

The effects of starting up a business in the fitness industry during the COVID-19 era

Case: Bodyplanet Oy, Nastola Finland

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Abstract

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Abstract		
<p>The aim of the study was to discover how COVID-19 affected new businesses starting up in the fitness industry. A case company called Bodyplanet Oy was utilised to research data for the study. The company is a new sports centre and gym, operating in Nastola Finland.</p> <p>Both theoretical and empirical research were included in the study. A literature review was written on the topics of COVID-19 and business start-up, as part of the theoretical portion of the study. Reliable sources were used for the literature review. The empirical research was conducted in the form of interviews and used as primary data. A participant from the case company and a business advisor were interviewed. Research methods included qualitative data collection with inductive reasoning. Such methods were utilised to provide phenomenological data in the form of personal experiences from the case company participant and business advisor. The data was then analysed to answer the research questions.</p> <p>The findings revealed that company operations in the fitness industry did not change during COVID-19. Research and data collected from both the literature review and empirical research showed that society suffered from the COVID-19 era. Furthermore, new entrepreneurs and businesses were offered the same opportunities to begin a new company, given that the process would be slower than before the COVID-19 era arose. Results showed a link between customer service skills, development of the premises and business success. There is further research needed on how to run a business during COVID-19 for this study.</p>		
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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

COVID-19 restrictions were ordered by the Finnish government in December 2021. Restrictions specified on public events. The memo from the social affairs and health ministry stated the intentions of the restrictions were to protect citizens and the public health care system. Furthermore, to reduce spreading of the COVID-19 virus. (YLE News 2021.) The Finnish Government stated the primary cause of actions were created to fight the COVID-19 pandemic and encourage citizens to protect their health (Valtioneuvosto 2022). Economically, however, businesses in Finland were negatively impacted. Specifically, the food and catering, sports, and fitness industry. In December 2021, the ministry memorandum stated that, due to one month of lockdown, gym industry expenses were potentially up to 21.5 million euros. (YLE News 2021.)

COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2), also known as coronavirus or covid, is a highly contagious virus which spreads in the air from person to person via coughing, sneezing, speaking, singing, or shouting. Furthermore, transmission of the virus occurs through close contact or close touch and touching of COVID-19 contaminated surfaces. In airborne atmosphere, the virus spreads easily when air ventilation is poor. (THL 2022a.) On 29 January 2020, the first COVID-19 case was confirmed in Finland (Clausnitzer 2022). From February 2020 to 16 March 2020, a total of 400 million cases were confirmed. Five million deaths had been confirmed from February 2020 to 16 March 2020, by the World Health Organisation. (World Health Organization 2022a.)

I have worked for 8 years as a fitness instructor and have made plans to start a business in the same industry. The topic of fitness and COVID-19 appealed to me and conducting the study aspired me to answer questions related to these topics. I believed gaining knowledge on the fitness industry and collecting data would provide tactics on succeeding as a new entrepreneur.

1.2 Aims and research questions

The main topic of the thesis is as follows: **The impact of COVID-19 circumstances on new businesses in Finland.** COVID-19 is a current topic, reported on multiple internet sources daily. Furthermore, new research is also constantly being done on the topic. (YLE News 2022a.) The aim of this study is to investigate how starting a new business is affected by the COVID-19 era. Business industry specification focused on sports and gym and the location specified to be in Finland. By utilising the case company Bodyplanet Oy as research

source, the study will evaluate the COVID-19 circumstances and the impact COVID-19 has had on Bodyplanet Oy specifically. The case company operates in the sports industry, in Nastola Finland. This makes Bodyplanet Oy a relevant source of data for the study. The aim of the empirical part of the study is to discover how COVID-19 has affected the achievements, and success of new entrepreneurs, operating in the Finnish fitness industry.

The empirical data for the study will be collected through interviews. Participants of the interviews will be asked open-ended questions. Asking such type of questions enables for free-flowing answers and supports the gathering of qualitative data.

The study is qualitative. Qualitative research is based on thought and experience and is used to understand human perception-based evidence. The opposite of qualitative research is quantitative research; based on mathematics. (Bijayini et al. 2013.) Qualitative research will serve to provide phenomenological evidence to answer the research questions which were naturally devised to be answered qualitatively.

The main research question of this study is as follows: **How has Covid-19 affected starting up a business in the fitness industry?**

To resolve the main research question, the following sub-questions are answered first:

- How does COVID-19 affect human health?
- How has COVID-19 affected society, businesses, and the public?
- What are the types of challenges the case company (Bodyplanet Oy) faced after having started up in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What is the difference between starting up a new business before and after the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What protocols and actions do businesses need to take into consideration to succeed during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- As competition is higher during the COVID-19 global pandemic, what can companies do to stand out from each other?

1.3 Research method and limitations

To begin the study, there will be a literature review consisting of research conducted on the topic of COVID-19 and the process of starting a new business. The topics of the literature review include: The COVID-19 virus, starting up a new business, entrepreneurship, COVID-19 restrictions, and how COVID-19 affects businesses. The primary sources of the literature review are displayed in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Classification of primary sources in the literature review

Following the literature review, empirical research will be conducted in the form of two interviews. The first interview will be carried out on a representative of management at Bodyplanet Oy. The interviewer questions relate to background information of the case company, the start-up process, its limitations, and successful aspects within the business, within the COVID-19 circumstances. The other interview will be carried out on a business advisor from Lahti Regional Development Ltd (LADEC). Doing so provides the study with further information on the business start-up process in Finland for both new and existing entrepreneurs. LADEC assist in business growth and competitiveness in the Lahti region (LADEC 2019, 1). Both interviews will produce data, assisting to answer the sub-questions and in turn, the main research question.

Limitations of the study include the limited amount of research participants. The empirical study focuses on only one case company, making the data collection narrow but sufficient and specific to one case. In addition, time constraint caused the duration of the study to be 4 months.

1.4 Structure of the thesis

The thesis is divided into five chapters: introduction, literature review, empirical research, conclusion and summary. A visual representation of the thesis structure is shown below (Figure 2).

