



Elements of Customer Experience in Sports VIP Business

Customer cases from Elämys Live Ltd

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Abstract

Previous studies have predicted growth for the global sports hospitality business in upcoming years. Yet, customer insights and customer experience management have not been further studied in the sports VIP business context in Finland. The purpose was to study what are the elements of a successful VIP experience in sports events. The gathered findings were discussed in relation to customer experience management in the sports VIP business.

The research method was qualitative. The qualitative research was conducted through semi-structured interviews via the TEAMS platform. The selected interviewees had purchased VIP services for the 2022 IIHF Ice Hockey World Championship from the commissioner company. The commissioner company, Elämys Live Ltd, was one of the official VIP re-seller companies of the event, which was held in May 2022 in Finland. Interviews were conducted during January and February 2022 to understand customer insights before the VIP event. The transcribed interview data were further analyzed by coding, categorizing and combining them into themes. The themes were conducted from the theoretical framework.

The findings indicated that the elements of a successful VIP experience were needs, expectations and motives. The primary needs were to ensure high-quality of service, to offer tailor-made solutions and to achieve customers' loyalty. The main expectations were effortlessness, price-quality ratio and total benefits. In addition, the findings demonstrated that the essential motives to participate were the event itself, personal interest in sports and once-in-a-lifetime-experience. All these needs, expectations and motives affected customers' buying behavior in sport-related VIP events.

In future research, the study could be continued by observing the fulfilled connection between customers' expected VIP experience and experienced services after the event. Furthermore, future research could expose new methods for better customer experience management in the sports VIP business. Customer experience management would enable as well other sport-related organizations to understand their customers' expectations to create more profitable experiences in the sports VIP business context.

Keywords/tags (subjects)

Sports business, VIP, hospitality, customer insight, customer experience management, Ice Hockey World Championship

Miscellaneous (Confidential information)

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1 Introduction

According to the sports hospitality market forecast, the global sports hospitality business is predicted to increase rapidly from 2020 to 2025. The sports hospitality market has been on a lockdown since 2020 because of COVID-19 and its restrictions on towards live events. Companies are more eager to build better relationships with clients after the pandemic and sports related hospitality is expected to grow with returning mega-events and their audiences. In the sports hospitality business, the developed and designed services must answer customers' needs, expectations and motives. Organizations try to build stronger relationships and offer unique experiences to their clients through tailor-made VIP treatment. (Research and Markets, 2020.)

A commissioner company of this study, Elämys Live Ltd, is a VIP supplier company that concentrates on offering experiential services at sports events. Elämys Live Ltd has noticed that VIP customer acquisition is expensive and time-consuming if a company does not recognize where to find and how to reach potential customers. The most important issues in effective customer acquisition and in maximizing sales are to recognize who are the targeted customer segments and especially why they are willing to invest their time and money in experiential VIP services in sports events. The motives behind buying decisions affect companies' expectations and experiences after an event. A VIP service supplier can focus more on customer experience management, identifying the actual customer insight and perceived expectations.

Elämys Live Ltd has neither researched nor utilized available customer insight behind the VIP service buying decisions of their corporate clients. A better understanding of customer insight and customer experiences may reveal information concerning customers' buying motives. The buying motives and buying behavior of clients can be used to improve the business unit's sales promotion and profitability in the future.

The prior study of Jones and Moital (2017) with their framework of corporate VIPs opened a discussion on managing VIP experiences to extend corporate effectiveness for further research. Jones and Moital (2017) focused on the techniques that created event prestige value for corporate VIPs. Furthermore, they assumed that in future research it would be advantageous to understand better which attributes, interaction and guiding principles create prestige value for VIP guests.

This research focuses on customer insight and customer experiences in the sports VIP business. By studying customer insight and customer experiences in detail, it is possible to utilize the

knowledge to perform better customer experience management. Customer experience management is crucial knowledge for an organization to answer customers' needs and expectations, and to predict customers' motives and buying behavior. In addition, knowledge of customer insight is extremely vital to maintaining the customer experience related to business because tailor-made VIP experiences are based on individual customer insight.

1.1 Background and key concepts

Integration of marketing and an increased amount of theory in the study field of sports and sports event consumption has generated plenty of new insights into customer behavior. According to Kahle & Close (2011) specific research and sport-related literature have begun to detail the special elements inherent in the sports event consumption experience. The research of sports event consumption is seen as extremely important because of the increased investments in sports and events. In addition, sports marketing has escalated over the last several decades to its new position as one of the major segments of the sports industry. (Kahle & Close 2011, 1.)

There are two different approaches to selling sports hospitality packages: the sports property takes care of the sales and marketing itself, or having hospitality packages that are sold to a suitable agency that sells and does marketing on behalf of the property owner (Fetchko et al. 2013, 195–196). For event management organizations it is normal to partner with hospitality companies to create events that they offer directly to customers. When the quality of the event is guaranteed, the focus on the hospitality sales can be ensured. (Ferdinand & Kitchin 2012, 257–258.)

Elämys Live Ltd is one of the official VIP service selling agencies of the 2022 IIHF Ice Hockey World Championship. Elämys Live Ltd started the sales in January 2021 and offered their official VIP packages to Finnish corporate clients and individual consumers. VIP packages included premium seats, a buffet dinner, pre-game programs and ice hockey experts' interviews, team Finland jerseys and a VIP tag for the VIP guests. In this study VIP services are defined as a full package that includes the product itself and the service before, during and after the event.

The commissioner company of the research is Elämys Live Ltd, whose main purpose is to sell VIP services to sport events for Finnish corporate clients. Elämys Live Ltd was founded in January 2021 and is a new Finnish trailblazer in the event hospitality business. The company was founded to answer the growing and expanding demand for sports, entertainment and culture events held in

Finland. Elämys Live Ltd is owned by Finnish stakeholders. It is operated by the second-biggest tour operator, Elämys Group, which is a modern-era travel group serving consumers and corporate clients in several travel sectors, ranging from sports and active travel to business travel and event organization. Elämys Group's annual revenue, before COVID-pandemic negative impacts, was approximately 25 million euros and in January 2022 company consisted of 53 employees. (Elämys Group 2019 & 2021.)

The selected and interviewed companies of the study are VIP customers of the 2022 IIHF Ice Hockey World Championship that is hosted by Finland from 13 to 29 May 2022. The tournament is held in two host cities Tampere and Helsinki. The main venue will be the new Nokia Arena in Tampere which official opening ceremony was held on 15 December 2021. The preliminary round group A, two quarter-final games, and the medal games will be played in Nokia Arena. Team Finland plays all their tournament phases in Tampere. The second venue for the 2022 IIHF Ice Hockey World Championship in Finland has been selected to be Helsinki Ice Hall. Group B will be playing in Helsinki Ice Hall. (FIHA & Infront 2019.) The spectator capacity of Tampere's new arena is 15 000 attendants. The arena also has a world-class hotel, an international casino, versatile event facilities and numerous restaurants (Nokia Arena 2022).

This study leans on a few central concepts derived from the relevant research literature. Corporate VIP services are contrasted with prestige value which can be defined as the supposed personal worth obtained through the consumption of products or services that highlight the concept of prestige for the individual. It has been suggested that prestige motivation is determined by five sources of value that are conspicuous (often the price is the main indicator), unique (related to limited availability and not being accessible to all), social (consumption is socially important), emotional (related to emotional merits of the service more than tangible elements) and quality (related to luxury and received perfect quality). VIP, Very Important Person, status may hold significant influence within recognition and honor of the status through granted privileges. VIPs often have a need for highlighted status and further recognition and therefore a greater need for prestige value. (Vigneron & Johnson 1999.) The term of VIP can be applied in many circumstances and meanings, in this study it is used with corporate customers who have purchased VIP tickets to the 2022 IIHF Ice Hockey World Championship.

Service, relationship, participation and experiential marketing increase sports events' incorporate elements of hospitality. Luxury treatment and private experiences in sports events are similar to

business meetings on a golf course whose objective is often to conduct business or to host key clients. The hospitality events have been utilized to meet key customers, discuss with possible vendors, motivate and reward both employees and distributors for performances in sales. (Kahle & Close 2011, 210.)

Corporate hospitality is used both for internal and external purposes. The internal use focuses on offering entertainment and rewards for an organization's employees to motivate them. The benefit of an internal corporate hospitality program is that it generates increased loyalty as an outcome of appreciation for the event experience. The external use deepens the relationship marketing strategy to enhance better business relations and preferences for an organization. However, it is crucial that in both purposes, internal and external hospitality, measurement of cost and settled departmental objectives are implemented, observed and evaluated. The objective of corporate hospitality should be an appropriate ROI for companies to justify investments. (Kahle & Close 2011, 212–213.) This study concentrates on external corporate hospitality because the aim of the research is to get a more profound knowledge of a commissioner company's customer insight and customer behavior. To develop the business of Elämys Live Ltd, the present situations must be studied and analyzed.

1.2 Purpose of the study and research questions

The research problem of this study is to find out what are the elements of a successful VIP experience in sports events. To improve offered VIP experiences of a commissioner company, the elements of successful VIP experiences will be researched further. Furthermore, the aim of this study is to understand the connection between customer insight and buying behavior of companies who have purchased VIP services for the 2022 IIHF Ice Hockey World Championship. The commissioner company has gathered and stored basic customer data of their customers, but they have not been able to utilize the collected data to offer better VIP experiences for customers.

Customers' needs, expectations and motives advance the commissioner company to understand better how corporate customers behave and which factors affect their purchasing decisions. This study offers practical information and knowledge about corporative customers' expectations and behavior in the context of international sport events. A better knowledge of customer insight and purchasing experiences will enable more effective customer experience management in the future.

The research questions of this study are:

1. What do companies expect from VIP services in sports events?
2. Why do companies purchase VIP services to sports events?

To answer the research questions, conceptualizations of customer insight, customer motives and experiential services in the sports business are justified. After collecting answers to the first research question, what do companies expect from VIP services in sports events, Elämys Live Ltd receives valid information about customers' attitudes and hidden needs, which reveals the true expectations. With the second research question, why companies purchase VIP services to sports events, this study tries to answer Elämys Live Ltd's corporate customers' buying motives and buying behavior to enable to build desired VIP services in the future. The gathered data is collected from the interviews of Elämys Live Ltd's corporate customers who have purchased VIP services for the 2022 IIHF Ice Hockey World Championship.

1.3 Structure of the study process

The structure of this study process is described in the figure 1. The study process included seven different phases that is divided into five main parts as numbered below.

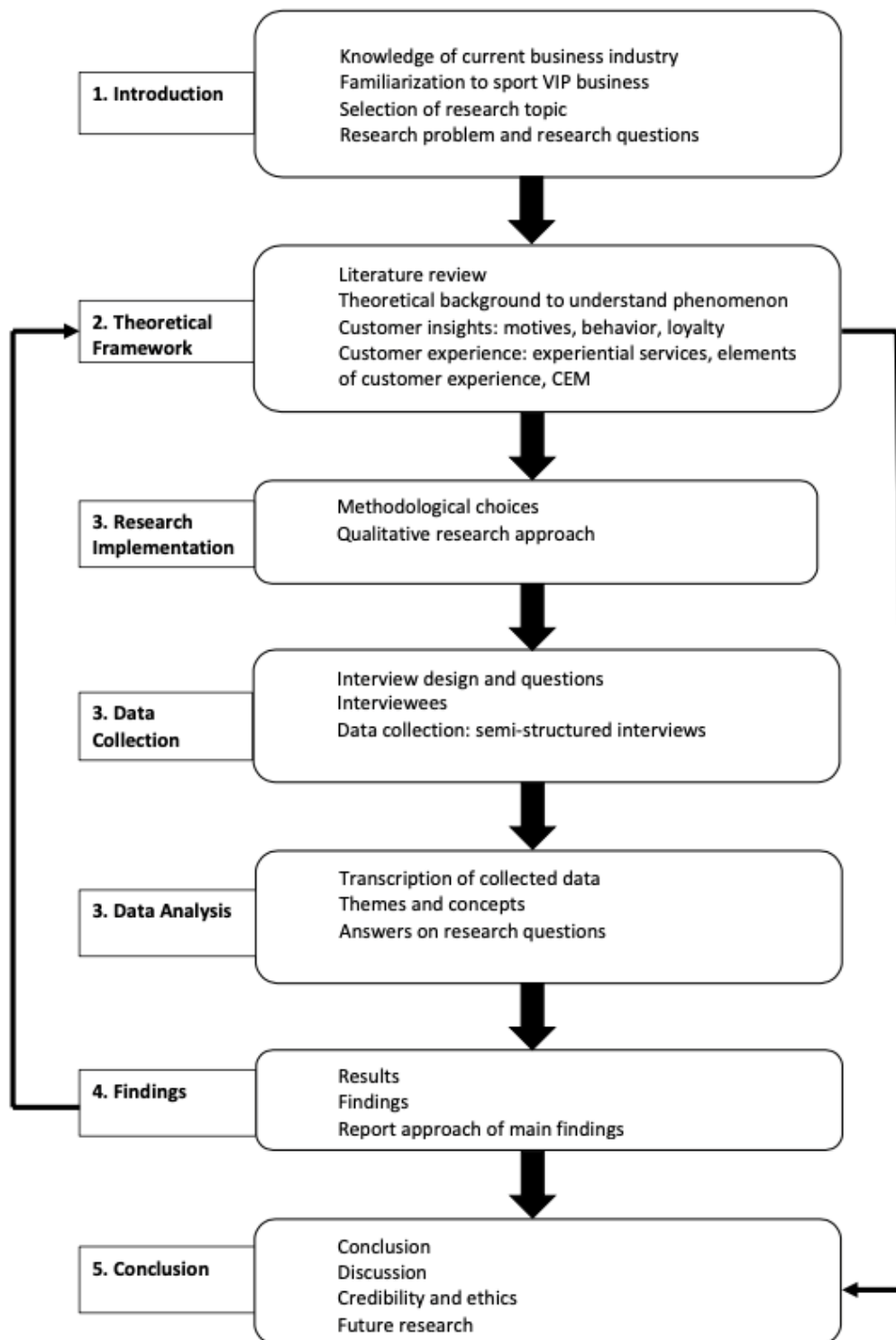


Figure 1. Research structure of this study

First, the introduction part focuses on the commissioner company and understanding the business industry of experiential VIP services. Familiarization with the business industry and its special features enabled choosing an interesting research topic and forming a research problem that guides the whole study. The theoretical framework begins with a literature review concerning the studied phenomenon. Customer insight and customer experience are quite new concepts in the experiential VIP services' business industry, but plenty of conducted research on these topics can be found from other business-related industries. The research implementation, data collection and data analysis are justified by a proper methodological research approach for this study. The findings of the study summarize and conclude the collected data and builds together with a theoretical framework a qualitative approach for the discussion, conclusion and future research.

