

**UNIVERSITY OF EASTERN FINLAND**

Faculty of Social Sciences and Business Studies

Business School



UNIVERSITY OF  
EASTERN FINLAND

**B2B firms and their customers:  
Re-strategizing customer experience for  
competitive advantage.**

MASTER'S THESIS

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## **ABSTRACT**

Technology has changed the dynamics of B2B markets. In this new marketplace, B2B enterprises are finding it increasingly difficult to differentiate their offerings. Customers now have total access to information, and their choices represents the main differentiator between enterprises. Good service from a company is instinctively becoming a market qualifier, which means that B2B enterprises need to shift from offering not just product alone, but also delivering experience to customers. Even though academics and practitioners have recognized the importance and benefits of customer experience in B2C, there is currently a debate and little empirical evidence on how it can be implemented within the B2B sector.

The fundamental objective of this research is to investigate the theory of customer experience management (CEM) strategy in today's business atmosphere, while trying to understand how B2B companies can better implement customer experience management as a differentiator to gain competitive advantage. Thus, this research was carried out in two stages. Stage one, a systematic literature review of CEM literatures was carried out to gain in-depth knowledge about the subject matter. Stage two was exploratory in nature, and thus involved specialised interviews with managers and company representatives that are responsible for initiating customer experiences within their various B2B enterprises.

With an inductive thematic analysis, the research uncovered two specific dimensions (service and functional dimension) consisting of several themes. These themes were categorized into nine customer experience influential factors. From the emanating nine themes, this paper presents a CEM implementation framework that managers and practitioners concerned with improving customer experiences could use as a main differentiator.

## **Keywords**

Customer Experience (CX or CE), Customer Experience Management (CXM or CEM), Strategy, Customer Journey, Touchpoints, Competitive Advantage, B2B Enterprise.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter is structured to introduce the subject matter to the reader. The idea behind this chapter is centred around evaluating the benefit of initiating a customer experience management, and to review the key components that affects its practical implementation in B2B firms. In other words, the research is trying to investigate if superior customer experience strategy leads to a competitive advantage; a way to successfully overcoming the customers' hearts.

### 1.1 Background

Business-to-business in this research is defined as a model that sells products and services to other firms. B2B companies acts as a supportive enterprise that provides products or services to help other companies succeed in their daily operations (Christopher, 2011). The primary customers in B2B firms are mostly government agencies, companies (small, medium, and large enterprises), and institutions. Several literatures agreed that the simplest, and most effective business-to-business marketing strategies focuses on the following components such as reducing costs, increasing sales, competitive advantage, and meeting government regulations (Blythe and Zimmerman, 2005: 13). According to Lemon and Verhoef (2016), they affirmed that the goal of every business enterprise is to generate sales, and for that reason it is extremely important for B2B firms to develop an effective sales technique. Figure 1 shows the key components of a contemporary B2B sales strategy:

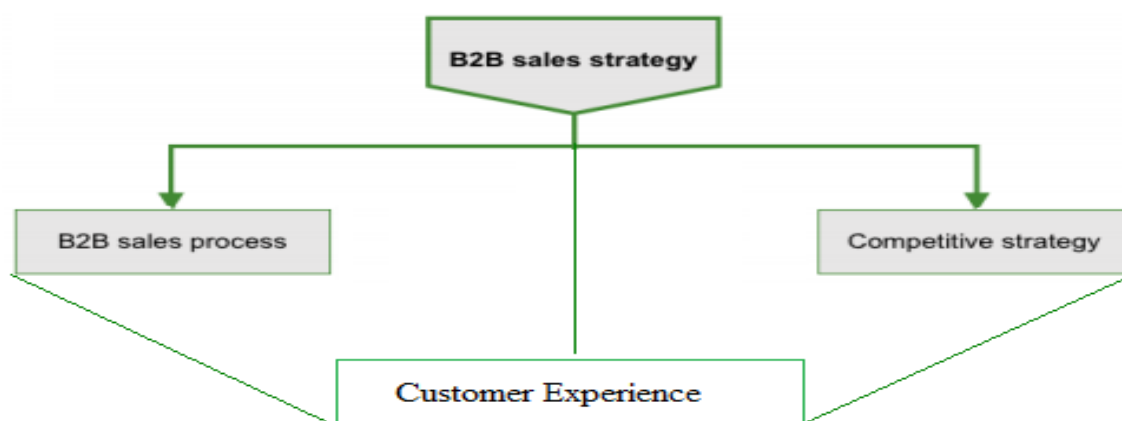


Figure 1. B2B Sales Strategy

In the past two decades, globalization has impacted on virtually everything ranging from; business strategies to business models. Advancement in mobile technologies and the internet has created a shift in the way businesses are ran these days. (Kumar et al., 2015). B2B customers are becoming increasingly inquisitive; meaning that they interact with different suppliers in an impeccable way, shifting between channels of communication and allowing various information to influence their buying behaviour (Kumar et al., 2015). Several literatures agreed that for an organization to be successful, they need to initiate strategies that develops and maintains customer relationships (Blythe, 2005).

To penetrate a new market and establish a successful business, B2B companies need to pay more attention on delivering value to customers than focusing on selling the actual product. These firms should know what their strengths and capabilities are, and how these strengths can aid them to compete within the marketplace. It is also extremely important to understand the customer and how to exceed their needs, especially with the products the organization is offering. As the B2B market evolves, it is becoming increasingly competitive and complex for many B2B industry leaders. Even though globalization has created countless market opportunities locally and internationally, in practical, exploiting these opportunities does not always come easy. Research done by Lemon and Verhoef (2016), distinctively evaluated the value of experiences in the modern B2B society, and the possibilities for firms to take advantage of the situation by creating strong and sustainable customer experiences. In trying to evaluate an emerging source of competitive advantage, customer experience (CE) was identified as a compelling antecedent. Companies are investigating different ways to remain competitive while managing customer interactions and experiences at the same time.

It should be noted that the determinant of success or failure of a business enterprise is how they manage competition. In every industry or sector, competition determines the efficacy of a company's actions which resonates in organizational performance. These actions relate to easy access to information, excellent product development, and innovative business practices (Castleberry & Tanner 2011, 69). A competitive strategy are tactics initiated by a firm while aiming for a profitable competitive position within a specific industry (Gromark and Melin, 2011). Business enterprise needs a competitive strategy for protection and to attain a sustainable position against the challenges that determines a specific industry (Gromark and Melin, 2011; Anees-ur-Rehman et al., 2018).



## 1.2 Problem Description

B2B firms are faced with numerous challenges in trying to achieve competitive advantage; while maintaining key customer relationships and satisfactions (Holliman, G. & Rowley, J., 2014). Even though the B2B industry is not a battlefield, losing business deals and customers to competitors is often an occurrence, which can be disappointing and unpleasant. Firstly, in modern day business-to-business industry, good services and innovative products are not enough to facilitate the competitiveness of an organization. Multiple literatures have suggested that while most B2B firms recognize the importance of better satisfying buyers and improving their experiences, there are still miles behind with impending hurdles to be crossed, some of which are self-imposed by the firms (Castleberry, S.B. & Tanner, F.T. 2011; Holliman & Rowley, 2014). B2B companies looking to penetrate international markets are faced with various obstacles such as unavailability of international clientele, geographic distance and lack of sales personnel assigned to target market, competitors with huge budgets, difficulty in handling international business partners, and host of other issues.

Secondly, B2B companies have started to realize that they are not immune to the digital revolution which has impacted on how customers find, enquire, and purchase their products and services. These firms are faced with increasing fragmentation from various channel of interaction, and as such, creating a more complex customer journeys (Brynjolfsson, Hu, and Rahman 2013). These firms are being evaluated on the similar characteristics such as ease of use, customer relationship, and value propositions, just as they do to consumer brands in B2C (Dholakia et al. 2010). Trying to emulate a consumer-style customer experience has obviously sets a benchmark that has proven to be rigorous and strenuous for B2B to match. Thirdly, the proposed framework known as "Customer Experience Management" (CEM) is not entirely a new concept. CEM is vast and it digs in deeper into the customer's world to gain insight from their unique perspective. B2B firms pay extraordinarily little attention and support to customer experience strategy. It should be noted that most B2B firms are known to be often preoccupied by stagnated product-centric cultures, which simply means they pay more attention to product uniqueness as a tool for competitive edge (Lemke, Clark, and Wilson, 2011). The most notable challenges in delivering customer experience is that companies fail to see it as the responsibility of every member of an organization (Bolat and Strong, 2016). It is the responsibility of every division and team to be a part of the larger strategy and buy into the part they play in creating an amazing customer experience.

From the in-depth analysis, it became apparent that B2B firms often fail to define what the required experiences approach should be. Apparently, the absence of specification of what the experience should be, creates a dilemma that leaves employees giving their best, and customers remaining unhappy. CEM should be an organization's-initiated tool for competitive advantage, and as a principal management objective. To develop a sustainable and an amazing customer experiences, B2B firms must re-evaluate and re-strategize their employees' competencies and ability to convey those experiences. In other to deliver an outstanding customer experiences, it does require a cross-functional effort by many parts of a company (Anees-ur-Rehman et al., 2018).

The overall analysis proves that “*a gap is existing between customer experience strategy and its practical implementation for B2B firms' seeking competitive advantage*”.

### **1.3 Aim of the Study**

The aim of the study is to investigate the concept CEM strategy; and how B2B companies can better utilize CEM to gain competitive advantage. This research intends to prove that CEM strategy should be an organization's-initiated tool, and as a principal management objective.

