User journeys and interactive participation at virtual events

Case Study: Understanding event journey mapping, participant interactivity, and success measuring at Case Company X's virtual events

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EXAMENSARBETE	
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Sammandrag:
Syftet med detta examensarbete är att förstå och utvärdera skapande av evenemangsresor, deltagarinteraktivitet och framgångsmätning på virtuella evenemang hos Case company X. Användning av virtuella evenemang ökade snabbt när covid-19-pandemin tvingade majoriteten av evenemang online. Med Case company X flyttades alla evenemang online i början av 2020, och därför anses en djupare genomgång av de tidigare nämnda ämnena och funktionerna som används i virtuell evenemangsplanering vara relevant. Forskningen är utförd med kvalitativ forskningsmetod, och avhandlingen skapad med hjälp av relevant litteratur och intervjuer. Teoridelen är uppbyggd med två huvudämnen, det första är en bredare översikt över olika byggstenar för planering och genomförande av virtuella evenemang, och det andra en djupare insikt i service managament termer och verktyg relaterade till kartläggning av kundresor. Forskningsresultatena presenterar de genomförda individuella intervjuerna, där respondenterna är två verkställande producenter från fallföretaget. Respondenterna ger sina syn och åsikter på de frågor som diskuterades, och förklarar hur de upplever de diskuterade ämnena. Begränsningar uppstod på grund av det komplexa ämnet med många forskningsfrågor, vilket uppmuntrade framtida forskning med en snävare räckvidd och/eller kvantitativ forskningsmetod. Resultaten av denna forskning delas med fallföretaget för att fastställa möjlig framtida forskning inom företaget.

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Abstract:
This thesis aims to gain an understanding and evaluate event journey creation, participant interactivity, and success measuring at virtual events at Case company X. The usage of virtual events increased fast when the covid-19 pandemic forced events online. With Case company X all events were moved online in early 2020, and therefore a deeper review of the previously mentioned subjects and features utilized in virtual event planning at the experienced event provider organization is seen as relevant. The research is conducted with qualitative research method, the thesis created with the help of relevant literature and interviews. The theory section is built with two main subjects, the first one being a broader overview on different building blocks of planning and executing virtual events, and the second one a deeper insight to service management terms and tools related to customer journey mapping. The results present the findings from the conducted individual interviews, respondents being two executive producers from the case company. The respondents gave their views on the questions asked and explained how they experienced the subjects asked during the interviews. Limitations occurred because of the complex subject with many research objects, which encouraged future research with a narrower scope, and/or quantitative research method. The findings of this research are shared with the case company to determine possible future research within the company.

Keywords:	Virtual events, Journey mapping, User journeys, Participant interactivity, Measuring success
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1 INTRODUCTION

The pandemic has had its affections on businesses worldwide. Social distancing that has become a common practice in 2020 has forced people around the world to change their habits. Businesses have had to concentrate their normally physical operations online to reach their clients and audience. Digitalization is happening faster than ever.

Significant changes and challenges have been introduced in organizations that have had a strong physical event presence before the initial covid-19 peak. The reactions to the changes are only starting to merge into the operation models of organizations. Learned practices have had to be changed to new that match the consumer behaviour online.

Event organizers need to be aware of the challenges users face in reaction of the new lockdown, work-from-home culture, and those of what the new physical event-less world has exposed. Users might experience online fatigue and overwhelmingness when getting multiple event invitations in their inboxes and be unable to differentiate opportunities. (Vaughan 2020)

Many user journey related concepts are seen as important tools for mapping out users' paths when managing services, particularly among service designers. User journeys in the physical world differ to the user journeys in the web and adapting those to online environment require a completely new approach. Companies must be aware of the need for user journey design, that is a tool for mapping the customers route from first interest to the final goal. By combining all tracking information from the used systems can the researcher really understand which channel did what, and that is the detail that will define the most effective on-site user journey. (Sinden 2008)

According to Vaughan (2020) there is room for improvement from both the hosts and the tech platforms to improve the user interface and experience of virtual events. The hosts can get a clearer image of the overall user experience by studying the user journeys. Re-inventions need to be made for all types of virtual and digital events, webinars, and hosted sites.

This study seeks to demonstrate and bring answers on the meaning and possible benefits of event and user journey creation when designing virtual events, and research event attendee interactions in the virtual event environment. The case will be built around theory from existing literature relevant to the theme and by studying the operations within Case company X's organization.

1.1 Problem statement

Companies are facing challenges with adapting to changing circumstances with their event management operations. Social distancing is changing behaviours and limiting physical contact with people outside of households, with advising to maintain a 1 or 2-meter distance between self and others when in public, depending on the country. (Coroiu *et al.* 2020)

Moving event operations online together with the global change of behaviour is creating a huge change for the industry. There is a lot to adapt to as a business when providers and users learn to use new technologies together at the same time.

1.2 Aim

This thesis aims to research event user journeys, participants' interactivity in the virtual environment, and how these are considered when it comes to measuring success and performance as a post-event procedure. The research is also aiming to address general attitudes towards the mentioned concepts within Case company X's operations.

1.3 Research questions

RQ1. Are event user journeys considered important when planning and executing virtual events, and are those utilized when measuring performance?

RQ2. Is participant interactivity considered important when planning and executing virtual events, and is that measured when measuring performance?

1.4 Limitations

Because user journeys, participant interactivity, and success measuring are broad subjects that can be applied to many fields there will be limitations to the study. The research is going to have the focus area around event user journeys, participant interactivity, and success measuring regarding these concepts. Only one method is going to be used. The interviews in Case company X are only going to be conducted with two professionals in managing positions in the company, which will limit the research only to their viewpoints in the company. Case company X has been organizing virtual events on a large scale only since covid-19 started that forced all operations online. Webcasts and streamed events have been organized since the company was established in 2012.

1.5 Structure

This thesis is a case study, in which the research in Case company X is going to be conducted based on the findings from the theoretical part. It is structured by introducing the theme in the first chapter together with the problem statement, aim, research questions, limitations, and case company profile. The second chapter is the theoretical framework. The third chapter presents the method, which is qualitative mostly discussion-driven unstructured research based on the research objective. The fourth chapter presents the results from the empirical data, based on the findings from the interviews conducted with Case company X. The fifth chapter is a discussion connecting the theoretical framework with the results. The sixth chapter introduces conclusions, and suggestions for future research.

1.6 Case company profile

Case company X is one of the leading event organizations in the Nordics. Their core competence is planning and execution of events for different purposes, such as corporate, influencer, and media events, exhibitions, consumer, and employee events, the implementation being either physical or virtual. The main vision for the company is that all successful and meaningful business happens in the interaction between people.

The main mission for them is to build a world where people's interaction creates success stories for businesses, with events that focus on real encounters with a unique idea and a meaningful execution.

2 THEORY

In the following chapter, the literature used for this research is going to be presented, and the key concepts are opened and examined as a part of this study.

The theoretical framework is built based on findings during data collection, to combine relevant theories and concepts that complement the theme of this research. The aim is to study the connectedness between the theories.

2.1 Virtual events

Virtual events have become a common, and even preferred alternative to hosting an event physically. The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has forced businesses to digitalize their events completely.