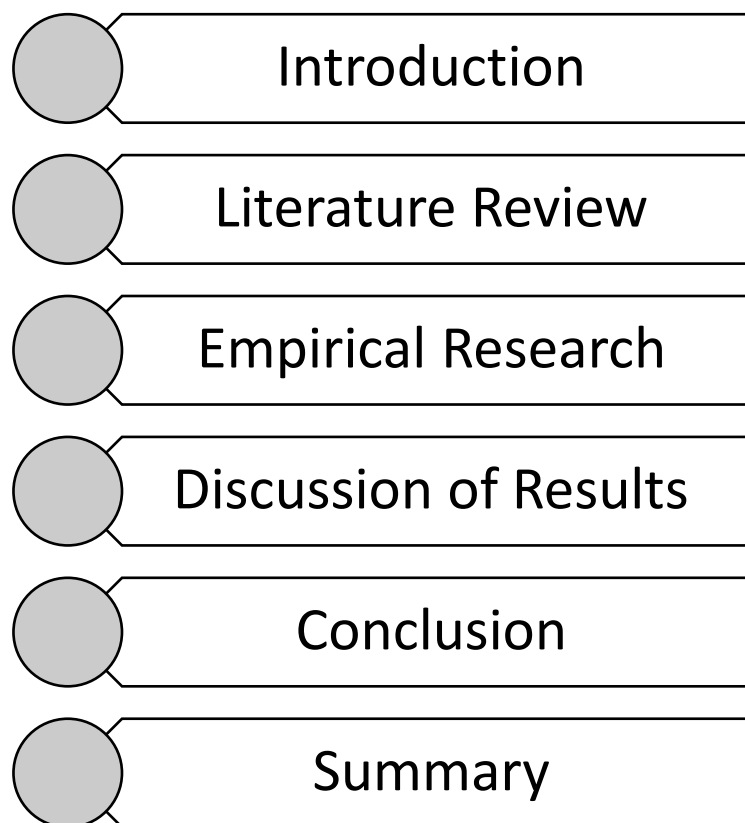


Figure 2. Thesis structure

Chapter 1 includes the background to the thesis. It gives a brief description of the topic being researched, as well as brief background information on the research topics, which are to be written in further detail in the following chapters. Chapter 1 also includes the aims of the thesis and research questions. Here, the aims of the thesis are explained in detail, the limitation of the study and the main research question is listed, as well as the sub-questions created to help answer the main research question. Chapter 1 finishes with the current sub-chapter: structure of the thesis, explaining how the thesis is structured.

Chapter 2 of the thesis is the literature review segment of the thesis, concerning the topics of COVID-19 and business start-up

Chapter 3 consists of the empirical research in the form of interviews conducted on the research participants: the case company representative as well as business advisor of LADEC. Furthermore, chapter 3 discusses data collection and the method of empirical research, aims and background information on research participants as well as phases of the study. Finishing the chapter with displaying the results from the interviews.

Chapter 4 is the conclusion, where the results will be discussed, and the research questions will be answered using reinforcement of the literature and empirical research. The conducted study will also be evaluated and suggestions for future research are presented.

The final chapter, chapter 5 serves to display all the steps throughout the thesis. In other words, chapter 5 combines chapters 1-4.

2 Literature review

2.1 The COVID-19 virus

Those infected with the highly contagious COVID-19 virus experience from zero to mild moderate respiratory complications. Some COVID-19 patients require more treatment than others. (World Health Organization 2022b.) COVID-19 consists of multiple variants (Table 1).

Name of the COVID-19 variant	When the variant was first detected	Where the variant was first detected
ALPHA	SEPTEMBER 2020 DECEMBER 2020	UK FINLAND
BETA	AUGUST 2020	SOUTH AFRICA
GAMMA	DECEMBER 2020 FEBRUARY 2021	JAPAN FINLAND
DELTA	OCTOBER 2020 MARCH 2021	INDIA FINLAND
OMICRON	NOVEMBER 2021	SOUTH AFRICA BOTSAWANA HONG KONG

Table 1. COVID-19 variants, time periods and discovery locations (THL 2022b)

The first cases for each variant occurring in Finland are not available due to the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL) not conducting regularly reports (THL 2022b). The omicron variant spreads more rapidly than any other variant. Concretely, two-three times faster than the Delta variant. Omicron has been found in 175 countries so far and exists as the newest variant. (Anthes et al. 2022.)

Methods of preventing COVID-19 from spreading include well ventilated public environments, safety distance from person to person, usage of facemasks, moderate speaking, staying at home avoiding contact and public events, maintaining proper hand hygiene, and testing regularly for the virus (THL 2022a). Vaccination is another method to be utilised for prevention against the virus. As of 2 March 2022, the World Health Organization claims that the total amount of fully vaccinated individuals amounts to five billion. (World Health Organization 2022c.) It is optional in Finland to receive the COVID-19 vaccine, but the vaccination

is available to any individual over the age of five. The vaccine is free of charge to receive. (Ministry of social affairs and health 2022.) THL recommends two vaccine dosages to fulfil sufficient defence against COVID-19. Furthermore, three vaccine dosages are recommended to those in the risk groups over the age of 12, with weak immune systems. (THL 2022c.) In the UK, the National Health Services (NHS) (2022) state that risk groups are individuals who are at high risk of serious COVID-19 side effects, including:

- *Individuals aged 5-17 living with a weakened immune system individual and patients with HIV, transplants, cancer, lupus, cerebral palsy, down syndrome, learning disability, undergoing rheumatoid arthritis treatment and other genetic conditions.*
- *Individuals over the age of 16 suffering from asthma, COPD, bronchiectasis and cystic fibrosis, heart conditions, kidney disease, liver conditions, brain conditions, learning disabilities, down syndrome, diabetes, spleen complications or removal of the spleen, BMI over 40, severe mental conditions, undergoing treatments causing risk of infection and/ or other medical conditions.*
- *Individuals with low immunity due to blood cancer, steroid usage, biological therapy, chemotherapy, radiotherapy, organ or bone marrow transplant and other conditions.*

THL listed risks group individuals as pregnant women, individuals aged 12-69 with type 1 and 2 diabetes, sleep apnoea, psychosis, chronic pulmonary diseases, and chronic renal diseases are part of the risk group. (THL 2022d.)

Taking the vaccine is more likely to save the life of the patient. Vaccines exists in various formulas. However, all vaccines have been created to prevent severe symptoms of COVID-19. (World Health Organization 2022c.) Symptoms stated by the Finnish institute for health and welfare (THL 2022e) include:

- *headache*
- *loss of smell or taste*
- *head cold*
- *blocked nose*
- *cough*
- *shortness of breath*
- *fatigue*

- *muscle ache*
- *sore throat*
- *fever*
- *nausea*
- *vomiting*
- *diarrhoea*
- *respiratory infection*

In severe cases, individuals infected with COVID-19 are prone to develop pneumonia, acute respiratory distress syndrome and other health complications. Such complications lead to fast deterioration and in some cases, death. (THL 2022e.) Therefore, receiving the COVID-19 vaccine avoids severe symptoms and hospitalisation. The World Health Organization (2022b) states that vaccination also prevents the spreading of the virus.

After being exposed to COVID-19, the incubation period begins. According to Arwady (2022), after five days the virus develops in the body and then starts showing visible physical symptoms. This means that an infected individual is likely to spread the virus two to five days after being initially exposed. (Arwady. A 2022.) After five days of being exposed to the virus, conducting a home COVID-19 test should show contraction of the virus. A negative test should still be followed with another home test. Doing this shows more accurate results. A home COVID-19 test, otherwise known as an over-the-counter OTC test, is available for purchase in supermarkets or pharmacies. (CDC 2022.) Home COVID-19 tests give results in under thirty minutes (GOV UK 2022). The Finnish government commends individuals to get an official test for the COVID-19 virus, done by a healthcare provider when the individual starts experiencing severe symptoms. The official tests should also be taken by those at risk of serious illnesses, pregnant women or individuals working in the healthcare or social welfare sector. (Valtioneuvosto 2022.)