The next part of this study introduces the theoretical framework of this research. The theoretical framework of this study builds a background for the studied phenomenon and guides the structure of the research. The theoretical background is utilized when selecting the proper research methodology and forming the data collection phase. In addition, the theoretical framework includes relevant knowledge base for this study and it is compared with the findings in the discussion part of the research.

2 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical background of this study consists of two main themes: customer insight and customer experience. Customer insight is divided into motives, behavior and understanding of loyalty matters. Customers, who are willing to purchase VIP services, can be motivated to the wanted direction of loyal behavior by understanding their needs and expectations. A concept of customer experience is opened more precisely to describe the nature of experiential services and elements of customer experience. The theoretical frame for customer experience enables a deeper look at customer experience management and how it can be used in predicting customers' future behavior.

2.1 Customer insight

Customer insight has been defined as knowledge about a customer that is valuable for an organization. Customer insight can be summarized as an organizational learning process about the customers. Identification of insight and analysis of customers is needed. Furthermore, market and competitor knowledge are important. After the identification, dissemination of insight across the organization is vital because of the importance of building and saving insight into organizational marketing databases. Many customer information sources are available via the proliferation of media channels. Together with more effective methods of data capture new possibilities are created for generating customer insight from the gained information and managing its dissemination and use. (Said et al. 2015.)

Data on customers' attitudes, behaviors and economics enable to increase the profitability of customers. Customer insight can be developed by greater knowledge of customer behavior, a better understanding of customer economics and a deeper connection between customer attitude and behaviors to understand better how potential customers change their behavior. (Langford & Schulz 2006, 21–27.)

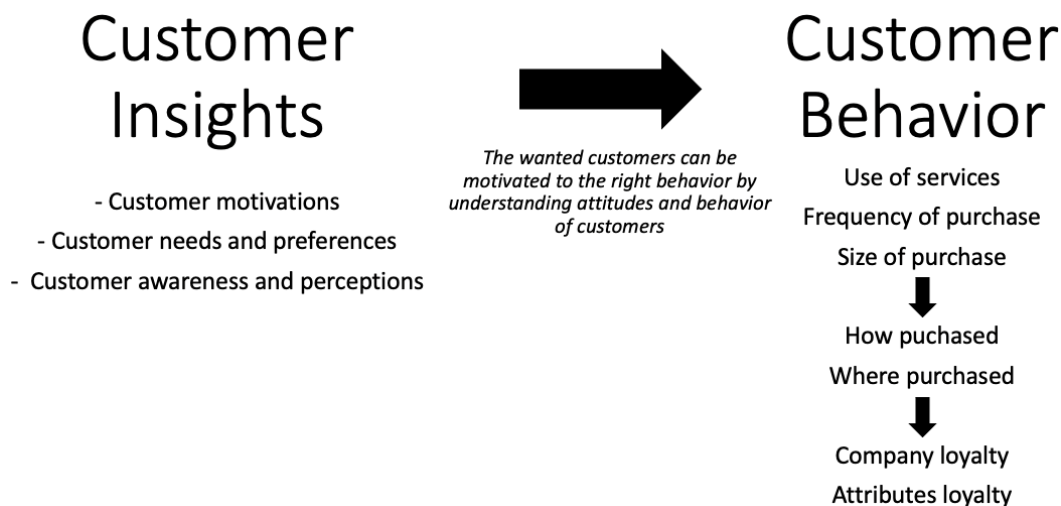


Figure 2. Model of customer insights (modified from Langford & Schulz 2006, 21–27.)

Customer attitudes can be seen as an evaluation of people, objects and ideas. It has been suggested that attitudes exist to be meanings behind goals. The attitudes can be cognitively based, affectively based or behaviorally based and those can be divided into explicit and implicit attitudes. The explicit attitudes are consciously recognizable when the implicit attitudes are more often uncontrollable and unconscious. (Jansson-Boyd 2010, 82–84.) Customer attitudes have an impact on customer behaviors that reflects powerful customer needs and preferences in relation to actual motives to purchase. The knowledge of customer behaviors and motivations have effect on a company's objectives to build proper purchasing channels by how and from where the customers can find and buy the services. (Langford & Schulz 2006, 21–27.)

Customer needs-based business opportunities can be divided into three sources. Completely new needs that customers have not been able to express in advance, needs that customer has expressed but those have not been able to serve and needs that have been tried to service but there should be more investments in time and resources to fully meet the needs and expectations. To improve its understanding of customer insight, a company must figure out the actual customer needs, which enables further customer value for clients. (Lönnrot & Lähdemäki 2018.)

Creating new services, it requires comprehensive customer insight and involvement of customers. For example, in tourism and hospitality industries development of new selection and brand extensions should be comprised by the creation of comprehensive experiences. It has been studied that in tourism and hospitality industries, including high-involvement services, better customer involvement leads to higher customer satisfaction. The core idea is to find out what

customer needs to be able to create value. Variable value expectations create changing demands in consumers' experiences. (Konu 2017.)

Laughlin (2014, 74–79) has stated that customer insight is a combination of plenty information sources, and it must be actionable to ensure it in practice. Hypotheses without practical usage are not considered as insights because they can persuade consumers to change their behavior. To increase customer understanding customer demographic and behavioral profiling are essential. Better customer understanding is not only knowing how customers behave but also recognizing why they are behaving like they are. In this study customer demographics are excluded in purpose because the focus is on behavioral aspects.

The opportunity to determine consumer decisions requires an understanding of dynamic consumer insights such as their needs and behaviors. Organizations aim to achieve competitive advantages by focusing on consumer behavior, attitude, values, needs and expectations. (Janiszewska 2013.) According to Janiszewska (2013), the consumer insight contains attitudes, opinions and values that can be discovered by listening carefully to direct opinions of the target group or indirectly by observing and analyzing the target group's attitudes and behavior. Values are behind individuals' actions and choices and form the basis for the evaluation of alternative brands. The understanding of values from a consumer's behavioral perspective enables companies to utilize the information to understand better buying decisions. There are many factors that affect individuals buying decisions but there is an obvious connection between purchasing patterns and attitudes which describe emotions, evaluations and experiences of a phenomenon. (Ekström et al. 2017, 129–135.)

2.1.1 Customer motives

To find out why customers are selecting a brand, a product or a service, it is extremely important to study the reasons why target groups are making these selections instead of just figuring out who chooses what. In-depth knowledge of the target groups has an impact on a better understanding of customers and their motivations which in turn enhances the competitive position in the business field. (Janiszewska 2013.)

Motivation leads customers to behave in a current manner. Motivation includes direction, effort and persistence, which all are related to the underlying need to engage in a behavior that has to be pursued until the need has been fulfilled. (Jansson-Boyd 2010, 115.) Motives can be divided

into six different classifications: primary motives, secondary motives, rational motives, emotional motives, conscious motives and dormant motives. The primary motives are reasons that lead to the new purchase of a product or a service. Behind primary motives, there are motives that lead to selecting a particular brand. Rational motives and emotional motives are based on logical assessment and feelings. There are motives that we are aware of, the conscious motives, which are affected by dormant motives below the conscious level. However, needs are the basis of all motivation and those are signals of lack of something whereas wants indicate specific satisfactions. (Blythe 2013, 31–32.)

Consumption motives can be divided into utilitarian and hedonic motives. The utilitarian motives reflect a consumer's desire to achieve a functional benefit from using a service or product. The hedonic consumption motives are based on a desire to have a sensory experience that elicits pleasure, fun or excitement. Furthermore, the previous study by Fetchko et al. (2013) has revealed eight different motives for sports buying behavior that can be divided into social, psychological and personal motives. The social motives bring people together and attract interest through group affiliation. The psychological motives arise from internal desires such as self-esteem and escape motives. A sports consumer enhances one's self-esteem and sometimes sports work as a channel of escaping from daily responsibilities and problems. The personal motives for sports consumption include aesthetic, entertainment, sensory stimulation and economic need states. (Fetchko et al. 2013, 29–31.)

According to Ko et al.'s (2017) study, conscientiousness, openness and extraversion are significant elements of achievement needs. Persons with have high levels of the conscientiousness trait tend to be more organized and hard-working and prefer structured events. Controversially, conscientious persons favor structured and precise events in daily life, but at the same time these characteristics may boost their need to have fun and excitement and seek an adrenaline rush. The purpose is to satisfy their unfilled need for arousal through sports consumption. The needs for affiliation and arousal need have an effect on sports involvement because sports consumption can be seen as a socialization process. Ko et al. (2017) suggested that people who watch sports events are more likely to actively participate in sports events.

Price and quality relationship can be stated when consumers rely on price as a factor of service quality and they think more expensive service is better. Customers may decide on the supplier by leaning on a well-known brand without putting value on the final quality. Often the higher price is

seen as an indicator of good quality. (Schiffman & Wisenblit 2015, 141.) According to Almquist et al. (2016), customers evaluate a product or a service by perceived value compared to the asked price. There are 30 identified elements of value that can be divided into functional, emotional, life-changing and social impact values. In figure 3, the identified elements of value are utilized from Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs and these extended insights focus on people as consumers by describing their behavior as it relates to products and services.

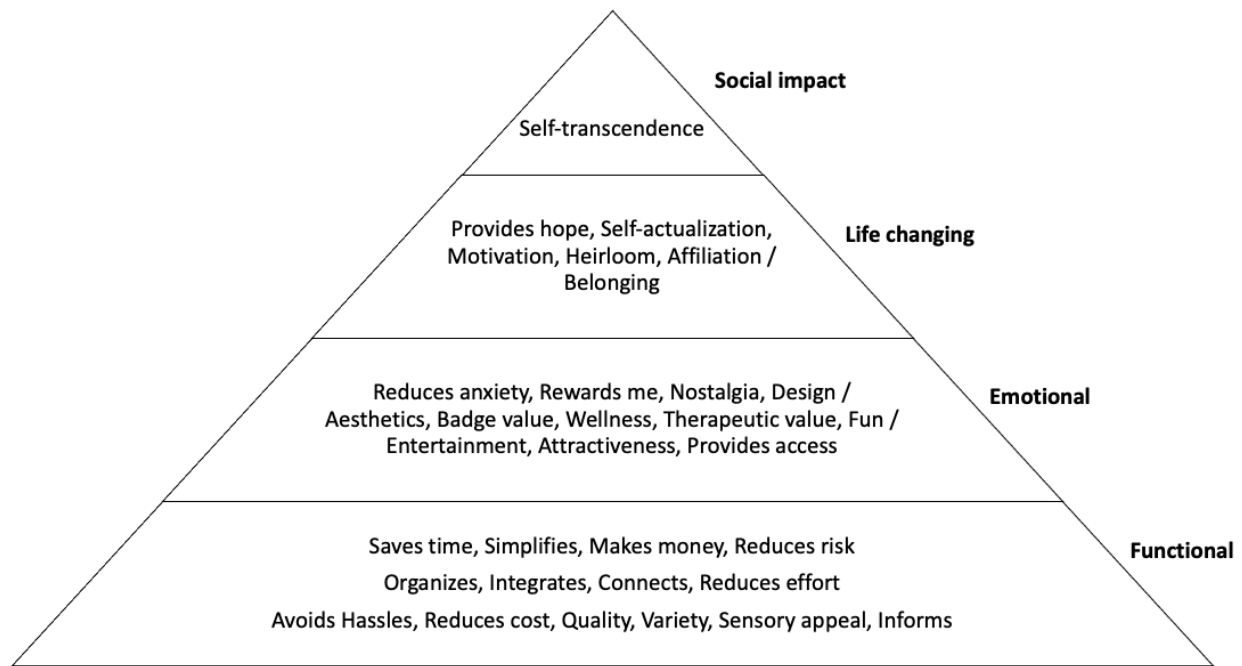


Figure 3. Identified elements of value (Almquist et al. 2016.)

Organizations should recognize their core values that they can improve through these elements of value and add elements to expand their value proposition. The elements of value offer company tools for growth opportunities to make value a priority. Furthermore, elements of value can present customer segmentation in new ways and indicate behavioral groups that meet with developed value elements of services. (Almquist et al. 2016.)

Kahle and Close (2011, 214–215) have proposed a three-function-model of attitudes which demonstrates the area of hospitality in sports events. The most superficial function of attitudes is called as compliance because it includes following the rewards and avoiding punishments associated with a certain situation. The next function is named as identification, which involves the referent power of groups to whom attach. The last and the deepest motive was specified as internalization which encompasses the core of a consumer's essence. After the functions and

motives have been identified, the behavioral goals of participation, learning, accessibility and identity are established.

2.1.2 Consumer behavior

Consumer behavior research tries to understand how to influence on an individual and societal level of human behavior (Kahle & Close 2011, 29). Without knowledge of people's ability to process information and how customers act, it would not be possible to explain consumer behavior (Jansson-Boyd 2010, 1). Blythe (2013, 5–6) has described consumer behavior as activities that people undertake when obtaining, consuming and disposing of products and services. Consumer behavior focuses more comprehensively on consumption activities than just why people purchase. The focus has moved into looking at consumption behavior and how and why people consume.

Service consumption can be divided into three stages: pre-purchase, service encounter and post-purchase. In the pre-purchase stage a customer needs awareness, information search, evaluation of alternatives and finally makes a possible purchase decision. If a consumer or an organization decides to buy or use the service, the decision is affected by underlying need or arousal. The awareness of a need will lead to an information search and an evaluation of alternatives before the final decision is made. After confirming a purchase decision, a customer continues to the service encounter phase, where a customer initiates, experiences and consumes the chosen service. In the post-purchase stage of service consumption, a customer evaluates the experienced performance and compares it with prior expectations that have been an outcome of the search and selection process. The post-purchase phase demands evaluation of a service performance which guides future intentions to re-purchase and recommend the service. (Wirtz 2012, 36–38, 49, 56–57.)

It has been stated (Blythe 2013, 273) that the consumer decision-making process follows seven consumer behavior stages: need recognition, search for information, pre-purchase evaluation of alternatives, purchase, consumption, post-consumption and divestment. In the first phase, a person notices that something is missing and he or she continues to internal or external information search that enables possible alternatives to fulfill the recognized need. The phase of purchase means acts of making the final decision and buying the product or the service that is followed by consumption of the product or the service to fulfill the original need. The post-

consumption evaluation determines if the product or the service satisfied the need or not and whether there were any problems arising from this purchase and consumption. The final stage, divestment, means disposing of the product or any residue left from consuming the bought product.