#### **1.3.1 Research Question**

For B2B firms to enjoy competitive differentiation within the marketplace; customers satisfaction is deemed incredibly important to achieve competitive advantage. Based on above discussions, the research sets out to answer the following statement:

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>How can B2B firms implement customer experience management as a differentiator to gain competitive advantage?</b></p>
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**Table 1. Research Question.**

To succeed at scale and build a meaningful CXM, customer experience practices must be consistent and integrated in the entire ecosystem of a business value chain, including customers, employees, and shareholders. To further strengthen the findings of this research, three supporting research questions were identified:

1. *How much visibility and control do customers have on product or service through touchpoints?*
2. *How quickly does new information about a customer disseminate within a B2B enterprise?*
3. *Can B2B companies actually drive growth using customer experience as a differentiator?*

#### **1.4 Research Methodology**

This research adopted a qualitative research approach to gather data. Qualitative research is defined by Campbell et al, (2003) as research method that focuses on obtaining data through open-ended and conversational communication. Therefore, the qualitative research methods allow the author to further probe and question respondents. The aim is to understand respondent's motivation and feelings towards the topic of discussion. It should be noted that results obtained via qualitative research methods are more descriptive, and the conclusions or interpretations can be retrieved quite easily from the data collected. An in-depth interview was used in this research for collecting primary data on individuals' personal histories, perspectives, and experiences. This method will most surely provide complex textual descriptions of how the respondents views the implementation of customer experience and how it affects the company's competitive advantage.

Exploratory research design is selected to understand how B2B firms can initiate and implement a strategic customer experience strategy throughout the organisation. Exploratory research design aims to investigate the indirect assumption in recent literatures; to explore the research questions with a better understanding of the existing problems. This research design is employed mainly because exploratory research is flexible to change and gives space to comprehend the nature of the problem as it progresses. (Saunders et al. 2009, p. 139). Exploratory research is defined by Campbell et al, (2003, p. 680) as research conducted to gain new insights, discover new ideas, and for increasing knowledge of the phenomenon. The author chose this approach with the intention to establish priorities, develop operational definitions and improve the final research design.

A thematic analysis is considered suitable for a qualitative research. It aids researcher in identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative set of data (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). An inductive thematic analysis involves allowing the data to

determine the themes surrounding the subject matter. On the other note, a deductive analysis involves coming to the data with already existing theme or pattern the researcher expects to find reflected in data. It is often based on theory or existing knowledge (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). An inductive thematic analysis, was employed in this research because little or no predetermined theory, structure or framework was used to examine data; rather the actual data itself is used to derive the structure of analysis. Researchers agree that the themes derived from this approach are strongly linked to the data since they emerged from it.

### **1.5 Rationale for this Study**

Author of this research is of the opinion that customer experience management (CEM) strategy is still under-utilized in B2B's. The idea behind the topic selection is to investigate and ascertain if CE should be an organization's-initiated tool, and as a principal management objective. Many scholars have agreed that a well-initiated competitive strategy can help a company distinguish their business from industry-specific competitors. In order to compete with the big players of a specific industry, B2B firms need to focus on delivering value to the customer than what the competitors are currently offering. This justifies the importance and makes this research topic worthy of study. With this body of work, the researcher is hoping to make a significant contribution to the already existing research.

### **1.6 Limitation of Study**

In trying to provide answers to the research questions stated above, business-to-business (B2B) perspective represents the participants and centre of interest for this thesis. Even though multiple researches suggest that a growing number of B2B firms are adopting a standard model of delivering customer experiences (McLean 2017, p. 658), it is important to state that this research does not focus on B2B models, sales, and marketing process. Rather it focuses on the general component of customer experience management, the processes, attitudes, and behavioural interactions of the customer and the organization. These components make it interesting to examine how B2B firms can take advantage of integrating a strategic customer experience management into their business practices to achieve competitive advantage. Another factor that could limit this research is the multi-dimensional, situation-specific nature of customer experience. It should be noted that customer experience is personal and specific, therefore, it favours qualitative rather than quantitative measurement

approaches. It means that data collection for this research was purely qualitative and explained in greater details in the subsequent chapter below.

Its practical implications can be limited due to the fact that the unique nature of customer experience; which is specific to a customer or customers of a firm, at a specific time and location, in the context of a specific event, reduces its managerial usefulness for planning, control, and generalization purposes.

## **1.7 Structure of the Report**

In this research, the first chapter provides a general concept surrounding the subject matter. It was also used to introduce the topic, research problems, current trends, and research gaps. Chapter two offers a theoretical framework and definitions on the concept of customer experience management (CEM) and definition of competitive advantages. The third chapter examines the research methodology, approaches and data analysis process employed in this study. This chapter further explains the objectives of the research, choice, and motivation for adopting the specific method for collecting data. In chapter three, the researcher further showcases a comprehensive account of the data collection method considered, highlighted its constraints, and issues related to ethical considerations.

The fourth chapter focused on findings of the study. The results of the interviews and questionnaires are presented, summarized, and analysed. Further in chapter four, the researcher evaluated the themes, and the concepts were compared to theoretical framework of customer experience management. Afterwards, the key findings were summarized and discussed in Chapter five. Chapter five elaborated on the findings from the data, and in chapter six, the researcher outlined the contributions of this research. Subsequently, the practical suggestions of these findings, research limitations and possible options for further research were presented in this chapter six.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

In this chapter, the author attempts to review the relevant literature related to the field of customer experience management (CEM). This section covers definitions and various theories of customer experience, customer journey and touchpoints, and different types of competitive advantage. The theories constitute the focus area of the research described further in this thesis.

### **2.1 Definition of Experience**

Experience is commonly defined as the understanding or knowledge of an event or subject a person acquires, either through involvement in such activity or exposed to it. According to Holbrook and Hirschman, (1982), they defined experience is an occurrence which leaves a lasting impression on a person, either negative or positive. It also means a practical contact with and observation of facts (Boswijk et al. 2012). In psychology, experience refers to an instant relatively isolated event, with a variety of emotions that leaves a feeling of a certain value for the individual within the condition of a specific situation (Boswijk et al. 2012, 61). These definitions support the idea that experience as a concept can be subjective and personal in nature. Scholars in the field of marketing agrees from a more decisive point of view, that experience occurs when organizations deliver unique values at various interactions between service providers and their customers (Meyer and Schwager 2007).

### **2.2 Customer Experience Overview (CX or CE)**

Customer experience simply refers to the value of interactions between an organization and its customer. It represents the totality of an organization's performance; senses stimulated by the business process, and emotions evoked on a customer 'expectations across all moments of contact (Shaw & Ivens 2002, 6). Several authors (see for example Shaw and Ivens 2002; Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004; Meyer and Schwager 2007), have collectively agreed that an amazing experience should be considered a new way of creating values for customers, so as to generate revenue, build customer base, and ensure loyalty to the business.

These scholars jointly emphasized that a good experience has positive impact on customers' satisfaction, yields customer loyalty, and infuses confidence between both parties (Pullman and Gross 2004). Verhoef et al. (2009, p. 32) classified customer experience as the standard of all the consumer's interaction with the firm's products, service, or brand. Customer

experience involves every aspect of a company's offering; from the offered products or services, to the quality of customer care, service features, sales process, and after-care services. In most cases, when a customer interacts with a company, they observe the organization's procedures and process to see if it suits their needs. In the same process, these customer or prospects form an opinion either good, bad, or indifferent. With the advent of internet and mobile technologies, the concept of experience in business gained more recognition. Products and services are becoming more indistinguishable in functionality, and this has led to the new wave of competition based on experiences, not only products or services.

Scholars like Pine and Gilmore (1998), agreed that experiences should be categorized as one of the fourth economic offering (in addition to; commodities, goods, and services) that organization delivers. It signifies that a company be successful and thrive in their business if they strategically offer great experiences. A research conducted by Shaw & Ivens (2002) identifies that today's customers want to participate and become co-innovator of their own of their experiences. The author affirmed that the experiences customers are getting from using a company's product or services is based on the customer's need or unique situation and should be personalized. Pine and Gilmore (1998), argued that products or services should deliver experiences to customers, which goes beyond tangible and intangible offerings. These authors are of the idea that customer's form the opinion on a company's offering, not only by its features, but by the degree to which it delivers the experiences they desire.

The influx of technology and innovation has led to the growth in demand for memorable experiences by consumers. Technology has provided customers with an unlimited access to information and they dictate the terms in purchasing goods and services (Meyer and Schwager 2007). Developing customer experience provides real benefits to companies that successfully execute customer-centric strategies. Across multiple sectors, it is usually the case that satisfied customers are prone to spending more, exhibit strong loyalty to companies that offers them great experience, and create conditions that permit companies to operate on minimal costs and higher levels of employee involvement (Verhoef et al., 2009).

A distinctive customer experience is determined by the company's stance and purpose to deliver the customer's true needs. Customer experience is the responsibility of everyone in an organization because it considers the overall customer journey by building long term relationship with customers. (Anees-ur-Rehman et al., 2018).

## 2.3 Customer Touchpoints

Scholars have provided different definitions for the word “touchpoint” in customer experience design, and the reason is that technology have been evolving rapidly over the two last decades. A touchpoint is any place of contact existing between an organization, and its old customers and potential customers. Shaw and Ivens (2002) defined touchpoint as any interaction (including encounters where there is no physical interaction) that might affect the customer or customers perception about a product, business, or service. For this study, a customer touchpoint refers to the points of interaction between the business and its targeted audience (customer).

It should be noted that these interactions often occur at various places (online and offline) and at various times. The mitigating factor is that touchpoints are deemed meaningful only if and when the company understands them from customer’s point of view. Since they represent interactions between businesses and customers, these moments significantly influence customer experience as well as customer expectations. By outlining key touch points on a map, businesses can capitalize on timely opportunities to optimize their business transactions (Anees-ur-Rehman et al., 2018). Therefore, it is important for companies to initiate an exciting impression to achieve their strategic sales targets.