2.2 Starting up a new business and entrepreneurship

An entrepreneur is an independent person who runs a business. The first step of starting a business as an entrepreneur is to create a business plan. The business plan usually constructed in document form, stating the company objectives, goals, marketing strategies, financial and operational situation. (Hayes 2021.) The aim of a business is to gather profit, fulfil customer wants and needs, employ workers, keep accounts, manage inventory, and

obtain legal protection (Kuratko & Morris 2020). Business Finland (2022a) states that there are certain steps to start up a new business in Finland (Table 2).

Company Establishment Steps	Description Of Steps
1. Registry	Enroll into the Finnish Trade Register (payment required) and to register for VAT at the Finnish Tax Administration (free of charge). At least one board member must be a resident of the European Economic Area.
2. Bank account	After establishment, open up a corporate bank account. To open the account, possession of trade register ID and personal ID are required. Then register to the Finnish Patent and Registration Office (PRH).
3. Accounting	By law, all businesses are to keep accounts. Accounting can be outsourced if needed and desired.
4. Insurance	Entrepreneur's pension insurance (YEL) is required for all businesses and is to be taken after 6 months after business start-up.

Table 2. Steps to establishing a business in Finland (Business Finland 2022a)

In Finland, advisory companies such as Business Finland, assist entrepreneurs who require business-related advice. Business Finland is a public-sector organisation consisting of business specialists. The company provides information and steps on proceeding to start-up a company and advice on running a successful business in Finland. All information and advice are for both foreigners and Finnish citizens. (Business Finland 2022b.) InfoFinland states that business start-up in Finland is possible for any entrepreneur, despite nationality but given that Finnish residency is in possession. InfoFinland provides connections with advice for employees, entrepreneurs and for financial issues. (InfoFinland 2022.)

There are various types of entrepreneurships, which produce different types of companies (Hayes 2021b).

Small business

Typically, a small business is privately owned and runs solely in one location (ASQ 2022). The entrepreneur is the sole investor of the company. It is uncommon for outsiders to invest in small businesses. Some entrepreneurs utilise loans to fund the business but most fund the business themselves. (Hayes 2021b.)

Start-up scalability

This type of entrepreneur runs a business with outsourced funds to reach a broader market. The purpose of the company is to stand out from others by offering unique and innovative products or services. (Hayes 2021b.)

Large company

A large company is often stemmed from an existing company. The aim is to expand the business to other sectors. Supermarkets are an example of a large company. In Finland, Prisma is one example of a large company. Prisma sells the same or similar products in every premises owned, and employees wear the same uniform. (Allt, S 2022.) Methods of branching out are first created by the CEO then further discussed with senior management to generate the process. (Hayes 2021b.)

Social entrepreneurship

Social entrepreneurs strive to provide society with well-being-focused products or services. The initial aim is non-profit based, but the desire to help others. (Hayes 2021b.) In Finland, social entrepreneurship grew from 2014. Sayej states that Finnish entrepreneurs aim to solve societal issues by improving labour rules, motivating others to lead a healthier lifestyle and help those with disabilities. (Sayej 2014.)

It is against the law to practice certain professions without a granted licence (Valvira 2021). Playing radio music at the premises of a sports and gym facility requires a licence, which must be obtained (Musiikkiluvat 2022). Providing certain group fitness classes also require a licence. For example, a licence is required for instructors teaching fitness classes under the name of Zumba Fitness (Zumba 2022).

2.3 COVID-19 restrictions affecting businesses

COVID-19 has impacted businesses worldwide, Finland included. Small businesses have faced limitations within their finances. (Apedo-Amah et al. 2021, 10.) However, whilst some businesses deteriorated due to COVID-19, other businesses gained success. Finnish hand sanitiser companies and distributors experienced a spike in demand to supply hand sanitisers in pharmacies and retail shops. (YLE News 2020a.) The spike was most likely due to THL recommending individuals to use hand sanitiser as a method to prevent contracting the COVID-19 virus, thus, a higher demand for hand sanitiser occurred.

Due to the recommendation from THL in 2020, for using face masks in public places or during official COVID-19 testing, face mask producers are another example of succeeding businesses in COVID-19 times (THL 2020). In 2020, a high demand for facemasks grew Chinese facemask exports in the international trade. European countries were importing

facemasks mostly from China in 2020. (Eurostat 2020.) Furthermore, sales of face masks tripled in Finland in 2020 (YLE News 2020b). However, later research in Finland showed that facemasks produced in China were not as sufficient at protecting individuals against the COVID-19 virus. Finnish manufacturers began manufacturing facemasks after this research discovery (YLE News 2020c).

International trade suffered from COVID-19, especially from 2020 onwards, due to the shift in demand for specific goods and services. A correlating shift occurred in the heterogeneity of international trade system. The overall international trade had normalised in 2021 despite the shift in demand. Nevertheless, failed to fully recover from losses made in 2021. Commerce of certain goods and services are highly demanded, whereas others are not. (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2022.)

Precious metals and stones, pharmaceutical products, electrical machinery, plastics, optical products, organic chemicals, machinery, iron and steel, motor vehicles and parts, minerals, and fuels were highly demanded in 2019 (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2021.) The rises and fall of the cumulative gap from the most traded goods in 2019 are shown in Figure 3.

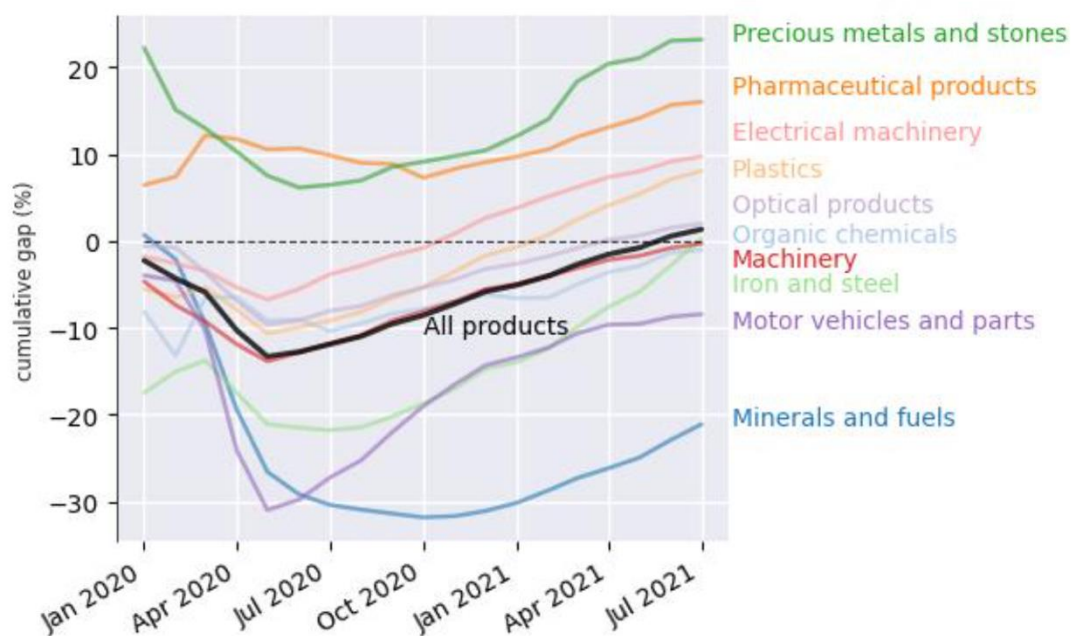


Figure 3. Cumulative gap percentage from January 2020 to July 2021 of top 10 products traded in 2019 (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2021)