Virtual events are event gatherings, where people experience the event rather in an online environment than in person. Typical examples of virtual events are webinars, virtual conferences, internal or external hybrid events. Webinars allow attendees to participate from all around the world to join and listen to the presentations, and typically favour conferencing tools that allow Q&A, the ability to present live or pre-recorded videos, and the ability to provide the content on-demand afterwards. Virtual conferences are built around a more complex structure and resemble in-person conferences. The agenda typically includes multi-session content presented live, consisting for example of keynotes, sessions, breakouts, and more. Community engagement tools are often used, and attendees can view keynotes in real-time, build their agenda from relevant content, and interact with other attendees. A hybrid event means a combination of physical and virtual. Internal hybrid events are company events that are usually used to share a message when the company is scattered on different continents. These can be for example companywide trainings, kick-offs, or townhalls. External hybrid events conversely are

for people outside your organization, used for example for industry conferences. (Howard 2020)

Virtual reality (VR) is a simulation created with computer modelling, that enables a person to interact with an artificial, three-dimensional (3-D) visual or another sensory environment. The user of a VR application is immersed in a computer-generated environment where the VR world is simulated through interactive devices. The simulation happens typically through goggles, headsets, gloves, or bodysuits. The user experiences the illusion of being there (telepresence) physically, the effect being created with motion sensors that pick up the users' movements usually in real time. (Britannica Academic 2021)

The term virtual community refers to a group of people that exchange words and ideas through digital networks. (Britannica Academic 2021)

2.1.1 Technical set-up

Muukkonen & Putkonen write that event organization without participants is pointless, and that the participants should always be the main focus when planning an event. The event planner should always take time to get to know their target audience before making any technical decisions. The technical expertise level of the audience should be acknowledged in the event production, the presumption being that participants do not have professional technical expertise of the used solutions. The event experience should aim to be effortless, easy, and pleasant, as any challenge might become a barrier and affect participation. (Muukkonen & Putkonen 2020: 36)

There are certain important questions that event organizers should ask themselves when planning virtual events. What kind of appliances are most likely used to attend the event, and how is the event accessed? What level of technical knowledge do the attendees have? How is registration organized? How is the participant going to behave, or consume the event? What can the participant do there? How does the participant get support if facing issues? (Muukkonen & Putkonen 2020: 36)

A primary challenge that Fortuna *et al.* faced when organizing eRum virtually was the identification of technological solutions to be used to connect participants at their event. The platform selected was chosen because it could efficiently recreate the spaces of a live conference digitally, like the reception area, main stage, parallel sessions, and sponsors booths. All sessions were to be hosted live with dedicated spaces for plenary and parallel sessions, and networking so the interaction between all parts would be possible. (Fortuna *et al.* 2020: 417)

Additional tools had to be added in the technical set-up for eRum, as the organizers later realized the platform did not have all the needed features. One technical solution was selected to host Q&As of keynote sessions, and to stream some parts of the event live on YouTube, and two others to manage all sounds during the live streaming, and to handle breaking times and slideshows in the YouTube streaming. Supporting staff were added to collect the questions for Q&A sessions. Each session was linked to its specific room configuration for Q&As, speakers had the opportunity to host people at a virtual table, or to have panel Q&A for regular sessions. Slack channel needed to be created for staff to manage communications between speakers and session chairs, and to provide technical support for the attendees, because the platform could not effectively communicate the "behind the scenes". (Fortuna *et al.* 2020: 418)

Users consume virtual content in a very different way compared to physical events. The competition for users' attention is hard and any obstacle or unclarity in the users' event path may result in a lack of interest towards the event. It is therefore important to understand the participants' path to the event, and where any challenging spots may be to solve the problems and prepare for them. Virtual event planning should be done to highly resonate previously set goals and the wanted experience. (Muukkonen & Putkonen 2020: 60)

Important questions to ask yourself when organizing a virtual event, are: what is the path in the event like? What all can you possibly affect regarding the participants' event path? (Muukkonen & Putkonen 2020: 60)

2.1.2 User participation

According to Lauren Hagerty (2019) it's important to ask certain questions when planning an engaging virtual event. First, knowing where the community engagement is happening, or what your community is talking about helps with the planning. Secondly, is your community asking questions that you could take a thought leading stance on?

Hung *et al*. (2010) address in their research, that previous studies have shown that customers' participation in the web influence the service innovation process. According to them, researchers have conducted several related studies that aim at participation, service development process and innovation performance rather than the antecedents of user behaviour. Those studies show that managing the customers' participation is a critical determinant of the effect of customer participation that in turn has an impact on service innovation.

Previous research in marketing according to Hung *et al*. show that customer participation can bring out a positive outcome for businesses, for example in forms of reducing costs and increasing of economic efficiency. They refer to previous literature, that indicate user participation being a new way of creating value. (Hung *et al*. 2010)

Hung *et al*. later open up the loyalty perspective in digital environment, saying that e-business success is closely related to its ability to foster customer loyalty. Flow experience and users' perceived value is explained out as "the term flow refers to a state of consciousness that is sometimes experienced by individuals who are deeply involved in an enjoyable activity". With that the authors refer to research made of human-computer interaction, where this flow theory is used to explain the users' states of involvement with the computer interface. It is stated that previous studies show that a flow is considered a critical intermediate variable in a behavioural model of website users' behaviour. (Hung *et al*. 2010)

2.1.3 Speaking and audience engagement

According to Mershon, event organizers should look for speakers that understand the principle that the speaker is not the guru, but the hero in the event is the person that is

sitting on the other side of the screen. The better it's understood who the audience is, the better the success, as engagement happens itself when the audience senses the connection. Knowing the audience and what pain points they might have together with applying the speaker's knowledge to something that is useful to the audience are critical matters the organizer should consider carefully. It's important for the speaker to understand what the audience is thinking and doing, by showing some sympathy that makes the listener feel relaxed. (Mershon 2021)

Crafting content for a niche audience is considered a high source of engagement. Chat functions are considered practical for communicating with the audience. Connecting to the audience through the screen is also seen as effective, but it might distract the speaker when seeing people's faces. Speaker training should be paid attention to, as it takes time to feel comfortable in the virtual setting where the speaker might have to communicate with face only. This differs a lot from the physical environment where the speaker can use the entire stage. (Mershon 2021)

Recruiting a host for virtual events might be a great idea. The skillset compared to a great speakers' is different, and the host might know better how to create the engagement with the audience, as they can read a room, and have a more energetic approach to lead the beginning. A good well-prepared host helps a lot with audience engaging at a multiple speaker event. The host can make the speaker feel more humane and help with getting the audience to know to speaker better, that most probably enhances the participants' experience. (Mershon 2021)

The speaker has to comply with whatever technology has been provided and is available by the event organizer. There are different practises to connect with the audience during a presentation, that help finding out what the audience is feeling about the presentation. There might be commenting, or polls enabled for the audience to interact, or maybe an even more advanced technology, where the speaker can see the participants faces and discuss with them. According to Mershon, great speakers might pause after a few minutes in the presentation and ask the audience if they want to hear more, or maybe pull out a poll. Asking the participants for example to comment either A, B or C in the chat might give more information to the speaker, and the content can then be more customized

according to the answers from the audience. It is a smart technique, it keeps people active and more engaged, and when an interactive participation feature like that is introduced early the audience learns the habit and starts engaging right from the beginning. Pausing, taking the time to read the comments is important for the speaker to do, as it keeps participants engaged. (Mershon 2021)

Hagerty (2019) encourages to throw out the formal presentations for creating an engaging virtual agenda, and instead investing in the efforts for hosting a pre-selected, and/or live Q&A. She emphasizes the proven desire for the event users to participate during the event and refers to supporting, existing data.

“As close as possible to physical" was the main principle when organizing eRum. All talks were decided to be presented live, with tailored Q&A sessions following the different types of talks. As the in-person interaction was not going to exist with the virtual event, dedicated networking areas and yoga sessions were added for each day to replace the absence of the physical human interaction. The organizers realized after a short time that the virtual conference was a great way to innovate new alternatives and to reach an even wider audience worldwide. (Fortuna *et al.* 2020: 417)

2.1.4 Event promotion

Fortuna *et al.* describe their event promotion adjustments in multiple ways, saying that a major reorganization had to be carried out to adapt the virtual conference format when moving their previously planned physical event online. Their conference website was developed to graphically correspond to the conference logo, and they decided to have a more architecturally informative approach, so the users would have easier access to information. The website was updated frequently to reflect important milestones, such as the opening of submission and registration, or an announcement of the virtual event, and program publication. Their promotion strategy was designed to be fully virtual and costless, using mostly social media like Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn, a partner blog, and emails from target mailing lists. An editorial calendar was used for planning the social media strategy, where all posts were scheduled from the start, making sure the style of the content was consistent across all channels over time. When the event was moved

online a dedicated YouTube channel was created for additional content, like video interviews with keynote speakers. YouTube turned out to be instrumental in supporting the virtual event. Informal interviews with keynote speakers were published beforehand, providing a relaxed narration of the speakers. YouTube was also used to stream sessions during the live event, and for publishing recordings of conference sessions after the event. (Fortuna *et al.* 2020: 418)