Scholars and practitioners have agreed that taking a comprehensive and thorough inventory of touchpoints can be extremely challenging. But it’s worth it, and Schmitt, Bernd H. (2003) explains why: if a company understands and organizes their touchpoints (from the customer perspective) to suit their existing strategy (company's perspective), they can have a clear vision of how to prioritize and deliver meaningful customer experience. One major concern is that experiences within the business world is constantly evolving, and it is easy to be left behind if business do not adapt to these changes. Therefore, understanding customer touchpoints could help businesses stay ahead in meaningful ways and remain competitive (Anees-ur-Rehman et al., 2018). The table below segments customer-focused touchpoint inventory and how they occur before, during, and after a purchase.



Activity	Touchpoints (Channels)
❖ Before a Purchase	1. Online Advertisement or Social Media - Ads, promotional videos, infographics, or an engaging blog post. These are touchpoints companies employ to promote products and services, build relationships with clients, and enhance the overall reputation of the company's operations. 2. Company Events - Conferences, exhibitions, and seminars where companies promote their businesses. 3. Peer Referral - It is no secret that customers trust their peers over advertisements, therefore companies should strive to ensure that they deliver their promises to earn word-of-mouth and be trustworthy.
❖ During a Purchase	Conversations with company representatives, product catalogues, point of sale and reviews are touchpoint customers will reach before making a purchase. Several authors (see for example Shaw and Ivens 2002, Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004, Meyer and Schwager 2007) have collectively agreed that a negative attitude at any of these touchpoints would have an immediate impact on the customer's purchase decision.
❖ After a Purchase	1. Billing - Often times, businesses do not see billing as a touchpoint. Verhoef et al. (2009, p. 32) classified this touchpoint as a particularly important because a negative experience can result in an immediate instance of churn, if not addressed properly. 2. Thank You Letters - This can be either an email, or, if possible, a hand-written note that appreciates the customers for their business. 3. Product Feedback Surveys - A particularly important touchpoint after a purchase which evaluates the customer's experience with using a company's product or service. 4. Customer Support Channels - These are platforms that companies use to communicate with customers. It often includes chat, email, phone, social media, peer review sites, and more.

**Table 2. Customer-Focused Touchpoint Inventory (Source: Anees-ur-Rehman et al., 2018)**

## 2.4 Customer Journey

A customer journey represents a set of activities that illustrates the steps customer(s) go through in engaging with a company (Schmitt, Bernd H. 2010). Whether it be a product or service purchase, an online experience, a retail experience, or any combination. It represents the customer's path, from various touchpoints (channels) of communication, to their final decision to purchase a product or services. Shaw and Ivens (2002) explained in their research that customers does not usually decide to make purchases immediately after finding out about it for the first time, these customers investigate about the product or brand several times before deciding on an action.

A customer journey map is a tool, diagram or several diagrams that displays and monitors the stages customers go through when interacting with a company (Anees-ur-Rehman et al., 2018). This map is critical to a successful implementation of CE because it forces the organization to look at how a prospect experiences the products versus how the organization thinks they are performing (Pullman and Gross 2004). It should be noted that organizations

which spends time and effort to understand their customers, can better deliver on their expectations. According to Lemke, F., Clark, M., & Wilson, H. (2011), customer experience advocates; they recommended that B2B companies must invest in becoming an experience-led business. This simply means that optimizing every customer journey allows a company to stay a step ahead of the customer to lead them on the path for a great experience and quality product or service. Figure 2 shows an effective visual map that reflect customers' journeys through selected channels.

#### **2.4.1 Stages of a Typical Customer Journey**

Industry experts have summarized a whole selection of activities to nail down the customer buying journey, making it easier to understand the process in order to improve it. According to Lemon, K.N. and Verhoef, P.C. (2016), they refer to these stages as the backbone of any customer journey map, and further provided critical moments in a customer's journey that organizations should capitalize on when trying to deliver a meaningful customer experience.

***Awareness:*** The first stage is the awareness stage where the prospects (customers) builds up their expectations of the product or service they want to purchase. During this stage, the buyers have realized they have a problem and are looking for information. Customers builds strong convictions based on information from channels such as PR, radio, TV, print, outdoor billboards and posters, word of mouth, online ads, viral email, digital signage, social media, search, landing page, and blog.

***Consideration:*** This moment represents the pre-purchase stage whereby customer shows intent on purchasing and is consider different options to execute it. This stage involves all the activities that leads to purchase decision. Customer has shown interest in the product or service and will enquire for more information. In most cases, the customer must be aware of the existence of the product or services; for this reason, it is necessary for the company to inform about the characteristics of the product and its strengths.

***Purchase:*** The third stage represents when the customer has agreed to purchase the product or service; customer must have made the decision and executes it. Activities at this stage includes for example, the experience at the point of sale, customer service, request for samples, and possibly delivery methods.

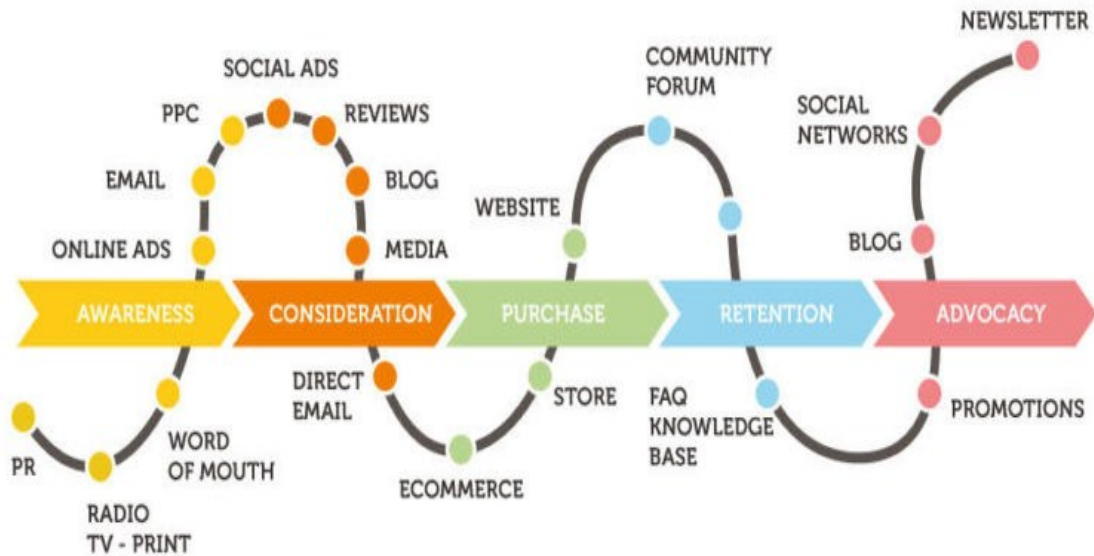
**Retention:** The fourth stage is very crucial because it involves experiences associated with customer using the purchased product or service. The “retention” stage is when the post-purchase process has been performed; customer has the product and organizations are looking to keep in touch with them to encourage other purchases in the future.

**Advocacy:** The final stage is visible after the customer must have used products or service. After a pleasant experience, customers will be able to help improve the company’s image and influence the process for other new prospects. During this stage, customers evaluate and reflect on the experience received against presumption and expectations they had. Whatever outcome derived from this reflection can have either positive or negative impact on the relationship.

### **2.4.2 Customer Journey Mapping**

A customer journey map represents a visual representation of the process a customer or prospect passes through to achieve a goal with an organization (Meyer and Schwager 2007). Implementing a customer journey map allows a company to get a sense of their customers' motivations, needs and frustration points. Scholars have admitted that without a customer's journey map, organizations will not be able to provide a good customer experience. From a customer’s point of view, they want their experience with a business organization to be connected and seamless (Meyer and Schwager 2007, p. 118). These customers expect companies to be aware and remember their interactions across multiple touchpoints; who they are and what these customers are looking for, so that the necessary information is available and without the necessity to repeat or clarify their needs (Gentile, Spiller, and Noci 2007, p. 397.).

Considering the accelerating growth, and innovative digital solutions to sales process, it has become even more challenging to perfect that process and continue maintaining customer satisfaction. With customer journey mapping, an organization can design, alter, refine, or eliminate elements to improve and enhance the holistic customer experience. Figure 2 shows the five stages of customer journey map, and the touchpoints at which these businesses and their customers interact.



**Figure 2. Customer Journey Mapping (Source: Revised from Shaw and Ivens, 2002).**

Adjusting and improving touchpoints via customer journey can be greatly beneficial as it helps the company identify and understand where customers interact with their business. Gentile et al., (2007) explained that customer journey mapping allows an organization to focus their business on a customer needs at different stages of the sales process. This is important because it displays the existing gap between the desired customer experience and the one received. Thus, highlighting development priorities that may still be lacking when a company is trying to maximize effectiveness.

## **2.5 Customer Experience Management (CEM)**

Several research in the field of business management have presented definitions for customer experience management. The most concise definition that clearly translates the essence of the term is by Schmitt, Bernd H. (2010). The author defined Customer Experience Management (also known as "CEM" or "CXM") a systematic process by which an organization manages and organizes every interaction across the customer's journey. Ding et al. (2010) explained customer experience management (CEM) as the collective business activity that involves designing and reacting to customer interactions, with the aim of meeting or exceeding their expectations. CEM allows an organization to focus on developing differentiated and personalized experience at selected touchpoints customers choose to communicate with the company.

With the impact of globalization and constant development in information and technology, customer experience management is regarded as next step for managing customer interactions, step-by-step in a strategic and creative way (Homburg et al., 2015). The objective of CEM is help companies personalize customer interactions to match customer's perception and exceed their expectations. It also allows these companies to nurture and strengthen long term customer relationships. Managing customer experience can be a very daunting task (Meyer and Schwager 2007, p. 119). It should be noted that touchpoints such as promotions and advertising campaigns, after sales support, website and social media accounts can affect the perception a customer has about the company.

According to Homburg et al. (2015); they agreed that for companies to manage customer interactions or create experience, they need to adjust and adapt their systems, processes, and infrastructures to put customer at the heart. They explained further that companies should consider creating peak experiences throughout the lifecycle of customer in order to deliver a memorable experience to customers. The concept of customer experience management (CEM) may sound idealistic or touchy-feely (Epp and Price 2011; Edvardsson, Tronvoll and Gruber 2011), but the impact on business cannot be over-emphasized. In fact, there has been constant debate recently that customer experience has become a critical differentiator in today's hyper-competitive marketplace (Edvardsson, Tronvoll and Gruber 2011).

