitation. In practice, this refers to that companies can track different interaction measures such as website visits, customers' paths through the website, views, downloads, and clicks. In addition, building a customer lead scoring model can help marketers to track engagement and the path towards sales. (Terho et al. 2022, 301) Marketers can track customer maturity using lead scoring models and thus identify

contacts who may be mature enough for sales to convert (Järvinen & Taiminen 2015,170; Terho et al. 2022, 301). The lead scoring model helps to show whether the customer maturity is positive or negative. Positive indicates that the customer interacts with company-generated content and negative is the opposite that the customer may get the triggers but does not react to them towards conversion. (Terho et al. 2022, 301) Therefore, by motivating buying personas forward in their journeys companies can influence and guide buyer personas to take actions in the journey by using call-to-actions. Call-to-actions can be used in channels and content to guide a person to proceed forward, for example, to consume other content that might be of interest. This can be useful in situations where a person is not showing interest to a certain content but then there are options to check for other content that might be more interesting to the buyer which helps them to move forward in the journey. (Terho et al. 2022, 303)

3.4. Sales role in the journey

Sales play a significant and determinant role in implementing marketing strategies (Terho et al. 2012, 174). Marketing actions in the pre-purchase journey can be seen as ensuring channel integration, multichannel management, multichannel content creation and management, and finding potential contacts for sales to convert (Järvinen & Taiminen 2015, 170). In addition, buyer journey mapping can help sales to identify potential cross- and up-selling and add-on-sales opportunities (Terho et al. 2022, 301). Focusing on strategically building effective content marketing in multichannel context has a positive effect on bringing leads to the sales representatives (Wang et al. 2019, 160). Marketing can start with identifying the maturity of the leads that are ready to be converted and then transfer those to the sales for contacting (Järvinen & Taiminen 2015, 170). The most important factors that decision-makers value in sales representatives are their responsiveness and technical expertise which positively influence decision-makers' purchase decisions (TREW Marketing & GlobalSpec 2022, 25). According to the findings by Ancillai et al. (2019, 296) sales have a significant role in the customers' purchasing journey, and being active in the right channels at the right time during customers' purchasing journey can result with beneficial outcomes. In addition, Demand Gen's (2017) survey stated that 63 percent of buyers value sales representatives' ability to practically express knowledge and experience within their industry when getting assistance for the decision-making. TREW Marketing and GlobalSpec (2022, 21) survey found that in B2B industries 51 percent of the respondents did research online, but they did also value that a sales representative is available to help and assist them with making decisions if any questions arise.

B2B buyers tend to contact sales representative through e-mail or phone, or to have traditional face-to-face meetings during the decision-making process (Anders et al. 2020). In addition, TREW Marketing and GlobalSpec (2022, 21) survey indicated that when buyers contact sales representatives the most common channels are email and phone which covered 78 percent of the responds. The factors that affect the selection of communication channels for buyers are maturity and information processing. Email is preferred for document sharing and processing information at the beginning of the discussions with sales and phone is preferred later on in the decision-making. (Anders et al. 2020)

Selling tactics that have increased effectiveness in business markets in recent years are value-based and social selling tactics (Terho et al. 2012, 174; Terho et al. 2022, 208). Value selling is a customer-oriented sales tactic where the goal is to create superior customer value by describing the potential and value of existing solutions to the customers' business and profits. Value-based selling has three dimensions that help with the implementation of the tactic: (1) increasing the knowledge of customers' business model, (2) value proposition crafting, and lastly (3) communicating customer value. (Terho et al. 2012, 174) Understanding customers' business model enables sales to find valuable solutions for the customers' business case by understanding their business goals, challenges, business logic, needs, and factors that drive value for a customer. After observing the customer's business model, the next step is to craft the value proposition by finding solutions that can drive value for the customer and their business performance. Lastly, it shows how to create value for customers and how choosing certain solutions can affect customers' bottom line by providing quantified evidence and minimizing perceived risks that customers are concerned about. (Terho et al. 2012, 182) In addition, Terho et al. (2022, 208) identified three key activities on how to boost social selling which are generating insight, connecting, and engaging. Generating insight refers the prospect identification and qualification through social media and understanding customers' relevant needs. Connecting refers to the connection creation and networking with key stakeholders and maintaining existing relationships in social media. Lastly, engaging refers to providing meaningful, valuable and helpful content for the social media network. In addition, sales representatives can boost company awareness through their personal channels (Terho et al. (2022, 304). Social selling can have a positive influence on performance when it supports sales in achieving a position as trusted experts and thought leadership drivers, and social selling can help sales with boosting customer acquisition performance (Terho et al. 2022, 218).

4. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This research aimed to collect information on the specific target group of the case company to increase understanding of the target group's behavior in decision-making and following the B2B buyer pre-purchase journeys. This chapter presents and discusses the research design, introduction of the research context, the data collection and interviewee selection criteria, the interview process, and lastly the analysis methods of the empirical study and how the analysis was conducted. Finally, the validity and reliability of this research are discussed in the last sub-chapter.

4.1. Research design

The research aim was to gather knowledge, new insights and increase understanding around the pre-purchase journey that helps to achieve improvements in this certain area. The empirical research for this thesis was conducted as qualitative research. Qualitative research is suitable when the aim is to get closer to a specified target group and their behavior, experiences and opinions about the research phenomenon. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2022, 13) In qualitative research, the aim is that collected data is processed and analysed as a single entity. In addition, specific variables cannot determine the findings. (Alasuutari 2011) This study aimed to achieve findings in a wider context where the main focus is on buyer behavior in the pre-purchase journey. Therefore, the qualitative research method was the most suitable to achieve the research goals of this study.

The case company of this study was a large power management solution provider that operates globally. This study was conducted for the Finland markets by narrowing the research findings to focus on a specific market. In the Finnish market, the case company operates in the B2B business, and their customer groups can be divided by separate industries. The case company provides solutions to different industrial sectors, and inside these industry segments customer segments can be identified separately.

As stated previously, the case company lacks understanding about one of the key customer segments, namely contractors. The case company aims to increase understanding of how contractors make buying decisions so as to be able to improve customer experiences in the pre-purchase phase of the journey. This research was conducted by collecting and observing the purchasing characteristics of contractors to find answers to this knowledge gap. Understanding

purchasing behaviors of contractors helps to find relevant strategic actions to allocate marketing and sales resources along the pre-purchase journey.

4.2. Data collection

Qualitative research via interviews and surveys are beneficial data collection methods when the topic of the interview is simple (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018). Interview as a data collection method aims to increase knowledge of a certain target groups' opinions and motives, of factors that influence their behaviors in different situations, and of why they act in a certain way (Eskola & Suoranta 1998; Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018). In addition, interviews are seen as a beneficial data collection method when the aim is to reflect interviewees' answers to the wider context (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2022). Interviews can be seen as a flexible data collection method where the interviewer leads the conversation depending on each situation in order to achieve the desired results. In addition, the questions can be presented by following the interview situation and the order of the questions can vary depending on how the interview progresses. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018; Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2022) Interviews offer opportunities to motivate interviewees, and the interviewer can interpret answers more flexibly (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2022). In addition, compared to form surveys, interviews give a possibility to lead the interviewees to give more versatile answers (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018). This study aimed to focus on the specific target groups' buying behaviors in order to increase knowledge of the buying journey that the target group goes through. Therefore, it is important to clearly specify that the interviews are conducted with a suitable interviewee that belongs to the target group and has knowledge of the topic. One benefit to choosing interviews as a data collection method is that the interviewees can be chosen based on selection criteria where interviewee has specific knowledge about the research topic (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018). Based on previous factors the qualitative data collection method was the most suitable for this study.

4.2.1. Semi-structured theme interviews

Subchapter 1.4 represented the theoretical framework for the research, and it presented the pre-purchase journey of the B2B buyer. Identified theoretical framework it represents the pre-purchase journey stages (Figure 1). These separate stages can be used to divide the research questionnaire and empirical data findings into themes to effectively process and analyse the collected data. According to Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2018), pre-defined themes are considered to follow the theoretical framework. Therefore, the collected empirical data via the interview

questionnaire was divided into themes and the themes were based on the theoretical framework of the study. Theme interviews are conduct according to pre-defined themes and add follow-up questions if needed during the interview (Eskola & Suoranta 1998; Tuomi & Sarasjärvi 2018; Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2022). Theme interviews refers to a data collection method where the interview proceeds based on certain pre-defined themes rather than focusing on presenting specific detailed questions in a strict order (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2022). In theme interviews, the aim is to find significant answers to the research problem (Tuomi & Sarasjärvi 2018).

The data was collected by themed interviews and the interviewees are working in construction industry and interviewees have been the case company's customers in the past or they are existing customers. The interview questionnaire structure was built by categorizing questions into themes that were in line with the research questions. he themes identified were the different stages of the pre-purchase journeys such as need recognition, information search, and evaluation of different alternatives. In addition, in the interviews participants were asked for background information on the company size and the person's responsibility and role in the company. This was conducted to compare different aspects such as how decision-making in larger companies differentiates from smaller or mid-size companies. Interviews were conducted through Microsoft Teams or phone interviews and were recorded. Interviews were done anonymously in Finnish and recordings were transcribed and translated. The goal duration time of the interviews was between 30-40 minutes.

4.2.2. Interviewee selection criteria

The aim was to get variety of interviewees to gather a comprehensive and wide overview of how different customers make decisions and go through customer journeys before making the final purchase decisions. To achieve a wide overview the selection criteria was conducted for the interviewee's selection. For the interviews, there were specific criteria for the selections of the interviewees to get the wanted variations of the gathered primary data.

The selection criteria of the specifically targeted customers were the following:

- Existing customer or has been a customer of the case company in the past
- Working in the construction industry
- Involved in the decision-making process
- Variation of the company size
- Individuals with different roles

The pre-defined interviewees' selection criteria improved to get versatile data and deep understanding of the contractors' buying characteristics in the pre-purchase journey. The final selections of interviewees were conducted based on the delimitations, defined selection criteria, and aims of the research. For this study, the goal was to interview 15 individuals to get a comprehensive and versatile overview of the research topic.

4.2.3. Interview process

Interviews were conducted by choosing potential interviewees based on the chosen criteria. The total interviewees selected were 15 individuals with different roles but that are highly involved in the decision-making process and working in different contractor companies. Before the interviews, the potential interviewees were identified. After identifying the most suitable interviewees, they were directly contacted first by email and after that by calling if they did not respond to the email. If the person accepted the interview invitation a Teams meeting was booked for the interview. Based on the selection criteria Table 3 presents the following interviewees that were chosen:

Table 3 Profiles of the interviewees

Interviewee	**Role**	**~ Turnover (€)**	**~ Employees**
Interviewee 1A	CEO	5 M	40
Interviewee 1B	Regional director	10 M	60
Interviewee 1C	Electrician installer	2 M	15
Interviewee 1D	CEO	5 M	40
Interviewee 1E	Site manager	500 K	5
Interviewee 1F	Electrician and automation installer	2 M	15
Interviewee 1G	CEO	3 M	15
Interviewee 1H	Site manager	3 M	20
Interviewee 1I	Site manager	4 M	20
Interviewee 1J	Entrepreneur & CEO (involved in construction projects with different contractor companies)	280 K	1
Interviewee 2A	Business manager	50 M	300
Interviewee 2B	Maintenance engineer	18 M	100
Interviewee 2C	Project manager	11 M	100
Interviewee 2D	Project manager	2 Mrd	14 000
Interviewee 2E	Project manager	2 Mrd	14 000

The chosen interviewees were divided to two different categories based on organisation-size because the aim was to seek if organisational size has an influence in decision-making and in the buyer journey. Small-sized organisations are numbered as 1 (the number of organisations was 10) and medium- and large-sized organisations are marked with number 2 (the number of organisations was 5). At the beginning of the interview, the interviewees were told the aim of the research, the anonymousness of their answers, and the publicity of the research. In addition, their consent for them to be recorded was asked for. A defined interview questionnaire was presented following the thematic order. The presenting order of the interview questions varied based on the discussions of the interviews that followed the interviewees' answers. Variations of defined additional questions were presented during the interview depending on how the interview progressed. This provided in detailed answers to get a comprehensive overview of the topic and achieve the goals and aims of the research. In addition, by presenting clarifying and additional questions the interviews avoided the risks of misunderstandings of the given theme. Additional question phrasing took into consideration that the questions are not giving too specific and narrow answers that direct the interviewee to mislead to a specific answer that the researcher might desire. The interview questionnaire can be found in appendix 1. Interviews took place between March-April and the duration of each interview was 30-40 minutes.

In transcribing the gathered consumer data from the recordings, all the personal information was removed to protect the anonymity of the interviewees. Personal information refers to all and any kind of information that could lead to identifying the person. The transcribed data was categorized with the existing themes so that it was easier to gather all the key findings.

4.3. Data analysis

After the empirical data collection, the transcribed data was analysed using the theory-driven content analysis method. The reason for the decision was that in theory-driven content analysis the aim is to support the empirical findings by finding connections between existing theories and the empirical findings, but the analysis is not directly based on the theory. Theory-driven content analysis is based on testing existing theories but in a new context and this offers possibilities to find new insights and solutions in the research area to challenge existing studies. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018) According to the features of the theory-driven content analysis, it was the most suitable analysing method for the purpose of the study. This study leans to the

existing theory of the buyers' pre-purchase journey and the theory was tested and explored in practice with the pre-defined target group. The analysing process followed the classified themes that were defined in the data collection subchapter 4.2. In addition, when analysing the findings, the interviewees' answers were compared based on organisation-size for identifying if it had an effect on the results. Classified themes were in line with the research problem and thus allowed comparing the occurrence of certain themes in the collected data (Eskola & Suojärvi 1998). This helped to classify the content easily and efficiently to process the collected data for further interpretations.

The data analysis begins with the entire data collection and then the entities are classified into separate parts and then similarities are synthesized and combined to conduct comprehensive findings back as one entity (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2022). Interview questions were conducted in thematic order and additional questions were designed but considered in a way that they were not directing the interviewee to give specific answers. Additional questions aimed to be versatile and open-ended so that the interviewee could openly answer the question. After the data collection the recorded and transcribed data was viewed multiple times to conduct coherent findings. Before dividing the collected data to the pre-defined themes each interview recording and transcription were viewed to get a bigger picture of the researched topic. Finding and interpreting the big picture of the research topic, the collected data was viewed separately to find the most relevant findings of each interview. After viewing each interview separately, the overall collected data was brought together, because the aim was to find similarities and differences to get comprehensive interpretations.