The Finnish government ordered a lockdown for businesses operating as sports facilities, restaurants, and bars from 30 December 2021 to 2 February 2021 (Ojanperä 2022). Entrepreneurs who strive to open a new business in the fitness industry were encouraged by

LADEC, as they state that the fitness industry grows rapidly and diversifies in the region of Lahti (LADEC 2022b). As of March 2022, gathering restrictions were no longer imposed in the Lahti region. Prevention of methods of COVID-19 contraction were still recommended. For example, the use of facemasks, safety distance between individuals and keeping sufficient hand hygiene (City of Lahti 2020).

After indoor sport facilities were allowed to open, hand hygiene rules were still required to be followed (City of Lahti 2020). This kept hand sanitizing products in high demand. LADEC states that during the COVID-19 era, businesses operating in facemask and hand sanitiser production and sales were the most successful (LADEC 2022b). However, restrictions in Finland were lifted as the COVID-19 situation improved. Finnish government proposed to discontinue the recommendation to work from home and the usage of facemasks, no longer be applicable. (YLE News 2022c.)

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and Statistics Finland data collection showed such effects COVID-19 had on the Finnish economy and how the economy had recovered. The data showed that the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) had decreased 16.4% from 2019-Q4 to 2020-Q2. However, the GDP began to steeply increase by 2020-Q3, when it had dropped by 2020-Q4. This indicated that the economy began to recuperate after 2020-Q2. (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development & Statistics Finland 2021.)

Gross domestic product, volume, growth in Finland, and other selected European countries (annualised series)

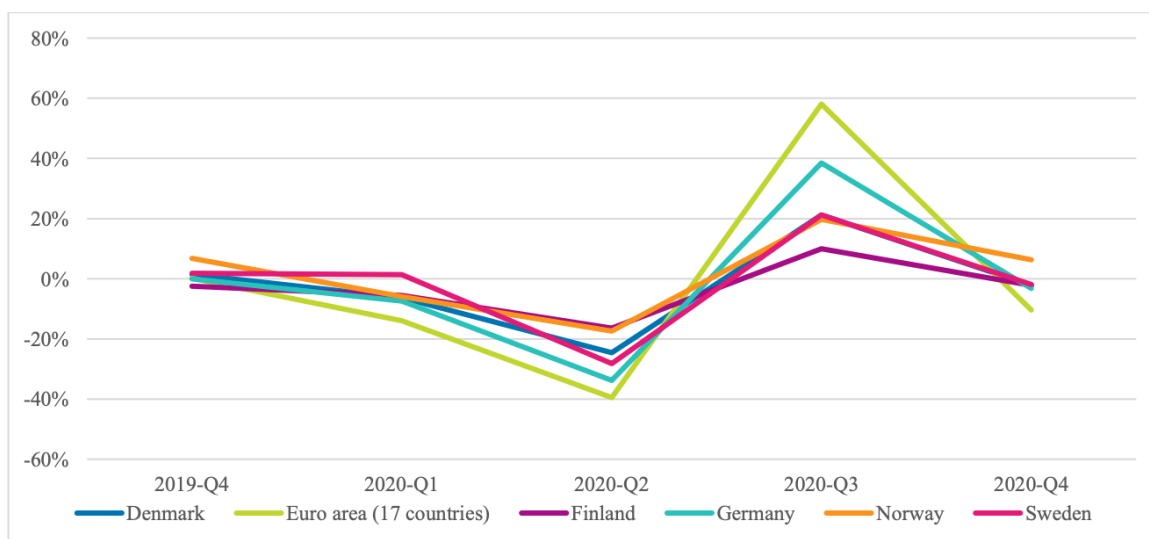


Figure 4. Gross domestic product, volume, growth in Finland and other European countries (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development & Statistics Finland 2021)

Data collected by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development indicated that businesses operating from home had suffered less from regression in the year of 2020 than those which operate sales mostly on face-to-face contact (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2021). Small and medium-sized firms suffered the most, by lacking large assets. OECD stated that small and medium-sized enterprises suffered the most from lockdowns. This is due to small and medium-sized enterprises possessing a limited amount of assets as the COVID-19 crisis began. (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development & Statistics Finland 2021.)

As the COVID-19 pandemic turned into a global problem in 2020, working from home began. Most wage-earners prefer to continue working remotely after the pandemic ends, as they began to receive full pay to work from home from May 2020. (Bloom 2022.)

3 Empirical research

3.1 Data collection and research participants

A case company called Bodyplanet Oy was chosen to serve as evidence of operating a business in the fitness industry during the COVID-19 global situation. COVID-19 restrictions applied to the company and thus, affected the operations of Bodyplanet. This made the company a valuable case for the study. Bodyplanet specialises in providing customers a gym facility which includes gym equipment, group exercise classes, personal training sessions and dietary guidance. Bodyplanet is located in Nastola, Finland.

To gather further data, another interview was conducted with a business advisor from LADEC. Both the management of business of the case company and business advisors agreed to partake in interviews. The case company participant had leadership status and the business advisor participant had multiple years of experience working with new entrepreneurs, making both participants relevant sources to collect data from. The interview with the case company representative took place in April 2022 and with the business advisor in May 2022.

The structure of the interview with the case company representative was longer than the with the business advisor. The first interview consisted of 17 questions. The beginning of the interview focused on gathering background information on the company and the process of the business start-up. The middle of the interview asked about personal experiences of working in the fitness industry as an entrepreneur, the effects brought to the company by COVID-19 and steps taken to avoid negative downfall on the business during the pandemic. At the end of the interview, the participant was questioned on the needed skills and capabilities to run a business in the fitness industry, and what it takes to run a business during the pandemic. Furthermore, questions were asked on how customer quantity and quality is upheld during the pandemic.