Further academic research has expressed that there is a tangible business value for organizations who manages their customer experience effectively. It should be noted that an effective customer experience management can be significant and beneficial in the following ways:

1. Increase company's revenue with incremental sales from existing customers and attracts new sales from word of mouth.
2. Influence customers to staying loyal (and create advocates) to brands through valued and memorable customer interactions.
3. Reduce costs by reducing customer churn.
4. Strengthen a company's presence and preference through differentiated and personalized experiences.

### 2.5.1 Challenges facing B2B CEM Implementation

**Digital Revolution Challenge:** According to a research conducted by Anees-ur-Rehman et al., (2018), it revealed that 73% of consumers stated that a positive customer experience and companies meeting their expectations was a significant key driver for their continued brand loyalty. Gone are the days of B2B companies trying to differentiate themselves through services and products alone. Currently, B2B companies are starting to see the effect and need to focus on creating customer experiences that deliver at scale (Baxendale et al., 2015; Pucinelli et al., 2009; Verhoef et al., 2009). In the last two decades, experts in business developments have been talking about the impact of digital revolution, and how it has transformed the view of B2B enterprise. With multiple access to information at various channels, B2B buyers can now spend more time on researching about a product or service before contacting vendors, which could prolong purchases (Baxendale et al., 2015).

**Personalization Challenge:** Another challenge facing B2B firms can be traced to personalization. Gartner predicted that by 2018, B2B companies with personalized experience would outsell competitors, who were not providing a personalized experience, by 30%. There have been all new developments in the business-customer relationship which are based solely on one thing: companies being able to communicate to and interact with prospects and existing customers from a customer-centric point of view. According to Pucinelli et al., (2009), they affirmed that every companies claim to be all about their customers, which may seem a little obvious, but a new world has evolved. These days, customers are expecting that companies show them empathy, increasing effective communications and interactions. B2B firms cannot seem to find an effective way of designing experience so that all points of contact and brand interactions with users can be personalized, creating a positive and memorable impressions.

**Leadership Challenge:** Another angle affecting the successful implementation of CEM can be traced to leadership. Companies are slow and reluctant to buy into CEM strategies and to make decisions based on different factors, such as department-specific metrics, individuals' objectives, or executive agendas instead of a cohesive vision of the organization. According to Shaw & al. (2010, 17), they affirmed that in order to motivate the entire company and achieve acute customer experience, an organization must be expressive and committed to a clear objective. It should be noted that these objectives must position all employees' daily decisions and is more reasonable than just increased profits.

***Employee Advocacy Challenge*** - It should be noted that humans can fall in love with other humans, certain ideas, good stories, or aspirational images that leaves a legacy. These emotional ties are what move the world, influencing all kinds of decisions — including purchase decisions. However, this aspect has become an issue for B2B companies, which have historically ignored this valuable resource, thereby, missing out on an important method of directly addressing end consumers. Research done by Shaw & al. (2010; 17), investigated that B2B companies are constantly seeking external ways to excite end-users, but they are increasingly coming to the realization that the right recruitment of professionals serves as the secret weapon needed for successful CX.

### **2.5.2 Critical Success Factors for CEM Implementation**

In this era, whereby technology-empowered customers are changing the nature of business, it is important to understand what it takes to succeed. Schmitt, (2003) demonstrates that when CEM is properly implemented in any organization, it can spur growth internally and externally, increase revenues, and transform the image of the company. How a business responds to the trend, and the level of customer experience (CX) the business provides, will determine their chance to succeed in this age (Schmitt, 2003; Verhoef et al., 2009). Managing the customer experience an organization delivers revolves around its operating processes and culture. More recently, academic researchers have investigated challenges that seems to be emerging from implementation of CEM. Issues like how organizations can systematically engineer their customer experiences (Verhoef et al., 2009) in order to achieve their organization goals has been top priority.

Transforming an organization's model into re-strategizing their business approach can be a huge undertaking. The reason is that customer experience is quite complex in nature and difficult to capture. Customers in today's technology driven world expect to interact with companies via channels of their choice – including voice, email, web, mobile, SMS, and many more (Schmitt, 2003; Verhoef et al., 2009, Lemon and Verhoef, 2016).

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Customer Understanding</b></p> <p>One of the most important critical success factors for implementing CEM is to understand the need, wants and preference of the target audience. According to Lemon and Verhoef (2016), they agreed that organizations should focus on gaining more insights through qualitative feedback about their (customer) interactions with the company.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Prioritization</b></p> <p>It is important for organizations to identify the most important customer groups, the core customer experience, and the characteristics that each core experience must possess. The company should establish economic framework that drives customer experience model and document the impact it has on their core business goals (e.g., revenue growth, competitiveness, and retention).</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Design</b></p> <p>Companies should utilize a human-centred process to design/update each of the company's core customer experiences. It is important to track customers behaviours, extracting patterns and properly adapt within organization to accommodate these changes. This will enable the company to identify and improve on their offerings.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Delivery</b></p> <p>Organizations should define the specific activities that each role must do to deliver or enable core customer experiences as designed. Companies should initiate tools that help employees deliver core experiences the right way every time (e.g. templates, workflow automation, etc)</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Measurement</b></p> <p>Today's multichannel environment has created rooms and sources for companies to acquire potential customer information (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). Several workflow tools provide an avenue for sales support to perform key task effectively and collaboratively, measuring customers' overall perception of core customer experiences (Schmitt, 2003; Verhoef et al., 2009). To succeed, Verhoef et al., (2009) recommends that companies should evaluate events, activities and attributes of customer interactions that are likely to have an impact on customer perceptions.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Organizational Culture</b></p> <p>Employee engagement represents a basic concept in the effort to ascertain the nature and level of the relationship between an organization and its employees. Edvardsson et al. (2011) affirmed that an organizational culture with engaged employees should be regarded as company's most valuable assets. Therefore, it is important that companies educate employees about customers, the customer experience vision, the ecosystem that delivers it, and their role in that ecosystem. These authors further encouraged that recruiters assess the empathy and customer centricity of job applicants to ensure that the right candidates are selected.</p>

**Table 3. Critical Success Factors on Implementation of CEM (Revised from <http://go.forrester.com>)**

Therefore, in trying to deliver an outstanding customer experience, firms must acknowledge and engage in strategic institutional changes. The table above carefully reviews the most important critical factors organizations need to observe when planning to implement CEM strategy. In building on the ideas above, this research attempts to ascertain a more strategic, unique, and co-creation-oriented approach to understanding B2B customer experience that is centred around the notion of value-in-use and network interactions.



In trying to achieve this, companies need to be aware that in theory, developing and implementing customer experience in a B2B context involve multiple interactions across different touchpoints. In practical, it does involve a variety of personnel involved, specifically, to ensure that a company is prepared for different customer expectations that may well relate to these interactions.

## **2.6 Competitive Advantage**

Porter (1990) defined a competitive advantage is an attribute gained over competitors by offering customers greater value, either through lower prices or by delivering additional benefits and service that justifies similar, or possibly higher, prices. Porter (1990) stated further that these attributes can include company's access to natural resources, access to highly sophisticated innovations, and skilled personnel human resources. A competitive advantage occurs when a company develops an attribute or combination of attributes that allows it to outperform its competitors in the marketplace (Ranko, Berislav, and Antun, 2008). Barney (1991) mentioned in his research that competition is at the core of the success or failure of firms. It should be noted that competition determines the effectiveness of a firm's activities that can impact its performance, such as innovations/innovative practices, a cohesive business culture, or good implementation of business process. These definitions corroborate that a competitive advantage is the ability to remain ahead of present or potential competition. Thus, a superior performance attained through competitive advantage will ensure market leadership, business growth and profitability.

### **2.6.1 Competitive Strategy**

Business models has evolved, and the economy is been driven by more demanding customers, global competition, and slower growth. Many organizations are looking for new strategic ways to achieve and retain a competitive advantage. A competitive strategy is the referred to as the long term plan a company initiates when searching for a favourable competitive position in an industry (Ranko, Berislav, and Antun, 2008). Competitive strategy is defined as initiatives developed and implemented by a company in trying to gain competitive advantage over its competitors in the industry. Companies initiate a competitive strategy with the aim of creating a profitable and sustainable position against the attributes that determine industry competition.

Michael Porter, (1990) affirmed the fact that a business organization classified as market leader, must initiate strategies for sustainability. For a company to remain competitive and sustain their business, they must develop clear goals, create strategies, and operations to ensure that they remain competitive (Porter, M.E., 1990). In the previous work done by Porter (1985), the author outlined three generic strategies companies can initiate to achieve a sustainable advantage. They are differentiation, cost leadership and focus. These approaches are referred to as "generic strategies" because they are not firm or industry dependent and Porter identified these strategies by conducting a research on over hundreds of companies. The following figure display Porter's generic strategies for competitive advantage:

		Cost	Differentiation
Industry-wide		Lowest cost across the industry	Better product/service across the industry
	Focus	Lowest cost within an industry segment	Better product/service within an industry segment

**Figure 3. Porter's Generic Competitive Strategies (Modified from Porter, M.E., 1985).**

**Cost Leadership:** This is perhaps the clearest of the three generic strategies for competitive advantage. With a cost leadership advantage, companies deliver reasonable value at a lower price compared to what the industry offers. Companies are known to achieve this by continuously improving the working efficiency within the organizational units. Porter (1985) stated that with the cost leadership strategy, the objective of the company is to become the lowest-cost producer within its industry. Subsequently, (perhaps all) market segments in their various industries are constantly looking for ways to offer great values while minimising costs. If the achieved selling price can at least near the average price in the market, then the lowest-cost producer offering reasonable value will (in theory) reap the best profits. It should be noted that the sources of cost leadership advantage are varied and thus, depends on the nature and scale of the industry (Porter, M.E., 1990). Companies that succeed with cost leadership as a strategy often have the following strengths and competencies: preferential access capital required for investment in production, access to raw materials, high level of expertise and efficient distribution channel. All these factors pose a barrier that many firms may not imitate or overcome.