For the eRum 2020 event, Twitter was found to be the platform that generated the highest engagement. The number of followers for their page doubled in a year, with a radical increase when the conference was turned into a virtual event. (Fortuna *et al.* 2020: 419)

Social media is characterized by its open access, speed of generation, and high volume making it an important source of information. Content characteristics like emotions play an important role and can lead to topics becoming viral in social media. Important events trigger strong emotions in society. (Daou 2021)

Fortuna *et al.* emphasize the need to keep the attention high to keep the audience engaged when re-organizing an international conference online. With their event, social media presence was increased with additional content, new channels, and user engagement features like games and contests. These helped with maintaining their audience active. Online pre-conference activities and virtual banners were added to increase visibility. Sponsorship packages that they had for the physical event were replaced by virtual alternatives, and the cost for those was reduced to have more sponsors participate. (Fortuna *et al.* 2020: 417)

2.1.5 User behaviour in social networks

Social network as a communication tool has become a more important part of people's daily lives, Twitter being one of the most popular sites among all social network platforms. A social network is a service that directly facilitates real-life relationships between people on the internet and expands other services online. In other words, social networks can be defined as a social structure, that can be either organizational or personal. (Xu *et al.* 2020)

Xu *et al.* discuss the rapid development of information technology where people's lives are inseparable from social networks. Digital information is all-around individuals and floods the entire social network. Life and employment information are all becoming digitized. In today's so-called era of social networking, users provide data with immeasurable potential scholarly value. Social networks user bases are growing at a faster pace than ever before. In 2016 Twitter announced the percentage of active users increased by 3% compared to the same period of time the previous year. Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Google+, Instagram, and other global online social networking sites have also demonstrated promising growth. (Xu *et al.* 2020)

The rise of social networks has also created new social forms and advocacy for the real world. The core value of social networks is in the relationships between individuals. Xu *et al*. also point out that by studying the relationship between users and the information dissemination model on social networks, the real network can be analysed to identify influential users, as well as to support enterprises' decision-making processes for market management. Social networks are not only used by people that are highly important to businesses. By studying the influence of individual users, the development of public opinions or rumours can be affected by opinion leaders when they are disseminating new ideas. User-released information can also be predicted and controlled, which can be used further for emotional analysis or topic evolution research. (Xu *et al.* 2020)

2.1.6 Measuring success

An important goal for post-event activities is measuring success. Muukkonen & Putkonen (2020) advise that once the main objective for the virtual event is decided, it's important to address what is wanted to be achieved, and how the information is going to be collected. Doing this before the event is crucial, as technical solutions for collecting the information from different programs may be needed. The success with events is often measured by the number of participants.

2.1.7 Availability

Muukkonen & Putkonen define availability in the virtual event context in the following way: all digital services, like websites and mobile applications are available and understood by everyone, despite any possible mental or physical limitations. Accessibility is often associated with physical spaces, and availability conversely with digital and intangible environments. A joint thing with both terms is the common goal of all environments being available for everyone. A larger number of participants are likely to attend keeping availability in mind, as it affects usability and user experience and therefore has a positive impact on every users' experience. (Muukkonen & Putkonen 2020: 62)

2.1.8 Planning of external communications

It's important to choose the right communication channels for the desired target groups and ensure there are multiple channels available, so the information reaches everyone. For problematic situations there should be alternative channels, where the participants reach the event organizers and vice versa. (Muukkonen & Putkonen 2020: 54)

2.1.9 Staff roles during the event

A moderator is a virtual security officer. There is a higher possibility for attendees to behave badly online because the acting in the environment is often anonymous, the attendees don't know how to use the software and there is a feeling of not being close to the other participants. It's important to consider the options for how to act if there appears distractive behaviour during the event. The moderator can for example remove or mute the person that is disturbing or confront the person virtually to solve the situation. The moderator is often also reading the attendees' questions during the presentation and coordinating turns for attendee statements. A facilitator can sometimes do the same. (Muukkonen & Putkonen 2020: 71)

A facilitator has the same role in physical and virtual events. Their main focus is to move the scheduled program forward, for example at speeches or workshops by leading and giving instructions to the attendees. (Muukkonen & Putkonen 2020: 72)

The role of technical support is to help the attendees to get to the event, and to operate in the virtual environment. Sharing instructions to support the technical demand and the usage of the software before the event is important, so the support does not get overloaded. It's also important to plan where the attendees can reach support from external channels. (Muukkonen & Putkonen 2020: 72)

2.2 Service management

2.2.1 Customer experience

Følstad & Kvale explain customer experience as the customer's cognitive, affective, emotional, social, and physical responses to a company, which is a key competitive advantage in many service sectors. Customer experience evolves throughout the service process, and it is shaped during all the interactions between the customer and the service provider. Enhancing and managing customer experience across channels is highly important as customer interactions continue to be an important service research priority. Customer experience is regularly and explicitly linked to the customer journey approach. (Følstad & Kvale 2018)

2.2.2 Virtual event experience

Muukkonen & Putkonen emphasize the importance to specify and demonstrate what kind of an event experience is targeted when planning a virtual event. When knowing what kind of an experience is wanted, it is easier to put the implementation to right the dimensions. More impressive experiences naturally require more work. As virtual events are immersive, it is important to carefully plan different parts of the event, that stimulate different senses. A complete infrastructure is created by different professionals from different fields for the one event instant, to correspond to the program and atmosphere. (Muukkonen & Putkonen 2020)

At physical events, the participants experiences can be sensed, which is not possible at virtual events. A typical aim is to provide a positive experience for the participant.

Experience as a concept is generally harder to measure than univocal participant numbers, but directional information can be collected for example through feedback questionnaires. (Muukkonen & Putkonen 2020)

2.2.3 Customer journeys as concepts

The historical roots of the customer journey perspective are hard to trace according to Følstad & Kvale, as the term pops up even parallelly in different fields of research and practice. In their literature review, the term "customer journey" within customer experience context and the service field is described as:

> "customer journey" has been widely adopted in practical service management and design. The term addresses the processual and experiential aspects of service processes as seen from the customer's viewpoint. It is described as the repeated interactions between a service provider and the customer, as an "engaging story" about the user's interaction with a service, or as a walk "in the customer's shoes". The customer journey perspective is key to the design processes of recognized service design agencies, is critical for involving customers in strategy work and business model development, and has also made its way into acknowledged books on service design.

Følstad & Kvale refer to customer journey terminology when they speak about associated terms, like touchpoints, stages, steps, or events. They understand customer journey approaches to be methods and practices by which the service can be analysed, modelled, or managed from the customer journey perspective. (Følstad & Kvale 2018)

Følstad & Kvale maintain that in spite customer journey approaches are commonly applied there seems to be a lack of common understanding of what customer journeys are, and how the different approaches can support service management and design. This is seen for example from the little amount of existing reference literature and customer journey terminology. Rather than just one commonly acknowledged perspective, there seems to be a mix of related perspectives to customer journeys. (Følstad & Kvale 2018)

Different authors' views on customer journeys as concepts are presented in the literature review by Følstad & Kvale. Some see customer journeys as delimited service processes with marked start and endpoints, others see them as more open-ended processes. Some see touchpoints as the key building components of customer journeys, and others rather address event or service encounters, and disregard touchpoints in their discussion. By

some, customer journeys are as considered a tool for reporting and visualizing user research, as others see them in the context of generative design activities. This all demonstrates that the literature does not seem coherent. (Følstad & Kvale 2018)