The logic behind the theory-driven content analysis logic can be seen as abductive reasoning. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018) Abductive reasoning refers to the situation where the researcher has specific theories that drive the research, and the aim is to authenticate the existing theory with the collected empirical data (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2022). Similarities and combinations were searched from the collected data between the pre-defined themes and for reflecting it to the theoretical framework of the research. In this study, following the abductive reasoning gave the direction for the data collection and it was used as a basis for dividing the data collection into themes that were used, but after the data collection was conducted the data analysis shifted towards analysing the data outside of the theory to reach an enriched view of the data that was beyond the theoretical framework.

4.4. Reliability and validity

Reliability and validity are generally used as evaluation criteria for research quality (Saunders et al. 2016, 202). The findings of the study must be reliable and valid, and these two evaluation criteria are considered critical and important in all research (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018). According to Eskola and Suoranta (1998), reliability refers to the interpretation that conducted findings do not include any inconsistencies. In addition, reliability refers to that research is conducted by considering the guarantee that another researcher could replicate the research process achieving the same results and findings in the end (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2022; Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018). Research needs to be replicable and consistent to be identified as reliable (Saunders et al. 2016, 202). Reliability can be divided into internal and external reliability. Internal reliability refers to the fact that during the research consistency is considered in every aspect. Whereas external reliability refers to that chosen data collection and analytics methods provide consistent findings even if the research is repeated (Saunders et al. 2016, 202; Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018; Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2022).

This study improves reliability by providing detailed information of the research methods used and of how the research was designed and conducted from the beginning till the end. The data collection method used was semi-structured theme interviews which refers to that interviews can be seen as individual and unique. The presenting order of the interview questions varied depending on the interview progress and flow, but the same questions following the pre-defined themes were presented to each interviewee. Improving the reliability of the research in the analysis aspect, the research was first conducted by presenting the collected data and then moving on to the interpretation part of the study where the existing literature and findings are synthesized to get consistent and comprehensive conclusions. Therefore, According to Alasuutari (2011), this can enhance reliability to the reader when it is possible to see the connections between the findings of the collected data and the conducted interpretation of the data. In addition, the analysis depends on the researcher's understanding and interpretation of the definitions that arise from the collected data. According to Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2018), one way to enchase reliability in qualitative research is by adding straight quotes from the collected empirical data as a part of the analysis. Therefore, in this study direct quotes were used to increase trustworthiness, and it was conducted by selecting key quotes from the collected data that supplement the analysis. Straight quotes have been transcribed, translated and added to the thesis.

Validity refers to ensuring that the accuracy and justifiability of the conclusions corresponds to the conducted research (Alasuutari 2011; Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018). Validity can be divided into internal and external validity. Internal validity refers to that theoretical and conceptual definitions need to be in line with each other. Whereas external validity refers to the fact that the relationship between the conclusions based on the findings and the collected data can be seen as valid. (Eskola & Suoranta 1998)

Collected data and conducted research validity proceeded to be at a high level. In this study, selections of the interviewees were made by following the delimitations and aims of the research. Selection criteria were defined to get variation to achieve a versatile overview of the B2B buyer behavior in decision-making. The research delimitations can be viewed in subchapter 1.6 and the specific selection criteria in subchapter 0. Before the interviews the interviewee was informed of the anonymization of the data that protects the interviewees' personal information and that it is impossible to identify the person from the findings based on the collected data. This can provide an open, relaxed and trustworthy space for the interviewee to answer the questions during the interview. To improve validity, the interviews aimed to make the interview environment as relaxed and open as possible by following the actions and reactions of the interviewee. In addition, by following the interview process progression with open-mindedness and if the interviewee might understand the interview questions slightly wrong clarifying questions were asked. These actions allowed getting more versatile and sincere answers in the semi-structured interviews that can be seen as flexible and unique situations. In addition, to conduct interviews time was taken into consideration by arranging enough time for the interviews. Arranging enough time avoids risks of pressures that tight time schedules can bring and that can affect negatively the answers to the interview questions.

5. RESEARCH FINDINGS

This chapter presents the empirical findings and overview of the collected data from the interviews. The subchapters have been categorized by following the customers' pre-purchase journey path that they go through before the actual purchase or acquisition. This is in line with the literature review conducted in chapter 2. The findings are therefore categorized by starting at the higher-level concerning background information where the aim was to get an understanding of the construction industry in which the interviewees operate, of construction project types and each interviewees' responsibilities and roles in the decision-making process, and of how the company makes decisions in the construction industry. After that, the focus shifts more to identify in detail pre-purchase journey where the aim was to better understand the stages that the company goes through in its decision-making process and what their key business needs, challenges, goals, and business cases are. In addition, the aim was to find core stages and key touchpoints that are the most relevant for contractors as well as to identify their content preferences along the journey. Another aim was to identify what value-creating factors affect the purchase decisions in order to find ways how the case company can influence their potential buyers during the journeys and improve the pre-purchase journey.

5.1. Contractors' pre-purchase journey and value-creating factors

The first identified theme aim was to gather knowledge of how contactors make decisions, what typical project types are and how the projects proceed and when acquisition decisions are made. Exploring the background information of contractors' decision-making and acquiring knowledge of the business cases and challenges enables increasing understanding of buyer behavior. In addition, the aim was to understand where the contractor's buyer journey begins and what different stages and factors are involved in the journey. Decision-making processes vary slightly in different construction companies. Decision-making behaviors' variation depends on the companies' business case, project type and the organisation size. Similarities can be identified in the buyers' pre-purchase journey paths which gave opportunity for generalize the findings.

Construction projects begin when a contract with the contractors' customer has been approved. Before the acquisitions and purchases construction plans are conducted for the project which include solutions and products that are specified and needed for the business case of the project.

In addition, the criteria are coming from the customer and solution specifications are coming from the construction plans. Pre-defined criteria and specifications guide contractors' decision-making. After the business need is recognized and specified, constructors seek all the solutions and needed information that can be suitable for the business case after which they evaluate the alternatives and make the most profitable decisions based on their customers' business case and needs. Construction companies did have differences in typical project types which affected decision-making of purchases. Project types that arised in the interviews can be divided into two categories: (1) new construction projects and (2) repair investments. New construction projects refer to projects where the customer is constructing completely new buildings with multidimensional solutions. Repair investments refer to projects where the construction focuses on repairing old solutions with new solutions. In addition, findings indicated that the projects can be in different sectors, public or a private, and the sector where the project is conducted can affect the decision-making of purchases. The differences of project types and of which sector the project is conducted in will be discussed in more detail in this chapter.

Generally, projects begin when a customer contacts certain contractor companies and asks them for a quotation in which the contractors make quotation calculations based on the criteria and construction-relevant documents provided by the customer. There can be additional negotiations of project-specific plans and details depending on the project. The customer accepts the construction company's provided quotation, and the construction project begins. Following the initiation of the project further negotiations are started with the customer during which specifics regarding existing construction plans, timetables, and other construction related details are discussed. After the detailed plan is clear the acquisition and purchasing begins by following the construction plan and observing different solutions in the market or the plan specifies directly all the needed solutions. Lastly, evaluations are conducted between different solutions and final purchases are made based on the plan specifications, a pre-defined criteria list and other customer desires.

"Projects begin with short notice and the construction work will usually start immediately. Also, all the planning, preliminaries and plan acceptance takes place at the beginning of the project. After the beginning it is also needed to plan the needed acquisitions based on the provided needs and through which channels to acquire the solutions." – 1B

"All the acquisitions are specified in the quotation based on customer's desires and criteria before they accept the quotation All expense estimates are needed in order to specify

correctly the quotation before the exact project begins. This helps to avoid the risk of the customer not accepting some solutions that are needed for the project." – 1A

"Typically, in our organisation the public sector projects are repair investments, and customers directly contacts us and provides the specific business case and a need with criteria and project related documents." – 1I

The timeline for the decision-making depends on the project size and volume but mainly in every company the decisions were straightforward and fast-paced because some critical solutions can have long delivery times and projects generally have tight schedules. The timeline of decision-making depends significantly on the product. There can be high-cost and low-cost acquisitions. Products that are typically purchased directly from the manufacturer are solutions that need further planning. These types of products are identified as high-cost acquisitions. Low-cost acquisitions are mainly basic products that are needed in construction projects and those are usually bought directly from the wholesalers. High-cost products usually have longer decision-making processes, typically from weeks to months depending on the product or solution, than low-cost basic products for which the decision-making processes usually range between days to a few weeks.

"Timeline in projects is typically very tight. Usually, an acquisition process begins right away, and the timeline is typically a week to four weeks to make final acquisitions." – 1D

"Timeline in the projects can vary depending on the project and the solutions, it can be 1 day to 2 weeks, but usually no longer than 2 weeks." – 1A

"Usually, decisions in repair investments are made in between 1-3 months depending on the project and the needed solutions." – 2E

"In high-cost acquisitions it has typically been one week that it takes to compare alternatives together and to make the final purchase decisions." – 1B

As findings identified there can be variation in decision-making timelines, but all interviewees mentioned that time is typically the determinant factor for making fast-paced decisions. Within each organisation the acquisitions take place at the beginning of the project and schedules are tight. Several interviewees noted that in recent years, there have been challenges with delivery times, price increases, and product availability. These challenges have significantly affected the decision-making durations and the conducted final decisions. In addition, product

availability has raised the challenge that manufacturers do not have products available, and that directly influences the decisions of what solutions contractors choose in the end.

"In recent years there has been delivery time and price increasement issues that significantly affect decision-making. Price increasements have created pressures and even forced making quick decisions before the prices increase more." – 1B

"Usually, we try to make decisions as quickly as possible because in recent years there have been a lot of price increasements. Also, products' delivery times are longer than before because of Covid-19 and economic recession." – 2A

"Price increasement has affected decision making so that we need to be prepared in advance to making quick decisions."– 1E

"In terms of the economic situation in the world it has been difficult to get quotations from manufacturers during the Covid-19 years because product availability issues have increased." – 1B

Decision-making team composition depends on the size of the organisation and findings of this study identified variations between organisations. In addition, generally decision-making teams mainly involve 1-5 people depending on acquisitions' size and product type. Generally, teams are small and there are no clear buyer centers that conduct the decisions for acquisitions. Projects have tight schedules and decision-making teams need to be flexible and know all the project details when conducting acquisitions based on the construction plan's specifications. Typically, the key roles that are highly involved in the decision-making are project managers or engineers, site managers, technical directors, and acquisition managers, and in some cases tender engineers that make the quotations are involved in the decision making. In small-sized organisations, the CEO can be involved in the decision-making of high-cost solution acquisitions. In repair investment projects a maintenance manager who has expertise of the old solution beforehand is typically involved in the decision-making. In addition, the customers have the most important role when making final decisions and customers always accept the final acquisitions before the purchase. Decision-makers in the construction companies are highly involved when they have industry expertise in the field of designing and construction. Small teams can be seen as flexible and effective in construction because tight schedules raise pressures to make fast-paced decisions. Typically, in low-cost products, the decision-making is straightforward, and only 1-2 persons are involved in the acquisitions, but when there are

more complex and high-cost solutions the decision-making involves typically multiple people with different roles to be a part of the decision-making team.

"The size of the project affects the decision-making team size and roles inside the team. Typically, there are involved one to three people from the tender calculation team, one project manager that makes all the final orders and manages the entire project start to finish, and one site manager that is responsible of the communication between the installation team at the construction site and the project manager." – 1A

"We do not have a certain acquisition team but there is one person who focuses mainly on large acquisitions and the project managers acquire the products that have lower costs and are more like basic goods that are a necessity in the projects." – 1B

"In decision making of purchases we have a technical director that gets quotations of different solutions and then the project manager and the technical director together evaluate different alternatives and make final decisions. In some cases, if there are some conflicts in interpretations then there can be bid counters involved as well." – 2C

"Repair investments involve a maintenance team, a project engineer and in some cases also the customer in the acquisition process. Usually, customers trust our expertise and what we suggest for them as a new solution. Normally the team consists of 1-5 people." – 2E

Findings indicate that there are different people and roles involved in the decision-making of purchases. Teams depend on the project size and the solution of what is needed to be purchased. As earlier mentioned, decision-making is a fast-paced process and the person or team that makes the decisions needs to be knowledgeable of the entire project, customer desires and business needs, and construction plans to make decisions. All the solutions are designed at the beginning and the decisions of solutions must be precisely defined and specified. Interviewee 2A pointed out that they try to combine acquisitions, if possible, between different projects to be more effective with the acquisitions. Typically, others mentioned that they will make acquisitions by focusing on one project at the time. In constructions projects it is common that the solutions that are designed in construction plan are not suitable in the business case which raises challenges for the decision-makers. In these cases, there is a need for expertise and problem-solving on how to change the solutions to be as close as possible to the original plan but suitable for the business case.

"We try to combine different acquisitions if there are separate projects where similar solutions are needed so that we can order them at the same time. This is more efficient and

saves time and money. If there are no similar needs for other projects, then I will order the solution separately." – 2A

"In some cases, there can be challenges with the solutions that they might not be suitable for the specific business case, and that takes time to figure out and fix as designers do not have time to consider all aspects that carefully when schedules are tight. So, then there can arise issues that it is not possible to follow the original plan." – 1D

"Challenges can arise if there are inconsistencies with the customers' desires and what solutions are possible to implement in practice." – 2C

"Designers that design the plans do not always have the latest information about possible solutions so it is important that manufacturers can directly quote the requested solutions but also an alternative solution separately if the manufacturer views that it could be a more beneficial and efficient solution quality and expense vice for the business case." – 1B

5.1.1. Pre-purchase journey stage 1: Need recognition

In the need recognition stage interviewees were asked how and where the needs are recognized and what type of needs usually arise in the construction projects. In addition, it was observed how legislation and regulation changes and trends in the industry affect the needs and final acquisitions. In each company, the decision-making process of purchases begins with specifying the business needs. Within organisations, the needs are conducted mainly by the customer, and based on the customers' needs the final construction plans are conducted. Construction plans and customer criteria lists are the main sources from which the needs for the acquisitions are recognized. Needs depend on the project, and the project type has an influence on the needs depending on if a project is a new construction or a repair investment. High-cost-solution related decisions are necessary to negotiate together with the customer and those typically require a longer purchasing process than high-volume products with lower costs that are called basic or bulk products. The factors influencing need recognition in the construction industry were similar in each organisation. All interviewees from different organisations mentioned that the needs are multidimensional. Differences can be seen between new construction projects and repair investments. In new construction projects, the solution needs are versatile because generally contractor builds the entire electrification for the business case whereas in repair investment projects there can be individual or specific products and solutions that need to be repaired with new solutions. Construction organisations do not have any impulsive needs when the construction plans have been designed precisely and solutions

have been specified. Customers accept designed construction plans before any purchases are conducted.