**Differentiation:** Adopting a differentiation strategy, means companies seeks to be unique by offering better benefits than its competitor. A firm can achieve differentiation by providing a unique or high-quality product that is widely valued by buyers within its industry. Differentiation allows companies select one or more criteria used by customers in a market or an industry, and then positions their business uniquely to meet those criteria. Often, differentiation strategy is usually associated with companies charging their customers a premium price for the product (Petison and Johri, 2006). Porter (1985) agrees that differentiation strategy usually has a higher profit margin and reaches customers better. These further highlights the rationale and logic behind this research, as differentiation can be based on the product itself, the company's delivery system, sales approach, the marketing approach, and a broad range of other factors. Companies that succeed in implementing differentiation strategy often possess the following internal capabilities: access to innovative scientific research, highly skilled and creative team with the competence to successfully communicate the value of the products, and company's reputation for quality.

**Focus:** This is the third generic strategy which simply means that a company understand and services their target market better than anyone else in the industry. Porter (1985) described the focus strategy as quite different from the other generics because it rests on the choice of a narrow competitive scope within an industry (See figure 2). By adopting a focused approached, companies optimize their strategies for the target segments. The main objective is that the user (company) seeks to achieve a competitive advantage in its target segments even though it does not possess a competitive advantage at the whole market. The key to a successful focus strategy is for the company to select a specific target market, and tailor its process to serving them to the exclusion of other companies.

Porter (1985) identified two variants of focus strategy, which are cost focus and differentiation focus. In cost focus, companies seek a cost advantage as a success factor within its target segment. Often, the product will be similar product to the higher-priced, with similar value offered by featured market leader, but acceptable to enough consumers. Whereas, in differentiation focus a company seeks differentiation as an approach within its target segment. The aim is to be able to identify just one or a small cluster within target market. Companies can successful with the differentiation focus, when either the quantities involved are too low for industry-wide competitors to manage economically, or when the extent of personalization (or differentiation) required is beyond the capabilities of the industry-wide differentiator.

## **2.7 Rationale**

It is important to have a clear view of how customer experience can create a competitive advantage in B2B companies. Multiple researches have shown that there are significant opportunities for companies' who adopt customer experience as a competitive differentiation strategy. Generally, when scholars think of “competitive advantage,” in most cases, perceptions' are always about product features and functions. There is little awareness on how B2B firms can leverage the opportunity by prioritizing and managing customer experience as a strategy for competitive advantage.

Customer experience management provides a clear opportunity for B-to-B firms; to leverage customer experience for achieving positive business results. This paper has proposed for exploring the components of competitive advantage and customer experience management as a differentiator. A company cannot achieve competitive advantage only of product uniqueness or in isolation to strategic differentiation. This research is trying to prove that it should be complemented by various organizational factors. The next chapter evaluates the research design, methodology and approaches used for this study.

### **3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Chapter three explains the research approach, design and methods used in gathering data for this research. It shows the reader how the researcher collected the data, explains the options that were available through the chosen approach, working conditions and considerations. It should be noted that this chapter does not intend to repeat the contents of methodology handbooks. For example, defining different types of research interview or differences between quantitative and qualitative methods, or list all different kinds of validity and reliability. Rather, the chapter reveals the method of analysis chosen, describes the weaknesses as well as strengths, and how it is suited to answering the research question(s). It starts by explaining the research process, approach, design data collection and analytical tools utilized in this study. Chapter concludes by reporting on the constraints of ethical issues and data gathering tools that emerged during the process, which demonstrate that the author gave due consideration to the validity and reliability of the chosen method.

A research is defined as a set of activities an individual or group of people undertake in order to investigate issues, topics, or trends in a systematic way, thereby increasing their understanding and knowledge of the subject matter (Saunders et al. 2007:5; Thornhill, A., et al. 2003:8). The above-stated definition iterates that a research represents a planned activity, with the goal of establishing new facts, knowledge, and information about a phenomenon. Saunders et al. (2007) explains that a research process involves sets of activities such as, the discovery of a particular problem or area of interest, interpreting the situation into a research problem, gathering data, examining or studying the data, and reporting the findings of the research. Wickham et al. (2005:10) defines research methodology as the procedures, technics or approach used by a researcher to gather and analyse data. Methodology explains research objectives, methods, approaches, data collection sources, selection of the samples, processes, type of data analyses, ethical considerations, and the limitations of the study. Using these investigative techniques helps to get the best result to a research problem.

#### **3.1 Research Objective**

The aim of this research is to investigate the concept of customer experience management (CEM) strategy in today's business atmosphere, while trying to understand how B2B companies can better implement customer experience management as a differentiator to gain competitive advantage.

Re-strategizing customer's experience to achieve competitive advantage can mean anything from a small technical fix to complete reformation of products, processes, and structures. In the process, this research will provide answers to the following question below:

1. *How much visibility and control do customers have on product or service through touchpoints?*
2. *How quickly does new information about a customer disseminate within a B2B enterprise?*
3. *Can B2B companies actually drive growth using customer experience as a differentiator?*

The sole intent is to prove that CEM strategy should be regarded as an organization-initiated tool, and as a principal management objective.

### **3.2 Research Design**

The research was an exploratory study since its objective was to investigate and gain background information on "how B2B companies can better implement customer experience management as a differentiator strategy to gain competitive advantage". Saunders et al. (2009, p. 140.) suggest that an exploratory research is instrumental to understanding the "why" and "how" of factors that have yet to be clearly defined. It should be noted that an exploratory research is not meant to provide conclusive evidence, rather, it helps the researcher to have a better understanding of the problem. Saunders et al. (2007) explained that an exploratory research is adjustable, easy to change, and presents the researcher the tools to decipher the nature of the problem as it progresses.

Therefore, this research adopted an exploratory research design for its' flexibility, and because it can be approached creatively to achieve the greatest amount of depth and insight. Researcher is of the opinion that an exploratory research is effectively designed to lay groundworks that could lead to future studies.

Yin (2009) defines case study a research strategy and an empirical finding that investigates a phenomenon within its real-life context. Case studies are based on an in-depth investigation of a single individual, group, or event to explore the causes of underlying principles (Yin, 2009; Saunders et al., 2009). Consequently, case study allowed this research to convert observations into useable data and turned opinion into facts.

### 3.3 Research Method

#### *Qualitative Research Method*

In order to achieve the objectives of the research, a qualitative research method was adopted. It should be noted that ‘qualitative’ methods are used to provide answers to questions about experience, meaning and perspective, most often from the viewpoint of the participant (Yin, 2009; Saunders et al., 2009). Qualitative research is concerned with a quality of information, and it attempts to gain in-depth knowledge of the underlying reasons and motivations for actions (Bell, 2005). This research employed a qualitative approach because it aims at establishing how people interpret their opinions, experiences, and the world around them. Researchers employ this approach when attempting to interpret phenomena from an individual or a group of people, seeking to get their own opinion about the subject matter. It further allows the researcher to investigate phenomena in their naturalistic settings.

However, it is also important to note that the effectiveness of qualitative research is determined by the skills and abilities of researchers. Often, result may not be perceived as reliable, because they mostly come from the participant’s personal judgments and interpretations. This is because the participants are generally small samples, making it unreliable to be perceived as reflecting the opinions of a wider population. The table below will list the advantages and disadvantages of using a qualitative research method.

<b>Advantages</b>	<b>Disadvantages</b>
1. It allows subject materials to be investigated with greater details.	1. The quality of the data collected in a qualitative research can be highly subjective.
2. The data in a qualitative research is based on human experiences and observations.	2. This approach creates findings that are highly valuable, but difficult to generalize.
3. It introduces good opportunities for arriving at unintended outcomes.	3. The influence of the researcher of selected perception can have a negative effect on the collected data.
4. Qualitative approach allows the researcher to ascertain or create industry-specific insights.	4. Qualitative research may incur high cost and often time consuming.
5. Allows researcher gather insights in a natural, flexible, and informal or unstructured setting.	

**Table 4. Advantages and Disadvantages of Qualitative Method (Source: Miles & Huberman, 1994: p. 40).**

### 3.4 Research Approach

While working on this research, it was important for the author to decide on the type of approach that would be suitable and effective. There are two kinds of research approaches, which are inductive and deductive. To increase the efficiency of a research study, several authors have suggested that it is essential for researcher to understand these approaches. Inductive approach is a research technique which allows a researcher to provide subjective reasoning using different real-life examples (Ridenour and Newman 2008). Deductive approach on the other hand allows researcher to develop hypothesis when trying to prove assumptions. The main difference between inductive and deductive reasoning is that inductive reasoning aims at developing a theory from a specific idea to generalize the situation as per the research topic, while deductive reasoning aims at testing an existing theory based on the general idea to reach at the specific conclusion (Crowther and Lancaster 2009).

The approach adopted for this research was the inductive one. The rationale for selecting an inductive research approach depended mainly on the nature of the research question. Several authors reporting analyses of qualitative data describes an inductive approach is highly suitable for explorative study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). It should be noted that an inductive approach represents a systematic and the most appropriate tool for analysing small samples that produce qualitative data. This approach was selected because it allowed the author of this study to engage in detailed readings of raw data to derive concepts, themes, or a model through interpretations of the raw data. The following factors are justifiable reasons why an inductive analysis approach was selected and adopted for this study:

1. It allowed the researcher to summarize and reduce an extensive raw text data.
2. It was adopted to establish clear links between the objectives of the study, conclusions, and findings ascertained from the raw data.
3. It seems to be an effective and flexible approach, as there is no requirement of pre-determined theory to collect data and information.
4. Lastly, an inductive approach permits the researcher or participant to provide subjective reasoning with the help of various real-life examples.