Sports event consumption reflects individuals' emotional involvement, and furthermore, it correlates with the nature of needs and consumption motives. The consumers of sports events are supposed to achieve a state of mind where hedonic motives are pre-eminent, and the consumption behavior requires buying decisional processes related to current products or services. It is concluded that attraction, self-expression and centrality are three significant factors in sports event involvement. The attraction is a combination of the degree of importance which is given by the consumer to the involvement in a certain service and the hedonic value or pleasure that can be associated with consumers. The self-expression is in the form of a message that can be told to consumers on a specific occasion, and it is directly related to the service under consideration. The centrality perceives the dimension that indicates the degree of congruence between the individual's scale of values and the role played by a certain activity. (Gardan et al. 2020.)

The involvement can be categorized into two: specific characteristics of individuals and social factors determined by the specific contexts. The individual characteristics may refer to various attitudes, values, motivations, needs, preferences or different forms of consumer experiences. The social factors can consist of given rewards, the embodiment of norms, pressures from relationships and expected social benefits. The degree of extension is associated with the information seeking and selective process when considering the consumers' interests in certain services. In addition, consumption alternatives, perceived differences and price can affect the choice and overall consumer behavior. There are examples that both utilitarian and hedonic consumption types can merge within a buying experience, and these are not excluding each other. (Gardan et al. 2020.) Customers may have an idea of the final price range that they are willing to pay and if it is not in the price range it might be excluded from the selection process. Furthermore, the customers may have a minimum price level as well because it tends to determine the association of quality. (Blythe 2013, 284.)

According to Gardan et al. (2020), it is obvious that emotions have a significant role in sports events consumption. Emotions can be seen as interpersonal factors that represent a trigger for

motivating consumers to identify a relationship between consumption and behavior. Furthermore, the stimulating approach of sport-related events includes a symbolic meaning of belonging to the team or self-actualization of emotions that are built upon the main motivation behind a purchase.

2.1.3 Customer understanding and loyalty

According to Lagrosen (2001, 348–354), a value creation is compulsory for a company that offers activities or services for customers. In-depth knowledge of customer needs and wants is vital to ensure value effectiveness and efficiency. In general, customers are irrational, and to meet expectations companies must deepen the overall customer understanding. To improve customer understanding, an organization should think and focus on customers' own perspectives of viewing the products or services. Customers want to satisfy their actual needs but, furthermore, express their personalities by buying products and services. The satisfaction level of consumption depends on prior expectations towards a product or a service. The main purpose is to manage customer expectations instead of needs. To succeed in the dynamic markets and rivalry of today, companies truly need to understand customer behavior to offer better value for the customers.

Consumer-based strategy is an organizational approach that is developed based on consumer insights. This kind of strategy can consist of consumers' wants and needs, the costs consumers incur to purchase and the convenience of obtaining goods and services. The insights can be collected from each potential customer who does not have a specific relationship with the organization yet. The objective of consumer research is to build consumer insights, whereas consumer-based strategy utilizes researched consumer insights in the development of organizational customer strategy. Contrary to consumers, customers have a relationship with a specific organization, and it is necessary to predict their behavior. (Hamilton 2016.)

There are five most significant differences between business-to-consumers (B2C) and business-to-business (B2B) which affect customers' motives: type of buyer, motivation for purchase, length of time to make a purchase decision, promotional tactics and how purchasing decisions are evaluated. It has been stated that consumers are more likely to consume sports to satisfy emotional and social needs whereas businesses utilize sports as a vehicle to advance their interest through external and internal objectives to create more brand awareness, gain new customers and strengthen bonds with existing clients, or enhance employee morale and motivation. Business buying decisions are

based on the evaluation of if the purchase will advance the company's goals and objectives. (Fetchko et al. 2013, 96–99.)

Furthermore, a client purchases products and services for their own purposes and needs. They appreciate personalized and relevant customer experience. In comparison, a corporate client is a part of an organization and perhaps a bigger team where are multiple points of view in making the buying decision. The customer experiences of corporate clients include less rational impacts, but those cannot be ignored because the communication in the buying process is always between human beings. (Löytänä & Korteso 2011, 65–66.) Furthermore, corporate clients justify decisions more by rational than emotional factors. On the other hand, it cannot be assumed that corporate clients are always more rational than consumers because behind every buying decision, there are human beings and their emotions are involved. (Blythe 2013, 375.)

A consumer decision-making model includes input, process and output phases. The input phase in decision-making is affected by the company's marketing mix and a consumer's sociocultural influences which are boosted by both external and internal communication sources. The process phase in decision-making is concerned with how consumers make decisions, and the influences of decision-making must be revealed. Need recognition and pre-purchase search are steps before a consumer perceives the need that might be satisfied by the purchase and consumption of a service. The output phase consists of purchase behaviors and post-purchase evaluation. A consumer might purchase a service for the first time as a trial or as a repeating purchase, which indicates brand loyalty and commitment. The post-purchase evaluation refers to expectations that a consumer has before the usage of a service, and positive disconfirmation of expectations leads to satisfaction if the performance of the purchased service exceeds expectations. (Schiffman & Wisenblit 2015, 368–374.)

Customer satisfaction is the response to a consumer's fulfillment. It is an opinion if a product or service provides a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfillment and evaluation of whether a product or service has met the customer's needs and expectations. Customer satisfaction is influenced by the features, perceptions of the quality and price. Personal elements, such as mood or emotional state, and situational factors, such as family member opinions, can influence the final feeling of satisfaction as well. There is a significant relationship between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty because satisfied customers are more loyal to a brand. (Zeithaml et al. 2013, 80–86.) Furthermore, when a customer uses a service repeatedly, it can be noticed as a sign of loyalty

to the brand. It is vital to understand consumers' decisions and the type of affecting factors to achieve brand loyalty and repeat purchases. (Jansson-Boyd 2010, 131.)

Growing customer loyalty is one of the most significant marketing functions because repeat buyers are more valuable and less expensive to reach than prospects. Database-driven marketing and customer relationship management are effective for upselling current customers as well as rewarding the loyal ones who are more profitable to an organization in the long-term. (Fetchko et al. 2013, 221.) Increased purchases over time and willingness to pay more are obvious economic benefits for an organization from loyal customers. In addition, loyal customers are cheaper to maintain and they are more likely to do word-of-mouth advertising without thinking of it as a marketing action. (Zeithaml et al. 2013, 154–156.) Loyalty management starts by identifying the market to match the customer needs of targeted customers (Wirtz et al. 2012, 366).

Customer loyalty can be described as a commitment to continue the business with an organization on an ongoing basis. Loyalty can be defined as a state of mind, a set of attitudes, beliefs and desires which precludes commitment to other suppliers. (Uncles et al. 2003.) The core of customer loyalty is based on three factors: trust, relationship and emotional attachment. Consumers must first trust the supplier, both a company and a brand, before they can be loyal customers. The trust is vital when consumers do not yet have enough informational cues because it reduces the perceived risk that the consumers might confront with a loss. The change from consumer to a loyal customer includes a positive perceived value that is stronger than from any other supplier who offers the same services. The brands build trust and deeper relationships with customers to achieve their positive emotional attachment. Successful interaction between a consumer and a brand indicates whether the brand will answer the promised expectations. (Reichheld et al. 2000.)

Customer loyalty can be associated with a brand with the purpose to identify and differentiate the organization's goods or services from other companies' similar ones. A brand is linked with identity, name or fame, and it determines a specific set of unique features, benefits and services to the customers. Brand building is seen as a marketing cost and an undertaking to attract customer loyalty. Brand loyalty enhances a supplier's differentiation from competitors and strengthens control over markets. (Kotler 2003.) Brand loyalty refers to re-purchase of a preferred product or service in the future. Loyalty can be seen as behavioral, attitudinal, and situational loyalty. Behavioral loyalty is determined as purchase and usage behavior that is often related to customer satisfaction. The attitudinal loyalty is explained by the continuous relationship with a

brand that is related to positive customer preferences that are strongly influenced by significant others. The situational loyalty is referred with a contingent relationship to the brand that is determined by the purchasing situation. (Datta 2003, 138–150.)

Relationships build a deeper coherence around loyalty than behavior-based models. According to Oliver (1999), loyalty can be categorized into one of the three insights based on the methods of definition and measurement. Loyalty can be divided into purchase behaviors and non-purchase behaviors. The purchase behaviors include frequency, volume, share and retention, which can all be measured and translated into revenues and profits, but these may not be predictable predictors of future behavior. The non-purchase loyalty behaviors, referrals, endorsements, advocacy, and selective exposure to brands, are more difficult to measure, and the impact on revenues and profits is less obvious. Furthermore, Schulz (2005) has stated that there are two differences between loyal customers and clients who are acting loyalty. Loyal customers are emotionally more involved in a continuing relationship and show their satisfaction, whereas not loyal customers are exhibiting loyal behaviors, and they do not have a threshold to change the used brand.

2.2 Customer experience

Emotions are the result of interaction between a subject and an objective. This leads to experiences, such as pleasure, displeasure and awakening. The next phase is the creation of adaptive behaviors with three main consumer emotion characteristics: behavioral, physiological and dyad emotion or rationality. Finally, all these interactions have an impact on the decision-making process in the purchasing experience. The importance of emotional branding leads to competitive advantages through consumers' commitment, long-term relationship and emotional connection with the brand. (Batat 2019, 23–27.)

The design of customer experience starts from the determination of what type of experience should be created to achieve the wanted audience impact. There are four different kinds of experience combinations that are derived from the participation and physical interaction dimensions: entertainment, education, escape, and esthetic. (Fetchko et al. 2013, 184–186.) Customer experience is the completeness of encounters, images and feelings about how a customer observes the actions of a company. The customer experience is not a rational decision, but an experience affected by subconscious interpretations. (Löytänä & Korteso 2011, 7.)

According to Löytänä and Korteso (2011, 26–27), the customer experience includes four different perspectives: building personal identity, creating positive feelings, developing exceptional engrams and making want more.

It has been researched that consumer experiences are derived from a unique combination of responses to physical environment dimensions and human interaction. The physical environment affects consumers' experience in multiple manners and human interactions, both with employees and fellow guests, have a significant influence on consumer experience. The positive interactions have been demonstrated to have an impact on both consumers and companies by enhancing customer satisfaction and enjoyment. In addition, personal characteristics and event-related factors have a direct impact on the consumer experience through their consistent nature. (Hudson & Hudson 2013, 48–49.)

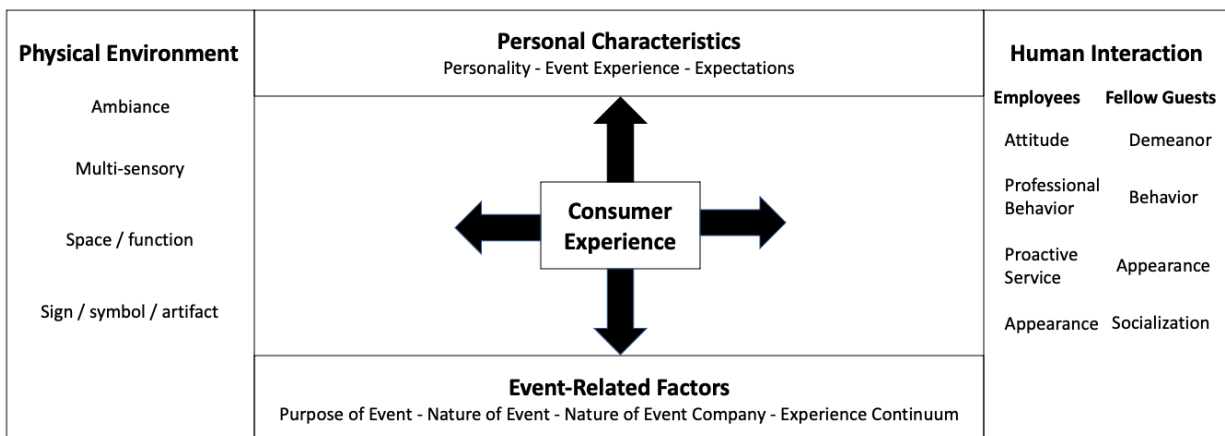


Figure 4. Conceptual model of customer experience in event context (modified from Hudson & Hudson 2013, 49.)

The model of customer experience in figure 4 indicates comprehensive factors that all define the customer experience in the event context. The personal characteristics and event-related factors are derived from the participated event and its character, whereas the physical environment and human interactions are more individual. The expectations and set purposes for the event determine if customers are satisfied with the experience. In sports VIP business, the consumer experience elements affect purchasing behavior. The human interaction and the physical environment are different depending on with whom a company is attending the event and where the event is located. Employees versus clients have different needs and expectations that both shape the motives to participate. The personal characteristics and the event-related factors are

more individual aspects of fulfilled experience, and these might include hidden-needs that are typical for intangible services.

2.2.1 Experiential services

Experiences are intangible activities that represent spent time enjoying a series of memorable events that engage in an inherently personal way (Pine & Gilmore 2020, 3). Services are customized by the consumers' request, whereas experiences have emerged to create new value. The individual experience derives from the interaction between the event and a consumer's prior state of mind. (Pine & Gilmore 2020, 12–16.) Furthermore, Wirtz et al. (2012, 15) have defined services as time-based economic activities offered by one party to another. In exchange for money, time and effort, a customer expects service value from access to labor, skills, expertise, goods, facilities, networks or systems. Experiential marketing is an individual consumer's response resulting from exposure or interaction with events-related stimulations. In addition, experiential marketing is defined as the creation of a comprehensive and interactive environment which adds value to consumers in the short-term and deepens relationships in the long-term. (Fetchko et al. 2013, 176–177)

In the hospitality industry, a service is both intangible and tangible, and these features differentiates it from other industries. The hospitality offering is a mix of product and service, and it is all about creating experiences by providing circumstances for consumers to enjoy. (Stringam & Partlow 2016, 64–66.) Corporate hospitality has changed from “a good excuse to get drunk with colleagues” to a strategic business practice whose objective is to achieve specific sales and marketing actions. A tangible return on investment plan of usage of corporate hospitality justifies utilization of unforgettable high-profile sports events' VIP experiences. (Kahle & Close 2011, 216–217.)