Experiential service providers often apply customer journey approaches in service management and design, to strengthen the customer experience throughout the service process. A distinct customer journey approach has developed in the field of marketing, with the focus on consumers' decision-making process, from being aware of the company to making a purchase or becoming a loyal customer. With this approach, the customers' behaviour and experiences are often analysed during the process, and structured in steps such as awareness, familiarity, consideration, purchase, and loyalty. These are often supported by customer relationship management (CRM) systems and web analytics. Service designers use customer journeys often as a preferred tool in summarizing customer research. Customer journeys are seen as valuable for communication, and for strengthening empathy between stakeholders and customers, and the customer journey perspective has been combined with other methods and terms in service research such as service blueprinting and service journeys. (Følstad & Kvale 2018)

One of the findings in Følstad & Kvale's research is that the customer journey perspective tends to be closely associated with customer experience sometimes referred to as service experience, or user experience. The customer journey approach is often viewed as of it is a resource for understanding customer experience. It is discussed that learning about customers' experiences accustoms service managers and designers to the needs of customers. Empathizing with customers is connected to improved involvement of customers in the co-design process, and it is stated that such empathizing may drive the design process. (Følstad & Kvale 2018)

2.2.4 Touchpoints

Følstad & Kvales' research states the term touchpoint is characterized as the building blocks of customer journeys, in a way that the customer journeys are described as sets or sequences of touchpoints, and that touchpoints also are central in many customer journey visualizations. Touchpoints are described as instances of interaction, or communication,

or moments of contact between the customer and the service provider. Some see touchpoints as the location or channel where the customer communication or interaction happens. These can also be for example buildings, websites, printouts, self-service machines, or physical personnel. (Følstad & Kvale 2018)

2.2.5 Customer journey mapping

Customer journey perspective with the use of visualizations is often referred to as customer journey mapping. There are different frameworks for classifying the techniques for service design visualizations. The customer journey map is a flow type visualization technique, where the service process is visualized in an abstract or diagrammatic form, to interpret and describe customer research and experiences. The maps are also seen as a means to "describe the process of experiencing service", an approach to analyse "emotional responses to products, goods and services", and as a means to reach insight into customer's experiences. The customer journey map is also seen as a definite prototype when talking about service prototyping, as it reaches a stable state once it is created. The map addresses implemented service processes and typically includes data collection either with customers and/or internals with data analysis and presentation of findings in a visual form. The data is collected from a wide variety of sources, including customers, external consultants, and internal experts. Interviews and observations are typically used for collecting data from individual customers, and collaborative workshops when working on collecting data from internal resources. Customer journey mappings are often presented encompassed in the research phase of a more comprehensive design process. One interpretation of data indicates that customer journey mapping may be conducted as a part of service design processes, but also for managing implemented services. (Følstad & Kvale 2018)

Følstad & Kvale describe customer journey propositions as generative design activities within the customer journey perspective that led towards the service "to be". The proposition is usually reported as a part of a bigger design process that can also include customer journey mapping. For example, a workshop designed for an improved customer journey where employees get involved in a service design project could be characterized as a customer journey proposition. A co-design activity where key touchpoints of a

customer journey map are removed to see what kind of touchpoints could serve better, or a storytelling group method where users are invited to formulate “dream journeys” at a co-design workshop can also be characterized as actions of customer journey propositioning. (Følstad & Kvale 2018)

2.2.6 Journey maps in practice

A journey map visualizes the overall experience of a person over time. With end-to-end customers, a journey map can visualize for example the customers’ experience with s service, a physical or digital product, or a brand. The map could include recognizing a need, searching for a specific service, booking, or paying, usage of the service, and possibly complaining if something goes wrong. Stickdorn *et al.*, describe journey maps as ways to help find gaps in customer experiences and explore potential solutions, for both existing, and future experiences. A journey map is often structured as a sequence of steps, that are referred to as events, moments, experiences, interactions, activities, etc. The maps can have various scales and scopes, and usually several are needed to represent different aspects of one experience or service. A high-level map is showing an end-to-end experience, and a more detailed map can be focusing on one step on a higher-level journey. A very detailed map can be demonstrating step-to-step descriptions of micro-interactions. (Stickdorn *et al.* 2018: 44-45)

“Journey maps make intangible experiences visible and facilitate a common understanding between team members”. The data can be visualized in a simple and empathic way, but the quality depends on the quality of data it is based on. The full complexity of service is not presented in a journey map, instead, one particularly interesting instance of a service can be shown. This allows diverse teams to work together efficiently with the customer’s experience as the common denominator. Letters represent different values that demonstrate and visualize the journey from different viewpoints.

A. Letter “A” is the main actor. A journey map always focuses on the experiences of one main actor, for example, a group of customers or employees represented by a persona.

B. “B” stands for stages, that represent the main phases of the main actor’s experience, such as, the classic buyer decision process. Stages help to structure a journey map and visualize its scale.
C. “C” is for steps, meaning any experience the main actor has, for example, an interaction with another person, a machine, a digital interface, but steps can also be other activities, such as walking or waiting.
D. “D” stands for storyboards, that visually represent each step through illustrations, photos, screenshots, or sketches, to tell the story of specific situations. A storyboard increases our empathy with a journey map and allows quick navigation.
E. “E” stands for emotional journeys, which are graphs representing the main actor’s level of satisfaction with each step, which visually reveals obvious problems within a specific experience.
F. “F” is for channels, that refer to any means of communication involved at a specific step. These can be for example face-to-face interaction, an app, a website, or an advertisement. Specifying the channels that are in use helps understand the cross-channel experiences. “G” is for stakeholders, listing which internal or external stakeholders are part of certain steps.
G. “H” is for dramatic arc, that illustrates the main actor’s engagement at each step.
H. “I” stands for backstage processes, that connect frontstage experiences visualized as steps. Backstage processes reveal which departments and systems are involved at specific steps.
I. A journey map including backstage processes can provide the same information as a service blueprint. There are often overlaps between these two tools.
J. “J” stands for “What if?”, that asks every step, “What could go wrong?”. This helps to identify if appropriate service recovery systems are in place. Important problems that happen can then be visualized separately. (Stickdorn *et al.* 2018: 44-45).

(Stickdorn *et al.* 2018: 46-47)

2.2.7 Service blueprinting

Service blueprinting was developed in the 1980s and has been further developed since then as a method to support service management and service design. The purpose of it is to illuminate the customer's role in the service process with diagrammatic visualizations, i.e service blueprints. Compared to the customer journey map, the service blueprint's focus of attention is often split between the customer's viewpoint and issues related to the underlying service organization and its infrastructure. The service blueprint describes support processes and actions of the service provider that are invisible to the customer, and customer actions, actions of service employees, as well as service evidence, meaning the tangibles that customers face during the service, that may affect their experience. This differs from the customer journey approach, where the customer is placed in the center of the service system design, and the service organization and infrastructure are not as significant as in service blueprinting. (Følstad & Kvale 2018)

Stickdorn *et al.* (2018) say that service blueprints are often understood as extensions of journey maps, that are set up to connect customer experiences with both frontstage and backstage employee– and support processes. "Frontstage" refers to people and processes that the user has direct contact with, and backstage in return represents people and processes that are invisible to the user. On a service blueprint, the frontstage experience is visualized in a customer journey map but adds layers of depth showing relationships and dependencies between frontstage and backstage processes.

2.2.8 Service journeys

The term service journey is often applied in research addressing customer expectation management, and service quality perceptions. Criticism towards the service journey approach has been shown, for example by stating that it is a generic, provider-oriented analysis that is insufficient for catching the rich experiences. More recently, service journeys have been used as support for customer expectation management and personalized customer process, and the term service process has been applied as a synonym to the customer journey. However, the term service journey is mainly affiliated with customer expectation management, and it does not appeal as strongly in service management and design as does customer journey. (Følstad & Kvale 2018)

3 METHOD

In the next chapter, I am going to present my chosen research method and the approach for the empirical study as well as the reason for choosing the method. The research is going to be conducted based on the material collected in the theory section.

3.1 Qualitative research method

The qualitative research method was chosen for this study because this research strategy emphasizes words rather than quantification. Bryman & Bell (2011 s. 386) identify the main qualitative preoccupations in terms, that have an emphasis on the ability to see through the eyes of research participants; description and context; process; flexibility and lack of structure; and concepts and theory as outcomes of the research process. These preoccupations characterize the nature of this research as interviewing people will play the main role and seeing the online event creation process through their eyes will be a key value. The aim is to analyse the overall feeling, thinking, and decision making around the creation and importance of event user mapping, participant interactivity, and success measuring regarding these within the organization.