"In electrical construction the needs are multidimensional, and the projects cover the electrification for the entire construction in which different products and systems are needed. There are high-cost acquisitions where it is needed to compare different solutions in the market and those need more planning, time, and effort to make the final decisions of these products but then there are also bulk products where the decision criterion is mainly price." – 2C

"The needs cover the whole construction project and needs are multidimensional. There are several products and systems that are needed when the project is a new construction. We make the electrification of the entire building. There are usually same needs in the projects but there might be some specifications that always depend on the customer, project and product." – 2D

"Customers have specified and described the needs, and we need to map the specific solution or alternative solutions to the offer for the customer that satisfies the specified needs the most profitably." – 1D

Additional needs or evaluation of the needs can arise during the project if specified solutions in the plans are not suitable for the business case or when there are inconsistencies with the plan and practice aspect. In this case, further information search and observations of more suitable solutions for the business case is needed. Manufacturers can affect the need recognition by suggesting alternative solutions for the customer's business case if the asked specifications are fulfilled in the alternative option. In addition, manufacturers have an opportunity to ask if contractors have other purchase needs because as mentioned earlier construction needs are multidimensional and versatile. In some projects, there is more flexibility to suggest alternative solutions based on contractors' expertise and experiences with the solutions and manufacturers. Alternative solutions need to have certain specifications and functionality that fulfil the original plans' specifications. The flexibility of suggesting alternative solutions depends on the customer, the business case, and the constructions plans. In addition, contractors have industry networks and good expertise can be found within the company. If a customer gives specifications and criteria contractors can use their existing network to seek potential solutions for the needs. Interviewee 2E is working in the public sector and the projects are mainly repair investments, and there the need can be recognized in two ways as either the customer contacts

the company about a specific need, or the construction company recognizes the need for the customer during maintenance.

"There can be situations when construction images and plans do not match with reality and additional needs arise when the project moves forward, and then it needs to be supplemented and corrected according to the needs based on reality." – 1A

"Customers can ask suggestions for different solutions if there are alternatives available with lower prices or that have higher quality and that are also in line with the certain criteria that have been specified in the plans, but the solution itself is tied to the original plans." – 1B

"Basically, we fully comply with the plans that are specified. It is challenging to try to change plans after it has been accepted. The alternatives functionality needs to be identical with the original plan. Suggesting alternatives process takes time and is challenging to get through so that both parties benefit from the change." – 2A

"In repair investment projects the need recognition happens either from us towards the customer when we are managing our customers maintenance, or the customer contacts us directly if repairs are needed. Typically, the needs in repair investments are similar solutions to what the customer has but just new version that could be more effective or have new specific specifications." – 2E

With every organisation, electrical legislation and standard changes are taken seriously, and constructors are aware early on of the coming changes. The reaction time to the changes is fast paced. Legislations affect the product acquisitions when products need to be in accordance with legislation. Customers, contractors, and manufacturers are aware of the coming changes, and when legislation changes take place transition times are given for the changes.

"It is always a necessity to react to legislation changes in the industry and to offer solutions that are in line with the legislations and standards. We also have the responsibility that we do not offer customers products that are old and do not match with the legislation and standards." – 1B

"Awareness of legislation changes are informed as early as possible to us and then we need to react to them quickly. Customers are also aware of the changes and then they set up criteria based on the changes." – 2E

Industry trends such as digitalization, sustainability and energy efficiency have raised interest in the construction industry. Sustainability has not affected purchasing decisions, but the topic

is on the surface in conversations, and people in the industry are aware of it. Sustainability can be seen more in working methods and document format but is not critical as a criterion in the decision-making of purchases. Typically, if the products are greener and more sustainable it can be seen in the price of the solution. In small organisations, the sustainability of products refers to higher product prices but if sustainability is mentioned as one criterion of the customer it needs to be considered in the solution. Trends and new technologies do not directly affect the acquisitions unless it is defined in the plans and customers' criteria. Interviewee 1B mentioned that sustainability and new trending technologies in the solutions can be considered as additional sales opportunities but not as the first decision-making criteria. However, additional sales can be seen as challenging in the project because schedules are tight and there is limited time to negotiate.

"There has been a lot of discussion about when the green thinking is going to be adapted to the construction industry, but we are not there yet, but it can be seen mainly in working than in products and solutions." - 1B

"Normally if there are greener products in the market then those are more expensive and therefore, we cannot choose them when our sales margin does not endure the higher prices in this highly competitive industry. The assumption is that the manufacturer tends to consider that products and solutions are sustainably produced." – 1A

"We consider sustainability in product perspective if our customer specifically desires this criterion, but it is not an important factor in products if it is not a specific need since more sustainable products usually cost more and it affects our competitiveness." – 2C

"Energy saving is currently a very popular topic, and it has affected the interest of more energy efficient products and solutions" – 1G

5.1.2. Pre-purchase journey stage 2: Information search

In the information search section interviewees were asked about what channels' contractors use the most for searching information and what type of materials or content they perceive the most valuable, helpful, and useful in their decision-making path. After the needs are clear the specified contractors shift the focus to information searching and finding the most potential solutions based on the construction plan specifications and criteria. In the information search stage, the contactors aim to find the most suitable solutions for the final evaluation stage based on the plan specifications and criteria list. Information search can be seen as time-consuming

when the information can be fragmented into several information sources. In addition, it can be challenging to find the needed information which can lead to frustration. Searching for information is typically depending on an individual, as everyone can have certain ways of how they start searching information for their needs and their certain business case. Generally, if contractors need to search information on solutions during the project when the need is relevant the search need is very narrow and focus mainly on product specific information such as product size, functionality, or certain specifications. In addition, contractors want to find if the solutions are suitable for their business case and in line with the pre-defined criteria and specifications. Table 4 and Table 5 represent divided by organisation size which different information sources contractors use for finding information for their needs.

Table 4 Information search sources (small-sized organisations)

Information sources	**1A**	**1B**	**1C**	**1D**	**1E**	**1F**	**1G**	**1H**	**1I**	**1J**
Wholesalers (phone & email)	●	●	●		●	●		●	●	
Manufacturer (phone & email)		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Events										
Trainings		●		●			●	●		
Face-to-face interaction		●		●	●		●	●		
Search engines	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Manufacturers website	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Word-of-Mouth (WoM)		●		●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Social media										
Webinars				●	●				●	
YouTube										
eNewsletters									●	
Industry sites				●				●	●	
Internal data collection				●			●	●	●	

Table 5 Information search sources (medium- and large-sized organisations)

Information sources	**2A**	**2B**	**2C**	**2D**	**2E**
Wholesalers (phone & email)	●	●	●	●	●
Manufacturers (phone & email)	●	●	●	●	●
Events					
Trainings					●
Face-to-face interaction			●		
Search engines	●	●	●	●	●
Manufacturers website	●	●	●	●	●
Word-of-Mouth (WoM)		●	●	●	●
Social media					
Webinars			●		●

YouTube	●		
eNewsletters	●		
Industry sites	●	●	●
Internal data collection	●		

There are different paths that constructors can take and channels that they can use during the information search process depending on the information they are searching for. Contractors have close networks of other colleagues and partners whom they use for information gathering. Contractors search for information by directly contacting the manufacturer by email or by calling. In addition, contractors typically have a familiar wholesaler contact whom to contact if the information is needed. Wholesalers typically have a high-level overview of manufacturers and product categories to use to give contractors suggestions for solutions. Wholesalers have knowledge of what other contractors have used in the industry before. After receiving suggestions from wholesalers' contractors can search individually more information about the suggested solutions. Other primarily used channels are search engines where specific keywords are used for finding the information needed. In addition, manufacturers' websites are seen useful for finding information for their needs. As discussed earlier in the findings, contractors have pressure to make fast paced purchase decisions and that significantly influences the chosen channels based on where to find relevant information the most efficiently. Small-sized organisations have slight differences from medium- and large-sized organisations, as they value more highly training and face-to-face presentations from manufacturers. Whereas large companies search information mainly by directly contacting the experts such as sales representatives or partners, or they use their wide network inside the organisation where knowledge is shared between colleagues. All the organizations mentioned that if information is needed regarding products, it is first searched for using search engines and manufacturers' websites.

"It depends on the product but normally at first, we ask the wholesalers' salespeople for options that are suitable for certain business case. After that we search online for more information about the product specifications and how the solution can implement it in practice. The best information sources are in these cases Google or manufacturers' websites. Wholesalers cannot give us the all the specific information of products." – 1A

"The construction plans have identified needed solutions with specific criteria and then we start directly asking for quotations of potential solutions from different manufacturers that can have potential solution for the business case." – 1B

"We try to use people who know about solutions in this industry as much as possible to find the information that is needed at the moment. This way we can get the latest information of the available solutions the most efficiently." – 2A

"We use manufacturers' websites for searching information but sometimes those are quite limited when manufacturers have multiple products so all the product details cannot be found there, but then we are directly in contact with the manufacturers." – 2C

Based on these findings, channels such as social media or more specifically LinkedIn, emails, articles, news, industry sites, blogs, webinars, and events are seen more as a channel where to increase awareness about products and manufacturers in order to gain knowledge of different solutions available in the market rather than using as information source during the decision-making. By increasing awareness towards the contractors, it can create a memory point of certain manufacturer and its solutions, and when that type of solution is relevant to an upcoming project the contractor can remember certain manufacturers or solutions that could be suitable for the business case. Manufacturers can increase their familiarity and findability in the market with providing content that increase awareness of the brand, solutions, and industry expertise. Interviewee 2D raised the point that some manufacturers' sales representatives directly contact them through LinkedIn to offer solutions, and that can sometimes be regarded beneficial as it increases brand awareness and awareness of new solutions that are not familiar to contractors. In addition, new product announcements through different channels are beneficial for the contractors, directly from the manufacturer or wholesalers, through events, training, or digital channels. In trainings or events contractors can get a wider overview of the manufacturer's brand and product categories and get contacts for whom to turn to when needed. Interviewee 1E pointed out that it is beneficial to raise awareness of products that have been in the market for a long time but that have had new improvements, for example becoming more cost-effective or more energy efficient compared to the old versions or models. In addition, word-of-mouth (WoM) is important in the construction industry as information sharing is useful during projects when people in the industry have a high level of expertise and different experiences to share, and that in turn can help with decision-making.

"It is beneficial if manufacturers come to present different solutions to us as then the products and the manufacturers become closer and more familiar to us, and we can trust what they offer. Also, people in the same industry are good information sources because

someone may have had good experiences with a specific manufacturer and its product that we maybe have not heard of before." – 1B

"Webinars and events are mainly networking places where you get to see different manufacturers and get a high-level overview of solutions but that does not affect that heavily our decision-making on everyday basis. Also, it is beneficial that manufacturers are in contact with us if they have new product launches that are competitive in the market and have special value because we do not have any historical information of them or experiences about the new solutions, so it is important that manufacturers raise awareness of them." – 2B

"Wholesalers usually have a good overview of the manufacturers that can have suitable solutions for our needs, and there might come up new manufacturers or solutions in the market that we have not even heard of before." – 1H

"In some cases, there is need for very specific details about a product and sometimes it cannot be found on the manufacturer's website. In those cases, it is needed to be in direct contact with the manufacturer's sales to get the needed information." – 1J

As findings indicated there are different information needs depending on the stage of the project. In the designing and acquisition stage, the most beneficial materials are the ones that include the values and benefits of the solution, technical specifications of the product, and functionality of the solution. In addition, different digital tools that manufacturers offer are useful for example for making calculations regarding the solutions or for helping to select the right solution for the business case. Digital tools that help visualize solutions are seen as beneficial and effective when making decisions. During construction, there is a need for product-specific materials such as installation guides and manuals that are more focused on the product specifications. After the construction is completed, there are needs for materials such as user guides and maintenance materials. In addition, training videos can be of help in different phases of the project. Contractor's value different materials based on their needs and personal preferences. Interviewee 2A answers that their task is to sell the solution to their customer, and it is easier when the materials are clear and present all the needed high-level information and key benefits. Interviewee 2A added that it is necessary to consider that their customer may not always be an electrical industry specialist, and that is why the materials need to be easily understandable and high-level for the customer. In addition, in repair investments the importance of information of old products rises because when searching for solutions to replace old solutions it is important to know of old product specifications that help finding new solutions for that specific business case.

"Usually when the product is specified in the plan, we need more technical materials such as maintenance materials, product cards and warranty related content in base of the decisions." – 1B

"Materials such as brochures that outline entities of the solution and also have specific details about the products included are beneficial and useful in decision-making processes. Materials that have great balance of technical and solution related data are the most useful." – 1D

"Technical materials are usually more beneficial for our needs as the specifications of the products are critical in the decision-making. Solution-oriented materials are also beneficial in decision- making when you can see clearly what specific product is suitable for which business case. So, a mix of both technical and solution related materials is the most beneficial." – 2C

"Designers' need more materials that arise benefits and opportunities and in construction level more technical materials are beneficial." – 2D

Different materials are beneficial in different stages of the consumer journey. Therefore, manufacturers need to observe what types of materials consumers need in each stage. During constructions customers need more installation related materials whereas after the completion of the construction information needs shift more towards maintenance related materials. Medium- and large-sized organisations highlighted that the maintenance related information is critical in the decision-making process when customers value information on total cost of ownership and on lifetime value of the products. One reason behind customers' future driven decision-making is that repair investments are expensive to conduct.