Sports and sporting event consumption differs from other consumption experiences by forming non-fiction and attainment that unfolds in real time. Although the sports experiences include common elements with other experiential consumption and entertainment, the sporting experience has its special features, and both the level of emotion and dept of affiliation often transcend other types of consumption. The consumption of sports is often a social act, and the presence of other people is important for the enjoyment of the whole experience. (Kahle & Close 2011, 2–5)

As a sports event can fulfill consumers' desires to experience excitement and pleasure, additional experiential elements, like music, contests and giveaways, can be integrated into an event to increase the experiential benefits (Fetchko et al. 2013, 29). In addition, hospitality as a product is mostly intangible and because of that each customer perceives it based on their own prior experiences and expectations (Ferdinand & Kitchin 2012, 253–254).

2.2.2 Elements of customer experience

A customer experience can be divided into two categories: functions of the product or service and emotions of the product or service. A related functionality refers to that how it is interpreted primarily by the logical manners. Furthermore, smells, sounds, sights, tastes and textures are all forming the emotions related to the product or service in its natural environment. The in-depth interviews with customers and employees indicate people's associations with offered experience. (Berry et al. 2002.)

Customer experience includes comprehensive elements of an organization's offering, such as a quality of customer care, advertising, packaging, product and service features, usability and reliability. An organization must understand the achieved satisfaction levels by dividing the complexity into experience components. Customers' prior experiences and the actual expectations must be monitored and probed to recognize and respond to direct or indirect contact between a customer and a company. Usually, direct contact occurs in the case of purchase, use or customer service and generally it is initiated by the customer, whereas indirect contact often involves sudden encounters with representations of an organization's services, products or brands. (Meyer & Schwager 2007.)

A customer's experienced value is formed by total positive benefits that makes the customer's life easier or satisfies some needs. Customers do not want to sacrifice their own time, but they value products and services that spare their time. Sometimes customers are more willing to pay extra for quick and fluent services. The experienced value can be divided into two different sources: utilitarian and hedonistic. The utilitarian sources are rational and are combined with measurable elements of an experience, such as technical characteristics, whereas the hedonistic sources are subjective, emotional and irrational which are memorable positive feelings. The hedonistic elements deepen customers' passion for the brand and increase their willingness to a recommendation. (Löytänä & Korteso, 2011, 30.)

The decisions from the customer experience point of view are based on pre-conceived expectations of what an experience will be rather than what it is. There are sub-conscious elements that influence to the customers, and often expressed wants are not the real needs. (Shaw et al. 2010, 11–13.) According to Shaw et al. (2010, 18–32), the customer experience can be divided into four different stages: pre-experience, experiencing intent, remembering experience and interacting experience. In the pre-experience, a consumer is implicitly involved and gathering impressions of a service. The pre-experience stage mirrors expectations, that a customer has about a service, and associations that he or she has built about a brand. In experiencing intent phase, a customer is more involved, thinking about engaging with a brand and being more focused on involvement. After an experience, a customer continues to the remembering phase in which the memory of the experience is transferred into learning by rationalizing what has happened. It is important to understand how a customer's memory of an experience interacts with expectations and desired goals. In addition, often sub-conscious values and moods affect the final experience after an event.

A typical sports hospitality includes the best event tickets, an area to entertain guests, catering services, parking passes, branded merchandise and sometimes even hotel accommodation. For businesses, the usage of sports hospitality as a marketing vehicle enables possibilities to get familiar with new customers or prospects, renew deals with existing customers and reward key customers with unique experiences. (Fetchko et al. 2013, 195.) Like any other business industry, the primary objective of organizing corporate events is to achieve intended business objectives that are related to the overall business performance. The corporate objectives can be divided into two categories, financial and non-financial. The financial objectives are to increase sales and revenue from other sources to complete a return on investment. The non-financial objectives can be to improve employees' skills and team building, networking, raise stakeholders' appreciation and strengthen brand awareness and loyalty. (Ferdinand & Kitchin, 2012, 269.)

2.2.3 Customer Experience Management

Experience can be described as the acquisition of the understanding of persons and things through their practices in the existing surroundings. Development of knowledge and the experience are vital in enhancing a strong emotional bond between the brand and its customers, who can develop their loyalty and lead to the dissemination of a positive brand image. However, customer experience has replaced relational marketing and customer relationship management that was

commonly used by organizations in the 1990's. The new customer experience concepts can be explained by the limitations of the customer relationship management approach and do not address in the best way the intangible and symbolic needs and expectations of consumers. CRM is mainly focusing on tangible characteristics of products, quality improvements, promotional sales strategies and rewards from customer loyalty. The customer experience concept highlights a relationship with a customer who has lived experience that evolves throughout the consumption journey before, during and after the purchase. (Batat 2019, 43–48.)

The creation of consumer experiences has become used as a strategy for building customer relationships and defining a brand for customers. A brand is more than organizations proclaim; it is the sum of customers' opinions and experiences. (Fetchko et al. 2013, 177.) According to Zeithaml et al. (2013), the elements of expectations need to be explored and understood for successful service marketing. It is vital to research the following four: what types of expectations do customers hold about services, which factors most influence on the formation of these expectations, what role do the factors have in changing expectations and how does a service organization meet and exceed customer expectations.

According to the study by Jones and Moital (2017), the prestige framework for managing VIP experiences from the perspective of expected values includes five attributes that motivate the buying decisions. Conspicuous values highlight expensive tangibles and usage of VIP experiences to show others the status. Unique values concentrate on exclusive VIP areas with a limited number of participants and social values employ the ability to networking. Ambient values create enjoyment, and a positive atmosphere strengthens the special experience. Last, the high-quality of the services, arrangements and facilities are important in order to produce prestige value for the guests.

The purpose of customer experience management is to maximize produced value for the customers by creating meaningful experiences. Customer experience management strengthens the customers' commitment to the company and lengthens customers' life cycle. (Löytänä & Korteso, 2011, 7.) In addition, the customer experience management always starts from a core experience that is a benefit and its value why a client wants to buy a current service. After the core experience is ensured, the next step is to expand the feeling of an experience by promoting or enabling the customer value to exceed the expectations. (Löytänä & Korteso, 2011, 33.)

Companies monitor past, present and future transactions to obtain the needed customer information. The past patterns refer to individual customers and their purchasing history. The present patterns are extended by the customer's awareness of alternative suppliers, new features the customers might desire and what it sees as challenges to its competitiveness. The present patterns are generally researched by face-to-face interviews. The potential future patterns and opportunities often emerge from the interpretation of customer data and observation of customer behavior. Companies know their customers' buying habits, incomes, and other characteristics to classify them, but they do not understand enough about the thoughts, emotions and states of mind related to customers' interactions with products, services, and brands induce. Before a company recognizes the customer experience contents, customer satisfaction is not used as an attainable goal but just a reachable slogan. (Meyer & Schwager 2007.)

Customer relationship management, CRM, systems have enabled successful link between companies marketing efforts and perceived profit from potential individual customers. CRM systems have been indicating which of the customers can support the higher marketing investments that are the result of specialized attention, product or service customization and promotional discounts. Generally, organizations utilize CRM systems to evaluate the worth of a customer and select the appropriate level of customer service. (Fournier et al. 2012, 304.)

Customer experience management differs from customer relationship management by instead of tracking customer actions afterward, capturing the immediate response of the customer when it encounters with the company. CRM indicates more of what a company knows about a particular customer whereas customer experience data is captured from customers' subjective thoughts. (Meyer & Schwager 2007.)

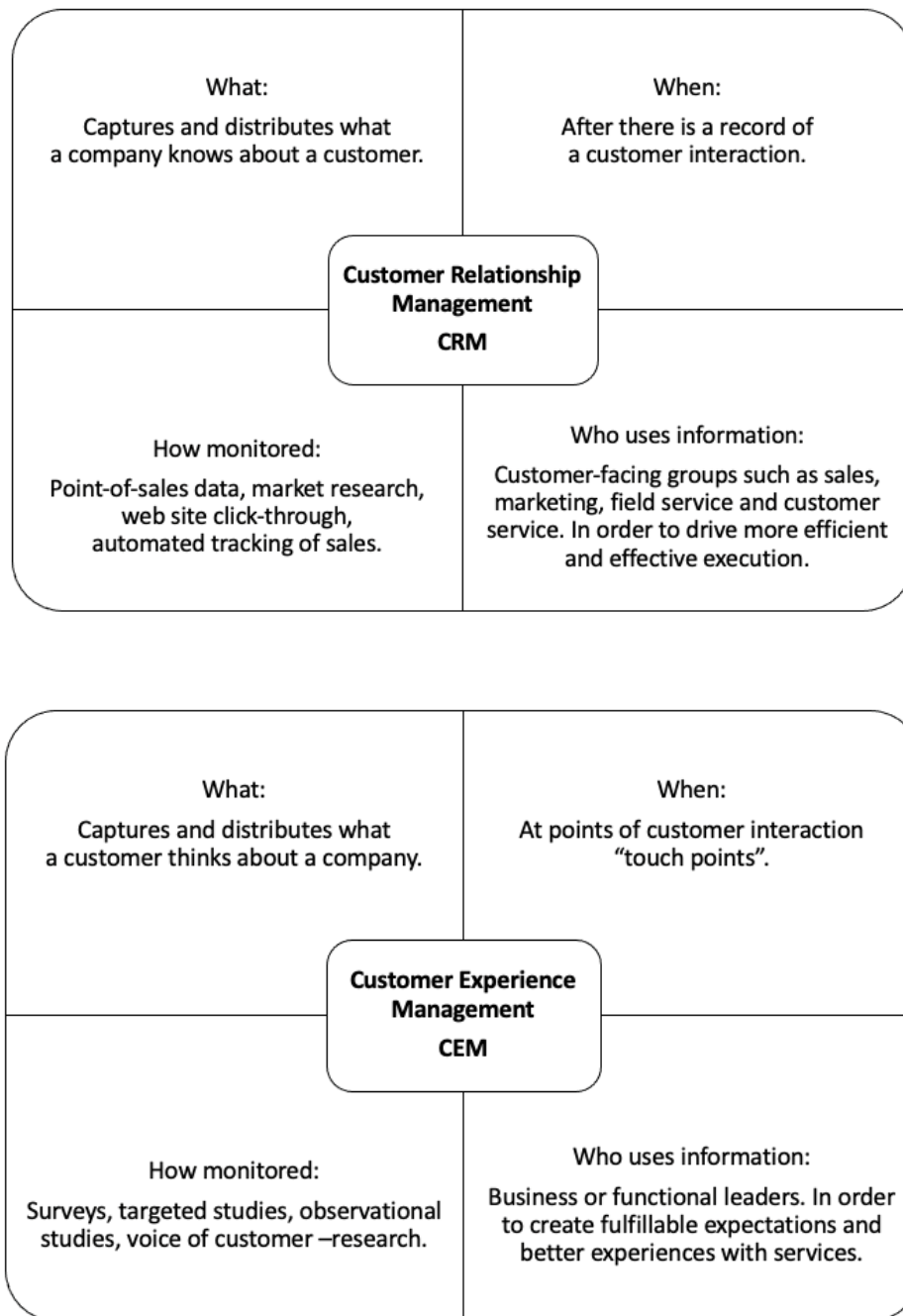


Figure 5. CEM Versus CRM (modified from Meyer & Schwager 2007.)

According to figure 5, customer experience management focuses on the future and predicting customer behavior. With comprehensive customer insight, a company can foresee customers' actions and impact on the formation of future expectations. Satisfied customer relationships are commercially more interesting to maintain because they are more willing to make repeat purchases. In this study, purchase experiences were chosen to be researched further and utilized in developing new customer experience insights for a commissioner company to enable more effective customer experience management in the future. Customer experience management can

be related to sports VIP business industry because of the experiential nature of sports. In this study a concept of customer experience management combines customers' needs, expectations, motives and buying behavior together to enable the commissioner company to create better VIP experiences with offered services that fulfill true expectations.

The aim of this study was to determine and understand the needs, expectations and motives of corporate customers to enable better customer experience management instead of traditional customer relationship management. Better customer experience management enables the creation of new services that answer customers' hidden needs and fulfill their expectations. The author of this study had prior experience and academical research knowledge from the business field of sports customer relationship management (Palsa 2015) and because of that, it was selected to focus more on customer experience management which utilizes more customer insight instead of customer data.

3 Research Methodology and Implementation

Qualitative research is used when a phenomenon is not known in advance and the main purpose is to get a deep understanding of a studied phenomenon. Qualitative research does not try to generalize, but its purpose is to describe, understand and interpret an individual case. (Kananen 2014, 16–19.) The aim of this chapter is to describe the selection of research methodology, and qualitative methods are needed to build a more profound understanding of the studied phenomenon. In-depth interviews are useful to cover holistic customer understanding and to provide deeper understanding. An inductive, qualitative, research method was chosen to reveal in-depth customer insight of the commissioner company's current customers who have purchased VIP services for the 2022 IIHF Ice Hockey World Championship Finland.

3.1 Qualitative research

Qualitative research is one method of studying social life and its phenomenon (Saldaña 2011, 1–3). Qualitative research focuses on studying the meaning of people's lives and real-world conditions by representing people's views and perspectives. Qualitative research tries to explain human social behavior with multiple sources of evidence and by contributing insights into existing or new concepts. (Yin 2011, 7–8.)

The purpose of the qualitative research method is not only to answer to “what”, but additionally to “why” research question. (Alasuutari 2011, 216). The purpose of a qualitative research is to describe a phenomenon, understand an act or theoretically interpret these two. It is essential that selected informants are not appointed by random selection, but they have enough knowledge or prior experience concerning the studied phenomenon and topic. In addition, the planned selection process of informants should be properly reported and justified. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009, 85–86.)

A researcher's responsibility is to choose a proper topic and be neutral to ensure the reliability of results. A study is evaluated as a complex when its inner coherence is emphasized. The subject of a study and its purpose determines what a researcher is studying and why. A process of data gathering and justified selection of informants' impact on the high ethicality of a research. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009, 136–141.) The most reliable qualitative research leads must be ensured that those are not inconsistent with the presented constructions. (Alasuutari 2011, 38).

In qualitative research, the role of the theoretical background is to create a research framework that guides the research analysis from a content perspective instead of existing theoretical concepts (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2022, 110–117). The involved persons are selected by their prior knowledge of the topic or gained experience from the studied phenomenon. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009, 74–75.) The semi-structured interview questions are the same for each interviewee and answers are not pre-determined, but interviewees are able to answer with their own words (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2004, 47).