Bryman & Bell (2011 s. 60) state that exponents of the case study design often favour qualitative methods such as observations or interviewing because those methods are seen as helpful for building intensive and detailed examinations of a case. One of the key features of qualitative research is to have a comprehensive view of the relationship between theory and research, whereby the research is generated out of the theory. This thesis uses qualitative interviewing as the main research method.

3.2 Case study

This thesis is conducted as a case study, which is a popular and commonly used approach in business research. A case study is a research strategy and an empirical inquiry that investigates a phenomenon within its real-life context (PressAcademia 2018). This research is going to investigate the interviewed professionals' experiences in the company in correlation on the studied phenomena from the theory section.

Case study design aims to have a detailed and intensive analysis of a single case, and the research is concerned with a particular nature of the case in question. (Bryman & Bell 2011 s. 59) This case is going to be a single organizational case study, where the research is going to be conducted to study the relatedness or compatibility between existing theories, and the operations in a leading event company.

3.3 Qualitative interviewing

Qualitative interviewing is a broad term to describe the interviewing style varieties, and the variety used in this research is a semi-structured interview. A semi-structured interview style is more open compared to structured or standardized interviews, where the questions are frequently more general allowing the participant to answer more in-depth. The interviewer also has some latitude to ask further questions in response to what is seen as significant replies. (Bryman & Bell 2011 s. 205)

Two employees of the researched organization are going to be interviewed. The interview structure and questions are going to be built based on the collection of relevant data from the theory section. The aim is to have the questions reflect the findings from the theory section. A specific list of questions will be compiled before the interviews. The participants are going to be informed about the topics covered beforehand. The process is called informed consent, where the participants are told about the key elements in the research, and what their participation will involve. That is a central component of the ethical conduct of research with human objects (Research Ethics & Compliance 2020). The questions are not necessarily asked in a specific order, and additional questions may be asked based on what is picked up from things said by the interviewees. The interviewing process with this style is flexible, and the emphasis will be on understanding how the interviewee sees the issues and events, and what the interviewee sees as important in explaining and understanding events, patterns, and forms of behaviour. (Bryman & Bell 2011 s. 467)

3.4 Respondent validation

Alternative criteria are going to be used for evaluating my research, as measuring reliability and validity will be complex with the chosen method. Respondent validation, sometimes also called member validation, stands for a process where the researcher provides the participants with her findings from the conducted research. This practice aims to strengthen the findings the researcher arrived at. (Bryman & Bell 2011 s. 396)

The findings from the interviews are going to be sent back to the people in the organization for final review. The participants will have the right to request minor amendments, as the aim is to develop mutual satisfaction.

3.5 Data analysis

Qualitative data analysis is according to Bryman & Bell (2011 s. 571) somewhat difficult because it quickly generates a large database, and despite its richness it is hard to find analytic paths through a large amount of data. Compared to the analysis of quantitative data, there are only a few well-established widely accepted rules for analysing qualitative data. One of the most common ways of approaching qualitative data is a term referred to as thematic analysis. However, this is not an approach to analysis that has an identifiable heritage, nor has been out outlined in terms of a distinctive cluster of techniques. The search of themes is an activity that can be identified in many, if not most of the ways to qualitative data analysis, like grounded theory, critical discourse analysis, qualitative content analysis, and narrative analysis.

This thesis is going to use narrative analysis to analyse the data from the interviews. According to Earthy & Cronin (2008) narrative analysis refers to a wide range of different approaches to data collection and analysis. Storytelling is the key analysing method for the narrative approach. The interview data is taken and transformed into a story or report to understand why people talk about the subject the way they do. Storytelling is a common approach in service design, which is why this method was chosen for the analysis.

4 RESULTS

In this chapter, I am going to present the sample together with the execution of my research, and the result from the conducted interviews. First, I am going to introduce background and concepts in Case company X. After that I will explain the respondents' views on user journey mapping and participant interactivity and address some important findings in between. The study aims to research event user journeys and participants' interactivity in the virtual environment, and how these are considered when it comes to measuring success and performance as a post-event procedure.

The sample for my research, is two Finnish Executive Producers, full-time employees of Case company X from the Helsinki area. They both have previous experience from the event industry before starting to work for the company, where they have been working now for 9 (respondent Xa) and 3 (respondent Xb) years. Respondent Xa is more involved with higher-level offerings and in event production with big commercial clients, whereas respondent Xb is mainly involved in event production with about ¼ of the events being publicly advertised (for example annual general meetings and product launches) and ¾ being for a limited audience (for example staff events).

The interview questions were grouped to better track the flow of the discussions. We had 4 main themes of questions for respondent Xa, with 26 questions altogether. First, we discussed background and concepts in the case company, then participant interactivity, after that about event speakers and their connection to interactivity, and event user journeys at last. With respondent Xb, we also had 4 main themes for questions, with 19 questions altogether. With Xb, we discussed background, participant interactivity, event journeys, and measuring success at virtual events.

The interviews were conducted on the 1st April 2021 with respondent Xa, and on the 6th May 2021 with respondent Xb. Both interviews lasted between 40-45 minutes. Because both respondents are Finnish speaking, the interviews were held in Finnish. The interviews were transcribed, and the writer of this paper is responsible for the English translations. The respondents are held anonymous to protect their identities.

4.1 Background, concepts, and technical solutions and in Case company X

Case company X was established in 2012, starting mostly with physical events, but organizing also webcasts and streamed events from the very beginning. Since the start of the covid-19 pandemic, the company has been organizing mostly virtual events, as the pandemic pushed everything online. Some hybrid events have been sold for 2022.

Case company X is using the same platform provider for all their virtual events because they have a good and cost-effective agreement and long history of cooperation with the company. The used platform simply offers the best solutions and is customizable for every client's needs.

Case company X offers different event packages according to the event size. All the sizes have slightly different deliverables, naturally adding more the bigger the event is. Event size "S" includes one man and a camera, and only the necessary technology and equipment. The production hours for event size "S" are between 60 – 80. With size "M", which the company sells the most, the event is recorded in the company's studio premises, or the technical partners' premises, and includes a multiple-camera setup, screen materials, open-air video, a host, and a manuscript reserved. The broadcast is usually 1-2h and the production hours are usually between 100 – 120. Event size "L" consists of XR, which stands for Extended Reality, which is a way to add extended reality to the event. This can include green screen technology, where different technologies are utilized to create virtual spaces, where the user feels they are somewhere else than in the studio. Size "XL" is everything larger than "L". The production hours for event sizes L-XL are 150 and over, sometimes even thousands. The planning phase is generally always completed before the production can start. The sizes help the clients understand the outlines of prizing and the amount of work included. In general, all the events are customized for each case, so the exact same product package is rarely offered for different clients.

A project brief process in Case company X means the mapping of the clients' needs, and after that, Case company X aims to get a two weeks' delivery time which is used for

planning the concept and for creating a cost estimate. After that, if the client gives a green light to start executing the plan, the event goes to production. Some planning naturally occurs after the production has started.

4.2 Benefits of user journeys in event planning from the respondents' viewpoints

Both respondents Xa and Xb considered that event user journeys are important in virtual event planning. The importance of involving user journeys in event planning can vary on a large scale depending on the event size, target, audience, and the set goal.

According to Respondent Xa, event journey is a concept that is quite strongly visible in event planning. The respondent sees that the users' "path" in the event is often in a visible role when holding planning presentations for clients. In this correlation the journey concept is usually described as a user-, or a communication journey throughout the event. Respondent Xb sees that the journeys are usually called user journeys, flows, paths, or that user flow can also be used sometimes.

Respondent Xb sees that user journeys are critical to use in event planning because visually planning and creating the users' path sums up the entirety of the event. The respondent thinks that journey mapping is relevant because the experience for the user is never only the event, but also all the other "events" happening before and after the event. Creating a user journey is useful specifically when considering the bigger picture.