"Various manufacturers lack the maintenance side in their information sources even though it can be seen as an important criterion and factor that can play a significant role in some cases where the customer is future oriented. Some products are hard to maintenance." – 2B

"Many manufacturers are lacking simple and clear installation instruction documents that take into consideration installation in practice. These types of materials are beneficial in decision making when we can see that the manufacturer has considered the installation in some level on their materials that helps us in practice." – 1E

5.1.3. Pre-purchase journey stage 3: Evaluation of alternatives

In the evaluation of alternatives stage, interviewees were asked how they evaluate alternatives and what type of process is behind the evaluations. In addition, other types of topics included were what type of criteria have the most critical influences on final decisions, and what criteria affect negatively the evaluations. After an information search and requested quotations from each potential manufacturer or wholesaler, contractors move to the evaluation stage where they compare the alternatives before making the final purchase decision. Typically, low-cost product purchases are conducted through wholesalers. Interviewee 1A answered that the price is the most critical and determinant driver for the decision when purchasing through wholesalers because there are differences between each electrician wholesaler. High-cost solution purchases are evaluated in more detail. Contractors buy products through electrical wholesalers or directly from the manufacturers depending on the solutions. Contractors typically evaluate 3-5 of the most potential solutions to each other in the evaluation process. Medium- and large-sized organisations emphasized that they usually choose the largest and the most familiar manufacturers from the industry and request quotations from each of them. Whereas small-sized organisations emphasized more that they value manufacturers that have the most affordable prices but that also have a suitable solution for the business case.

"We aim to get at minimum 3 quotations which to compare between and which are suitable for the business case." – 1B

"Evaluation of different alternatives is based on price. Typically, we evaluate 2-3 different solutions together." – 1E

"Evaluation happens by choosing 3-4 of the most potential ones that have similar price range. After that there will be evaluation of the total benefit of the solutions, and of which fulfils the need." – 2C

"Normally the evaluations take place between 3-4 manufacturers' solutions. Typically, those are familiar for us, and they are large manufacturers in the market. It is not optimal for us to get stuck with the same suppliers and we are open-minded to hear about new solutions that are not familiar to us from the past." – 2D

Contractors have requested quotations from the chosen manufacturers or wholesalers to start the evaluation process. Generally, different solutions are evaluated by using Excel for making the tables in which to add all solutions from different manufacturers and each solutions' details

side by side. After that contractors evaluate solutions by adding scores or weights to each criterion that they emphasize as more critical and important, and then by adding weights to each variable based on preferences. The wight of each criterion depends on the contractors, customer desires and construction plans that guide the decision-making. Alternatives are evaluated based on key criteria and after that solutions are compared with each other. In the construction industry, the purchases are very specific, and they need to function as the construction plans have specified.

"Evaluation is done by the project manager, and the evaluation is based mainly on previous experience about the product and orders are made based on the experiences." – 1A

"We make excel tables in which we put different solutions' specifications and then compare them to each other. Mainly we compare technical specifications." – 1B

"In the evaluation process there will be the most potential solutions at the end and then those are compared together by adding weight values to each variable, for example price, product's technical specifications, manufacturer and maintenance are examples of different variables." 1J

There can be slight changes to the original construction plans if the solution is not suitable for the business case when the solution is being implemented in practice. In addition, contractors can suggest to customers more suitable alternative solutions based on their experiences, on how the solution functions in practice, and on if there are other solutions with lower prices available. When suggesting alternative options, it is needed to consider that the solution needs to be in line with the pre-defined specifications that were designed in the construction plan and that the functionality of the solution remains the same.

"We try to suggest solutions to customers that could simplify some aspect in practice and that are effective in use, cost effective and have functionality on a good level." – 1B

"Manufacturers can also suggest alternative solutions that are in line with the certain criteria and that can slightly change the original decisions." – 1B

"After receiving the quotations from manufacturers, it takes time to compare them together and which solution is perceived the most suitable for the business case when considering all the benefits and value that it is affordable at the same time." – 1B

"Acquisitions are mainly done through familiar wholesaler companies and the evaluation is mainly happening between those wholesalers. Typically, customers have desires of the manufacturer who they want to use in the projects, but they are flexible to hearing of alternative solutions." – 1F

Evaluations are based on the decision-making criteria that can vary between companies and projects. Decision criteria are highly dependent on the customers' specified criteria and desires of the functionality of the solution in practice. There can be seen differences between the interviewees' mentioned key criteria when each criterion is based on their customers' criteria lists and design plans that are project specific. Table 6 and Table 7 represents criteria that influence the decisions in each organisation, and once again the tables are divided based on company sizing.

Table 6 Decision criteria affecting final purchases (small-sized organisations)

Critical decision criteria	**1A**	**1B**	**1C**	**1D**	**1E**	**1F**	**1G**	**1H**	**1I**	**1J**
Price	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Ease of installation	●	●	●	●	●	●		●		
Total benefit of product	●	●			●				●	●
Familiarity of manufacturer		●	●	●		●	●	●	●	●
Reliability of manufacturer				●	●					●
Experiences	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Customers' desires	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Delivery time	●	●	●		●	●	●	●	●	
Responsibility of manufacturer		●					●			
Reliability of delivery	●	●	●		●	●	●			
Product durability	●	●		●		●				
Product reliability				●				●		
Communication with manufacturer		●		●			●	●		
Product quality	●	●	●	●	●	●			●	
Sustainability										
Maintenance		●		●					●	●
Long warranties				●						
Cost effective		●			●					
Compatibility with other products				●	●	●				
Product lifetime	●						●			●
Total ownership costs										●
Life cycle costs										●
Product availability	●	●	●		●	●	●	●	●	

Table 7 Decision criteria affecting final purchases (medium- and large-sized organisations)

Critical decision criteria	**2A**	**2B**	**2C**	**2D**	**2E**
Price	●	●	●	●	●
Ease of installation					
Total benefit of product	●		●		●
Familiarity of manufacturer	●	●	●	●	●
Reliability of manufacturer	●	●			
Experiences	●	●	●	●	
Customers' desires	●	●	●	●	●
Delivery time		●		●	●
Responsibility of manufacturer	●				
Reliability of delivery		●	●	●	●
Product durability	●	●	●		●
Product reliability	●		●		●
Communication with manufacturer				●	
Product quality		●	●		●
Sustainability					
Maintenance	●	●		●	●
Long warranties					
Cost effectiveness					
Compatibility with other products					
Product lifetime		●		●	
Total ownership costs		●	●		●
Life cycle costs		●	●	●	●
Product availability	●	●	●	●	●

As the tables represent there can be seen variation between different interviewees. As identified in the tables the most critical criteria are price, familiarity of the manufacturer and positive past experiences of their products and solutions, customers' final desires, and delivery-related factors such as availability of the product, delivery time and reliability. In addition, technical specifications of products are critical in the decision-making but those depend on the solution, project, and the functionality in practice and what there matters the most to the customer. Small-sized organisations consider price as the most critical factor because it significantly influences their competitiveness in the market. In medium- and large-sized organisations pointed out a criterion that is critical in the decision-making that solutions need to be long-lasting. Here the meaningful variables are ease of maintenance, high life cycle and total ownership costs, and product durability. Customers want durable solutions that have long life cycles when the repairments are expensive. Constructors' customers value factors such as price and total benefit of the product. Differences between the small-sized organisations and medium- and large-sized organisations are seen in the implementation stage related factors

such as ease of installation. This is because in small-sized organisations decision makers are usually highly involved in the installation part of the project and there the ease of installation has value from the contractors' perspective. Interviewees 1A, 1D, and 1H pointed out that ease of installation is a critical criterion as well when it can turn out to be a cheaper option than the original one that has a lower price at the beginning but is more complex and time-consuming to install. Installation takes time and time costs money. In addition, product quality is an important factor in the end, but various medium- and large-sized organisations are mainly using familiar large manufacturers' solutions, and there the product quality between large manufacturers are at a high level. Therefore, there are not that significant differences between the quality of solutions in the market. The product quality as a criterion does not significantly affect the final decisions. As earlier mentioned, future maintenance was considered more important in medium- and large-sized organisations when they may take care of the maintenance once the construction is completed. Only 3 of 10 small-sized organisations emphasized maintenance of the solutions as relevant in the decision-making of purchases. According to interviewee 1D pointed out that building loyalty cooperation with a specific manufacturer, can strength the trust in both ways and that they contractors can learn and gather experiences of their products. This brings high value when making decisions in future projects. Therefore, it helps contractors with selling solutions to their customers when the products are familiar, and they know the products' worth in practice. In addition, interviewee 1J pointed out that manufacturers could increase value in the eyes of contractor customers if they can do close cooperation together with the contractor throughout the project from the beginning till the end. Manufacturers and their products' familiarity with contractors and their customers plays a determinant and significant role in the decision-making because it decreases risk-taking, and the product is familiar installation-wise, and the maintenance can be seen to be easier to conduct in the future.

"Product acquisitions are mainly identified and specified in the construction plans so when the products are strictly specified the price is in the end the determinant factor or at least it affects 95 precent of the decision. Also, the delivery time, reliability of delivery, and ease of installations are important criteria that can affect decisions. We need to choose the products and solutions with the lowest prices when that affects our competitiveness in the market. Also, the previous experience with the product is a significant benefit and it highly affects the decisions because if it is a good product, and easy to install when you have that experience already in the background, so it is easy to choose that product. From the customers side there can be the criterion that products must have a certain lifetime." – 1A

"Customers have strict desires or even requirements for the product specifications. Price is the most critical factor when making decisions as we are a small operator in the industry, we need to be an affordable option for the customer and also, we need to be critical with prices to stay competitive." – 1F

"I have many years of experience of the products and different manufacturers in the field, so the decision making is quite simple and fast. Maintenance aspects are also relevant to customers that want to use same products in their projects so that the maintenance is easier and quicker to do." – 1I

As earlier mentioned, typically medium- and large-sized organisations emphasize their expertise and experiences in the market when they tend to use familiar and large manufacturers that are well-known in the industry. Whereas small-sized organisations are more price-sensitive decision-makers but in their decision-making past experiences do also have a high value. Interviewee 1J that has been working on different contraction projects together with different sized construction companies, mentioned that based on the industry knowledge product specifications should play a more significant as a decision criterion rather than the price itself but in almost each project the price plays the most important role at the end. Customers want to find the most suitable option with the lowest price possible. In addition, interviewee 1J added that the products need to be considered as long-term solutions and there the specifications are the most important factors to consider. Medium- and large-sized organisations raised other specifications as significant rather than only the price, but the price is the starting point for the evaluations. After the price ranges have been set at the same level in each solution in the evaluations the technical specifications take a higher role. In addition, future-oriented solutions that have long lifetime value are critical for contractors' customers.

"Usually, we choose manufacturers that are well known and large operators in the industry and the ones that we have positive experiences with in the past. Customers want solutions that are suitable and flexible for potential expansions in the future and that have a long lifetime. Also, total ownership and life cycle costs are valuable criteria. Meaning that the built infrastructure is ready for expansions if needed." – 2B

"Typically, customers want to use same manufacturers' products as the old ones in repair investments' products but that is not always the case. In recent years product availability and delivery times has increased as critical variables in decision making process." – 2E

The public sector decision-making has differences in criteria when making final decisions. In public sectors, the most significant criterion is the price. In private sector there is more

flexibility when making decisions and there the product specifications together with price are critical such as functionality, overall benefits of the solution, product's lifetime, and maintenance can be seen as valuable variables. In addition, contractors' past experiences and knowledge are significant factors when making final decisions about the solutions.

"Public sector is more straightforward than the private sector that has more flexibility when it comes to product specifications and negotiation of alternative solutions. In public sector the price is in almost all cases the only determinative factor for the decisions and sometimes delivery times can arise as a critical factor." - 1I

"A difference between public and private sectors is that in the public sector the main criterion is the price but in the private sector the factors influencing decisions are more flexible and for example past experiences, technical specification and expertise are seen valuable in decision-making. When looking at the overall lifetime costs of the solution, product with better functionality can be cheaper in the long-term rather than the product that is cheaper at first but does not have long lifetime value." – 1J

Interviewees were asked what are the factors that can negatively affect the decision-making and can cause rejection of a manufacturer's solution. The main factors for the rejection of the manufacturer were the reliability of the manufacturer and lacking two-way communication between the contractor and manufacturer before and during the project. Contractors' value two-way communication, manufacturer's accessibility, and effective cooperation during the project. Positive experiences with the manufacturer in each stage of the project influence positively the future as experiences is a significant criterion when it comes to decision-making. If a manufacturer has given a negative experience to the customer, it can cause rejection on another project and it affects the reliability of the manufacturer.

"If there has been a negative experience with the manufacturer then it directly has a negative effect in the future so that we might not want to choose that manufacturer if for example the communication has been lacking or if deliveries have been late. Also, we might be cautious of choosing a certain manufacturer if there is a risk that they might have liquidity problems." – 1B

"The cooperation and communication need to work seamlessly throughout the project. We appreciate getting reports of the project progression or delivery times to know the situation rather than asking all the time from suppliers what the status is. Also, if there are bad experiences in the past those have a negative effect towards decisions in the future." – 2D

"Accessibility and seamless communication have high value when the decision making in these projects is fast paced, and if we do not get any responses from a specific manufacturer then the customer might have done the decision when we have been waiting the response from some manufacturers, so it affects negatively to the manufacturer's selection if the responses take time." – 1G

In addition, the contractors emphasized the accuracy of the quotation documents as one of the challenges. Quotations lacking accuracy can cause instant rejection if the manufacturer's quotation document includes additional solutions and not the solution that was initially requested from the contractors' side. As earlier mentioned, contractors have tight schedules, and they need to make decisions fast and if they need to ask manufacturers to correct a specific quotation then they rather choose to reject the quotation instead.