The second interview consisted of seven questions and began with the basics of starting up a business in Finland and the effects of COVID-19 on said process. The middle of the interview focused on methods to overcome competition. The end enquired advice from the interviewee pertaining to new entrepreneurs starting a company as well as existing entrepreneurs starting a new company,

Data sampling of the interviews were specified to target work experience as well as own knowledge, opinions, and thoughts of the participants. Examination of background data on the case company and the topic of business start-up as well as COVID-19 were utilised to construct the interview material. Doing so enabled the interviewer to question on the correct

topics of interest which would assist in answering the main research question and sub question. It is important to understand that due to language differentiation, interview answers were translated from Finnish to English during data analysis, for the purpose of writing the thesis.

As there was no hypothesis to begin the thesis, the method of inductive reasoning was used to conclude and form the final solution to solve the research questions. The principal to inductive reasoning means to produce a conclusion based on the monitoring of discrete situation (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2004). Thus, by observations of the samples of data gathered, a conclusion to the thesis could be made.

3.2 Phases of the study

The study began with conducting the topic of the thesis and research question on week six 2022. Writing of the literature review began on week seven and continued until 18 of 2022. Planning of interview questions occurred during the weeks of 14-15.

Interview with case company occurred on week 15 and with business advisor on week 17. Completing the results section of the empirical research occurred from weeks 15 to 18.

The conclusion, recommendations for future research and evaluation of the study were finalised in the week of 19. The events and date of events which took place during the whole study process (Table 3).

Week 6 2022	Establishment of thesis topic and research questions
Week 7-18 2022	Literature review
Week 14-15 2022	Empirical research material formulation
Week 15-17 2022	Implementation of empirical research
Week 15-18 2022	Data analysis
Week 19 2022	Final conclusion and evaluation

TABLE 3. Dates pertaining to the phases of study

3.3 Results

3.3.1 Case company: Bodyplanet Oy

The interviewer questioned the representative of management on the start-up date of the business, experience on- and ideas behind the whole process. It was also asked what steps were needed to take to start the company.

Bodyplanet was established early October in 2021. The idea to create Bodyplanet began in September 2021, followed by the action to make it happen. Soon after the idea came about, a few meetings were established with the owners of the premises, renting associates, trustee in bankruptcy and the original owner of the gym premises.

Liikuntakeskus Lumo, the company before Bodyplanet, operated gym business in the same premises before Bodyplanet took over. Working as a fitness instructor for Liikuntakeskus Lumo from 2014-2019, and Bodyplanet Oy from 2021 onwards, the interviewer had experience working with both businesses. During 2019-2021 Bodyplanet had taken over the gym as Liikuntakeskus Lumo Nastola had gone bankrupt in autumn 2021. Liikuntakeskus Lumo had a gym based in Lahti and another in Nastola. The company had begun working in 2001 and finished in October 2021. (Finder 2022.) In September 2021, the process of transition between Liikuntakeskus Lumo and Bodyplanet Oy began. The interview proceeded to question the process of the transition between the two companies.

The process went smoothly. The essentials were put together for funding and planned so, that the gym would not be closed off from customers at any given point between the transfer from Lumo to Bodyplanet and anytime afterwards. Finally, the required documents were signed, and the ownership was then transferred to Bodyplanet.

Undoubtedly and unfortunately, there had been a negative impact on customers due to the perpetration of the previous company Lumo, COVID-19 restrictions and the fear from customers of contracting the virus. The interviewer strived to discover how Bodyplanet executed the persuasion to regain customer satisfaction.

As Liikuntakeskus Lumo became bankrupt, the premises turned into a bankruptcy estate, in which the debt of Lumo was dealt by lawyers. The bankruptcy situation began to get very bad on Spring 2021, leading to customers relinquishing their gym memberships and joining other gyms instead. This hindered the process of business start-up, but only in the sense of delaying the transition a little.

News reporters also negatively impacted our company, by writing accusation articles on one of the owners, hindering the gym's reputation and the general news on COVID

which scared customers away from gyms or any other social or face-to-face contact completely. Nevertheless, the situation got better shortly after it got bad. In fact, as the ownership transferred to Bodyplanet, new and old customers began joining the gym again.

Furthermore, companies undoubtedly were impacted by the COVID-19 restrictions. Specifically, the governmental order to close all sport centres from 30 of December 2021 to 2 of February 2022. The government ordered lockdowns since the COVID-19 situation worsened in 2020. Lockdowns had been a regular occurrence, in which Bodyplanet should consider a plan if the situation worsens again. However, individuals still avoid public places, including sport centres. The interviewer continued to question company experience of business start-up during COVID-19. Furthermore, questioning the actions took to regain success and to keep the business running during COVID-19.

During the lockdown everything just stopped. Some of our customers paid their gym memberships, whilst others left theirs unpaid. This led to more expenses for Bodyplanet.

It was only possible to be open for 2 months after starting up. During that time, the gym had undergone some changes. For example, purchasing new equipment and machines. This left Bodyplanet with expenses unable to be filled during the lockdown.

During the lockdown the gym strived to get new customers to join the gym and so far, it has been successful after reopening.

Starting up a business as a new entrepreneur, especially during COVID-19 times, resulted in further challenges. To stay on the study topic, the interview proceeded to new and existing entrepreneurship in the fitness field. The section of the data collection is vital to acquire information on sports centre-based entrepreneurship.

I have worked before in the fitness field but not as an entrepreneur. I have also worked as an entrepreneur before but not in the fitness field. It does not matter which field you are in as an entrepreneur. The process and upkeep are quite the same in any field, there are always the necessary things that need to be taken care of. Such as expenses to upkeep the business, payment of employees, keeping accounts, customer service and so on.

I wouldn't, however, start a business in a field I know nothing about. Since I have worked previously for fitness-orientated companies, it gave me some background knowledge and wisdom to start entrepreneurship in fitness.

The purpose of the rest of the interview was to inquire about the necessary skills needed for running a fitness-oriented company. The interview revealed the following: the importance of customer service and customer satisfaction to succeed. A gym experience is more than about exercise and health improvement, it is also about customer service and satisfaction received from employees at the facility. Customers are more likely to continue using the services of a business if their needs are met. A happy customer equals greater company success.

You need to be ready to do things, take actions straight away, be quick and work efficiently. You cannot just think about things, you must do them. You should also have excellent customer service skills and overall people skills to succeed in a business. Regularly asking for customer feedback helps to meet our customers wants and needs. You should be passionate about fitness because it motivates you further to run the company in that field.

You should also be able to stand out from other gyms. Offer something that others don't have. Offer something that customers desire from their whole gym experience.

Be ready to work all the time, especially in the beginning. It's not just a 9-17 job.

The interview revealed that the aim of Bodyplanet is to increase customer satisfaction, acquire new gym equipment, provide good quality group exercise classes and increase business profit.

It has been naturally challenging running the business without one of the owners, especially because staff live far away from the gym, meaning in another city. But we have managed well thus far. We now have a new employee working for us, who takes care of marketing and dealing with customers at the reception. It helps having customer-orientated staff and they are passionate about customer service.