Qualitative research can be conducted by using different approaches, such as ethnography, grounded theory, phenomenology, case study, content analysis, narrative inquiry, evaluation research and action research. There is an interviewer whose focus is to find answers to research questions by utilizing the knowledge or information of interviewing participants. The interviewees should be selected to offer new insights and thoughts regarding the research problem. A data analysis part of the qualitative study has its own guidelines and standardized models that generally refer to different codes and comprehensive coding. One of the most important phases in qualitative research is to collect the data through interviews, observations and reviewing the existing documents. The individuals can be selected by the nature of the research, and individual interviews are more valid than group discussions. Furthermore, the interview can be themed or in-depth depending on the researched issues. (Saldaña 2011, 40–44.)

To utilize all possibilities, it is important not to focus only on one's own preconceptions, but on inductive methods that are effective in qualitative research (Lagrosen 2001, 348–354). Qualitative research is based on an inductive process that proceeds from individual to general and it is interested in several factors at the same time. The study and research categories develop during the research process and those are context-related. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2004, 25.) In addition, researchers sometimes utilize both induction and deduction at the same time and it can be described as abduction, which refers to the process of continuing from the everyday descriptions and meanings given by people to categories and concepts that build the basis of an understanding or an explanation of the studied phenomenon (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2016, 24).

Qualitative analysis can be divided into an inductive and deductive analyses. The separation is based on the interpretation of a used research logic of reasoning, which is either inductive, from individual to general, or deductive, from general to individual. The most significant challenge in this practical division is the dismissal of a third scientific interpretation logic, abductive, that refers

to observations from a guiding principle. In principle, the significance of theory relates to an abductive methodology by declared commitments guiding the analysis. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009, 95).

By understanding customer motives behind the VIP purchasing decisions, the offered experiential services can be more specified and tailored for the wanted target group. Customer experience management is the next and more developed phase of customer relationship management. Customer experiences are vital to measuring the experience economy industry such as sports VIP events. This study aims to deepen the understanding of customer insight by an inductive qualitative research method. The qualitative research method was chosen to give more profound knowledge of the researched phenomenon and to expand understanding of customer insight in the studied business context (Nisstany & Knezevic, 2016).

3.2 Data collection

Interviewing as a data collection method includes interaction between an interviewer and a participant. Structured interviews form the final interaction in which a researcher uses a formal questionnaire. The researcher adopts a formal role of an interviewer and tries to capture responses from an interviewee. The same consistency of behavior and demeanor needs to be obtained with every participant. (Yin 2011, 133.) The most common research data collection methods in qualitative research are interviews, surveys, observation and comprehensive document-based knowledge. When a qualitative research purpose is to study orientational behavior and several intentions of behaving in a current way, the most suitable research method is based on private discussion. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009, 71.)

According to Tuomi & Sarajärvi (2009, 72–73), the idea behind an interview and a survey is extremely simple. When we want to know what a person thinks or why he or she acts in a current way, it is reasonable to ask about him or her. The interview is a personal discussion in which an interviewer present oral questions and records the answers of an interviewee. The difference between a survey and an interview pertains to the flexible role of an informant because the questions can be repeated, and the misunderstanding can be rectified in conversation with an interviewer. The most important objective is to achieve as much information as possible concerning the studied topic. It is justifiable to offer interview questions or facts about a topic in

advance to ensure the success of an interview. Furthermore, it is ethically legitimate to tell for an informant what the topic of an interview is.

The data collection phase of this study included planning and preparation which was followed by the final interviews. The preparation phase started with a comprehensive literature review that enabled a preliminary understanding of the studied phenomenon. The literature review was united with pre-understanding of the phenomenon and prior studied themes of interviews. In addition, the preparation included a test interview two days before the actual interviews started and it was conducted with a neutral person who did not attend to the actual interviews. The test interview enabled to check that the neutral interviewee understood the interview questions and the questions were understandable. Furthermore, the test interview was conducted to test used IT programs (video and voice recordings) and to estimate the total length of a personal interview session in advance. This affected the time demand of the interviews that were told to the participants in an introduction email. All these preparations strengthened the validity of the research's data collection phase.

Interview as a data collection method was chosen because the object of the study was to understand better an existing phenomenon in the VIP business industry. The interviews were conducted in Finnish to ensure that all participants understood the interview questions and they could answer with in their native language. The data from studied company cases in this research was collected by using semi-structured interviews where interpretations of customer insight and customer buying motives were studied.

This research was implemented by semi-structured interviews. The selected interviewees had purchased VIP services for the 2022 IIHF Ice Hockey World Championship from Elämys Live, and the chosen companies represented organizations that had prior VIP service purchases to sports events from Elämys Live. The companies were selected from the commissioner company's customer base, and these selected participants were supposed to represent loyal and re-purchasing organizations. The semi-structured interview was divided into main themes: needs, expectations and motives, general buying behavior and buying experiences. The theoretical framework of this research guided the themes, questions and structure of the semi-structured interview. The semi-structured interview template was further influenced by customer insight and customer experiences in sports VIP business context.

In total, four companies were invited to remote interviews by email during January 2022 and all of them participated into the interview phase within one week. The companies were told that the interviews and the analysis would be executed anonymously, and their organizations or personal identities could not be recognizable from the collected and analyzed data. The interviewees were told that the interviewer's current working position at the commissioner company would not affect the research results and all relevant conversations would be handled confidentially and only within this study.

Furthermore, the background details from each interviewee were asked after the official interview questions. The first part of the semi-structured interview included ten main questions and eight sub-questions. The questions were about the needs, expectations and motives of events' VIP services. The second part focused on buying behavior and buying experiences in general and consisted of seven main questions and two sub-questions. The last part of the interview was conducted to give a deeper understanding of corporate clients' expectations, motives and experiences of the selected sports event case, that in this study was the 2022 IIHF Ice Hockey World Championship and the customers who have purchased VIP services.

In this study, four individuals were selected from four different organizations and they were representing the company perspective in the interview situations. They were told about the research topic in advance and asked about their willingness to take part in this research. In the first email, the introduction of a researcher himself and a short description of the main objectives of this study in the first email can be seen as ethically legitimate and strengthened the willingness to attend.

All participants received several options for the interview session, and these sessions were held via TEAMS remote platform over two weeks period. All four interview sessions were executed with remote connections because of uncertain circumstances with COVID-19 and the participants wanted to avoid face-to-face contacts. Two of the interviews were done with video connection and two only with a voice connection. The average time for one interview was approximately 31 minutes. Interview sessions were scheduled for one hour to ensure enough time for possible open conversations and questions.

The interview questions were sent one day before the scheduled interview session to give the participants time to prepare and get familiar with the topics. On the other hand, the interview

questions were not wanted to be given earlier than one day before to ensure that the respondents would not form the answers in advance in order to have an authentic discussion during the interview session. The interviews started with the introduction of the research's terms and conditions.

In addition, two things were highlighted in the introduction speech: the interviewee should be answering from the company's point of view, not as an individual, and the job-related position of the interviewer would not have an impact on this academical research. Furthermore, it was told that the recorded interview sessions were to be demolished after the research had been published. To ensure the most natural interview circumstances and open conversation, all interviews were conducted in the participants' native language (Finnish).

Because of the anonymous nature of this study, interviewees were named by using numbers from one to four. This prevents that they cannot be linked to their real personalities and organizations they represented in this research. The participants of this study were chosen from all the companies that had purchased VIP services for the 2022 IIHF Ice Hockey World Championship from Elämys Live. Both business-to-business (B2B) and business-to-customer (B2C) customer segments of participated companies were chosen. Furthermore, the companies were not random non-recurring buyers but those who can be treated as loyal customers who have purchased Elämys Live's VIP services before. The selection of the interviewees was based on their prior experience of VIP services in sport-related events.

Table 1. Participants of the study

Interviewee	1	2	3	4
Job Title	Chairman of the board	Director in Marketing Department	Country Manager	Account Director
Business Unit	Construction	Brewery	Digital Entertainment	Food Industry
Annual Turnover	10 mil. €	300 mil. €	1 milliard € (profit)	220 mil. €
Number of Employees	130	300	1500	500
Customer Segment	B2B	B2B, marketing B2C	B2C	B2B
Date of Interview	27.1.2022	28.1.2022	2.2.2022	3.2.2022
Interview Method	TEAMS, voice	TEAMS, video	TEAMS, voice	TEAMS, video
Duration	35min	29min	30min	40min

All participants were from different industries and in different positions in their companies. In addition, annual turnover and number of employees indicated the size of the company, which was intended to be size of medium or large to guarantee the sufficient volume of the business when measuring these two variables. It was assumed that larger Finnish and international organizations

have more experience with the VIP services, and they have utilized these more frequently than local and small companies. However, the selection of these four companies was justified by expecting that they have better and expanded customer insight of VIP services and VIP experiences.

3.3 Data analysis

Interview as a qualitative data collection method aims to gather prevented information. The interview as a part of a research is an interaction for which is characteristic that an interviewer has gotten familiar with the research topic both in practical and in theory. The purpose is to achieve reliable information concerning a research problem, but an interviewee must be able to trust that the given information is handled in the right manner and confidentially. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2004, 43.)

There exists two phases in qualitative research: reduction of observations and solving a researchable riddle (Alasuutari 2011, 50). One method to discover research data's adequacy is saturation. In saturation the research data starts to repeat itself and informants do not produce any new information from the perspective of a research problem. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009, 87.) But if the objective is to seek research data's differentiation, saturation is not a relevant method (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009, 89). In this study, saturation was not used as a method for data's adequacy because the aim was to find out the data's differentiation to gain a deeper understanding of the researched phenomenon.

Inductive data analysis can be divided into three steps: reduction, clustering and abstraction. In reduction the interview data can be in written format and irrelevant research information will be deleted. The reduction can be either distillation of information or splitting it into parts. A research problem guides the selected method. In the clustering method, the data is systematically coded, seeking for similarities and disparities that describe concepts. The clustering phase creates the foundation for a research and enables preparatory descriptions of the studied phenomenon. Abstraction is followed by clustering. The relevant data and information are transferred as theoretical notions and lead to conclusions. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009, 108–111.)

The littering means voice recordings, pictures, and videos transforming into written formation and can be analyzed either manually or automatically with qualitative data analysis programs. There are different levels of littering methods: littering, coding, categorizing and combining.

Furthermore, littering style and depth can be selected between word-to-word littering, general littering or proposition level littering. (Kananen 2017, 134.) The first part of this study's analysis phase was to modify all the data to the same form. The most popular form of data is text, and it was done by using verbatim transcribing methods. The transcribed data were coded, categorized and combined. After the transcription phase, the focus was on familiarizing and understanding the collected data and subsequently divided the data into two chosen themes that were further analyzed based on the presented research problem and research questions. The data was divided and themed with different colors in Excel spreadsheets which enabled more efficient observation of collected data. In later parts, the observed data was used as study findings that will be analyzed more precisely.

The interview questions from one to five (see Appendix 1) were expected to give answers to the customers' needs, while the sixth question and its sub-questions focused on customers' expectations. The questions from seven to ten revealed customers' motives behind the VIP service purchase. Questions 11 to 17 focused on customers' buying behavior. Furthermore, the final part of the interview discussion phase, with interviewing questions from 18 to 26, focused on customer purchasing experiences of the 2022 IIHF Ice Hockey World Championship's VIP services.

4 Findings

This part of the study concentrates on findings that were conducted from interviewing sessions. The findings of this study are divided into two as an aim to answer the presented research questions. To answer properly on the first research question, what companies expect from VIP services in sports events, the needs and the expectations of interviewed persons were examined. To answer the second research question, why companies purchase VIP services to sports events, the respondents were asked why they are buying VIP services for sports events and which factors make VIP events successful in their opinion. The used citations were utilized to highlight the current answer and they were translated word-to-word from Finnish to English.

4.1 Needs and expectations of VIP experiences

Needs

The findings revealed that there are different needs that corporate clients want to be fulfilled when using VIP services. The most significant finding was that the customers' needs include a thought of high-quality services when considering VIP services. The standard of service for a VIP customer should be better than for a regular customer. The quality of service, hosting and program were mentioned in three interviews as needs. One of the participants summarized the high-quality VIP service as:

It is a service that not anyone can experience every day. (3)

The second observation was that the customers wanted tailor-made services rather than general packages. The tailor-made service should ease a customer's work with organizing the experience and that it will be executed smoothly from the beginning to the end. According to the findings, VIP service should offer more than just the regular experience. Furthermore, the tailor-made service considers all the needs, not just a part of those. The personalized service is unique and individualized to the exact needs and wants of both the buying customers and the final clients who use the services as invited guests.

The VIP event will be implemented smoothly from the beginning to the end, and it is tailor-made for us. (3)

Only one interviewee mentioned that VIP service should include the best seats at an event. This notification was surprising because the presumption was that it is one of the key elements of VIP

service. Generally, in sports events the courtside seats and the first row are expected to be part of the best VIP service and experience. In addition to unexpected notions, one of the interviewees mentioned safety as needed elements. It is assumed that the safety was related to the COVID-19 pandemic and all health precautions in events that had been made to ensure the safe participation in events.

The findings revealed that customers, who are buying VIP services, prefer either sports events or concerts. In addition, respondents mentioned that customers, who are the clients of these organizations, have the power to choose the event based on their own needs and interests. All the respondents highlighted the needs and interests of the customers and said that there are different customer stages and customer groups that will affect the selected level of quality of VIP services. For the best and the most important customers, there should be some special treatment because they are refusing the invites to basic events. Furthermore, two interviewees said that they want to know exactly the needs of their customers whom they are inviting as guests.

The invited customer segment will affect the selection of an event for sure. (2)

Some of the customers are more important to us, and we consider what would suit for them. (4)

With standard level customers, we choose standard arrangements. (3)

For one of the organizations, the main need behind participation in sports events was to network and create new business contacts. The respondent said that their focus is on getting familiar with new people and bringing people with shared interests together.

Customer VIP events' main mission is networking. Getting to know new people and making new contacts are highly important. (1)

The respondents stated that the needs of their employees are not as relevant as their customers when deciding the event and VIP services. The budget for employees' VIP events is lower and the employees must be treated equally without any special services. Sometimes the events, in where the employees can attend as VIP guests, are those in where the brand is doing co-operation with an event due to sponsorship deals.