"One negative side that can affect the final decision is that the manufacturer offers something extra which is not needed and requested for in the first place. Ideally the manufacturer offers the solution that is requested in the first place and if there are some additional or alternative solutions that could be beneficial for the business case they could be added as a separate quotation. It is challenging if there are some extra solutions in the quotation and when we need to make decisions in a hurry. It is harmful if there are small details that should not be there as we need to abound the quotation, or it costs time to update the quotation back and forth." – 1B

"It is quite common that we get a quotation that includes something extra and then we need to reject that manufacturer from the project due to lack of time. If a manufacturer does not have a perfect solution for our needs, then we assume that the manufacturer informs clearly what is the specification that is not fulfilled and suggest a solution that has high potential to solve our need instead. The functionality needs to be same if there is an alternative solution." – 2C

There can be cases where the manufacturers do not have exact solutions to offer for the needs that contractors are initially requesting. In these cases, if a manufacturer does not have a perfect solution to offer to a customer it is important to point out and specify in the quotation document and then the manufacturer can offer an alternative solution for the business case. In addition, if there are situations where manufacturers seek better opportunities to find more suitable solutions what is requested that can be suggested in the separate quotation document. Typically, contractors are flexible, open-minded and trust the manufacturers' expertise. If contractors have additional quotations from the manufacturer in a separate quotation document, they can try to sell and suggest the alternative solutions to their customers. However, suggesting of alternative

solutions can be seen to be challenging if a project has specific designs and criteria. In addition, once the contractor decides to cooperate with a specific manufacturer, there is more flexibility to negotiate alternative solutions that can be more suitable for the business case.

"We want to hear suggestions for how the project could be carried out in a smarter way and more efficiently. It could be beneficial to have a quotation that is fully in line with original plan's criteria and another quotation whereas slightly different solution is suggested, but which could be even better than the original plan. Also, we appreciate if manufacturers question the original plans if they see that it is not efficient and does not function correctly. That shows us expertise." – 1B

"We suggest our customers the best alternative solutions for their needs based on past experiences and what others have used. Customers are typically very aware and strict about what products they want, and they always make the final decisions. It varies a lot of what manufacturer solutions each customer like and trust." – 2B

"If we suggest alternative solutions for the project, it is always needed to first get acceptance from the customer before we can make the final purchase decision. Some customers can be very strict and critical when it comes to alternative solutions. However, the properties need to be the same in the alternative solutions." – 1H

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The study aimed find ways to improve B2B buyers' customer experience in the pre-purchase journey. In addition, another aim was to identify buyers' characteristics and value-creating factors that influence buyers during their purchasing journey and that guide purchase decisions. The purpose of the study was to increase and extend the existing knowledge of how the case company's contractor customers operate when making decisions about purchases for different construction projects. Furthermore, this study aimed to find answers to the buyers' core pre-purchase journey stages and key touchpoints that they go through in their journeys and what their content preferences are during the decision-making. Another goal was to identify the key decision-making criteria that guide buyers in making final purchase decisions. These findings can help and support marketers to find critical factors, target marketing and sales resources to the right channels with valuable messages that match buyers' business goals and needs, and to design and improve engaging buyer journeys.

In this chapter, the findings are examined by answering the research questions that are identified in subchapter 1.3. In addition, the findings will be discussed and combined with the existing literature presented in chapters 2 and 3. This allows for comprehensive and more specific answers to the research questions. After answering the research questions the final conclusions of the study are presented. Conclusions are followed by discussion of the theoretical contributions and managerial implications. Lastly, the limitations regarding the study are conducted and directions for future research are suggested.

6.1. Discussion

The empirical findings showed that B2B buyers in the construction industry have different types of projects and decision-making can be seen as straightforward and fast paced. This is important for B2B marketers to understand so that they are available on the right channels, offer the right content in each stage of buyers' pre-purchasing journeys, and for them to be a potential option at the consideration phase of buyers. B2B buyers are open to hearing what different vendors have to offer but they have limited time and resources to search for information and solutions which makes it essential for marketers to be visible and accessible towards the B2B buyers. B2B marketers need to have customers knowledge of how their customers act during the pre-purchase journey to have the ability to attract customers in the right channels with the right messages and information.

The research findings indicate where B2B buyers' needs are coming from, what are the main touchpoints that B2B buyers go through in their pre-purchase journey, and what are the main decision-making criteria when considering and evaluating alternatives to make a final decision. This subchapter combines the main findings and existing literature to observe answers to the research questions. Discussion is provided of how well the empirical findings support the existing academic literature, and to find the most comprehensive overview and answers to the research questions. Each research question will be discussed within separate subchapters, starting with the sub-research questions, and ending with answering the main research question.

6.1.1. Key characteristics of B2B buyers

Webster (1965, 370) highlighted that it is more effective to observe the specific narrowed customer segments and their decision-making journeys rather than generalize buying journeys for wide customer segments. In addition, Terho et al. (2022, 301), Duran (2018), and Lingqvist et al. (2015) highlighted similarly that before customer journey mapping it is important to identify a specific customer segment by observing the segment's factors that influence customers' buying behavior and motives in the decision-making process such as key business needs, goals, and challenges. The empirical findings support this view of designing the buyer persona and identifying the main characteristics that guide target buyer persona's actions in their pre-purchase journey towards the final purchase. In addition, the findings increased the knowledge of the target group's buying behavior leading to a better understanding of their motives and goals in the pre-purchase journey. Priya (2020) supports the findings, by first considering what buyers' values and engaging factors drive and trigger their motivation and attitudes towards purchase and satisfaction. Similarly, Holliman and Rowley (2014, 269) highlighted first and foremost it is necessary to increase knowledge of the target customer group to fully understand their real needs and buying behavior. To begin with, this study aimed to find key characteristics of the target group that influence B2B buyers in the pre-purchase journey as to conduct a buyer persona mapping. The first sub-question was defined as *what are the key characteristics of B2B buyers in the pre-purchase journey?* This sub-question aimed to identify how the B2B buyers begin their buying process and what needs, goals, and challenges arise during the process. The empirical findings indicate that needs come directly from construction plans and customers' identified criteria. According to findings stated by Webster (1965, 371) and Puccinelli et al. (2009, 26) B2B buyers' needs can be born in two ways (1)

from B2B marketers' marketing efforts triggering buyers' buying motivations or (2) buyers have a need or a pressure to satisfy. The empirical findings lean more towards the second alternative on how the needs are developed and born. Findings indicated that in the construction industry, the needs are specific and not born impulsively because the needs come from customers and construction plans. This supports Webster's (1965, 371) research where it is highlighted that B2B buyers' purchasing can be seen more as rational rather than impulsive. In addition, if a contractor is responsible for the maintenance of their customers' solutions the need can arise from the contractors' side if they recognize that repair investments are required.

The empirical findings indicate that purchasing motives are driven mainly by the pre-defined business needs, construction plans and customers' criteria lists. Existing literature supports this view, as Webster (1965, 373) identified that before continuing to the next stages in the pre-purchase journey it is vital for buyers to evaluate the specific goals. In addition, a criteria list is necessary when evaluating the selected alternatives to make the final purchase. Furthermore, Webster (1965, 373) highlighted that B2B buyers can typically have limited time for making the final decisions and the project schedules have a significant effect on the decision-making process. The empirical findings proved this interpretation correct when contractors typically have tight schedules to make decisions. In addition, time-sensitive projects arise challenges in decision-making as potential design errors may occur, information search is limited, and errors in acquisition may arise. contractors have encountered additional challenges, including price increases, limited product availability, and delivery times, all of which impact the expediency of decision-making. All these mentioned challenges lead to a time-sensitive decision-making schedule and to fast-paced decision-making.

According to Webster and Wind (1972, 12), Moon and Tikoo (2002, 293), and Mohan et al. (2022, 1) in B2B buying there is typically a separate buying unit that involves multiple people. The empirical findings differ slightly from this by showing that in the construction industry companies do not have separate buying units for B2B buying but rather separate people from different operational levels partake in the process and the number of people involved in the decision-making is typically between one to five. People involved in the decision-making can vary depending on the project size and type, and decision-makers must be aware of the project details and the construction plan to make these decisions. In addition, time sensitive projects can be seen as one determinant reason for small decision-making team sizes because the decision-making needs to be fast-paced and flexible.

To conclude the empirical findings and to support the buyers' pre-purchase journey mapping the buying persona can be created for the construction industry decision-makers. According to Duran (2018), Kusinitz (2022), and Terho et al. (2022), the buyer persona identifies the specified and targeted customer segments' main challenges, needs, and goals that lead this specific customer groups' decision-making. In addition, Duran (2018) identified that when creating buyer personas, it is beneficial to cover categories such as geography, demography, educational level, and the main behavior characteristics of how they make decisions and based on what variables. Based on the existing academic literature and the empirical findings, the buyer persona mapping was conducted to represent the identified buyer persona related characteristics which are influencing the decision-making and guiding the buyer through the pre-purchase journey. The final buyer persona mapping is presented in Appendix 2.

6.1.2. Key touchpoints of B2B buyers in pre-purchase journey

According to Lingqvist et al. (2015) and Terho et al. (2022, 301) the next step after the buyer persona identification is to map the pre-purchase journey for finding the key pre-purchase stages and the most critical touchpoints of the buyers. The second research sub-question focuses on identifying what the identified buyer persona's key touchpoints during the pre-purchase journey are in each stage. The second research question is the following: *What are the key touchpoints of B2B buyers in the pre-purchase journey?* According to existing literature, journey mapping starts by identifying the main steps in the journey (Terho et al. 2022, 301). The empirical results indicate a similar view that the decision-making in each contractor company goes through the main steps and journey structure, starting off with the first step of recognizing the business needs. Following that in the second step the information search begins and the most suitable solutions from potential vendors are chosen based on the pre-defined needs, criteria list, and business case. Lastly, the solutions are going to be evaluated by scoring and weighting different variables and criteria based on each variable's importance and criticality, and finally, the solutions are compared to the business case and criteria list and to other alternatives. The empirical findings gave more evidence to existing literature on the commonly used pre-purchase stages that are (1) need recognition, (2) information search, and lastly, (3) evaluation of alternatives (Webster 1965; Neslin et al. 2006; Puccinelli et al. 2009; Court et al. 2009; Richardson 2010; Grewal et al. 2015; Lemon & Verhoef 2016; Stein & Ramaseshan 2016 and Kannan & Li 2017).

The empirical findings indicated that the main steps of the pre-purchase are similar for each individual, but the differentiator is that the key touchpoints can vary during the pre-purchase journey stages when the information needs can transform along the journey. In addition, key touchpoints used by buyers can vary depending on the individual preferences and values. These findings support the research by Rosenbaum et al. (2017, 145-146) which indicates that it is necessary to map the most relevant touchpoints separately for each stage of the buyer journey. In addition, Cornfield (2021) highlighted that touchpoints cannot be viewed as a linear series of touchpoints that all buyers go through because buyers follow their preferences, impulses, urges, and whims. The empirical findings are in line with existing literature as the touchpoints utilized by contractors depend on their preferences and personal tendencies, but the most used touchpoints can be found from the empirical data. In addition, van der Veen and van Ossenbruggen (2015, 211) identified that different search strategies can affect each individual's motivations and preferences regarding which channels to use during the pre-purchase journey. The empirical findings identified similar features of search strategy across individuals. Some contractors search actively potential solutions in the market and make the decision based on the information search, they tend to follow information search strategy. Whereas others can search information actively but needs reassurance for their decisions, they are following reassurance search strategy. In addition, some contractors have limited time to search information and they seek it from sources where to get needed information as fast as possible for example contacting directly to sales representative. These individuals are following peace-of-mind searching strategy. Lastly, others know their specific need and what they want, but decides to make specific searches to get the reassurance for the decision. These individuals tend to follow convenience searching strategy. The empirical findings indicated that most of the contractors are following typically either reassurance, peace-of-mind or convenience searching strategies. Information searching strategy is not a commonly used because contractors typically have to contact a sales representative to get a quote and to be reassure that the solution fits the business case before the purchase.

According to Rosenbaum et al. (2017, 145-146) that when key touchpoints are identified they can be mapped on the customer journey in a horizontal axis that is in line with the journey's main stages. Based on the empirical results Figure 7 represents horizontally the identified key stages of the pre-purchase journeys, and separate key touchpoints are mapped under the pre-purchase stages. As seen, the touchpoints can be seen to narrow down to more specified

channels during the journey to find more specific solution-oriented information. Existing literature indicated a reason that can explain to the narrowing of touchpoints. Broilo et al. (2015, 200) and Kotler and Keller (2015, 196) identified that searching begins with heightened attention as buyer becomes more representative for the information when a need is recognized. During information search, the focus shifts to active information search, when the need is recognized, and the final purchase decision is closer and more relevant (Kotler & Keller 2015, 196). In addition, the empirical findings found that there are a versatile variety of different touchpoints that can be owned by different stakeholders. Figure 7Figure 7 represents each key touchpoint and which stakeholder is the owner of each touchpoint. This helps to visualize which touchpoints marketers can direct strategic actions towards and where to cooperate with other stakeholders. Touchpoints identification and categorizing implements the Figure 7theory of different touchpoints categorization Figure 7Figure 7created by Lemon & Verhoef (2016), and this method is used to visualize the empirical results more effectively and on a deeper level.