Methods of increasing customer satisfaction include creating campaigns for new and existing customers, providing quality customer support, and asking for feedback from customers to help fulfil their wants and needs. Socialising with customers is also important for customer satisfaction, as humans react to positive social stimulation.

The ugly truth about COVID-19 is that it has been blasted all over the news which scares people away from coming to places like gyms. Now there hasn't been as much news on COVID-19 but more on the Ukrainian war, sad as it is, it has helped businesses like ours stay away from negative news taking our customers away. In fact, more people have been motivated to come to the gym and specifically buy memberships from us.

Before the transition of ownership between Lumo and Bodyplanet, the total of customers and memberships began to decrease. Once the word had spread that there were new owners, new customers were wanting to join the gym. Previous customers from Lumo were also wanting to join the gym again as there were now new owners.

We have lost customers due to corona. Trying to gain them back has been almost impossible because those who are persistent to stay away from social activity will do so. But they have mentioned to us that they will come back to Bodyplanet once the situation has settled.

To be more successful, we have done a lot of work with our social medias and marketing strategies. We have a new employee as I mentioned who takes care of those and they have been a big asset to the company.

Our customers are happier than before, when owned by the previous firm. Customer satisfaction has grown due to better customer service provided by Bodyplanet and also due to development of the gym.

3.3.2 Business advisors: LADEC

LADEC is an advisory company, assisting entrepreneurs and businesses with founding, internationalisation, growing, developing, and locating a new business. LADEC operates in Lahti, Asikkala, Hartola, Hollola, Iitti, Orimattila and Padasjoki. (LADEC 2019, 1.) The interview with was based on starting a new business in Finland as an entrepreneur and how has COVID-19 affected the start up.

Starting up a business requires more steps for a new entrepreneur than an existing one. This interview revealed the various processes a new entrepreneur must take into consideration before going about beginning his or her new company. The interview also portrayed the steps needed to be taken by an existing entrepreneur to create a new company.

As a new entrepreneur, you must first have a business idea which has been “tested” with potential customers. Testing means, asking your customers their opinion on your new business idea, what they think. Next, you must make a business plan, together with profitability calculations for the next three years.

In the case you are going to apply for the Start-up grant, before registration of your new company, you must contact the Employment and Economic Development Office, otherwise known as TE-office. TE-office gives you information on how to apply for the Start-up grant. Apply, and after receiving the decision on whether you are eligible to get the grant, you can proceed with the company registration.

Permits are also something to take into consideration, find out whether you need a permit or multiple permits for your business. For example, starting a business in the health or wellbeing field, you might need permits from Valvira or Avi.

In addition, before starting the business, it is important to find out whether you can receive financing. If it is possible to receive, you must hire a place where you can find financing.

The interviewee referred to instructions created by Uusyrityskeskus, a business counselling service, helping entrepreneurs to start businesses. Developing a business idea is the first step to creating a business. The entrepreneur is required to think about possible necessary permits for the business. Besides the business idea, a business plan must be made, which includes the form and name of the company. Financing, start-up documentation and registration of the company comes next. Banking, accounting services (possible to outsource or not), insurance companies, the entrepreneurs' own pension insurance for self-employment and other necessary insurances must be obtained as well. Only then the entrepreneur starts his or her own business with all the necessary equipment.



Figure 5. Steps to take when creating a new business, advised by Uusyrityskeskus

The interview revealed that Finland is one of the countries with high taxation. All income is taxed, as well as good and services. This includes income made by entrepreneurship whilst

running a business. Creating and starting up a new business requires various registration steps, informing the Finnish tax office on the new company identification, company ID.

You need to have a company ID to start up a business in Finland. You will receive this when you register and list your company to the tax office: VAT value added tax and corporate income tax register. Registration at the tax office, occurs at the same time when registering the new company to PRH Finnish Patent and Registration Office.

Global GDP had decreased 2020, and on-site businesses suffered from regression, more than remotely operating business. This was sure to create competition between entrepreneurs, especially those with smaller businesses. To stand out from other companies, one should rely on the profitability calculations made before expenditure begins to outweigh returns.

Finding a unique way of producing services/products can help to stand out from other businesses. Think about how production of superior customer experience can be achieved and how can customers be induced to use your services. However, be careful with costs and follow the profitability.

Due to COVID-19 restrictions and citizens avoiding close contact with other persons, it can be assumed that starting up a business in particular fields of interest, might succeed better than others. The interview showed that COVID-19 does not directly impact the business start-up, but possibilities of the business being unsuccessful due to governmental acts and issues may occur.

There is no difference in the process of starting up itself, but of course you need to be prepared for the possibility that we might get a new lockdown if things go bad again. This means that you must make plans what you do/ how you sell your services or products etc. In case this happens, usually this means taking the business online.

Legal requirements should be taken into consideration, incumbent to the business category, field of operation. The interview revealed that by operating by, for example, importation and exportation affect the types of permits needed to run the business, which can lead to limitations. Such aspects and steps must be considered.

The line of business can affect the start-up because of the permits. You must find out whether there is a request for those permits. There might even be some limitations for example, concerning import/ export business. Fitness industry businesses might or might not need permits. If you work as a physiotherapist, you need a permit, but if you work as a personal trainer, you do not need it.



Figure 6. Steps of starting a new company

To succeed with a new business, as a new entrepreneur or existing one, advice was asked on what steps to take to ensure a more successful future.

Be prepared, take time to scan the future, quiet signals, trends, black swans. Invision the scenario; what could be the future you might face and how to face them? Be innovative and try to find new ways to think about the old problems and the future changes. Develop your products or services. Find new products and services in the most unexpected ways of production.

Don't do what everybody else is doing, be unique. Also, think about what is missing in the line of business where you operate. Imagine what your business needs within the next few years.

Despite the focus being on the business and possible products being made, other and more personal steps should be considered.

Take care of yourself and make connections and networks. Don't just sit down and wait for problems to disappear. It may be wise to end the business if you just don't see a future with it.

To summarize, the data shows business transactions and operations are prolonged due to the COVID-19 restrictions. When in the process of business start-up, the entrepreneur must consider main aspects which include business idea and plan, legal requirements and documentation, partnerships and networking, insurance, and financing. Finnish government tax regulations and registrations are to be checked by the entrepreneur, ensuring correct taxes paid. Entrepreneurs are to possess passion for the field for the business of operation. This promotes business success. The case company were affected by the lockdown on the terms of unpaid bills by customers. News reports on COVID-19 caused customer loss. Nevertheless, Bodyplanet strives in Nastola, continuously gaining potential customers as the

COVID-19 situation subsides. Customer satisfaction skills and marketing were proven to further build company success.

4 Conclusion

4.1 Discussion of results

Both the literature review and empirical research interview showed that business start-up occurs in steps. The entrepreneur must endure the process, ensuring all the necessary steps for a successful company are met. Interviews showed that there is almost no difference between the process of building a new company before or after COVID-19. However, the process could have the potency to take more time if governmental restrictions and lockdowns are put into action.