All the interviewed organizations were using multiple VIP companies, but they focused on one event with one exact VIP partner. According to the interviews, VIP companies have their own

strengths and weaknesses, and these aspects can affect the needs of a buying organization and the selection of a VIP partner. On the other hand, trust and loyal customer relationship with successful history of VIP events were elements that supported usage of only one VIP organization on all occasions. The needs of organizations were significantly linked in five aspects that increase the trust between the customer and VIP organization. History and prior experiences, fluent arrangements, communications, recommendations and a reputation of a company can be highlighted. When prior experiences have been positive and smooth, all relevant information before an event is delivered in advance, and other companies or colleagues can confirm the level of prestige services – at this point companies are usually trusting the service provider.

We are used to co-operating with the selected partner. Different service providers have their own strengths and weaknesses, one has better abilities to organize trips abroad whereas others are better with events in Finland. Reputation, size of the company, history, fluentness of events and good experiences that we have heard from somewhere else have a straight impact on trust with a VIP service provider. (3)

Expectations

The interviewed organizations had both positive and negative experiences from VIP services in sport-related events. Principally the participants meant with the positive experiences that the whole VIP event was complete, and the event's content offered memorable moments besides the show itself. With the negative experiences companies stated that something expected was not fulfilled. The findings indicated that if VIP events repeat themselves, it has a negative impact on future buying decisions.

We have mainly positive experiences from VIP services in sport-related events. Sometimes the arrangements have failed, for example, in a VIP tent they forgot to install the floor, and our guests commented about it, and there have been cases when food has run out. (4)

In sport-related VIP events, it is bad that those are held in the same places every time, especially here in Finland. (2)

The companies that had purchased VIP services were asked that what they were expecting from the VIP experience in World Championships. The question of expectations was presented before the event to enable reflection of the expectations with realized experiences after World Championships. The conducted interviews revealed four attributes that described the expectations: fluency, feelings, sporting achievements and venue experiences. The fluency

included smooth arrangements, high quality of services and good customer service at the venue. The feelings referred to the overall atmosphere at the games, memorable experiences and strong emotions of joy and disappointment, which both belong to sports. The sporting achievements referred to the athletic success of team Finland and the venue experiences with new arena facilities.

I am expecting that the games will be an exceptional experience and the team Finland will play well. It is a remarkable thing when we play at the new arena, and can't wait to see it. I am expecting that the facilities over there will be better than ever in Finland. I would like to believe that all arrangements will work fine in the first place. I trust that we are going to witness the World Championships of all time that will be ever held in Finland. (2)

According to the findings, the expectations of VIP services in sports events can be divided into three categories: effortlessness of VIP services, the expected value for the company and benefits of organized VIP events. The findings summarized that the effortlessness of VIP services is one of the most significant expectations of companies. A professionally planned and organized VIP event must be easy to handle and include all the needed to ensure a pleasant VIP experience. Before, during and after the VIP event, all arrangements must be in order and well informed. Pre-orders, transportations and other services at the event should be smooth without any lining up. The simple booking process for the customer without any further extra arrangements is a key. The customers expect that the information and communications from VIP supplier are clear and sufficient and the timetable is well planned. The host of the client group expects and values predictable situations to ensure the well-being of their guests. Furthermore, the focus should stay on customers and their needs at the VIP event. Most of the respondents highlighted that VIP events do not need to include the wow factor all the time, but the whole event should take place in high-class facilities with delicious food.

There should be proper information in advance to know what the VIP event includes and what the timetable is. In any circumstances, there cannot be a situation with the guests where I do not know where we are going or what will happen next. The program should include some activities all the time, but it doesn't have to contain wow-elements all the time. Well-planned and smoothly organized VIP events are enough when I can only focus on my invited clients. (2)

For a company that is attending to a VIP event and has invited its own clients, it is important that the expectations are fulfilled with true value. For the invited customer, it is significant to offer prestige service that they may not experience in other circumstances. The expected value includes

growth in customer value and getting deeper relationships with customers. The interviews showed that it is important to get invited customers to feel valued and that VIP services offer extra value for them. The loyalty of existing customers is the main objective to achieve by getting familiar with people behind the organizations as individual persons.

To benefit from VIP services, there are two segments that are seen as separate: employees and clients. The organization's internal motives and objectives guide the targets and utilization of VIP services with employees. It can be stated that the well-being of the employees is at the focus when considering VIP services for them. In addition, organizations expect that with VIP services they can indicate appreciation and care for their staff, which increases commitment and growth of team spirit. On the other hand, VIP services in events have also been used as positive rewards for employees' current success, for example, as prizes for annual sales competitions. However, in one of the interviewed companies monetary bonus models have replaced all the experience and event-based rewards.

With the staff, it is important to enhance their well-being at work by showing them that they are respected. Purchased VIP services at events indicate to the employees that we care of them. (1)

The external motives lead to the utilization of VIP services for the company's favor to promote the business with their clients. The purpose of using VIP services with clients is primarily networking and building a neutral environment for the business-related meetings. Enhancement of existing business partners is vital, but also to meet potential new business connections in VIP events. Furthermore, the satisfaction and loyalty of existing customers are external motives to engage them with VIP services. In addition, VIP services are used as sales products for the potential clients to engage them better. Two of the interviewed organizations said that they are expecting to learn and benchmark from VIP services at events.

VIP events offer an opportunity to get know new clients and partners. The purpose is to pair clients off with partners and enable mixed "business-to-business" situations. In addition, we want to learn and change ideas with other people during these VIP events. (1)

Our expectations for VIP events are to guarantee clients' satisfaction, loyalty and compensation in the long-term. (3)

4.2 Motives and buying behavior of VIP experiences

Motives

The interview questions (see Appendix 1) in this part concentrated on companies' buying motives for VIP services in sports events and what kind of motives have an impact on the final buying decision. The reasons behind purchasing decisions were linked to different motives. The findings revealed that ice hockey is seen as a national sport and the organizations want to be involved because of the status of the sports or because they have a prior history with the ice hockey. The location of the World Championships in Finland and the expectations of mega-event in companies' home country affected their interest towards VIP services. A new arena was opened to Tampere in 2021, and that was one motive behind purchasing experience. Furthermore, the companies' highlighted that their clients are interested in experiencing the home championships as well, and VIP services are one option to fulfill their clients' needs. The companies stated that they have expectations of experiencing the championships because it is one of the "must see" unique events, and the invited guests may not have the possibility to attend without offered VIP services. The existing partnership with Finnish Ice Hockey Federation guided the selection of one of the companies to participate in this event as VIP guests.

The World Championship in Finland is not going to happen every year. I am waiting to see the new arena in Tampere and the VIP event arrangements seemed tempting. In Finland, ice hockey is a national sport, and it is easy to invite our clients to attend. (1)

Money and budget evoked contradictory findings because most of the respondents stated that the price affects the final purchasing decision, but on the other hand, the same respondents described that the price is not the main determinant, especially with the most important clients. From the findings, it can be found that the event itself and its quality motivates companies to make the decisions. In addition, the companies' guests have a significant impact on the selection of VIP services and in the end, price and quality must meet. However, one interviewee pointed out that it might be risky to offer too expensive VIP services for their clients because, in some companies, it may relate to bribery. It was found that only one respondent mentioned rewarding of clients as a motive to utilize VIP services which indicated that the companies have deeper motives than the rewarding.

The price will always have an impact on buying decision. The level of VIP services and the selected customer group are driving motives behind the final purchases. With small customer groups we must consider closely if it is worth of investing, but with the most important and the biggest clients the price does not matter. (2)

The interest towards a current event has a significant impact. The price is not the dominant element, but the quality and the price should meet each other to justify the purchase. (3)

The majority of the respondents stated that they are participating in sports VIP events because their clients are interested in sports. Furthermore, emotions from live events and benchmarking the VIP services are motives to attend. The whole event and its attractiveness affect the selection. The date and the location of the event must be suitable to organize all arrangements for the clients. However, the guests who are going to attend a VIP event have the decision power. The guests of an inviting company seal the purchase of VIP services if they show excitement and are willing to join to the event. In addition, having created and maintained a personal relationship with a providing partner of VIP services strengthens the motives. All the interviewed companies admitted that they are not measuring the value of VIP services and measurement is not seen as any motive behind purchasing VIP services. The only elements by which these organizations have measured value were if the VIP event was fun and how the customers' experienced it.

First, we have to find out if our customers are interested in the event. Then we estimate the whole event and what it includes from the VIP services point of view. The date of an event must be suitable for us and our guests, as well as the location must enable simple logistics and accommodation solutions. There are times when our clients have said straight that they are not interested in the planned event and the booking process stopped immediately. (4)

Buying behavior

Content of VIP services affects customers' buying behavior and willingness to purchase. According to the findings, VIP service is described to start before the actual event, and it includes all the services that are related to a VIP event. The following elements of VIP service were named to have an impact on a buying decision: quality of food, tasting menu rather than buffet, simple order process, champagne, arrival, VIP area's location, time together, good music, and other program inside an event. Furthermore, the respondents highlighted that with VIP services, every detail must work and be organized in advance. VIP services do not appear for the guests until at the event, but for the buying customers, the VIP service begins from the first point of contact with a supplier. The participants were asked to narrate a concept of VIP, and they pointed out that an

ostentatious VIP event is no longer tempting, but it should be exotic, fun and irregular, like a once-in-a-lifetime experience that guests can think back after many years. The organizations were mostly satisfied with purchased VIP services in sports events. However, according to the findings bad price-quality ratio, too manual order process, not enough staff and insufficient instructions caused dissatisfaction with VIP services.

In excellent VIP events, it is extremely important that all the expected arrangements are working at the venue. If the order process is complicated or manual, it causes dissatisfaction with VIP services. Because VIP service begins before the actual event, all services related to the VIP event can be stated to be part of the experience from pre-orders to arrival. (1)

The purpose of interview questions number 13, 14 and 17 (see Appendix 1) was to find out how often companies participate in VIP events annually, what are the group sizes and how much they are willing to pay for VIP services. Two of the respondents clarified that they participate in sport-related VIP events from five to six times a year. One of the interviewees said that for them, it is from 10 to 15 events annually. Another one stated that their participation it is not regular but more seasonal with many small groups in different events than one big group in the same event. The argument to avoid bigger guest groups was that it is more challenging and requires lot of arrangements, and then there will be cancellations too close to the event date. The optimal group size for all the companies was approximately 10 guests, and a group with more than 15 persons usually caused challenges. It has been said that it depends on the event how many persons they are inviting as VIP guests, but the average amount was from 50 to 100 guests per an event.

We participate and invite VIP guests to sport-related VIP events multiple times in a year, let's say approximately six events annually. The optimal size of the group of guests is from five to ten persons. When it is more than ten persons, it is challenging to handle. (1)

The target group for companies' VIP guests was very collective, and all the organizations planned to invite their existing clients. The companies did not plan to invite any potential customers but good, loyal and existing clients. In addition, partners and special VIP clients were mentioned. The size of the invited VIP group varied from two persons to 60 persons. The exception with only two persons was explained because of the venue's business is controlled by one of the companies' rivals, and the organization does not want to invite their clients to the rival's place. The rest of the companies have purchased approximately the same amount of VIP packages as they were justified by the optimal group size in VIP events. From eight to twenty guests were invited to multiple

games of team Finland and the finals. The total amount of purchased VIP packages were from 60 to 156 per organization.

We purchased eight persons VIP tables for multiple games, both team Finland and the finals. We invited good and loyal customers. (1)

The event itself has a straight impact on the price that companies are willing to pay. It matters if it is one event in continuous series of sports events or some special event that takes place once. Regular events' VIP services are considered cheaper than special and popular events. All the companies agreed that the average price of a special event's VIP services is approximately 500 euros, and if the price is more than 600 euros, it is harder to validate the motives to buy. Within the continuous series of events, the acceptable price point was stated to be from 100 to 200 euros. For one respondent the invited target group also affects the price level of VIP services. In addition, too expensive VIP services may cause troubles for the companies because of Finnish taxation policies. Furthermore, some rules of large corporate organizations may forbid receiving any VIP services from another company because those can be ethically suspicious from the business point of view.

If the event is part of continuous series, the price must be under 200 euros, but if it is some special event, then a little bit under 500 euros is okay. If the price of VIP services is more than 500 euros, then I need to come up with explanations. (2)

The findings revealed that there are two kinds of buying schedules: the companies who make the purchasing decision when the VIP services of an event have been published, the so-called early birds, and others who close the purchasing intentions two months before the event. The "early birds" want to ensure the planned VIP experiences to popular events by early bookings to avoid "sold out" situations. In the early stages of the decision process, the companies may not have the guest list ready yet, but they invest the proper amount of money in guaranteeing the sufficient extent of VIP services, and after that, they are considering to whom they will send the invites. However, often the buying process starts by naming the guests, and after that, continues with purchase decisions because the companies want to be sure that their clients want to participate and will appreciate the current event.

We purchase the VIP services in the early stages from the publishment of an event. When the event is published, we have to invest some amount of money and then think who are going to. If we know the event will be sold out, we must buy VIP services when the event is published. However, usually, we know whom we are going to invite in advance and then we purchase the VIP tickets and dedicate those to them. (2)

The organizations recognized three sources of received information about VIP services of the 2022 IIHF Ice Hockey World Championship: direct personal contact from VIP supplier, email communications, and independent information retrieval. The internal conversation in the company and the outline of needs from a VIP supplier had an impact on purchasing experience. In one of the interviewed organizations the internal conversation before the purchase was obligatory because the planned amount of money was significant, and their CEO accepted the investment in VIP services. Furthermore, the needs and interests of the executive board were monitored to ensure the proper amount of reserved VIP services. The companies respected a quick and fluent outline of their needs and then a tailor-made offer of VIP solutions for them. The price of the VIP services was not the determining element, but fluent arrangements and the game itself had more value. The companies valued fluency, quality and location of VIP services, and they were willing to pay more if these expectations will be fulfilled. Obviously, the games of a national team of Finland that will take place at a new arena in Tampere influenced the choice of VIP services.