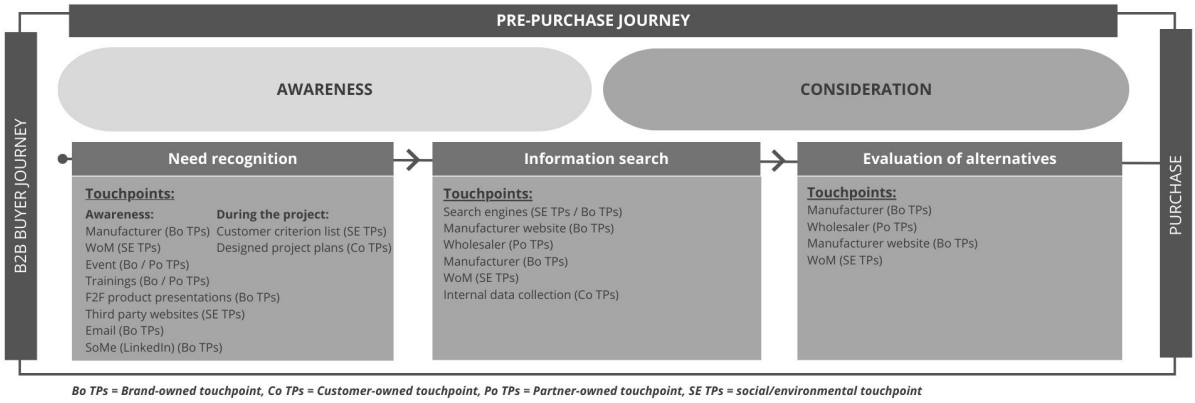

Figure 7 Buyer persona's pre-purchase journey and identified key touchpoints

Broilo et al. (2016, 202) highlighted that buyers tend to have different preferences and criteria that guides their decision if a certain source is beneficial and valuable for them. In addition, the research proposed that the information sources need to be reliable, time efficient, informative, accessible, and understood easily to be chosen. Similarly, the empirical results indicated that it is critical to offer relevant and informative content that is easily findable because contractors have time-sensitive projects and therefore the time for searching information is limited. This leads to the fact that if contractors do not find the information needed fast and easily, they will search it from somewhere else. In addition, the empirical results indicated that contractors have a specific need that guides them during the information search and when seeking solutions for a certain business case. This implies that decision-makers' information needs are specific and

more technical-oriented in their decision-making journey. Webster (1965, 373) highlighted similarly that B2B buyers need to evaluate their goals and define the criteria list before starting to search for potential solutions as that helps to align search needs and potential alternatives in the market.

The empirical results stated that contractors are using both offline and online channels during the pre-purchase journey. The existing literature supports these results as Broilo et al. (2016, 205) highlighted that buyers search for information through online or offline sources or the variation of the two to find the relevant information in the decision-making process. The empirical results indicated that the most used online channels during the decision-making process were search engines and manufacturers' websites. In addition, TREW Marketing and GlobalSpec (2022, 8) survey indicated that the most used channel in information search was the vendors' or suppliers' websites. Furthermore, the results indicated that there are two tactics that contractors use to search for information from online sources. The first way is to search through search engines for potential vendors by using the relevant keywords for the search, and the other option is that the contractor has a certain manufacturer in mind and searches for it using the company name and goes to the manufacturer website to search for specific information on their products and solutions. Marketers need to consider search engine optimization for increasing the company-related content organic findability. The existing literature is in line with this empirical finding as Terho et al. (2022, 304) and Kannan and Li (2017, 29-30) suggested that search engines are the common information search channel where customers can search based on their criteria and relevant keywords. Therefore, Terho et al. (2022, 304) proposed that search engine optimization is valuable tactic to increase the findability for content-related content and the brand. In addition, the empirical findings show that the key offline information searching channels are typically different stakeholders and other interactive channels. Decision-makers typically tend to lean toward their close contact network like colleagues, partners, and other people working in the same industry. Direct contact with the wholesaler or the manufacturer is an effective and easy information source for the decision-makers because searching information online can be seen as time-consuming.

In addition, contractors are using internal and external sources during the decision-making process. Similarly, Klein, and Ford (2003, 30) have identified that buyers tend to search information by balancing the internal and external level sources. The empirical findings indicate that contractors have internal documentation where they can have flyers, brochures,

and other materials and internal social networks with industry expertise and experiences that support decision-making. In addition, contractors are using external sources where they can seek information through partners, sales representatives, or search engines and a variation of websites. Moreover, the empirical results indicate that contractors significantly emphasize their past experiences of the manufacturers and the products in their decisions and when suggesting solutions for their customers. Court et al. (2009) research highlighted that B2B buyers have industry knowledge, previous experiences, and references of different brands at the beginning of the decision-making process that can influence their decisions. This assumption supports empirical findings, as contractors tend to have familiar brands in mind at the beginning of the decision-making journey. Furthermore, contractors may be prejudiced against manufacturers who have given negative experiences on previous projects. Typically, in the consideration stage if there is a need to acquire high-cost solutions it is beneficial and valuable for contractors to get manufacturers' assistance when needs have certain specifications and criteria, and the quotations must be requested before the evaluation process.

The empirical findings indicate that during the pre-purchase journey contractors have a specific need for a certain project. However, there is room for marketers to affect the decision-making before the projects begin by raising awareness about the solutions they have to offer. Terho et al. (2022, 304) highlighted similarly that companies can improve their findability through different digital channels by indicating where their audiences search for information and interact. This way contractors can potentially remember the manufacturer or its solutions and when the project begins the buyer can search for more detailed information about the manufacturer and its solutions or directly contact the manufacturer to request a quotation. The empirical findings indicated that the most used channels for increasing awareness are LinkedIn, events, email, training, direct contact with the sales, industry websites, and news. Manufacturers can to some extent influence their presence in industry websites or news, but it depends on the site. In addition, Andersson and Wikström (2017, 1105) discovered that LinkedIn is a beneficial channel for attracting large audiences and seeking new customers. Terho et al. (2022, 304) highlighted that company representatives can boost company awareness and findability by sharing company-related content on their personal accounts and it can be beneficial for boosting social selling and company presence towards potential buyers. In addition, contractors value word-of-mouth (WoM) along their decision-making process as they trust and value close networks experiences and expertise. The empirical results indicated

contractors' different content preferences along the pre-purchase journey that are represented in Figure 8.

Figure 8 Content preferences along the pre-purchase journey

The empirical findings state that the content preferences are highly dependent on the pre-purchase journey stage. In an awareness phase, buyers perceive valuable high-level information that can increase awareness of various solutions, brand, and industry trends. Similar outcomes showed the recent study by Andersson and Wikström (2017, 1105) which highlighted that content needs to be more general-level and targeted to broader audiences when raising awareness. In addition, Andersson and Wikström (2017, 1105) highlighted that the information that highlight problem-solving, thought leadership, technological trends are seen as valuable in B2B technology industry. Whereas in a consideration phase, more specific and technical-related information about the solutions is more valuable and beneficial for the decision-makers. In the consideration phase, one explaining factor is that the need is evaluated clearly and precisely, and the purchasing process has typically already begun whereas, in the awareness phase, the need is not yet entirely specified if there is missing a concrete business case, and the goal is to find solutions and manufacturers for the further evaluation stage. Andersson and Wikström (2017, 1105) support this finding as the content messages should raise a brand, high-level information of the solutions benefits and value-creating factors, and industry trends at the beginning of the journey and the content should be provided to a broad audience.

To conclude, the empirical findings guide the companies in focusing on building versatile content depending on the buyers' information searching goals and content needs in each journey stage. Focusing on the key touchpoints is critical for marketers to take into consideration in order to provide content based on buyer personas' information needs which assists buyers along the pre-purchase journey. The empirical findings indicate that when a

potential buyer is moving into the consideration phase the diversity of the content plays a critical role. Typically, important areas in the decision-making are to know if the solution is suitable for certain business cases, what the technical specification are and do those satisfy the pre-defined business needs and criteria list, and how the solution is more valuable compared to the competition. The findings show that in the consideration phase, technical documents such as technical datasheets, product catalogs and brochures, user manuals and installation guides, maintenance documents, how-to videos and configurations, and other digital tools are the most used content types. TREW marketing and GlobalSpec (2022, 19) conducted a survey and found similar results as the most used content in the B2B technology industry was different product-specific content such as technical documents, product demo videos, white papers, how-to videos, CAD drawings, and product configurators.

6.1.3. Key value-creating factors of B2B buyers

The third research sub-question focuses on the decision-making criteria of the B2B buyer persona which are seen value-creating factors of the purchase decisions. In addition, the aim of the sub-question was to identify how the final purchase decision is formed at the end. Therefore, the last research sub-question is defined as *what are the key value-creating factors that influence B2B buyers purchase decisions?* As earlier discussed, the empirical findings discovered that needs and goals are based on construction plans and customer criteria that are formulated at the beginning of the project. Webster (1965, 373) supported the defined finding as in the evaluation stage the goals and the criteria list are a base for buyers' final purchase decisions. Furthermore, the findings by Broilo et al. (2016, 206) support the empirical findings as buyers' behaviours and decisions vary based on the criteria of the need, personal intentions, information search, and close social network. The empirical findings of this study lean to this existing literature that there are several variables that affect the purchase decision such as the decision makers' and their customers' desires and criteria list, the found information, past experiences, and social network. All these variables are seen as determinant criteria which can vary depending on the project and even during the project.

The empirical findings indicated that in the construction industry, the different product needs are multidimensional. In new construction projects the needs are more multidimensional than in retail investment project. In the new construction projects the aim is to build electricity for the entire building whereas in the repair investments projects the specific solutions needs to be

repaired with new solutions. According to Webster (1965, 375), the evaluation of alternatives begins with qualifying vendors based on the needs and criteria lists. The empirical results indicate the same that after the information observation, most qualified manufacturers or suppliers are chosen for further evaluation and solution quotations are requested. The results indicated that typically, the volume of purchased products is mainly based on price and the products are usually purchased through wholesaler channels. High-cost acquisitions that necessitate comprehensive planning take more time to decide, and evaluation is more time-consuming, orientation-driven and involves multiple decision-makers. In high-cost products or solutions, the evaluation process begins when the manufacturer's quotations are received, and the price range is set for the solutions. The following Figure 9 represents the key criteria that affect the decision-making of contactors categorized based on organisation size.

Figure 9 Key criteria affecting to decision-making compared organisation sizes

The existing literature defined process of evaluating alternatives that B2B buyers typically follow: (1) vendor qualification based on goals and criteria list, (2) comparing offerings with criteria list, and lastly (3) comparing different vendors' offerings together. In addition, the empirical findings found that criteria can vary between decision-makers, but similarities were identified. Which sector the project is conducted in can have an effect to the criteria and to how flexible the decision-making process can be. In the public sector, the decision-making is strict and straightforward, and the main decision-making variable is the price and the most affordable one is chosen. Whereas in the private sector, there is more room for the decision-making process because there the price can be seen as starting point, and at the end the product's overall functionality and suitability are the main goal for the final decision. In the private sector, the

criteria can vary depending on if the construction organisation is small-, medium- or large-sized. Small-sized organisations typically emphasize prices whereas in medium- and large-sized organisations the product specifications play a significant role together with the price. The empirical findings indicated that the most common evaluation process is to use tables where to add all the variables about each solution and add them next to each other. After listing all the variables in the tables based on the criteria list the variables are weighted and scored based on which are considered the most important, and which are not that valuable compared to other variables. The solution with the highest score is typically the most suitable option in the end and the final decision can be conducted. Kotler and Keller (2015, 197) support this finding as they highlighted that the supplier-evaluation model is the commonly used tool for making evaluations and the aim of the tool is to add different attributes and rating scales which depend on the buying situation.

The empirical findings showed that contractors typically evaluate 3-4 solutions from different manufacturers and compare them together based on a set of criteria, contractors' expertise in technical specifications, and past experiences. Similarly, Webster (1965, 375) and Kotler and Keller (2015, 223) identified that typical criteria that affect B2B buyers' decisions are past experiences with a product and the brand if the vendor is known in the industry, company size, and the quality of the production. In addition, the empirical findings showed that in the construction industry, decision-makers qualify different vendors at first mainly by price range. The empirical findings highlighted that each organisation despite the size valued positive past experiences and familiarity with the manufacturer. If mentioned variables are not fulfilled it is seen as risky for the contractors to choose the manufacturer, meaning that if there are negative experiences with the manufacturer or their products, or they do not have previous experiences with certain manufacturers or the product, and if a manufacturer is not known in the market. Similarly, Webster (1965, 375) identified these variables as risky for B2B buyers when it is easier to consider the ones that are familiar to the decision-makers. In addition, Webster (1965, 375) categorized separately vendor-related and product-related criteria that can be used in the evaluation process. The empirical findings show that functionality of the products and solutions plays a significant role, but the solution is viewed more from the total-benefit point-of-view. Medium- and large-sized organisations emphasized solutions' lifetime as an important factor and usually the contractors' customers value long lasting solutions because retail investments are expensive to conduct. Therefore, this explains the reason why medium- and large-sized organisations value the maintenance as a criterion in the decision-making. Small-sized

organisations on the other hand value criteria such as ease of installation and product quality, but the price is the most important determinant as prices affect significantly small organisations' competitiveness in highly competitive markets. Based on the empirical findings, it is challenging to generalize different product-related variables' importance as in each project the weights of different variables can vary based on customers' desires and a pre-defined criteria list.

6.1.4. Improving B2B buyers' customer experience in the pre-purchase journey

Finally, after discussion of the sub-questions has concluded, the focus can shift to address the main research question. The main research question was *how to improve B2B buyers' customer experience in the pre-purchase journey?* The empirical findings indicate that B2B buyers' pre-purchase journey is not linear and the needs that drive the actions in the journey are multidimensional. This empirical finding supports the statement by Grewal & Roggeveen (2020, 4) and Cornfield (2021) that customers are not always following a linear journey. To visualize the study's key findings the revised model of the theoretical framework is conducted and presented in Figure 10. The B2B buyer goes through the awareness and consideration phases when making decisions, but the journey can be divided into three specific main stages that B2B buyers go through before the final purchase decision: (1) need recognition, (2) information search, and lastly (3) evaluation of alternatives. Under the pre-purchase journey stages, the key touchpoints of the B2B buyers are identified. Under the touchpoints, the identified content preferences are presented. Content preferences indicate type of information and messages B2B marketers need to consider when creating content for each stage of the B2B buyer's pre-purchase journey. Lastly, there is indicated the potential strategic actions of marketing and sales for improving B2B buyers' pre-purchase journey.