Data gathered in the literature review specifying international trade, showed that during the peak of COVID-19 in 2020, all other top 10 products fell and rose in the cumulative gap, except for pharmaceutical product which had a steady rise from March 2020 to July 2021 (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2021). This is most likely due to the demand for COVID-19 prevention products. Such as, face masks to prevent contraction of the COVID-19 virus (Eurostat 2020). Therefore, starting a business which focuses mainly on exports and imports, should be considered as to which category of commodity being imported and/ or exported.

Furthermore, employees were in favour of transferring operations from the premises to remote work either home or a closed environment. However, unlikely profitable for new businesses or small businesses. (Bloom 2022.) If another lockdown occurred, forcing gyms to close; it is predicted that sport industry businesses would suffer. This depends on clients and customers. For example, the case company received several paying customers during the lockdown whilst others had left membership bills unpaid. Resulting in further expenses for Bodyplanet. Such consequences that lockdowns appear to have on the case company, where similar situations are prone to occur in other businesses operating in the fitness industry.

Other non-COVID-19 factors also affected the start-up of the case company. Factors including the previous ownership of the premises where the case company currently operates, which caused customers to cut off their memberships and already adjusted to the previous company customer service quality.

Comparing the literature review to the empirical research, the collected data both coincide with each other. COVID-19 and governmental restrictions changed the economy in terms of shifts in the demands of certain product and service sectors. Furthermore, changing the notion of citizens interacting on a social basis.

Both interviews confirmed that certain activities in the fitness industry require authorisation in the form of permits, such as some group exercise classes. Personal trainer services do not require a permit. Furthermore, COVID-19 does not and has not directly affect the permit requirement of the business in any way. Interview with the case company showed despite the negative impact COVID-19 has had on the business, it has not ceased complete failure on business start-up in the fitness industry. Potential customers are partaking in social events and social premises, during COVID-19.

4.2 Answers to the research questions

This subchapter serves solely to display the answers pertaining to the research questions. By doing so, the entire study maintains a clear structure and display of information gathered during the thesis process.

The main research question serves to coincide with the topic of the thesis. Then, sub questions (displayed in the background chapter) were created to further discover in-depth research on the main topic of the thesis, this helped to answer the main research question.

Answers to sub questions are displayed in this section, followed by the answer to the main research question.

1) How does COVID-19 affect human health?

Referring to the literature review, the effects of COVID-19 virus vary from person to person. Some suffer from the virus so severely that intensive hospital care is needed to aid them back to health. Some experience the COVID-19 virus with mild symptoms. Research shows that vaccination is one way to prevent severe symptoms from occurring. Other causes of prevention, in which individuals can take include wearing a facemask, avoiding large crowds, proper hand hygiene.

Referring to the interview with the case company, some people have stopped physical activity in the form of gym activity. It can be predicted that their health can suffer, in terms of decreased endurance and because of this.

2) How has COVID-19 affected society, businesses, and the public?

Internationally, import and exportation had suffered when COVID-19 was at the peak of its time. Although the world had recovered from the Import-export obstacles, the type of trade has changed, in terms of the type of goods being imported and exported. For example, in Finland there is more demand for facemasks produced by Finnish manufacturers. Wearing

a facemask helps to prevent the contraction of the COVID-19 virus, leading society to purchase more facemasks as well as the research from China-produced facemasks not being sufficient at protecting against COVID-19.

The interview showed that the public have been scared out of joining the gym because of news on social media about COVID-19 and social norms have changed due to this. The company had lost customers from this. The company had also gained customers as the public were motivated more than ever to join the gym.

3) What are the types of challenges the case company (Bodyplanet Oy) faced after having started up in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic?

The most expensive challenges which Bodyplanet Oy faced, occurred when the governmental restrictions were put on for gyms to close in December 2021-February 2022. Clients who did not pay their gym membership invoices brought forth extra expenses for Bodyplanet Oy.

Other challenges included running the gym alone as one of the owners ended up in intensive care in Spring of 2022. When the gym was run by the previous company, a large quantity of customers has resigned from their gym memberships due to the business being run poorly. Luckily the situation has recovered and despite COVID-19 still being there, there have been new customers joining Bodyplanet Oy.

4) What is the difference between starting up a new business before and after the COVID-19 pandemic?

The interviews showed that the process of starting up a business does not differ before or after COVID-19 began. The interviewed business advisor states that in Finland, there are certain steps needed to be taken before starting up a company as an entrepreneur, but this has not changed because of COVID-19. The only changes include maintaining a successful business if COVID-19 restrictions occur and processes and business transactions are to take longer due to COVID-19 restrictions.

5) What protocols and actions do businesses need to take into consideration to succeed during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The Interview with the case company showed that customer satisfaction is to be kept at a high level of contentment. Including promotions and development of the premises further improve the likelihood of gaining new customers, leading to higher profit, leading to success.

Both interviews show that staying unique as a company helps to gather more customers and persistence, staying active and passion all are factors of what an entrepreneur should have to maintain a successful business in the fitness industry during COVID-19.

6) As competition is higher during the COVID-19 global pandemic, what can companies do to stand out from each other?

Similarly, to the previous sub question answer, uniqueness and creating new products and services for customer help to stand out from other companies during the high competition cause by COVID-19.

Finally, the answer to the main research question, utilising the answers from the sub questions:

How has COVID-19 affected starting up a business in the fitness industry?

Research from the literature review concludes that COVID-19 physically affects those who are prone to specific health conditions and problems, which can keep potential customers away from fitness industry businesses if they are hospitalised or severely infected. Data collected in the empirical research proves that COVID-19 made processes slower for business operation to start-up in the fitness industry. The virus also affects social norms and the opinions of potential customers. This hinders the motive of potential customers to purchase memberships from sports facilities. However, individuals who have contracted the virus are further motivated to support new businesses in the fitness industry, by doing so individuals better their own health.

4.3 Evaluation of the study

The study utilised both literature and empirical research to gather sufficient data. Data quality was adequate for answering the research questions, despite the small number of participants. The interviews from the empirical research portrayed personal experiences, helping to form the conclusion. Furthermore, the questions asked in the interviews enabled for further suggestive questions. This method allowed the thesis writer to gather further information on the business operations during COVID-19. The literature review consisted of applicable background research for the study. For example, COVID-19 contraction causes death for some individuals (World Health Organization 2022b). This factor affected the case company customer quantity. As customers fear the contraction of the COVID-19 virus, it resulted in the customer disappearance at Bodyplanet.

Both literature and empirical research were competent sources of data

The structure of this thesis made the study easy to read. The presentation of research and data was displayed clearly and consistently. A visual representation of the study process (Figure 7).