We got information about VIP services from a VIP supplier ahead of time, but we were active with information search by ourselves too. However, we had internal discussions with the sales department and with the CEO about what we are going to reserve. This was a big investment for us, and we wanted to be sure that our CEO and executive board were informed of VIP services. It also had an impact on us that we wanted to participate in multiple games of the Finnish national team. (4)

I received emails from different suppliers and was comparing the VIP services from websites also. I was ready to pay more for VIP services if we would know that we do not have a lot of arrangements and the VIP events will take place in one location. I purchased the VIP services from a professional who outlined our needs quickly and smoothly and offered the proper VIP service solutions. (3)

Personal contact with a company that is offering VIP services is extremely important. Personal customer service is valued if the size of the group is big or the event and the place are unfamiliar to the buyer. It was also noted as positive when a selling company recommends spontaneously new and interesting events for a customer. Often the personal contact becomes more valid if there are specific questions about VIP services and the received answers advance the buying

process. The communication between a VIP supplier and a buyer is usually starting with emails and continuing with possible phone calls. The companies said that an email is an easy, quick and clear method of communication to receive an offer of VIP services in detail. The conversation on the phone is not necessary to make the purchase but in some cases, there are the event or the VIP service related specific questions that are easier to clarify by a phone call. The organizations prefer personal contact to automatized online shops because the feeling, atmosphere and expertise affect buying decision. If the VIP services are simple enough and the company invites only a couple of guests, then the web shop can be an option for purchase. However, the corporate companies often want to proceed with the payment with an invoice filled with company details due to taxation policies.

Personal contact with a VIP supplier is important if there are any questions. It is good when the connection can be formed quickly, either by phone or by email. Often the questions are related to details of VIP services that we want to check in advance. However, if VIP services are combined as a clear package, it may be possible that we use an online shop to make reservations. (4)

The purpose of the last three interview questions (see Appendix 1) was to find out how the companies will measure the outcomes of purchased VIP services and what kind of expectation they have towards the whole experience of VIP services in the 2022 IIHF Ice Hockey World Championship. The findings confirmed that the companies have not been planned to measure the final value of purchased VIP services. The organizations mentioned that they might measure the outcomes of their clients with long-term loyalty and better customer relationships. The companies were not able to describe how they would measure these variables, but they believed that the offered VIP services would develop the quality of partnership and value of customer relationship. As customer relationship values, the organizations named customer care, stakeholders' loyalty and long-term added value by investing time and money in existing relationships.

I am not interested in how many euros we will invest or how much this investment will bring sales conversion to us. I am interested that the invited client is loyal after 10 years because of this VIP experience in World Championship. In my opinion, we have achieved the expected value from our investment if we can still remember the experience after five years. One thing is extremely important, these events create friendships and I have seen that many customer relationships are really close with true friendships. (1)

5 Conclusion

The purpose of this part of the study is to give insights into the settled research problem by answering the research questions. The research problem of this study was to find out what are the elements of a successful VIP experience in sports events. To improve offered VIP experiences of a commissioner company, the elements of expected VIP experiences were researched further. The findings of this study tried to answer the two settled research questions:

1. What do companies expect from VIP services in sports events?
2. Why do companies purchase VIP services to sports events?

To answer the first research question, the needs and expectations of interviewed companies will be concluded. Kayleigh and Moital (2017) studied how to create event prestige value for corporate VIPs and what attributes deliver prestige value for the companies. According to their research, it can be stated that different customers have varying motives for pursuing prestigious experiences. Furthermore, Zeithaml et al. (2013) stated that it is important to research customer insight to exceed customer expectations.

Companies' needs and expectations for sports VIP services

The corporate clients have needs that they are trying to fulfill with VIP services in sport-related events. The clients have either new unexpressed needs or expressed but not served needs (Lönnrot & Lähdemäki 2018). The main purpose of a VIP supplier is to answer both needs. According to the findings, the corporate clients must fulfill their own customers' needs, and because of that, they are using high-quality services. By answering their guests' needs, they are building comprehensive customer loyalty, which aims to achieve brand awareness and good reputation. Corporate customers' needs are more connected with goals and objectives than satisfy emotional and social needs. On the other hand, the findings indicated that sports is not only utilized to enhance better business relations (Fetchko et al. 2013), but there is always a human being behind every decision, and each of them has personal preferences and expectations.

The research findings indicated that the value of packaged services is highly appreciated. The companies are willing to guarantee the high-quality of services by co-operating with the official VIP supplier companies, such as Elämys Live Ltd, because they do not have the time or the

expertise to create and reserve all related services to a successful VIP experience. Customers expect completeness from sports hospitality and its typical elements (Fetchko et al. 2013, 195). The regular event tickets are easily available, but these do not include the services that offer enough high-quality. The expected quality of service, hosting, and event program should be at a high level to be able to differ from daily experiences in sports events.

Furthermore, tailor-made services guarantee easy and smooth experiences which fulfill the exact needs. The VIP service should be individual and take both buying organization and their guests into account from the beginning of the buying process to the post marketing actions. The tailor-made services enhance the feeling that a VIP supplier has listened to the needs and expectations of a customer by offering proper content of services.

When considering high-quality VIP services, safety-related and health security issues have become more important due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. The organization that is inviting their customers or partners cannot take any risks with VIP events if there is any chance of spreading the COVID-19 disease among VIP guests. The findings showed that the safety instructions are expected. When a VIP supplier has documented and communicated clear safety instructions in advance, it increases the sense of responsibility. It can be noted that even though COVID-19 has affected mostly negatively and decreased the demand for events' premium services, it has forced the whole VIP and hospitality industry to put more effort into safety issues to guarantee increased standards of high-quality.

Customer satisfaction is an outcome of the fulfillment of needs and expectations which leads to increased customer loyalty (Zeithaml et al. 2013, 80–86). According to Langford and Schulz's model of customer insight (2006), the customer loyalty process starts by identifying customer insight, needs, expectations, and motivations, which can be proceeded to wanted customer behavior by measuring how purchases are implemented. The findings showed that VIP services increased customer loyalty is not measured by companies, but they would be willing to measure loyalty if there is a reliable tool for that. Loyalty is seen as re-purchases and long-term investments during the customer relationship between companies. Furthermore, companies value the personal bond between organizations' representatives to create friendships with their clients. Business relations are people's business, and behind every decision, there is a human being whose needs, expectations, values and emotions are relevant.

The companies expect that their guests are interested in a selected event, and it enables special content for the selected target group. Effortlessness, price-quality ratio and total benefits are key factors for companies when fulfilling their expectations. Well-organized arrangements and sufficient information before, during and after the event affect final fluency and the feeling of effortlessness. Professionalism and high-class service are valued. The expectations can be networking with other people and creating new business relationships or experiencing world-class entertainment and enjoying the unique atmosphere that is not possible in normal business circumstances. The purpose is to experience memorable moments and to share feelings with other participants.

Furthermore, in this study, the overall success of team Finland and the new venue experience in Tampere were mentioned as high expectations. It may be assumed that different needs and expectations can be fulfilled by selecting appropriate events for each individual situation. Overall, customers' evaluation between pre-purchase expectations and post-purchase of experience is the real indicator of a successful service, as Wirtz (2012) has also stated.

Effortlessness, expected value and benefits of VIP services must confront with a company's needs and expectations. The VIP service should include all the relevant content in all phases of a sports VIP experience, and the buyer must be aware of the next steps of the experience. A smooth VIP experience requires active communication and clear pre-instructions to avoid any misunderstandings or unexpected situations with invited guests. The whole entity of VIP service, from the first point of contact at a VIP venue's door to the return trip back to home, must be well-planned and in order. However, the VIP service is not worthy of investment if some part of the entire experience is lacking. The needs and expectations are vital to be fulfilled with true prestige value. The loyalty of a customer must be earned by showing that the host company is taking the individual persons into account as well. As Datta (2003, 138–150) has stated, loyalty can be referred to as behavioral, attitudinal and situational factors which aims to re-purchases.

The study findings support the equal approach with Vigneron & Johnson (1999), and it can be stated that the selection of high-quality services is affected by price, uniqueness, social factors, emotional aspects and received quality. According to Laughlin (2014, 74–79), the reasons why customers are behaving in a current way are the most important key points to better customer understanding. The price and the company's budget are obvious motives that have an impact on the selection of VIP services. Usually, VIP services are more expensive than regular tickets, and

companies must evaluate the final value for them and their guests as well. Corporate organizations may have annual customer acquisition and customer relationship budgets which determine the level of VIP services at events. Although the price of VIP services was one significant factor when considering premium services, it was not the main determinant. According to the findings of this study, all elements of value can be seen to have an impact on customer behavior: functional, emotional, life-changing and social impact as also stated by Almquist et al. (2016).

VIP supplier companies have different strengths and weaknesses. Benefits for the purchasing company are valued by reflecting these into their own needs. Some VIP suppliers have many years of experience in organizing VIP events, but still forget to listen to the customers. It is extremely important to focus on strengths and answer to the demand. History, trust and loyalty issues affect the selection of a VIP co-operator. If there is a prior history of co-operation and the VIP supplier has gotten positive feedback, it is more likely that a buying organization will trust on their services in the future.

On the other hand, only one unsuccessful VIP event experience or negative word-of-mouth from another organization may turn into an obstacle for a continuous partnership. According to the findings of this study, it may be summarized that history and prior experiences, fluent arrangements, proper communication, positive recommendations and good reputation of a VIP supplier company are significant conditions for reliable customer relationship which enable more profound customer experience management in the future. The companies expect they can have full focus on their VIP guests.

As Kahle & Close (2011, 212–213) have summarized, corporate hospitality is divided into external and internal purposes. The companies expect two kinds of benefits from using VIP services. The findings showed that employees are not as important stakeholders as the clients are. With employees, the most significant internal expectation for utilizing VIP services is their well-being and feeling of belonging to the working community. Furthermore, the companies show their appreciation by rewarding the employees with better services and experiences at sports events. The rewarding as an internal purpose is also stated as a benefit in the theoretical framework (Kahle & Close (2011, 212–213). The expectations of benefits with clients are that VIP services promote the business relationship and strengthen the satisfaction with the company. When business relationships between corporate organizations are based on trust, the customers are more engaged with a brand and more willing to use offered products or services. Although

companies may claim that they are not inviting their final clients and partners because of business-related endorsement, this study shows that there are always business motives behind all decisions.

Companies' motives to purchase sports VIP services

To answer the second research question, why companies purchase VIP services for sports events, customers' motives and buying behavior will be concluded from the main findings of this research. Corporate customers have both financial and non-financial objectives (Ferdinand & Kitchin 2012) when planning to purchase VIP services. Motives drive to participation and buying behavior guides purchasing decisions that try to meet with needs and expectations.

The price and quality of VIP services must meet with the needs and expectations. The main findings of this study support Schiffman & Wisenblit's (2015, 141) statement that customers rely on price to value the service quality in advance by indicating more expensive is better. Companies evaluate the final value and the price before the purchase. The motive for buying VIP services can be to reward the customers with a continuous business relationship. If a company is investing in customer relationships, they are more willing to justify the VIP service purchase by stating the customers have earned the best treatment, and the services must be at the same level to show their respect for the customer relationship. In addition, companies are validating the VIP services in sport-related events by knowing that their customers appreciate and are interested in sports. According to the findings, ice hockey is seen as a national sport, and World Championship is one of the "must see" events in Finland.

Emotions and feelings from live sports cannot be substitutable and experiences are always unique. The findings highlighted exotic, fun and irregular emotions, which Fetchko et al. (2013, 29–31) have described hedonic consumptions motives. Furthermore, networking, commitment to collaboration and more loyal customer relations were stated in the findings as utilitarian motives similar of Fetchko et al. (2013, 29–31). For some companies benchmarking in VIP events was one motive to attend. The VIP events offer the best seats, food and beverages services, pre-program and own host staff to ensure a smooth event experience. Companies may want to learn from the VIP events how hospitality is planned and organized to repeat the experience in other B2B circumstances and strengthen the personal customer relationship.

However, commercial customers can determine some of the motives to purchase VIP services, but surprisingly measuring the outcome of experienced VIP services is not a motive. It does not seem rational behavior if the VIP service investments are often tens of thousands of euros, but the companies just want to measure if the VIP event was fun. There exist plenty of ways to measure the outcome, value and satisfaction of experienced VIP services, but the companies are not able or interested in doing that on their own which opens new business opportunities for VIP suppliers in the future.

Companies want to experience positive and memorable moments, once in a lifetime experience. The respondents stated that the event itself and its attraction elements are the most important factors when choosing the event participation. Furthermore, personal interest in sports increase the desire to participate in sport-related events. However, different customer groups are unequal and better customers earn better treatment. In the end, the invited customers have the power to choose where they want to attend, and this guides the decisions making processes. Companies must be careful with the offered, expensive, VIP services and those of monetary value for the invited company. Some global organizations have strict ethical regulations that may forbid the offered services as acceptance of bribery, and this may negatively affect on the relationship (Blythe 2013, 380).

Companies' purchasing habits of VIP services can be divided into two models: either they purchase immediately when VIP services of an event have been published or later when there are only two months before an event. The so called "early birds" want to ensure the best services available and be early with their own invite process to guarantee the wanted target groups to have enough time to prepare their schedules.

Oliver (1999) has categorized customer loyalty by dividing purchase behavior into frequency, volume, share, and retention. According to the findings, companies participate approximately in 11 VIP events annually. In addition, the findings indicated that an optimal group size of VIP guests is under 10 persons because when the group is over 10 persons, it is more challenging to handle and give focus on each customer. In small customer groups, under 15 persons, the contact and discussion with all participants are continuous and it is more effective to build deep customer relationships and get familiar with the persons behind company roles. Eventually, human beings are doing the business together, and the personal interest is extremely important to show to the guests. In addition, the interviews indicated that the event itself determines the actual price that a

company is willing to pay for it. 500 euros was stated as an average price, while over 500 euros VIP experiences is being seen as too expensive and need more justification to explain the high investment price.

The price range associations are highly important for the commissioner company. As Blythe (2013, 284) has noticed, customers can picture their ideal price range and either high prices indicate high-quality associations or, in the worst case too high prices might block the purchase process in the beginning. With the knowledge of price associations, it is more efficient to create VIP services in where the price and demand meet. The prices of VIP experiences may vary a lot depending on the event and its uniqueness, but when the VIP supplier knows the maximum price, that companies are willing to invest in, it enables maximum profits from offered VIP services.

It can be stated that in the past two years the rapidly changing event restrictions and regulations due to COVID-19 have affected companies purchasing decisions and buying behavior. The companies are making the final decisions closer to the event dates. The plans of attendance have been more challenging to confirm because even short-term planning has been hard to execute. However, communication builds trust and it can be one of the key factors why companies purchase quality services and intangible experiences that they are not even able to value or measure in advance. Feelings, atmosphere and expertise in VIP communication are relevant factors in the experience business. All these three elements lead to successful experiences that create adaptive buying behavior, which interactions impact on the decision-making process of strategic corporate hospitality in sports events.