### 3.5 Data Collection Methods and Tools

In order to gather data for conducting this research, and to provide an answer to the research question, an effective data collection was deemed incredibly important. In this research, secondary data was mainly used as a tool to increase awareness and gain more in-depth knowledge on the theoretical background of the subject matter. The information and knowledge acquired from the review of literature was then utilized to initiate and design an interview question. In an era where customer experience plays a vital role in a company's business strategy, it was important to understand the benefits and usefulness of constant improvement of customer experience. The following are some ways the author of this research used to collect data, journals, articles, books, data archives (Google scholars, Semantic scholar, etc.), biographies, webinars, and internet web pages. The idea was to investigate different views and aspects of customer experience. Another source of acquiring knowledge that the author utilized was to sign-up as a member of the LinkedIn customer experience cluster. By signing up to this group, the author gained unlimited access to a lot of interesting contemporary literatures and discussions on issues around customer experience management.

One of the notable challenges encountered in collecting data from the secondary source is ensuring that the data collected is of a high standard, the hassles of deciding why, what, how, when to collect data. other than that, it was beneficial for this study because it allowed the author to collect data specific to the problem under study.

**Interviews:** In trying to investigate customer experience and collecting data for a qualitative research, it was important to utilize an interview (Denyer and Tranfield, 2006). Unlike quantitative data (which is often based on mathematical calculations and deals with number and figures), qualitative data are mostly non-numerical and highly descriptive in nature. Qualitative data mostly derived and collected in form of words and sentences. Experience is personal and the data collection method employed in this research gave the researcher an unparalleled capacity to directly target respondents from conversational response. For the purposes of this research, an in-depth interview seems to be suitable and was used with the aim is of identifying participant's emotions, feelings, and opinions regarding customer experience in general.

It was effective because it allowed the author to ask open-ended questions to the participants, exploring their individual experiences or opinions regarding the concept of customer experience (a detailed form of the interview guide is presented in Appendixes). Furthermore, a semi-structured interview allowed this research to cover more theoretical issues during the conversation. The information gathered and insights gained from literature review were used as a guide for developing open questions in order to understand the concept of customer experience.

Researcher posted on the group page and initial contact were made with the professionals in January 2020. This was to gain acceptance of their participation and to explain the nature and the scope of the study. In general terms the respondents were willing to participate in the research and the interviews were conducted between January and February of 2020. The interviewees were promised anonymity and gave total consent to tape record the interview. The interviews were done on two separate days via WhatsApp calls which was cheaper and more convenient.

Each interview took between 45 and 60 minutes. In trying to achieve a decent and fluent interview, this research classified the questions into different categories. However, it should be noted that while the interview was in progress, the numerical structure of questions in the interview guide was not strictly observed. This was a strategy adopted by the author to allow the interviewees provide answers the questions in an unconstrained way, expressing their thoughts, opinions, and perception.

### **3.6 Sample and Sampling Method**

There are various sampling techniques suitable for a qualitative research, but the two most popular non-probability sampling techniques sampling techniques that align the best across nearly all qualitative research designs are convenience and purposeful sampling (Patton 2002; Silverman 2000). Convenience sampling technique as the name implies is used by researchers when recruiting participants who are easily accessible and convenient. To draw a convenience sample, researcher simply collects data based on available resources, or suitable location that make participant recruitment convenient. On the other hand, a purposeful sampling comes from recruiting specific participants for a research on purpose because researcher already knows the participant(s) have the necessary characteristics.

Patton (2002) affirms that using a purposeful sampling technique allows the researcher select participants based on their ability to provide in-depth and detailed information about the phenomenon under investigation. For this research, a purposive sampling technique was employed by the researcher to recruit participants based on their years of experience, knowledge about research subject matter, and expertise. Researcher sent a request to join and was granted access to the Customer Experience Professionals group on LinkedIn with almost 30,000 members worldwide (See Appendix 3). Participants were approached through LinkedIn, and five professionals showed interest and were willing to be interviewed. Unfortunately, only two CX professionals were with the basis of them having; special relationship with the phenomenon under investigation, adequate and relevant work experience in the field of customer experience management, as well as proven background and understanding of B2B sectors. The table below show the data of the participant:

<b>Interview Participant</b>				
	<b>Participant 1</b>	<b>Participant 2</b>	<b>Participant 3</b>	<b>Participant 4</b>
Gender	Male	Male	Female	Female
Age	Range from 40 - 45	Range from 37 - 40	Range from 40 - 45	Range from 37 - 40
Industry	<b>B2B – Computer Software</b> Software-as-a-Service (SaaS)	<b>B2B - Machinery</b> (Active Magnetic Bearing)	<b>B2B – Insurance</b> (Insurance Company)	<b>B2B – Computer Software</b> Software-as-a-Service (SaaS)
Position	Head of Sales / Business Development	Sales Development Representative	Head of Customer Experience	Head of Sales Performance Management
Years of Experience	10+	9	9	8
<b>Focus Group - Customer Experience Professionals Group</b>				
<b>“Customer Champions”</b> Online event! Date: 23rd to 26th March 2020. Time: 2:45pm - 3:45EST // 11:45am - 12:45 PST	<b>Industry</b>	<b>Tags</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Years of Experience</b>
	Insurance	<b>Participant 5 - Male</b>	Customer Experience Officer - CxO	7
	Medical Equipment	<b>Participant 6 - Male</b>	Chief Marketing Officer	7
	Insurance	<b>Participant 7 - Female</b>	Head of Customer Experience	11
	Product Marketing / Consulting	<b>Participant 8 - Male</b>	Head of Sales Performance Management	9

Table 5: Data of Participants (Source: Interview/Event Host)

### 3.7 Data Analysis

According to Moore & McCabe (2005), they classified qualitative data as often subjective, rich, and consists of in-depth information which is mostly presented in the form of words. Therefore, trying to examine qualitative data involves reading a large amount of texts, identifying similarities or differences present within the data, and subsequently finding themes and developing categories. For this research, the interview results were transcribed and processed for the subsequent analysis. Qualitative content analysis by Moore & McCabe (2005) was used in this study to evaluate the data which was gathered from personal interviews.

This method was selected because it allows data to be categorized in themes and sub-themes, to enable comparisons. Basically, it permits the researcher to code or categorize of large amounts of data by reducing the volume of raw information, subsequently identifying significant patterns, and finally deriving meanings from data collected. According to Moore & McCabe (2005) there are three basic forms of interpretation in qualitative content analysis, which are; "summary" (represents reduction of data), "structuring" (filtering and selecting important aspects of data) and "explication" (searching for further materials to back up data). For this research, the author selected two forms of interpretation which are 'structuring' and filtering, as they seem to be appropriate and suitable for reducing and simplifying data.

This technique seems to be a valuable method for research of this kind because it considers the context in which the material was generated, and at the same time it takes into account the theoretical background of the research. Furthermore, categories were developed in an inductive way, which allows researchers to structure the qualitative data collected in a way that satisfies the accomplishment of research objectives. It should be noted that some statements were quoted directly as described by the participants, but most were paraphrased in the author's own words.

Despite the advantage of adopting a qualitative content analysis technique for this research, it is still prone to human error. Moore & McCabe (2005) stated that there are risks involved when using this technique as researchers might tend to misinterpret the data gathered, thereby arriving at an unreliable and false conclusion.

### **3.8 Ethical Considerations**

A well-coordinated research study should observe moral and ethical endeavour, consciously ensuring that the interests of those participating in a study are not harmed as a result of research being done (Roth, 2018). This research observed ethical consideration throughout the process and was subject to certain ethical issues. Before collecting primary data, researcher clearly communicated the aims and purposes of the research to the interviewees. Subsequently, all participants approved their written acceptance regarding their contribution to this research, via a signed consent and briefing letter. This principle is related to offering respect and protection to research participants by assuring them of utmost confidentiality of information shared and anonymity by not revealing the identity of the individuals and institutions involved (Roth, 2018). Consent forms were signed and participation in interviews was predominantly voluntary. In addition to data collection, responses from interviewees were managed anonymously in order to protect the privacy for respondents. This research also sought permission from the interviewees before recording their statements with the recording device.

### **3.9 Validity and Reliability**

The validity and reliability of this research was greatly considered during the process. Research validity evaluates the extent to which a research presents a clear, accurate, and unambiguous answer to the research question (Gill and Johnson, 2002). Objectivity of this research is achieved by developing and exploring important categories in themes. This whole process is accomplished using an inductive analysis and coding the data according to the selected categories. Reliability permits a study to be duplicated provided that the data collected should be independent of the researcher (Gill and Johnson, 2002).

For the credibility of the research findings, this research meticulously observed record keeping techniques, demonstrating a clear decision trail, and allowing consistent and transparent interpretations of data. Author of this research engaged with other researchers to reduce research bias, thus, investigating similarities and differences across industries to ensure different perspectives are well represented.

### **3.10 Limitation of this study**

As it is for every study, this research had some notable limitations:

Firstly, academic research about customer experience management in B2B sector is still in its' infancy. Therefore, the different dimension, and situation-specific attributes embedded in customer experience allows for the adoption of a qualitative approach. For this reason, it would have been more beneficial for this research to collect data from a bigger sample size, which would probably have enhanced and improved the reliability aspect of this research. Obviously, results with little sample sizes in most cases cannot be generalized to represent the whole population. However, Klaus, (2013) described that in qualitative research, sample sizes are often exceedingly small. It does mean that the number of respondents cannot have any significant effect on the responses of a single participant.

Secondly, participants who are still currently employed may refused to speak against their organizations thereby reducing the validity of this research.

Thirdly, notable limitation can be traced to the uniqueness of customer experience, which in most cases is subjective and specific to a customer.