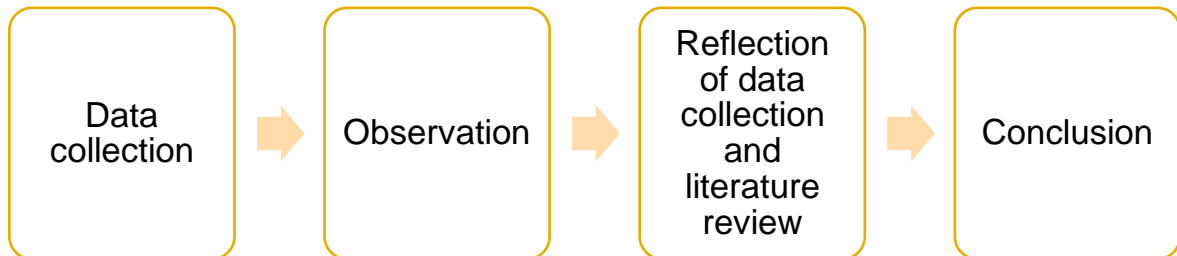


Figure 7. Thesis study process

The method, aim and purpose of the study were all relevant to current research data available. A substantial topic was chosen for the research and as well as a relevant case company.

4.4 Suggestions for future research

As the thesis only used two research participants, to conduct more thorough research there should be more participants for future research studies. The more data collected, the greater the in-depth conclusion. For the literature review, perhaps a great number of articles could have been utilised as well as a broader variety of articles. However, in Finland there are the few well-known trusted sources for quality information and research on health-oriented topics. For this study, THL and YLE news were the most used sources. Nevertheless, both were reliable sources. Consequently, taking a greater time span to gather data and process the data information would benefit for a higher quality study next time. There is a need for further, in depth research on the topic of COVID-19 and business operations in the fitness industry, in Finland.

5 Summary

The study aimed to discover the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on business start-up within the fitness industry. Methods of research included a literature review and empirical research. The literature review consisted of information extracted from reliable sources, such as news articles, research papers, governmental- and healthcare documentation. The topics of the literature review included: the COVID-19 virus, business start-up for entrepreneurs and the effects of governmental restrictions on businesses. The empirical research was conducted in the form of two interviews. One with the case company management of business representative, and the other, with a business advisor from Lahti Regional Development Ltd (LADEC). The purpose of the interviews was to collect qualitative data in the form of inductive reasoning, to be used as primary data. Instead of solely utilising previous studies and other facts, collecting phenomenological data in the form of new personal experiences, enabled conclusions to be made with a broader and more current view.

The case company Bodyplanet Oy was discovered through past personal experiences in the fitness industry, working as a fitness instructor for the previous owner of the case company, Liikuntakeskus Lumo. Bodyplanet operates a sports centre and gym in Nastola, Finland. Bodyplanet was an asset to the study, as they began business in the fitness and sports industry, during the COVID-19 pandemic and governmental restrictions were applied to and affected the company. The other research participant: business advisor from LADEC, was discovered through LAB University connections. The business advisor was an asset to the research, for providing information on business start-up for entrepreneurs. Furthermore, to reveal whether COVID-19 impacted the process start-up process.

After extracting literature and conducting the empirical research, analysis of the data took place, to form the findings. It was found that COVID-19 had no effect on the method of business start-up as a new entrepreneur. Entrepreneurs were still given the same start-up opportunities. However, as COVID-19 had slowed down almost all business transactions, the time taken to form a new business could be longer than before COVID-19. The possibility of future governmental restrictions to be ordered on the sports and fitness industry puts a halt to on-site operations. However, providing customers with other remote options to use business products and services, will not only improve customer satisfaction but also improve the business reputation, leading to success. Data from both the literature and empirical research revealed that COVID-19 negatively impacted society; individuals lack motivation, fear of contracting the virus keeps potential customers away from businesses, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) decreased, businesses lost customers and other valuable assets. Nevertheless, the Finnish economy remained stable. The study found a link between quality

customer service skills, development of company premises and business success. Additional interview participants and broader empirical research methods are needed for future research on the topic of COVID-19 and new entrepreneurship in the fitness industry.

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Appendix 1. Interview questions for the representative of management at Bodyplanet Oy

- 1) When and how was Bodyplanet established? How did it all go?
- 2) Liikuntakeskus Lumo Nastola was running a gym and group exercise classes here before Bodyplanet took over. What kind of impact has Lumo had on Bodyplanet launching directly after?
- 3) How would you describe the transition between Lumo and Bodyplanet, has it been a smooth transition? Have there been some challenges or difficulties?
- 4) What would you say has gone well for Bodyplanet after taking over from Lumo?
- 5) Have you worked as an entrepreneur before, in the same field (of fitness)? If yes, how does that affect launching and running a new business in the fitness field. If not, tell me about your experience of running a business in the fitness field, how does it differ from your past work experience?
- 6) According to YLE News, gyms were ordered to close from 30 December 2021 to 02 February 2022, due to rising levels of COVID-19. How did that affect business for Bodyplanet?
- 7) During the close what did Bodyplanet do?
- 8) As we all know, people have been back and forth in quarantine, avoiding public places and otherwise unmotivated to exercise since the COVID-19 restrictions started, in 2020. How has that affected Bodyplanet starting up in the middle of this situation?
- 9) As of 2 weeks ago, YLE News states that there are 300 more COVID-19 patients being treated in hospitals since the restrictions have been lifted in February. It seems that the COVID-19 situation has been getting worse. What do you think? Has it had an impact on Bodyplanet?
- 10) Have you lost any customers due to the COVID-19 situation? If yes, then how have you tried to gain them back? If not, then how have you tried to otherwise grow the business?
- 11) Have you gained any customers during the COVID-19 situation? Would you say customers are more motivated to join the gym after the restrictions have been lifted?
- 12) How has it been running the business without the presence of the other owner?

- 13) Would you consider Bodyplanet to be successful in the future? Whether or not COVID-19 goes away completely.
- 14) What types of actions will Bodyplanet be taking to ensure a successful future?
- 15) What does it take to be an entrepreneur in the fitness industry?
- 16) How would you describe the characteristics needed to be successful in running a business in the fitness industry, here in Finland

Appendix 2. Interview questions for the LADEC business advisor

- 1) How does the whole process of starting up a business go? If you are
 - a. A new entrepreneur
 - b. An existing entrepreneur
- 2) What kind of tools do you need to start up a new business? For example, company ID? (Y-TUNNUS)
- 3) Does starting up a company in a particular field affect the whole business start-up?
 - a. If yes, what needs to be done to start up a company in the fitness industry?
- 4) Due to the impact that COVID-19 has had on society, how would you describe the process of starting up a new business? Is it any different than before the COVID-19 era began?
- 5) There must be more competition now than ever due to COVID, to maintaining a successful business? What would you advise entrepreneurs/ businesses to do differently to stand out from others?
- 6) What advice would give for an entrepreneur who wants to start their business in the fitness industry?
- 7) What advice would give for an entrepreneur who wants their business to stand out in the fitness industry?