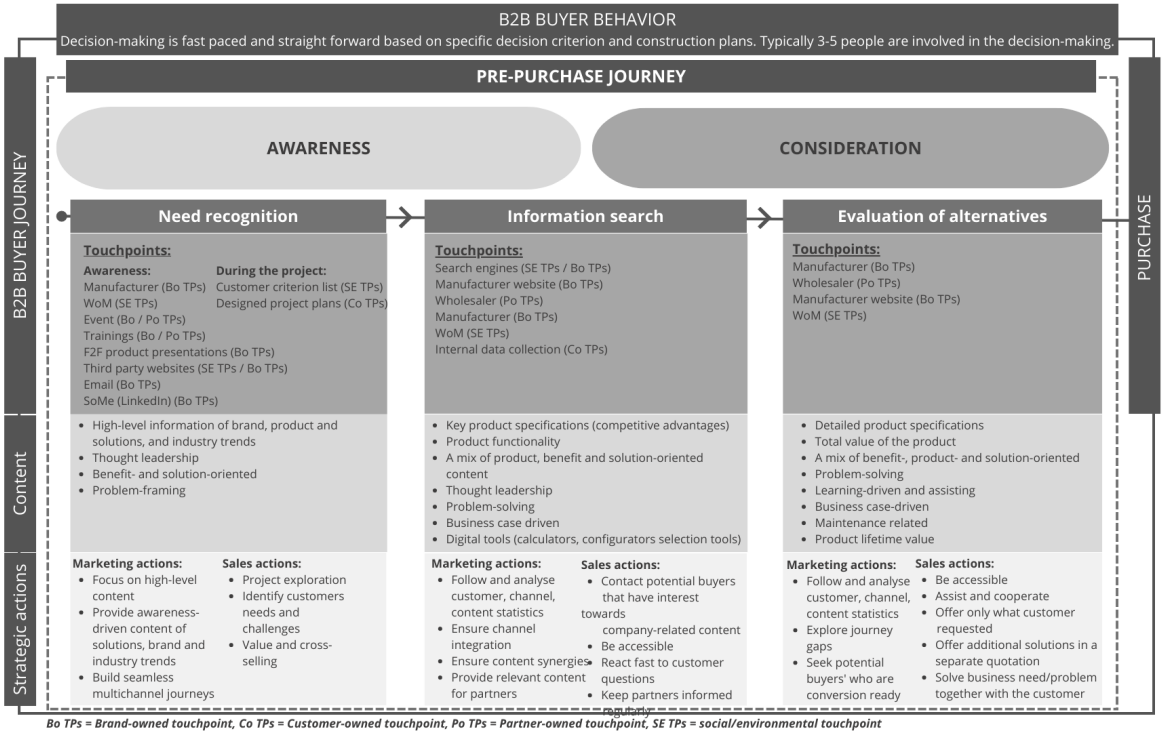

Figure 10 Revised theoretical framework

The conducted discussion of sub-questions provided insights on the targeted buyer persona's buying behavior during the pre-purchase journey. In addition, it gave valuable knowledge to finding ways on how to manage and improve the marketing and sales actions for providing better customer experiences in pre-purchase journeys. According to Stein and Ramaseshan (2016, 18), and Grewal and Roggeveen (2020, 3) viewing customers' entire journeys from a customer perspective helps to find the key actions to enhance and improve customers' experiences and satisfaction. As empirical findings show buyer persona mapping indicates the key characteristics that guide buyer behavior. Whereas the buyer pre-purchase journey mapping based on the buyer persona characteristics represents the core stages and key touchpoints that buyers perceive as the most valuable during the pre-purchase journey. The basis of the effective buyer journey design is to focus on developing integrated and engaging pre-purchase journey experiences to reduce loss of potential buyers. As empirical findings showed, in the construction industry buyers tend to contact directly the wholesaler or manufacturer, or they may first try to search for potential solutions by exploring preferred online channels and then contact the wholesaler or manufacturer. According to Holliman and Rowley (2014, 270), content marketing is a tactic to engage customers during the journeys towards the purchase. In addition, Terho et al. (2022, 302-304) highlighted that increasing

knowledge of customers, mapping their journeys, and finding content that buyers perceive valuable, is a beneficial foundation for effective content marketing.

The empirical findings showed that content preferences can change depending on which stage the buyer is at in the pre-purchase journey. Likewise, Zomerdijk and Voss (2010, 69) identified that customer engagement can vary based on connection level in the environment and participation during the journey stages. The empirical findings indicated that the content preferences are multidimensional, and it begins with high-level information that increases awareness of the brand, products, and solutions. Similarly, Terho et al. (2022, 302) highlighted that in the beginning of the journey problem-framing content provides customers with more high-level visionary perspectives on business-relevant themes and encourages open-minded thinking. The empirical findings show that when a potential buyer moves towards the consideration phase it shifts the interest more towards the key benefits, value propositions of the solutions, problem-solving, and high-level specifications of the products. Terho et al. (2022, 302) supports this finding by indicating that problem-solving content is responsive content which supports solving buyers' recognized needs and it is seen to have a larger effect during the consideration stage of the pre-purchase journey. Lastly, at the end of the consideration in the evaluation stage the content preferences shift to more specific and detailed specifications of the products and deeper knowledge of the solutions. In addition, in the evaluation stage, it is typical that buyers need assistance with specifying the solution to certain business cases. The empirical findings show that in each stage of the journey the content needs are going from broad high-level information towards more detailed and specific information of certain solutions. In addition, Terho et al. (2022, 302) identified that it is important to craft synergistic content paths along the pre-purchase journey. The content in each journey stage needs to have logical relations and generate deeper knowledge for guiding buyers through the journey towards the conversion. Importance of synergistic content crafting is raising in the empirical findings when considering the content preference evaluation during the journey (Figure 10).

Based on the results, when designing journeys that are engaging and where buyers will take actions and move towards purchase, it is important to consider providing versatile content based on buyers' value-creating factors through key touchpoints. In addition, the content messages and channels need to be synergic and integrated to ensure a continuation of the pre-purchase journey. As the empirical results indicated, in buyers' pre-purchase journey each channel has separate purposes in information search, for example social media is used to

increase awareness, websites for finding detailed information and events for networking and increasing knowledge of manufacturers and solutions in the market. Similarly, Andersson and Wikström (2017, 1103) indicated that for example in social media channels, it is a possibility to attract different audiences with personalized messages when each channel has a different purpose. In addition, it is critical to focus on key touchpoints and provide content that is valuable and engaging for buyers. Sharing content in the pre-purchase journey needs to be created based on the buyers' content needs and value-creating factors in the decision-making. Terho et al. (2022, 303) support this finding when the content needs to guide buyers forward on the journey by using call-to-actions and considering personal, engaging, and relevant messages that engage the buyer persona along different journey stages. In addition, based on empirical findings, it is possible to interpret that it is important to ensure that the content is accessible, and the contact details are available and easy to find on each channel when potential buyers want to be in contact. It is critical to make sure that all partners and other stakeholders have the relevant content for supporting and assisting potential buyers. Designing the buyer journeys based on buyers' needs, interests, preferences, and challenges, it is important to manage and analyse regularly how the journey functions based on gathered customer, channel, and content related data.

The empirical results indicated that in pre-purchase journeys both marketing and sales efforts are needed and the cooperation between these functions is critical. In the awareness stage, marketing plays the most critical role with content marketing tactics to trigger buyers to engage interest of the company and its offerings. In addition, marketers need to ensure that channels are integrated and to effectively guide potential buyers in their pre-purchase journey towards the purchase. In addition, marketers can seek potential prospects who are interested from company related content and therefore find potential leads for sales to convert. These findings bring more evidence to the existing literature as Järvinen and Taiminen (2015, 170) identified that marketing actions in the pre-purchase journey focus on channel integration, multichannel management, content creation, and management, and finding prospects for sales to convert. Previous literature supports the empirical findings that in the consideration stage the sales have been raising their role when potential buyers typically need more assistance for making the final purchase. In addition, the findings indicate that a contractor's final purchase decision typically needs reassurance from an expert to reduce potential risk assumptions of the solutions not being suitable for their project and business case. Existing theories are in line with the empirical findings that marketers' task is to help and assist B2B buyers to solve their business

problems (Meyer & Schwager 2007, 119; Yaghtin et al. 2020, 1007). In addition, the empirical findings showed that supporting, assisting and problem-solving driven selling is perceived as valuable in the construction industry. Directing sales representatives to shift their selling tactics more towards helping customers to solve their business problems by raising value-creating factors can lead to better sales performance. Based on the empirical findings, decision-makers in the construction industry value that the manufacturer cooperates with them during the project to find the most suitable solutions for their business cases. The potential sales tactics for this are to cooperate with the buyer and identify what value to bring for a buyer to be satisfied. Terho et al. 2012, 174, presented value-selling that could be a potential tactic for sales to consider when the buyer specific value-creation factors can be identified. Based on the empirical findings, attracting contractors with value-selling tactics can provide positive customer experiences when buyers value-creating factors are identified and considered. Delivering valuable customer experiences is a significant benefit for the manufacturer to get chosen in future projects when one of the identified key criteria for the contractors' decision-making is the past experiences.

According to Terho et al. (2022, 301), tracking the buyers' maturity levels that can be positive or negative is beneficial in valuable content creation. If the buyer's maturity is positive the buyer is interacting with company-related content whereas if it is negative the buyer does not interact with content. The empirical results suggest that buyer journey management is important to do regularly when it offers an opportunity to seek journey gaps and new potential buyers through the journey and their content preferences for content marketing improvement purposes. The existing theory supports the suggestion to track and manage the buyer journey to find potential gaps where potential buyers do not react or response to company-driven content. In addition, the empirical results indicated that buyers could feel information overload if there are multiple channels and a large amount of content available, for example, different manufacturers have several different product categories to choose and find product specific information from, which can be time-consuming for buyers to go through. Driving valuable content marketing and content findability supports potential buyers in finding needed information to satisfy their needs and supporting them towards the purchase. In addition, Terho et al. (2022, 301) highlighted that the principle of journey facilitation is to track and analyse the engagement levels of produced content regularly for example different measurements such as website visits, web surfing path, views, downloads and clicks. In addition, by following and analysing the target group's provided feedback for the company-driven content it can be used

as guidelines to create more valuable content for the buyer persona's real needs and interests (Court et al. 2009; Andersson & Wikström 2017, 1105). Terho et al. (2022, 301) suggested the lead scoring models can be seen as one of the journey measurements to help to analyse how mature a potential buyer is in the purchasing process. This supports the other suggestions based on the empirical results of the criticality of tracking and managing the buyer journeys.

6.2. Conclusions

The motive of this research was to find ways to improve the B2B buyer journey customer experience in the pre-purchase phase. Existing buyer journey literature has researched the main structure of the buyer journeys as a one complete journey that consists of the stage's pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase. However, existing research has identified the core stages of the buyers' pre-purchase journey but has not focused in detail on each stage of the journey. This leaves a research gap on how to identify B2B buyer persona's key characteristics, touchpoints and value-creating factors which guide buyers through the pre-purchase journey towards purchase decisions. The aim of this study was to increase the understanding of pre-purchase journey stages, critical touchpoints, and buyer persona's buying characteristics and based on the gained knowledge to identify what marketing actions can be used to develop customer experiences in the pre-purchase journey. In addition, this study had motives to implement existing academic theories in a practical context. The key findings of this study are concluded and presented in a revised theoretical framework in the Figure 10Figure 10. The framework presents the B2B buyers' pre-purchase journey stages that they go through before the final purchase is conducted. The pre-purchase journey was mapped based on the buyer persona's core journey stages and key touchpoints which buyers perceive relevant in their decision-making process (appendix 2). The identified B2B buyers' core pre-purchase stages were the following: need recognition, information search, and evaluation of alternatives.

Contractors' needs are multidimensional and provided by the customers. In addition, construction plans are determinant for specifying what the needs are for certain business cases. Contractors tend to use a mix of both online and offline touchpoints where to find information along their pre-purchase journey. Furthermore, information needs in each stage transform during the journey from general-level to more detailed information needs. It is important for marketers to consider pre-purchase journeys' customer-centricity and the fact that in B2B marketing the aim is to support buyers with their decisions rather than pushing offers towards

buyers. Digitalization has brought multiple channels where to create and provide content for existing customers or seeking new potential prospects to convert. Content creation should focus on providing information based on customers' business needs and goals and on finding solutions for their challenges. In addition, it is critical for marketers to consider how the content is available for buyers to find. Marketers need to focus on improving buyer's pre-purchase journeys by considering multichannel marketing strategies together with content marketing. The key activities where marketers need to focus on is to enhance channel linkage and synergising content through separate channels. Furthermore, marketers need to regularly manage multichannel management for enchasing continuous and comprehensive pre-purchase journeys. It is beneficial to evaluate regularly B2B buyers' pre-purchase journey performance by analysing customer-, channel-, and content-related statistics. Regular evaluations ensure pre-purchase journey development by finding gaps in the journey that can influence losing potential buyers. In addition, sales representatives have an important role in the pre-purchase journey because contractors are contacting sales representatives along their pre-purchase journey if the manufacturer's solutions are considered during the decision-making process. However, marketing and sales can seek potential prospects which have shown high-interest on company-related content and try to contact potential buyers before they have made the decisions. In the construction industry, the most beneficial selling tactics identified were problem-solving, cross-, value- and social-selling. Contractors find it valuable when a sales representative demonstrates expertise and provides support in identifying the most suitable solution for their business needs. In conclusion, both marketing and sales efforts are critical in improving customer experiences in the pre-purchase journey.

6.3. Theoretical contributions

This study was able to bring more evidence to existing buyer journey research literature in B2B context. In addition, this study managed to expand current knowledge of improving customer experience in the journey before a purchase is conducted. The expansion of current knowledge was accomplished by delving into the pre-purchase journey in detail, rather than solely examining the entire buyer journey, which also encompasses the purchase and post-purchase phases.