## **4. DATA ANALYSIS**

Chapter four presents the results obtained from the initial literature review, the interview and focus groups. The aim of this chapter is to provide an in-depth analysis of research results obtained, and findings will be discussed in relation to the academic literature.

### **4.1 Introduction to Data Analysis**

In trying to investigate the concept of customer experience management (CEM) strategy in today's business atmosphere, and also to understand how B2B companies can better implement customer experience management as a differentiator to gain competitive advantage, the results from the analysis was presented in two steps. Firstly, an analysis of the literature review, and secondly, an analysis of the interview and focus group discussions. At the analysis of literature review stage, the author of this research considered different opinions on the definition of concepts, procedures, and interpretation in data analysis.

With a focused approach, this research analysis starts with a theory or relevant research findings as guidance for initial codes. Inductive content analysis was employed used to gain preliminary awareness and to analyse text (Powers & Knapp, 2006). A systematic literature review was initiated to gain in-depth knowledge on the concept of customer experience, and as a prelude to refining the research. A systematic coding and categorizing approach were used to explore large amounts of textual information unobtrusively to determine trends, style of words used, frequency it was used, their relationships, and the structures (Mayring, 2000; Pope et al., 2006; Gbrich, 2007). An inductive thematic analysis method was used to identify, analyse, and report patterns (themes) within data from the interview and focus group discussions (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 79). The data analysis process in content analysis according to Elo and Kyngäs (2008), and in thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke (2006) allows the researcher to familiarize and transcribe data, obtaining the sense of the whole concept through reading the transcripts multiple times. An overview of a qualitative analysis process from planning to presentation can be seen in Table six.



Research Analysis phases	
Content analysis <i>(Elo &amp; Kyngäs, 2008: 110)</i>	Thematic analysis <i>(Braun &amp; Clarke, 2006: 87)</i>
<p><b>1. Preparation</b> - Selecting the unit and deciding on the analysis of manifest content or latent content.</p> <p><b>2. Organising</b> - Open coding and creating categories, grouping codes under higher order heading.</p> <p><b>3. Reporting</b> - Reporting the conceptual map or categories.</p>	<p><b>1. Familiarising with data:</b> Involves transcribing, reading, and rereading the data.</p> <p><b>2. Generating initial codes</b> - Systematically coding interesting features of the data.</p> <p><b>3. Searching for themes</b> - Collating codes into potential themes.</p> <p><b>4. Reviewing themes</b> - Evaluating themes in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set.</p> <p><b>5. Defining and naming themes</b> - Generating clear definitions and names for each theme.</p> <p><b>6. Producing the report</b> - Selection of clear compelling extract examples, retracing back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a report of the analysis.</p>

**Table 6. Processes of data analysis in qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis.**

After data gathering and transcribing the data, the researcher paid attention to participants' emotions in order to obtain the sense of the studied phenomenon through reading and rereading. It is important to note that each stage was performed several times to maintain the quality and trustworthiness of the analysis. The next section starts with a presentation and discussion of the results from the analysis of the literature reviews, which was done using a qualitative content analysis (Moore & McCabe, 2005). The structure of the analysis of each step of this research is discussed under their respective headings.

## 4.2 Analysis of the Literature Review

According to Fiegen, A.M. (2010), a systematic literature review of multiple works done by contemporary researchers should reveal trends in a maturing research methodology. Thus, the literature from 2016 to 2019 was analysed for this research. The timeline in Table 7 provides an evidence of the evolution of the literature in customer experience, research methods and summary of findings. Notable factor for selecting this timeline is that previous years, literatures on customer experiences solely focused on the customer perspective of the experience, whereas very few researchers have paid attention on the organizational perspective. Not until recently (from 2010 onwards) has literature on CEM emerged, along with several models, and frameworks for implementing CEM in an organizational setting. Based on the above-mentioned reasons, 3 approaches (models and frameworks) from three different authors were selected that relate specifically to CEM, from the period between 2016 to 2019.

Author	Research Methods	Summary of Findings
<b>McLean G. J. (2017).</b> <i>Investigating the online customer experience – a B2B perspective. Marketing Intelligence &amp; Planning</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Experimental studies.</li> <li>- Structured interviews.</li> <li>- Structural equation modelling.</li> </ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Credibility/trustworthiness of the firm.</li> <li>2. Quality of the information on various touchpoints.</li> <li>3. Simplicity of customer journey.</li> </ol> <p><b><i>These factors all have a significant effect on the organization's customer experience in a B2B context.</i></b></p>
<b>Peppers, D., &amp; Rogers, M. (2016).</b> <i>Managing Customer Experience and Relationships: A Strategic Framework.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Merged theory, case studies, and strategic analysis.</li> <li>- In-depth discussions.</li> <li>- Field test and experimental study.</li> </ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Employee Capabilities - Strong need for knowledgeable practitioners to manage and deploy initiatives.</li> <li>2. Incentives for practitioners can increase the effectiveness of task-based initiatives.</li> </ol>
<b>Du Plessis, L., &amp; De Vries, M (2016)</b> <i>Towards a holistic customer experience management framework for enterprises.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Systematic literature review.</li> <li>- Inductive thematic analysis.</li> <li>- Ethnographic field study with survey.</li> </ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Consolidates the intricacies of the customer-enterprise relationship.</li> <li>2. Indicates that customer experience occurs at the point where the customer and the enterprise meet.</li> <li>3. Enterprise capabilities and customer expectations have an impact on perceived quality.</li> </ol>
<b>Katherine N. Lemon &amp; Peter C. Verhoef (2016).</b> <i>Understanding Customer Experience Throughout the Customer Journey</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Experimental studies.</li> <li>- Structured interviews.</li> <li>- In-depth discussions.</li> <li>- Ethnographic field study with survey.</li> </ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Customer interaction has witnessed tremendous changes.</li> <li>2. Firms need to integrate multiple business functions, and even external partners, in creating and delivering positive customer experiences.</li> <li>3. In this era of increasingly complex customer behaviour, firms need to develop a stronger understanding of customer experience and the customer journey.</li> </ol>

**Table 7: Synthetic analysis on contemporary literature and researches.**

#### 4.2.1 Theme classification

The approaches described in Table 7 were analysed using Elo & Kyngäs, (2008) qualitative content analysis guidelines to code, categorize and derive themes for CEM. Elo & Kyngäs (2008) argues that it is advisable to draw on past work related to the subject matter while developing coding scheme as it helps the researcher accumulate a cohesive body of knowledge. The analysis suggested that most of the approaches incorporates components from two distinctively high-level themes, which are themes are:

- *A customer experience strategy and implementation.*
- *Organizational competence that promotes meaningful customer experiences.*

Assessing the first main theme, "customer experience strategy and implementation", it became evident that in order for an organization to make the customer experience strategy achievable, common, or related sub-themes were grouped together and transformed into discrete initiatives. The initiatives addressed key capabilities in areas such as "*experience design*", "*customer understanding*", "*customer experience measurement*" and "*process delivery*" (McLean G. J., 2017; Peppers, D., & Rogers, M., 2016). McLean G. J. (2017), emphasized further that since the strategic program was to be measures over multiple years, it was important to find the right internal resources with proper commitment for the long term.

From analysing the second theme, "organizational competence that promotes meaningful customer experiences", evidence emerged that achieving excellence in the management and delivery of customer experiences requires adequate focus on insight, interaction and improvement (Du Plessis, L., & De Vries, M., 2016; Katherine N. Lemon & Peter C. Verhoef, 2016). Each of these important elements should be supported by organizational capabilities and competencies. Subsequently, five sub-themes were identified, and they are *leadership style*, *organisational culture*, *strategy*, *technology*, and *employee*. In this business era where customers have access to information, only companies that excel in customer insight, interacts internally, constantly improves their offerings and those which have a strong customer orientation are more likely to outperform their competitors (Du Plessis, L., & De Vries, M., 2016; Katherine N. Lemon & Peter C. Verhoef, 2016).

Theme Categorization	Number of Appearance
<b>1. A customer experience strategy and implementation</b>	
- Experience design	15
- Customer understanding	11
- Customer experience measurement	8
- Process delivery	14
<b>2. Organizational competence that promotes meaningful customer experiences.</b>	
- Leadership style	25
- Organizational culture	21
- Strategy	11
- Technology	19
- Employee	18
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b><u>142</u></b>

**Table 8. Theme categorization and number of appearances (Source: Literature review analysis)**

The table above presents a summary of the number of times each theme appeared in the analysed approach content. It should be noted that some of the identified themes were more influential than others. Notable among the influential themes were customer understanding, leadership style, organisational culture, technology, and employee. From the findings in the approaches, it is difficult, if not impossible, to design and deliver excellent experiences in the absence of knowledge of the individual customer (McLean G. J., 2017). Management perception of customer experience and model has an impact on organization's core business goals (Peppers, D., & Rogers, M., 2016). recommends that organizations' train and empower frontline employees on how to execute the part of the customer experience that they personally deliver (Katherine N. Lemon & Peter C. Verhoef, 2016).

To ensure that employees are committed to delivering customer experience, organizations should formally reward employees and informally recognize employees who deliver or enable good CX within the ecosystem (Du Plessis, L., & De Vries, M., 2016). Also, from the analysis, it became apparent that none of the analysed approaches or literatures incorporated all the defined themes. For this reason, the identified themes were used as a basis for developing the interview questions (see appendix).

### **4.3 Qualitative Analysis**

This section presents the qualitative findings obtained from the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions.

#### **4.3.1 Background of the Participants**

There were eight (8) participants (P1-P8) for the interview and focus group. All were customer experience professionals in their various industries and data was segmented by demographic composition using gender, age, industry, position, and the respondents' years of experience. It is important to point out that detailed background information such as name of the company and other personal questions will not be included in this research due to importance of anonymity. All participants were decision makers for big actors in various B2B industries.