NEEDS to answer High-quality service, hosting and program Tailor-made services Customers' loyalty		EXPECTATIONS to fulfill Effortlessness Price-quality ratio Total benefits
	FINDINGS	
MOTIVES to participate Event itself Personal interest in sports Once-in-a-lifetime experience		BUYING BEHAVIOR to meet Annual purchasing volume Budget and price Group size

Figure 6. Main findings of this study

The main findings of this study in figure 6 conclude the needs, expectations, motives and buying behavior of interviewed companies who had purchased VIP services for the 2022 IIHF Ice Hockey World Championship from Elämys Live Ltd. The main findings summarize the answers to what companies expect from VIP services in sports events and why companies purchase VIP services for sports events.

5.1 Discussion

The aim of this qualitative research was to describe a phenomenon and understand the researched topic better. The purpose of this study was to discover what are the elements of a successful VIP experience in sports events. This study was conducted to give new insights for the sports VIP business industry and, furthermore, to increase knowledge of customer experience management for the commissioner company. Sports VIP and hospitality in terms of better customer experience management have not been further research in the Finnish sports context. This study aimed to offer both relevant academic information for sports mega-event organizers in the Finnish VIP business context and new insights into sports VIP customer experiences for global sports markets. In addition, the results of this study will be utilized in Elämys Live Ltd's future business developments.

The research process was started in September 2021 by discussion with the commissioner company. The intention of the discussion was to figure out the most interesting research topic in terms of the business development of sports VIP services. In addition, the 2022 IIHF Ice Hockey World Championship's local organizing committee was also contacted, and the World Championship related research topic was suggested for them as well, but they did not want to be involved in this study process. Quickly after these discussions, the research topic was selected together with Elämys Live Ltd, who was able to agree on justified and relevant research content. The commissioner company was satisfied with the study proposal, but more active participation could have helped to outline the wanted outcome of the study. Furthermore, the position of the interviewer as a chief operating officer at Elämys Live Ltd may have affected the subjective view of the study. On the other hand, personal experience and prior knowledge of sports VIP business have helped to focus on a relevant research problem.

The theoretical framework for the study was formulated in the autumn 2021 and the frame for the interviews was produced at the end on the year 2021 according to the theoretical framework. The

data collection was accomplished in two weeks between 27.1.2022 – 3.2.2022. The data collection phase was efficient because the interviewees were loyal customers who were willing to develop the commissioner company's business to achieve better service and experiences in the future. To strengthen the results, the chosen interviewees had the knowledge and prior experience of the studied topic as Tuomi & Sarajärvi (2009, 85–86) has appointed. Furthermore, the author knew the selected interviewees by name and the contact with them was natural because they had purchased VIP services for the 2022 IIHF Ice Hockey World Championship from Elämys Live Ltd. The theoretical references of this study were found mainly from international academic publications and books, but the research methodology was easier to understand and describe in author's native language (Finnish). Most of the qualitative research methodology sources were utilized from Finnish databases and supported by relevant international research methodology sources.

The research was conducted successfully in a reasonable time even though the author was working at the same time with the whole research process. The research implementation was clearly divided into different parts, and it was well planned in advance to ensure continuous study process development. The number of selected interviewees, in total of four companies, were tolerable because of limited time resources. More selected interviewees could have enhanced the variety of results and might have deepened the findings. However, the chosen companies represent major international business industries, and the size of the selected companies created credibility for the findings.

Better customer experience management in the future can be achieved by a comprehensive knowledge of factors that affect customer purchasing decisions and experiences. The conducted research indicated that companies have needs and expectations that affect deeper motives to purchase VIP services. VIP services are seen as prestige value for the final guests who are experiencing the event. The deeper knowledge of purchasing experiences in the VIP business enables VIP suppliers to modify the offered services to answer exact needs. However, the core of the VIP experience should always include the expected elements which create the value for the whole experience. All the promised aspects of premium services must confront with an actual final product to build a long-term customer relationship. Customer experiences are always individual, and companies may experience the services in different manners regardless of the content.

To improve customer experience management, a VIP supplier company must recognize what are expected elements of value and how these can be utilized in building better customer experiences. Companies expect that their customers' needs are taken into consideration, and the expectations are fulfilled with tailor-made VIP services which enable the clients to feel they are appreciated and valued. The sports itself cannot be predictable, but the VIP arrangements around the event must be well-planned and informed in advance. The companies expect to achieve premium quality in total and receive unique experiences with VIP services. Furthermore, VIP services enable companies to keep the focus on the invited customers and their interests instead of keeping an eye on event arrangements and strict schedules to ensure the successful event experience. The key word for expected VIP service is simplicity.

It may be stated that companies purchase VIP services for sports events because they expect high-quality services that deeper their existing customer relationships. Price has an impact on selected VIP services, but it is not the determinant factor. The invited customers' interests in specific sports affect the most. Unique experiences and feelings from live sports are motives to participate as a VIP guest and create once-in-a-lifetime memories with customers. Clients have a distinct value to the company, and the level of chosen VIP services is determined by their current customer relationship. Eventually, the invited customer has the power to choose a sports event by reflecting their own personal interest, and the inviting party should be aware of the customer's insight which leads to better customer experience management in the future.

5.2 Research credibility and ethics

To ensure internal and external validity and reliability of the study, a researcher must focus on proper research design (Yin 2014, 45–46). Validity and reliability are often linked with quantitative research and have been consciously avoided in qualitative research. However, it is important to observe the trustworthiness and credibility of a research. In qualitative research, the description of the research process enhances trustworthiness and credibility. This includes how data has been collected and analyzed, what kind of analyzing methods have been utilized and why the categorization of the data is done in current manners. (Hirsjärvi & Sinivuori 2000, 214–215.)

Credibility in qualitative research can be established by citing the original writers of related works during the theoretical review phase. In addition, the credibility can be specified by the analytic data methods through data analysis with the participants and by evaluation of the validity of data

that were collected. Furthermore, trustworthiness is ensured by informing the reader of the actual research process and, at the same time, providing credibility for the study by revealing a researcher's honesty and integrity. (Saldaña 2011, 135–136.) A valid study can be ensured by probably collected and interpreted data, which leads to representing the reality of what has been studied (Yin 2011, 78).

This research aimed to describe the whole research process as precisely as possible to ensure the credibility of the research. The credibility and trustworthiness of this study have improved by describing the research structure and the conducted phases of the study in figure 1 in detail. The structure of this study process follows the guidelines of a qualitative research properly to get a deeper understanding of the studied phenomenon. Furthermore, the structure of this research was planned and organized in a logical order to enable a fluent reading experience for a future reader of the study. References from theoretical frameworks were conducted clearly and comprehensively. The use of straight citations in the findings part has been justified to increase the trustworthiness and credibility of the study.

The semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data, form the findings of this study and to answer the presented research questions properly. The collected data from interviews was transcribed, coded, categorized and combined with chosen themes to ensure the credibility of the data collection phase. In addition, the collected research data have been stored and managed with care to ensure the anonymity of the interviewed persons. The research findings have been presented by following the proper rules of qualitative research and the findings are interpreted impartially. Conclusions have been made by combining the theoretical framework and the findings to conclude the aim of the study.

The interview structure and questions were tested in advance by going through the interview with a neutral participant who did not attend to the study. The test session ensured that the interviewees would understand the questions like the interviewer had meant. It also provided an estimated length of the interview session, which allowed to tell this in advance for the interviewees. The interview structure and questions were sent to all the interviewees one day before, which can be seen to increase the credibility of this research. However, unless the interviews were conducted successfully at remote sessions, the face-to-face interviews could have improved the validity when reactions, gestures and feelings may have been interpreted in live circumstances. In addition, some of the interview questions were formulated too broad, and these

repeated themselves. It was noticed that in some parts of the interview discussions, the interviewees were offering the same kind of answers as in prior parts of the interviews. A more compact interview schedule would have reduced repetition and improved the reliability of the findings.

Yin (2014, 78) has summarized that research ethics can be followed by observing the research design and other technical considerations. Within this study, participation in a study was completely voluntary, and it was informed to all participants in the first email letter. Furthermore, privacy and confidentiality issues were taken into consideration by selecting participants with fair manners and informing them of all needed details included in the research process. The participants were told to be handled anonymously and that there was no possibility to connect them to their true identities. Participants were informed that they could interrupt their participation in the study at any phase of the research process without causing any negative impacts. In addition, participants had full right not to answer proposed questions, request to delete the given answer, or to stop the consent at any stage of the interview.

According to the Finnish National Board on research integrity, the participants must be aware of the content of a study, the method of application of personal information and the schedule of a research publication. Furthermore, the participants must recognize the current role of a researcher if he or she has other adherences with a participant. (Finnish National Board on Research Integrity 2019, 8–9.) The interview choices of this study have been chosen by following proper conduct of research ethics. At the beginning of every interview session, it was highlighted that the current working role of the interviewer at the commissioner company would not affect the results of this study. During this study, the interviewer took a neutral role, and the results were only utilized for academic purposes of the research. The interviewees were told that this study was planned to be published in spring 2022 before the 2022 IIHF Ice Hockey World Championship started on 13.5.2022. Furthermore, it was promised to send the published research to the participants which can be seen to strengthen the trustworthiness of this study.

5.3 Proposals for future research

This research can be considered to study deeper in other sport-related businesses. Hospitality organizations can achieve further understanding of the researched topic to manage their customer experience better. Furthermore, this study can be utilized in other event business industries

besides sports. Advanced customer experience management replaces traditional customer relationship management in the service industry and this study offers new approaches to satisfy and engage customers in terms of customer insight. The conducted research indicated that VIP customers have various needs, expectations and motives to make the final purchase decision, and these factors should be studied further to understand customer behavior.

An interesting future research topic would be to study the same companies, that have purchased VIP services for the 2022 IIHF Ice Hockey World Championship, after the event but before the next Ice Hockey World Championship. The study would observe the fulfilled connection between the expected VIP experience and the experienced service after the event. In addition, this future research could expose new methods for better measurement of customer experience. That would allow companies to justify the VIP purchases more adequately with their return on investment.

In future research, this study can be utilized as a framework for better customer experience management in sports business context. Furthermore, a global study approach regarding other international sports events would be worthy of further research in order to compare Finnish companies with other nations. International sports venues and arenas all over the world could build more profitable VIP business structures by utilizing a deeper understanding of customer insight and customer experience management. VIP services are one of the most profitable income sources for the event organizers when customers are willing to invest in tailor-made experiences. Future research in customer experience management would enable sport-related companies to understand the actual customer behavior and to fulfill both the hidden needs and the expectations.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Interview schedule

Introduction for interviewees:

My name is Jami Palsa and in this interview I represent a Sport Management Master's level student of University of Applied Sciences in Jyväskylä. The commissioner company of this Master's study is Elämys Live Ltd. My role today is to conduct an interview for the academical research. I want to highlight that my role as a chief operating officer at the commissioner company do not affect conduction of this study and the answers are utilized only for the purposes of this research.

This research is conducted as an anonymous semi-structured interview. The research results are confidential and personal identities or organizational details of an interviewee cannot be tracked down. All the interviewees have right to not to answer presented questions in any phase of the interview or to ask given answer to be deleted from the final research. In addition, an interviewee has the possibility to interrupt the interview session in any phase of the interview session. Video and voice recordings of remote TEAMS interviews are saved and stored with proper manners until the study has been officially published. After the publication, the video and the voice recordings are deleted. The research paper will be sent for the participants after the official publication.

The purpose of this study is to find out what are the elements of a successful VIP experience in sports events. The aim of this study is to understand the connection between customer insight and buying behavior of companies who have purchased VIP services for the 2022 IIHF Ice Hockey World Championship.

In this study, an interviewee represents the company, which had purchased VIP services for the 2022 IIHF Ice Hockey World Championship. During the interview, an interviewee answers on presented questions from the point of view of the represented company not as an individual consumer.

Needs, expectations and motives:

1. How would you describe VIP services? (what do you think it includes?)
2. What kind of events your company preferably participates in?
3. Does it affect the selection of an event with whom you participate? (employees/clients)
 - 3.1 If yes, how?
4. Do you use various VIP service suppliers or only one?
 - 4.1 Why?
5. What factors affect reliability of a VIP service supplier?
6. What you expect from VIP services in a sports event?
 - 6.1 In which factors you pay attention in VIP services' fluency?
 - 6.2 What makes a VIP event successful?
 - 6.3 What do you expect VIP services offer for your company?
 - 6.4 For which purposes you utilize VIP services?
 - a) Internal motives / employees
 - b) External motives / clients
7. How price affects your buying decision of VIP services?
8. Why do you purchase VIP services for sports events?
9. What factors affect the final purchase decision of a VIP service?
10. Do you measure the produced final value of VIP services? Do you settle scale for utilization of VIP services? If yes, how do you measure advantages of VIP services with various stakeholders?

Buying behavior and purchasing experiences

11. What kind of experiences you have from sports events' VIP services?
 - 11.1 What has been the best VIP experience? Why this one and what it included?
12. Have you been satisfied with VIP services in sports events in which you have participated?
 - 12.1 If not, why?
13. To how many sports events you purchase VIP services annually? (before COVID-pandemic)
14. For how many persons you purchase VIP services for a sports event?
15. How do you purchase VIP services? (online shop, phone calls, emails etc.)
16. At what stage do you purchase VIP services before a sports event?
17. What amount of money has been sufficient to invest in VIP services for a sports event? (per person)

Purchase experience: the 2022 IIHF Ice Hockey World Championship

18. Why did you purchase the VIP services for the 2022 IIHF Ice Hockey World Championship?
19. From where you received information concerning the VIP services of the 2022 IIHF Ice Hockey World Championship?
20. Did different price categories affect the selection of reserved VIP services? If yes, how?
21. How was the buying process? How did you purchase the VIP services for the 2022 IIHF Ice Hockey World Championship?
22. For how many persons you purchased the VIP services?
23. For which stakeholders the purchased VIP services are allocated?
24. How do you measure advantages of the purchased VIP services?
25. What kind of value you expect the purchased VIP services to offer for your company and its stakeholders? How will you utilize the VIP services of the 2022 IIHF Ice Hockey World Championship?
26. What you expect from the VIP experience at the 2022 IIHF Ice Hockey World Championship in Finland?

Background details of interviewees

Place of the interview session // The interview method // The duration of the interview session

The interviewee's position at the company

The business industry of the represented company

The annual turnover of the represented company

The number of employees at the represented company

The main customer segments (B2B / B2C) of the represented company