Customer journey mapping in Case company X according to respondent Xa is done so that the planning team creates slides, where all the "events" are presented on a timeline that indicates what is supposed to happen and when. Respondent Xb sees that there are no specific tools used for user journey mapping, that all planning happens based on professional experience. Event planners design the user journey and do user flow-related mapping when the whole event is designed.

Some common steps on the user journey map were mentioned by respondent Xb.

- Presumptions/hearing about the event (How? Where?)
- Invitation
- Registration
- Link/communication before the event
- Thoughts about what to do in the event
- Picking up needed things for the event (if instructions given)
- Going to the event
- After event considerations
- Getting materials from the event afterwards
- The user possibly gets a call if contact information given during the event

Respondent Xb sees that creating a user journey map does not happen necessarily with every event, that during covid some of the events have been so small for example that no journey mapping has been needed. The respondent still considers that with all normal-sized projects, those that are creating the most turnover for Case company X, the user paths are always thought about.

Post-event activities according to respondent Xa are a thank you message right after the event with a link to a feedback questionnaire, where the user is asked to evaluate how they would rate the event for example. This is customized according to the client.

4.2.1 Important touchpoints and invitation and registration process

The invitation sending process was considered an important touchpoint on the user journey map by both respondents. Communications regarding the event invitations were considered important, and it was mentioned that a user journey map for the invitation process is created for most events.

According to respondent Xa, the journey map is customized for different events according to the event type. If the event is for example a high-class dinner, it is important to send a customized or even physical invitation. Or perhaps an invitation using AR technology. Most often the invitations are electric.

Respondent Xa mentions Lyyti, which is a registration and communication system that can be used to send automated messages. Case company X uses the platform with their processes. It is highly important to have the data available of attendees that have registered so that automated messages can be sent at a later phase. The needed communications are usually mapped out on a journey map going forward from when the invitation has been received.

The most important touchpoints in event planning according to respondent Xb are:

1. Registration and invitation, and here specifically the matters that really get the user to sign-up for the event. For a commercial event, it is very important how the invitation is presented. Seeing for example in LinkedIn that there are very good speakers at the event might add the probability for the user to sign-up.
2. Arriving at the event, how easily you can access the platform and you are able to log in effortlessly, that everything works, and that the user manages to use the platform without any issues. Finding instructions and help easily is highly important.
3. After event operations. If the user attends a commercial event and never hears about the company again one could consider the event unsuccessful.

The main “events” or “touchpoints” according to respondent Xa:

1. “Save the date”
2. Invitation
3. Program teaser
4. Another program teaser
5. A welcome message
6. The event
7. What happens in the event
8. Feedback questionnaires

4.3 Benefits of participant interactivity from the respondents' viewpoints

Participant interactivity at virtual events was considered important by both respondents Xa and Xb, specifically from the value bringing perspective.

According to respondent Xa participant interactivity brings additional value to the event if the chat is rolling, and people comment and respond to questions. It brings the feeling of attending live, and a sense of a physical event. Because of this, it is generally wanted that those different kinds of functionalities would be available on the used event platforms so that participants could react with emojis for example, similarly, as how can be done in Facebook or Instagram lives, where for example flying hearts can be seen as people react to the broadcast. To be able to do this is important, as the participants do not see each other. It helps to bring the understanding other people are attending as well.

Respondent Xb sees participant interactivity as important or critical depending on the event's aim, target and nature. For example, a press conference is often meant to only pass on information, so it's an event type where interactivity is not important. For almost all other event types the respondent considered interactivity being important.

Respondent Xb says that having a versatile program at virtual events brings more interactivity naturally. For example, if there are only keynotes after keynotes or only certain types of "events" at the event it does not activate the audience as much as a more diverse program approach would. An example of a more diverse program would be a keynote, a panel discussion, a 1-1 discussion, and a live Q&A where the speaker is replying to questions.

4.3.1 Common tools used for participant interactivity

Respondent Xa considers that the chat function is a common and well-known tool at virtual events. A poll or a questionnaire can also be used to get event attendees to participate. "Question–answer" forms can be used to ask questions. There can also be partner rooms or group discussion spaces. The platform that is used for Case company

X's virtual events has an active participant list available during the event, where you can send 1-1 chats to other participants, and, or take a 1-1 video call with someone during the event. During the past year, these features have developed enormously according to the respondent. When comparing virtual events at the time before covid and now, the image needed to be to be sent somewhere in HD quality, but now that virtual is the only option should the platform be more like a social media feed, where emojis and filters would work the same way. The respondent thinks it probably will not take long until Snapchat like functionalities start appearing on the virtual platforms. The competition is so hard that the platforms must be developed all the time.

Respondent Xb considers easy options for communication tools the best ones, as there are often participants with so many different experience levels. The tools are customized per event according to the experience level of the audience. The chat function is usually the easiest one because most users can manage it.

According to respondent Xa, the interactivity tools are customized as much as can be to increase interactivity. Chat functions can also be annoying to some users, but the more there is something to do on the platform, the better the users enjoy being there. The used tools can be chosen for example according to the target group. When the demo version of the event is ready the client can test the environment with a test group of participants. After that, it is chosen what works and what does not, and the tools are chosen according to the results.

Respondent Xa talks about certain interactivity tools needing more staff compared to others. The event size is mentioned as crucial here if comparing for example 100 versus 1000 people at the event. There is a need for someone to be driving each of the partner rooms, or chat moderators might be needed for example to 10 rooms at the same time. So, the tools also employ people according to the headcount, and according to how complex the entirety is. Having filters is extremely important in the B2B world (chats) as inappropriate comments are unwanted there especially.

According to respondent Xa, the pricing for different interactivity tools can vary a lot, but certain things come with the platform. The price adds up according to the customization,

the more is customized the higher the price. These too have been packaged reasonably in Case company Xs' cost estimates, so that there is a basic package, a little more inclusive one, and then all-inclusive.

4.3.2 Bringing interactivity with speakers and presenters

Respondent Xa says that when it comes to thinking about participant interactivity together with the event speakers, Case company X goes through different alternatives with the speakers, for example about possible questions to ask from the audience and about different tools that are available to use. Case company X can suggest that it would be good to take a poll to activate the audience in between performances so the audience can ask questions. Content planning can come either from the client side or from Case company X, it might vary. If the speech seems dull or monotonous, Case company X might suggest a change. Professional speakers usually can take the audience into account and know when to ask questions and how to make the attendees participate, but a basic company representative might not have the same ability. Usually, everyone knows that questions need to be asked.

Respondent Xa says that event hosts often belong to the package with Case company X. A host is included in almost every sold event because it's such an advantage to have a professional host that leads through the whole event and is quick-witted if anything comes up. Experience brings certainty here too. A host is always recommended.

Out of different speech styles, respondent Xb considers a well-planned panel discussion with the right kind of speakers the best option when it comes to audience interaction. With this, the respondent means that it is better to have viewpoints that complete one another in the discussion, rather than counterfactual thinking. The respondent sees that this approach activates the audience more. The respondent sees that successful holding of keynotes can help with getting more attention from the audience, that the attendees might tweet about it or comment more if the content is great. The more there is an active conversation in the program itself, the more it creates interactivity in the audience.

4.3.3 Improvements to interactivity tools from respondents' viewpoints

Respondent Xb sees that more social media-like features could be added to virtual event platforms. Respondent Xa sees that not enough background research is usually done when it comes to customizing interactivity tools according to the event. Background research is done at some level according to the event type, so a participant profile is considered at some level, but more research could be easily done.

Case company X does mostly B2B events, but if it was doing events for kids or young people, they would be taking a different approach, for example, a more social media or a game-like an approach where the user could for example be collecting points. Respondent Xa thinks that all interactivity tools that are available within the platform should be enabled because not everything has to be used by the user necessarily, but it is good to have many alternatives.

Respondent Xb's viewpoint is that discussion rooms have not worked very well, that a part of the audience is not taking them well. It might be too personal for some attendees to have to put a camera on. The respondent has notified on the event platform used by Case company X that some of the attendees drop out when the discussion rooms open, so group working rooms are not the best options.