B2B pre-purchase journeys are used for increasing the knowledge of customers purchasing characteristics and how to target marketing and sales effects to serve seamless customer

experiences in pre-purchase journeys. In addition, the pre-purchase journey visualizes buyers' key stages and touchpoints during the journey. Therefore, when buyers' perceived stages and touchpoints can be identified it offers insights where marketers and sales are relevant to focus resources on for enchasing customer-centric journeys. The indicated B2B buyer pre-purchase journey consists of three core stages that can be identified as (1) need recognition, (2) information search, and (3) evaluation of alternatives. The research brings more evidence to the existing theories on how the pre-purchase journey core stages are visualized (Webster 1965; Neslin et al. 2006; Puccinelli et al. 2009; Court et al. 2009; Richardson 2010; Grewal et al. 2015; Lemon & Verhoef 2016; Stein & Ramaseshan 2016; Kannan & Li 2017). Buyers' key touchpoints vary along the journey based on their certain need and preferences in each stage. In the beginning of the journey where buyers have not identified a certain need, buyers tend to seek high-level information based on their interests and preferences. Whereas when a certain need is formed the active information search begins based on the needs and goals. Therefore, the further the buyer advances in the pre-purchase journey the deeper and specified information are needed. Buyers' pre-purchase journeys are highly guided by their business case and need, personal existing knowledge, experiences, and information sources. This implies the fact that buyer journeys can be complex and non-linear as each previous factor can vary based on individual. In addition, previous research indicated that B2B pre-purchase journeys can be complex and non-linear as B2B buying typically involves multiple decision-makers with varying purposes and typically B2B journeys are longer than in B2C context (Webster & Wind 1972, 12; Moon & Tikoo 2002, 293; Cornfield 2021; Mohan et al. 2022, 1).

In existing research, marketing efforts for providing valuable customer experiences in pre-purchase journeys is ensuring journey design by considering buyer persona characteristics (Webster 1965, 370; Neslin & Shankar 2009, 77; van der Veen & van Ossenbruggen 2015, 211; Duran 2018; Terho et al. 2022, 301; Vaughan 2022), customer-centric multichannel integration (Neslin & Shankar 2009, 77; Briedis et al. 2021; McKinsey & Company 2022; Chung et al. 2022), creating synergetic content paths and comprehensive content along each journey stages (Terho et al. (2022, 302), and lastly, developing journeys by measuring and analysing customer-, channel- and content-related data (Court et al. 2009; Briedis et al 2021). This research offers more evidence to previous research literature and indicated these marketing tactics to have opportunities in improving B2B buyers' customer experiences in the pre-purchase phase. In addition, marketing can follow maturity of buyers along the journeys and following it to find potential prospects for sales to convert. Sales has an important role

during the B2B buyer's pre-purchase journeys when B2B buyers tend to need assistance and reassurance along their decision-making path. Therefore, it is critical for sales to consider and use problem-solving and value-selling tactics in sales situations. In addition, B2B buyers' needs are considered as multidimensional and therefore cross-selling can bring more opportunities and increase sales performance.

In conclusion, this study contributes deeper insights and knowledge on how to build buyer personas with collected customer data and implement the knowledge for mapping the pre-purchase journey. In addition, this study indicated how to find the critical touchpoints and identified the needs and how customers go through the journey towards the purchase. This study also indicated that journeys have not been completely digitalized and the direct contact between the company representatives is still valuable along with the digital channels. Furthermore, this study was able to contribute a deeper knowledge of the pre-purchase journey which outlined the existing academic literature and brought it into practical context. The research conducted marketing and sales tactics on how to improve B2B buyers' customer experience in pre-purchase phase of the journey.

6.4. Managerial implications

B2B marketing has shifted more digital and buyer centric. This study provides several beneficial implications for B2B managers, particularly those operating in a similar industry to the construction industry. B2B marketing has shifted more towards digital and customer-centric. In addition, buyers are more demanding and in control of what channels to use and what type of content to consume during their decision-making path. The increasing shift to digitalization through the years has brought new opportunities and challenges for marketers. In the digital age, simply having a presence across various online channels is not enough. Seeking differentiation in the market marketers should shift their focus to design and build integrated buyer-centric journeys through the multiple channels for providing valuable customer experience along the pre-purchase journey. Seamless and buyer-centric journeys by considering marketing and sales cooperation provide a deeper understanding of buyer persona's behavior characteristics, targeted marketing content that considers buyers' needs and values, potential sales opportunities, and increased customer satisfaction.

The study's findings offer guidance on acquiring knowledge about potential customers as a foundation for developing the B2B buyer persona. Furthermore, the findings highlight how the buyer persona can be used as a foundation for mapping the pre-purchase journey. Pre-purchase journey mapping can be challenging to manage and indicate if buyer persona characteristics are not known. By understanding of B2B buyers' purchasing characteristics and their pre-purchase journeys, it gives building blocks for journey development based on buyers' preferences and value-creating factors. A deeper understanding of the phenomenon underlying B2B purchasing journeys and its characteristics enhances the ability to effectively address buyers' needs through the creation of value using sales and marketing strategies and thereby increasing the prospects for achieving success in marketing and sales performance. In the beginning, it is critical to identify the buyer persona by defining its business need, goals, and challenges in the industry. After buyer persona identification the mapping of the pre-purchase journey is more efficient to conduct. B2B pre-purchase journey mapping begins in core stage identification. B2B buyers are following the core pre-purchase stages where at first, they (1) identify and map the needs, (2) search potential solutions for the needs through different channels that they perceive the most effective, and lastly, (3) evaluate and compare the potential solutions together based on the pre-defined criteria list. Furthermore, when core stages are identified, it is important to identify the key touchpoints where the buyer persona tends to engage interest and consume content.

Increased digitalization has offered opportunities to engage the interest of potential buyers through different channels and gather customer-, channel- and content-related data. Marketers are facing challenges on how to utilize massive amounts of data, buyer persona knowledge, and marketing resources as a part of pre-purchase journey development. Therefore, it is crucial to find ways how to design, implement, manage, and evaluate the pre-purchase journey with the data available. Regular improvements based on data sources provide insights on how to guide buyers along the journey toward conversion and what are the journey gaps. The study also conducted the separate roles of marketing and sales, and how to manage cooperation along the buyers' pre-purchase journey. Buyer journey mapping is a beneficial tactic for sales as well as marketing to increase understanding of the specific customer group, what are their main pain points, and how to seek and offer relevant content and support on solving B2B buyers' business cases. In addition, the mapping supports the marketing and sales cooperation as the roles in each journey stage are identified.

The results indicated that buyers need both online and offline channels during their pre-purchase journey. In addition, the information search needs are transforming along the journey stages from explorative search towards active search and information is more specific and detailed. Searching mainly depends on the buyer persona's preferences, existing knowledge, previous experiences, and internal and external data sources. However, buyers are valuing assistance and reassurance during their decision-making path. Marketers need to consider integrated multichannel management and content synergies to provide valuable and seamless buyer journeys and sales should consider supporting selling tactics that drive value and reassurance for buyers' decision-making. In addition, marketers need to ensure information accessibility and findability. B2B buyers' have time-sensitive projects and therefore limited time to search for information. In addition, sales need to react to buyers' requests and questions fast to ensure potential sales opportunities and consider value-providing sales tactics.

6.5. Limitations and potential directions for future research

This study has a several limitations that can be used for future research of the topic. The generalization of the results is quite limited as B2B buyers' pre-purchase journeys can be seen complex and individuals' preferences and habits can differ in the journey. In addition, because the research was conducted in a specific industry in Finnish markets observing a specific customer group, the results need to be viewed critically when reflecting to other industries, customer groups and markets in different countries.

Limitations arise due to the research being conducted with qualitative research methods because there the sample size can be seen as rather small. Sample consisted of 15 interviews and the interviewees were chosen by following the pre-defined selection criteria. Therefore, the collected data provided beneficial and good answers for the case company to increase their knowledge of their target group, but the generalizability of the results can be regarded as quite limited for other companies and industries. Furthermore, responses can vary on an individual basis. Another limitation is that interviewees might forget to mention some relevant points because the questionnaire was presented during the interview at the first time. However, these findings underscore the paramount factors that occupy the forefront of buyers' thoughts.

This study showed and suggested a process and tools of how to improve and design B2B buyers' pre-purchase journeys in practice to improve marketing and sales strategies for specific

customer groups. Therefore, this process can be used in other company or industry settings in B2B context. However, on future research gap can be identified as how to manage buyer' journeys over time and what specific management and performance measurement tactics are seen beneficial and effective in practise. In addition, as B2B buyer journeys can be seen as complex and multidimensional, another future research gap could be to find methods on how to test and measure buyers' journeys in a multichannel context. By researching this gap there can be found potential directions on how to effectively lead B2B buyers towards the final purchase. Conducting for example, A/B testing in practice to improve pre-purchase journeys along different channels for example, social media, web, or email context. A/B testing can offer beneficial findings of how buyers proceed in different channels along the pre-purchase journey.

This research analyses and observes buyer interests and value-creating factors based on customer interviews where customer data was collected. Therefore, for future research, another potential gap could be to analyse and observe buyer interests only with gathered data from digital sources to find gaps in the pre-purchase journey in online channels. This suggestion can be suitable for cases where a specific company has already a well-defined buyer persona and has defined the major pain points of this specific buyer group. This can give further knowledge and suggestions for how to develop B2B buyer journeys more efficiently in practice by following existing data of where customer journeys typically end and how to find tactics to engage customers to explore more content in separate channels.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Interview questionnaire

BACKGROUND:

- What is your current role in your company and what are your responsibilities?
- What is the size of the company where you are working in? What is the personnel size and approximate revenue of the company?
- What is your typical customer like?

DECISION-MAKING PROCESS OF ELECTRICIAN INSTALLERS:

Describe what is the typical decision-making process in electrical contracting projects?

Additional questions:

- *Who are involved in decision-making and in which roles?*
- *What is a typical time frame in decision-making processes of acquisitions?*
- *What challenges/problems have you are facing during the decision-making?*

STAGE 1: NEED IDENTIFICATION:

How are the purchase/acquisition needs typically recognized?

Describe the different purchasing/acquisition needs you most often encounter.

Additional questions:

- *How does legislation and regulation of the electricity sector affect the identification of needs or purchases?*
- *How does industry trends affect to identification of needs or purchases?*

STAGE 2: INFORMATION SEARCH:

What is the typical information searching process in electrical contracting projects?

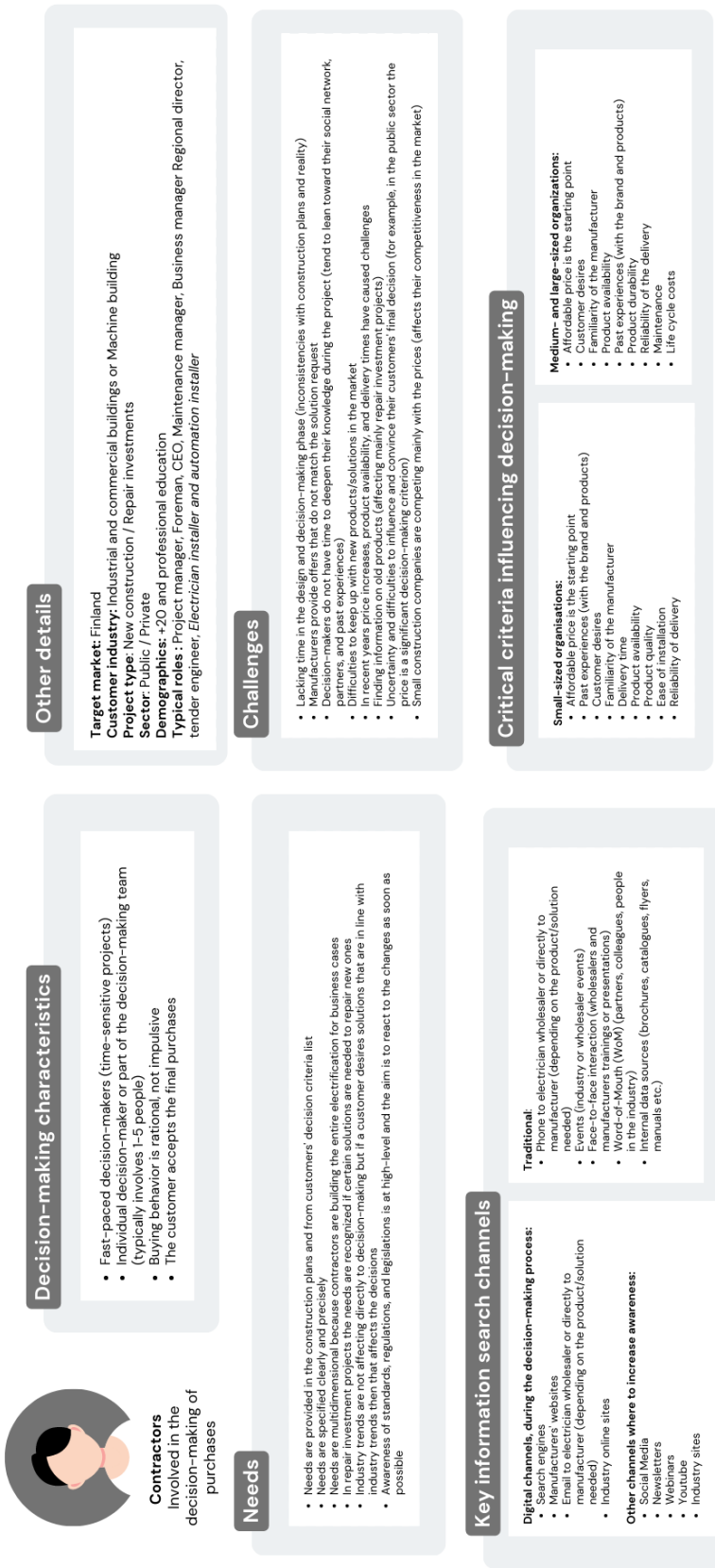
Additional questions:

- *What channels you use to get the information about different vendors/solutions/products?*
- *What kind of material do you need to support decision-making? (Do you, for example, need more product-specific or solution-oriented materials)*
- *How could the manufacturer/supplier improve different contents and their discoverability?*

STAGE 3: EVALUATION OF ALTERNATIVES BEFORE PURCHASE DECISION:

Describe the process of evaluating different solutions from different manufacturers. How do you use the collected information before making a final purchase decision?

Additional questions:

- *What do you find valuable at the solution, product, and company level? Which factors might influence the final purchase decision the most?*
- *Describe how choices are made between different manufacturers. Do you use any selection or evaluation methods to benefit from this?*
- *How many manufacturers' solutions/products do you usually compare together at the same time?*
- *How does the project schedules affect decision-making?*
- *What are the different reasons or factors why you end up rejecting a certain manufacturer's product/solution?*
- *What are the reasons why you would suggest certain products to your customers?*

Appendix 2. Buyer persona: Decision maker in construction industry