4.4 Measuring success

Respondent Xb considers the most usual success measuring tool being questionnaires that are sent to all attendees after the event. The higher profile the event is the more difficult it is to get replies. In those situations, the respondent mentions that collecting so-called "quick data" during the event works best. The data can be gathered through a voting tool on the virtual platform, where the questions pop of on the screen at the end. The attendees reply with this method more often when compared to feedback questionnaires. The respondent also mentions "no show" percentage as a success indicator, where it's measured how many of the registered attendees show up. The number of leads or messages a salesperson gets during the event, or the reach outside of the event in social

media can work as success indicators as well. The success indicators are decided individually according to the project and event.

Respondent Xb considers that measuring success at virtual events is a relatively new thing. Event organizers are only starting to understand all possibilities for measuring on virtual platforms, where data gathering can happen to a much larger extent compared to physical events. Detailed data on users can be exported from the virtual platform. The data can be for example the time spent on the platform, what activities the user has been involved with there, like watching a video or a stream, or how much voting or commenting features have been used.

4.4.1 Participant interactivity as a success indicator

According to respondent Xa participant interactivity can be a meter for success for the client. The client can set up a goal saying they want x number of comments or poll answers. These can be the clients' KPIs (Key Performance Indicators). The platform hosts all the data, and after the event, the figures can be compared to the previously set goal. Quite a few clients have yet reached this deep of a level, but respondent Xa sees these as very clear goals for virtual events.

Respondent Xb sees that having interactivity as a success indicator depends a lot on the client and event. The respondent gave one client event as an example here, where the goal for the event was to be the trending topic on Twitter on the day of the event. That had happened a couple of times previously, but not every time. Some different event goals that have been set for events produced by the respondent are for example how many messages have been received in an hour, or in one minute. The data on how long the participants have been active on the platform have been utilized also in measuring success. This data can be exported from the platform used at Case company X.

According to respondent Xb measuring success is more relevant in commercial events, such as marketing or brand events, or product launches. In the previously mentioned event types, the main success indicator is usually the number of leads, messages, sales, or the

number of people the event organization has reached. In other events types, the success indicator is typically replies received through a feedback questionnaire.

4.4.2 Event user journeys with measuring success

The data from different touchpoints on the event journey can be used when measuring success according to respondent Xb. By utilizing the data from the invitation process it can be viewed how many users have read or clicked messages open. The information here might be useful if utilized together for example with the events "no show" percentage. The organizer can make conclusions thereafter and decide follow-up actions accordingly. Respondent Xb also says that when looking at the event retrospectively the event user journey is viewed as a whole, and it's reviewed and analyzed what users have experienced during different points of the event. The respondent also sees that creating an event path for the user in the first place has an impact on success.

4.4.3 Best practices for Q&A sessions in Case company X

Respondent Xa tells that at some events Q&A sessions can be held directly in chat. There can be either question alternatives, the participants can ask themselves, or Q&A can be questioned and answered through polls. The most common practice is that the host has a tablet where the chat is visible, and the host picks the questions from the chat and asks the questions from the previous speaker. The person replying to the questions can also be doing it directly by commenting in the chat.

4.4.4 Out of scope for Case company Xs' virtual event planning

According to respondent Xa, social media marketing procedures for virtual events are often done by a marketing agency, and not Case company X, as it's not their core competence. Case company X does acknowledge social media in event planning, but it is not specialized in them, so it can not present in the best possible way what kind of marketing should be utilized on different channels.

Respondent Xa considers that the best events are organized so, that all the "events" are behind Case company X. For example, things that are done by other companies during

the same event are things that Case company X can't administer or manage, and it makes the event planning more difficult.

According to respondent Xa, the event goes always first, and what the client gets and experiences. When it comes to other cooperation partners, there is not enough time to go through everything and plan as much as would be needed. Officially there are quite rarely other partners involved.

5 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The results from the research supported some of the theoretical allegations from the theory section of this study.

The results gave many examples of how user journey mapping and participant interactivity are used in event planning in Case company X, and in which ways those are seen as critical components of event operations. For journey mapping, I would have hoped more in-depth answers and examples of how the mappings are done in the planning phases. The main characteristics for user journeys explained in the theory section get visible from the results. Not having one way to do things or one vision on when the journeys are needed matches with the findings.

As discussed in chapter 2.2.3 in the theory, Følstad & Kvale (2018) write about customer journey approaches being methods and practices by which the service can be analyzed, modelled, or managed from the customer journey perspective. The respondents describe that in Case company X the event journeys are mapped to analyze the users' paths and to manage the service. Følstad & Kvale also describe customer journeys as being considered a tool for reporting and visualizing user research. Based on the results we can say that the journey approach is also considered this way in Case company X where user mapping is utilized in defining different steps in the process, and for example registration and communication are tracked and reported through these steps. The visual map is created for client presentation purposes and to reach a common understanding. Følstad & Kvale describe user journeys as valuable for communication, and for strengthening empathy between stakeholders and customers. It can be determined that the journeys are seen this

way in Case company X to understand the users better, the goal being to guarantee a better overall user experience.

Empathizing with customers is connected to improved involvement of customers in the co-design process, and it is stated that such empathizing may drive the design process (Følstad & Kvale 2018). Customer journey maps make intangible experiences visible and facilitate a common understanding between team members (Stickdorn *et al.* 2018), as discussed in theory in chapters 2.2.3 and 2.2.6. The respondents told that understanding the user is one of the most important things in virtual event planning because being successful depends largely on how the user experiences the event and is how the user can use and manage the event platform. Customer journey mapping is helping event planning in Case company X also internally by bringing the whole event together.

In theory chapter 2.2.2 it's discussed how Muukkonen & Putkonen (2020) emphasize the importance to specify and demonstrate what kind of experience is targeted when planning virtual events. Knowing this it is easier to put the implementation to the right dimensions. This thinking reflects also on the respondents' views, as both saw that user mapping, interactivity, and measuring decisions must be made according to the characteristics and the defined target of the event.

In theory chapter 2.1.1 it's discussed that Fortuna *et al.* (2020) had to move their big event online at the beginning of the covid era in 2020. Their main challenge was to find a technical solution to connect the participants. To reflect how Case company X is using different communication and interaction tools with their virtual events, I get a sense that the tools have developed a lot since. Of course, the situation is slightly different from the event Fortuna *et al.* described because Case company X is an experienced event company, that has a solid partner in providing the virtual platform with many interactions features automatically available. Still, I think a lot of development has happened with all the technicalities since early 2020.

According to Muukkonen & Putkonen (2020), in theory, chapter 2.1.1, users consume virtual content in a very different way compared to physical, and that it's highly important to understand the users' path to the event. Virtual event planning should be done so that

it resonates with the previously set goals and the wanted experience. The respondents describe a very similar approach in all the Case company Xs' operations, specifically when it comes to creating the users' path to the event. The respondents say that the path and all touchpoints for virtual events should be designed so that the wanted experience and the previously set goal define the whole approach.

As discussed in theory chapter 2.1.2 by Hung *et al*. (2010), user participation can bring a positive outcome for businesses, and that user participation is a new way of creating value. When it comes to virtual events, both respondents saw that participant interactivity at virtual events is considered important specifically from the value bringing perspective.

As discussed in theory chapter 2.1.3, the event speaker needs to understand the audience, and showing sympathy makes the listener feel more relaxed. Chat functions are considered practical for communicating with the audience (Mershon 2021). Respondent Xa says that having the chat open with users commenting and responding to questions is important from the value bringing perspective, and for getting a sense of a live event. Xa considered that chat function is a common and well-known tool.

As discussed in theory chapter 2.1.3, recruiting a host for virtual events is highly recommended, as the skillset is different, and the performance might lead to higher engagement in the audience, and might most probably enhance the participants' experience. The speaker might pause during the presentation to ask questions, the audiences' opinion, or to pull out a poll. This helps with keeping the users engaged and activated (Mershon 2021). Respondent Xb sees that a versatile program brings more interactivity naturally. A diverse program approach actives the audience more significantly.

As discussed in theory chapter 2.1.4, social media is an important source of information because of its open access, high volume, speed of generation, and high volume making it. Content characteristics like emotions play an important role and can lead to the virality of topics in social media (Daou 2021). Both respondents described that more social media-like features are wanted on the virtual event platforms, as the features bring a sense of belonging and cohesion.

As discussed in theory chapter 2.1.4, Fortuna *et al.* (2020) highlight that their website needed to be updated frequently to reflect important milestones like submission, registration, or program publication, when they were transforming their big event to be virtual. For their event Twitter was found to be the platform that generated the highest engagement. Respondent Xb described that being trending in Twitter was set as a goal for some events. Respondent Xa said a specified program is used in Case company X to communicate important milestones and to track the actions of the recipients. The event companies' own websites were never mentioned, might be that those updates were not a part of Case company X's operations, as the communications were monitored on another platform.

As discussed in theory chapter 2.1.6, success is often measured with the number of participants. Once the main objective for the virtual event is decided, it's important to address what is wanted to be achieved and how the information is going to be collected (Muukkonen & Putkonen 2020). The respondents explained that the number of registrations and the number of opened messages are some factors that are tracked and studied when it comes to measuring success. Case company X measures success also through questionnaires, "quick data", voting tools, number of leads, number of messages, number of comments, views, or through reach outside of the event. The respondents explained that success indicators are decided individually according to the event. The wanted data can be exported directly from the virtual platform that is in use at Case company Xs' events, so there is no need to address how the information is collected per event.

As discussed in theory chapter 2.1.7, availability at virtual events is important to keep in mind, as it affects usability and user experience and therefore has a positive impact on every user's experience (Muukkonen & Putkonen 2020). From the respondents' replies, it can be deducted that Case company X considers availability an important factor and that interactivity and the users' path are designed based on the wanted user experience.

In theory chapter 2.2.2 Muukkonen & Putkonen (2020) talk about directional information that can be collected through feedback questionnaires when it comes to measuring

experiences. The results show that this is a valid method that is in use with Case company X, but that it is sometimes hard to get enough data as not all the participants reply to the request to fill the feedback form.

The reliability and validity ("trustworthiness") of this study limits to the two respondents' viewpoints, but it can be concluded that their views on the handled subjects are common opinions in Case company X, because of the respondents' positions and experience in the company. The interviews were transcribed, and the respondents' replies were translated to English. The writer of the study made no own interpretation of the content. The results are accurate interpretations of the respondents' meanings. The authenticity could be improved, with having employees from different positions participate. Employees from the service design field could for example be beneficial to have, as they are heavily involved in the event designing.

6 CONCLUSIONS

This thesis has been focusing on user journeys, participant interactivity, and measuring success at virtual events. The following conclusions can be mentioned based on the theoretical framework and results:

- User journey mapping is considered important with virtual event planning as it helps with understanding the user better, and binding the whole event together. The invitation, registration, and communication processes were seen to be important phases regarding the journey mapping. The data from the journey map can be utilized in measuring success at different phases.

- Participant interactivity at virtual events is considered important specifically from the value bringing perspective. The importance is decided to depend on the event's aim, target, and nature.

- Easy options for participant interactivity tools are considered most important because of accessibility. The most common tools mentioned are chat functions,

polls, partner- and group discussion rooms. These are customized per event. To have many variables of tools available is generally wanted for virtual events. More social media-like approaches are wanted.

- All user mapping, interactivity, and measuring decisions must be made according to the characteristics and the defined target of the event. All touchpoints for virtual events should be designed so that the wanted experience and the previously set goal define the whole approach. Diverse program at virtual events is seen to lead to higher user engagement. The performance of a more experienced speaker might lead to higher engagement in the audience.

6.1 Recommendations and suggestions for further research

A quantitative research method, with more in-depth questions and several more respondents could be used to further study the matters that were researched in this thesis. A more trustworthy result could possibly be achieved with a bigger sample.

Deepened research could be conducted in Case company X regarding user journey mapping, to inspect and analyze user journey maps that have been in use with already executed events. The benefits could be examined to see if a clear business advantage can be found in using journey maps.

A clear template for user journey mapping could be introduced in Case company X, and further studied and utilized in measuring success, and in summarizing results. Different participant interactivity measures could be made a broader phase of the whole user journey mapping.

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APPENDICES

Interview guide for interview 1

The interview questions are translated from the Finnish originals to English by the writer of this paper.

Background

1. How would you describe virtual event as a concept, does it include many sub concepts, or can all online events be called virtual events?
2. How long has Case company X been organizing virtual events?
3. How big percentage of all organized events are virtual events?
4. What kind of virtual events do you offer and organize? Is there a certain setting of event types?
5. Is there a certain event type that you organize the most, that would possibly be thought to be the best?
6. If we think about different technical solutions (platforms, etc..), what are the most common reasons to choose these for each event?
7. How much time can at best be used for planning and customizing one event? What does it all include?

Participant interactivity

1. Do you experience, that participant interactivity in virtual events is crucial when considering the events performance and reaching targets?
2. What kind of means / resources do you use to activate the audience during the event?
3. Has participant interactivity been notified to impact the succeeding or execution of events? Or to have impact on the set primary goal?
4. Are features and solutions customized to increase participant interactivity according to event and audience?
5. If we think about tools used to activate audience – on what basis are those selected?

6. Do certain solutions (tools) require more staff during events?
7. Is the price difference significant between alternatives?
8. Is audience activation considered carefully prior to events? Or are features customized according to each event? Is any background research done prior to events to find out about target groups?
9. What is the most common way to organize Q&As in virtual events? Does it depend?

Event speakers / performers

1. Do you go through ways for activating audience with event speakers / performers before events? Is any training done for this?
2. Do speakers usually have their own opinions or approaches for activating users?
3. Do you use hosts in virtual events? If so – have you noticed hosts to have an impact in the audience / users, or other things?

User journeys

1. Do you experience, that event- or user journeys are central concepts and tools in event planning? Are these in use at Case company X?
2. Is any customer journey mapping done for virtual events – where all touchpoints before and after the event between the consumer and event provider are mapped out? (Goal to have all the users' touchpoints mapped out during the whole event path)
3. For virtual events, are the touchpoints added for the whole event journey?
4. Are the event target groups, or their online behaviours researched before the event?
5. How do you take social media into account when planning virtual events?
6. Is social media considered to have an impact on event promotions, and user accessibility?
7. What kind of post-event procedures are usually done, if any?

Interview guide for interview 2

The interview questions are translated from the Finnish originals to English by the writer of this paper.

Background

1. What kind of position do you have at Case company X?
2. How would you describe the term virtual event as a concept?
3. What kind of virtual events are you usually working with?

Interactivity

1. Do you experience, that participant interactivity in virtual events is crucial when considering the events performance and reaching targets?
2. What kind of actions or tools do you think work the best when it comes to activating the audience? What could be improved?
3. If you think about improving interaction situations between client and event provider, is there an event type that works the best in your opinion? Or a specific tool for this that you think works best?
4. Is interactivity measured for each event, in relation to succeeding / reaching targets? Or is a connection between interactivity and reaching targets been notified in general?
5. Can participant interactivity work as an indicator for reaching targets?
6. Are interactivity tools customized according to target groups?

Event journeys

1. Is the concept of *event journeys*, commonly used in the event industry, or is *user journey* or *event user journey* more common?
2. Do you experience, that event- or user journeys are central concepts and tools in event planning?

3. What is your general experience of using event journey mapping? What would a possible map look like?
4. What do you think are the most important touchpoints when organizing events, if thinking about the mapping and the users' event path?
5. What kind of tools do Case company X have in for creating a journey map?

Measuring success

1. How do you measure success with events? What are the most common meters? What about tools?
2. What is the most common indicator for a successful event?
3. Can participant interactivity be connected to succeeding with the event?
4. Do event journeys have data that can be used to measure success with events?
5. (How do you think participant interactivity or the creation of event journeys impact succeeding with events?)