An overview profile of the sample has been previously presented in Table 5. Participants were aged between 37 and 46 years, with an average of 8+ years of professional experience. There is a slight imbalance with regard to gender, as 62% were male and 38% female (figure 4). Furthermore, the pie chart in figure 5 presents the diversity in industries the samples emerged from. The insurance sector had the highest influence with over 37% representation. The sample having such a dissimilar composition and variety suggests an assortment of views and opinions on their experiences. It should be noted that the interviewee also known as "participant" in this research were assigned coded numbers to allow easy identification of each construct later on in the analysis. While the first alphabet "P" stands for the "Participant" (interviewee), the second number after the alphabet stands for their position according to Table 5. Thus, for example, P1 means Participant one, and so on.

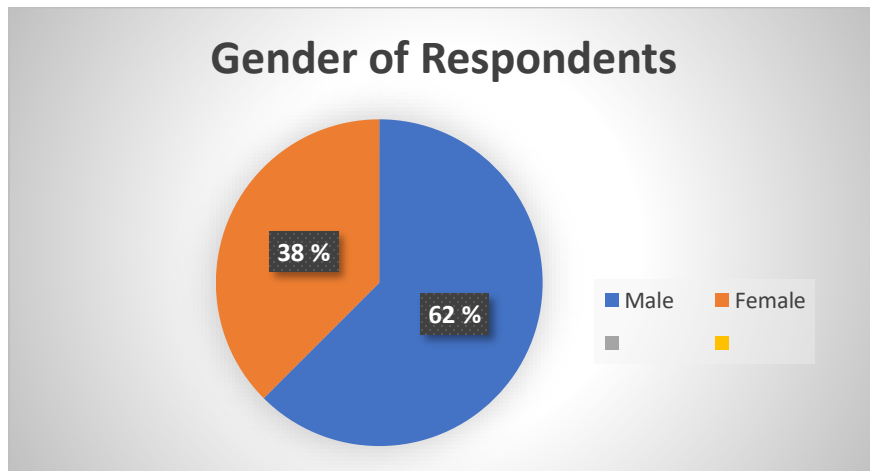


Figure 4. Gender of Respondents (Source: Interview, 2019 – 2020)

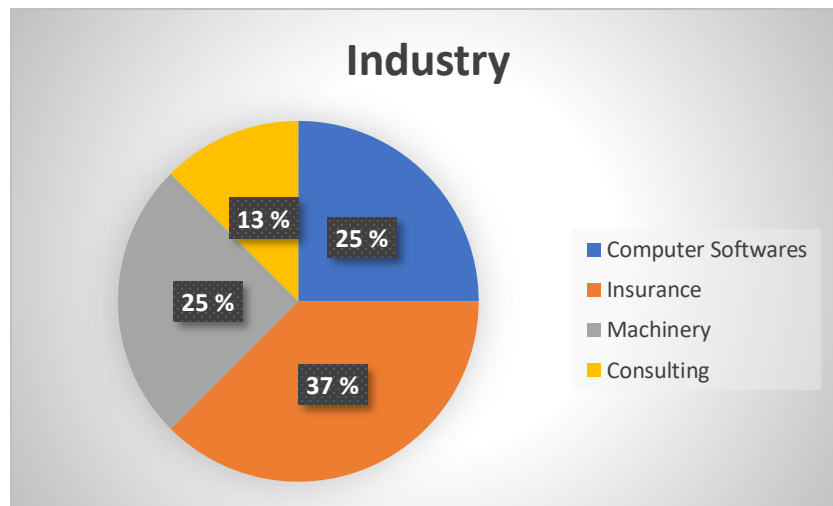


Figure 5. Industry of the Respondents (Source: Interview, 2019 – 2020)

#### 4.3.2 Interview Result

An ‘open coding’ suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998) focuses on connecting the qualitative data to the research issues derived from the literature review. This process involves the researcher reviewing the transcripts line-by-line, making notes of common constructs that relates to the list of codes and generating new codes as the understanding of the data continues. The interview framework or questions were developed from influential themes (See Table 8) with the highest number of rating. They include questions about *customer understanding*, *leadership style*, *organisational culture*, *technology*, and employee involvement in delivering customer experience.

After conducting the interviews, they were transcribed into a Microsoft Word document and reviewed several times to provide a full understanding of the meaning of each construct. In order to identify themes for CEM inductively from the interviews and focus group discussions, an evidence-based inductive thematic analysis suggested by Braun & Clarke, (2006) in Table six was employed. Gibbs (2002) affirms that utilizing a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, such as Nvivo, Excel and a host of other software, makes it easy to analyse data, improves reliability, accuracy, and transparency. Microsoft Excel was then used as a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software to code, categorise, and identify patterns (themes) for analysis. Finally, a statistical analysis was employed to ascertain the influential themes and the section concludes with a summary of the key findings.

An evaluation of the key findings from the evidence-based inductive thematic analysis connected to the implementation of customer experience strategy are discussed below. Eight high-level themes of customer experience derived from the interview transcripts. They are *management perception, customer-centric communication, experience specification, perceived quality, situation mediator, delivery, measurement, and management's capabilities*. These themes are highly relevant to customer experience management implementation.

#### ***4.3.2.1 Management Perception of CX***

Since customer experience is the main concept of this thesis, the first interview question was on the participants opinion on the concept, and how they define “customer experience”. At this point, however, the aim was to understand how the interviewees literally defines and explains customer experience. A gap in management's perception of customer experience can be visible when an organization second-guesses their customers' wants and needs. Findings from the qualitative study indicated that it is important for companies to research what their targeted customers want at every interaction point. Additionally, the textual analysis of the literature and the GAP Model of customer experience management developed by McLean G. J. (2017) illustrates that customer are nine times more likely to re-purchase and advocate for companies that understands their

needs and wants at every point of interaction. Some statements from the participants are listed below:

*“From my experience, I'd say that customer experience covers such a multitude of interactions between businesses organizations and their customers. To succeed, it is important for our organizations to manage a customers' entire experience and interactions with our products and services to ensure a happy and loyal customer” (P1, January 2020).*

*“CX represents the entire experience that our consumers get when interacting with our brand (be it offline or online) throughout the whole customer cycle, from pre-purchase, consumption to post-purchase (P2, January 2020). I have come to understand that offering unique customer experience is an internal component but yet, subjective response customers have to any direct or indirect contact with a company” (P3, February 2020).*

*[...] the totality of CX includes every interaction between the customer and an organisation. In my opinion, it spans from initial awareness to the post-purchase moment. In other words, CX concerns every aspect of communication with customer before the purchase, during and after a purchase, delivered service, or meeting their expectations (P4, February 2020).*

It has become apparent that across various point of customer-company interaction, either online or offline, there is a perception and an expectation from both parties. Participant 4 further stated that "interacting on the Web, through a call centre, on the phone, by e-mail or face-to-face, customers are experientially evaluating the extent to which our company values their patronage". The statement of the participants further validates the recommendation provided according to McLean G. J., (2017) that "an organization which provides consistent, compelling interactions across the customer journey stand to win the business and loyalty of these buyers". The participants added that customer experience is initiated within their various companies so as to ensure all points of interactions with prospective and existing customer creates positive and memorable impressions.



#### **4.3.2.2 Customer-centric Communication**

Participants were asked "what were their customers most preferred communication channels? The aim was to ascertain how the interviewees would describe their customer's specific preferences. It is the foundational role of an organization to develop and implement a customer communications strategy that will facilitate an efficient operation and also deliver a superior customer experience. Customer-centric communication emerged as the second high-level theme from the interview analysis, with a mixture of sub-themes such as *process, touchpoints, channels, technology mediated, organizational culture*, and strategic team. In today's business world, buyers' expectations have risen dramatically. These buyers now expect organizations to understand their specific preferences and deliver personalized, relevant information on demand, through the channel of their choice (Du Plessis, L., & De Vries, M., 2016; Katherine N. Lemon & Peter C. Verhoef, 2016). Below are some statements from the interview:

*"In our organization, we use social media for short videos, animations, podcasts, info graphics, good journalistic texts, stories, communities and blogs. We recently adopted a paid social media ad on LinkedIn because we felt we needed to target specific audience. We believe it is a great way to grow your client pool and also increase revenue" (P3, February 2020).*

*"My company believes that when our sales reps communicate well with our customers, we close more deals and our chances of success in business increase exponentially. We mostly use email, phone, live chats and most importantly, scheduling an appointment using electronic video meetings software such as Skype, and WhatsApp" (P5 March 2020).*

*[...] "however, within the industry we operate, traditional channels such as email, phone, website and online support remains the preferred channels. Other social channels are more of landing pages for customer to acquire more information about our offerings (products and services) and, establishing trust with prospects" (P7 March 2020).*

Furthermore, it is not just about understanding the preferred communication channel (P2, January 2020). A well-designed communication strategy enables our organization harness data to initiate and deliver more relevant content through customer preferred channels (P1, January 2020). Respondent illustrates that companies could making the most of the information gathered during each customer-company interaction. For example, a sales representative trying to determine the next best offer for a customer would require sophisticated data analytics, and in most cases are beyond the current capabilities of many organizations. This statement further supports the recommendations by Peppers, D., & Rogers, M., (2016) that a unified, customer-focused approach can help companies align customer communications with core organizations objectives.

#### ***4.3.2.3 Experience Specification (Customer understanding)***

In this section, respondents were asked if the needs and preferences of their target audience has changed over time? Sub-themes like; *experience design, segmentation, motivation, attributes, value, and process delivery* all emerged from the data. A common challenge companies encounter when trying to implement customer experience strategy is trying to market to everyone (Katherine N. Lemon & Peter C. Verhoef, 2016). It is understandable that every company wants to generate huge sales and sell to anyone, but this can only be attainable only if the company can be specific in who they target (McLean G. J., 2017). The question was asked to ascertain if respondent's organizations has a thorough and accurate understanding of the lifestyles and needs of their target audience. Here are some statements from the interviewees:

*"Of course, in the software industry, it is customers that drive business success or failure – and whoever meets their needs best will get their business. Those needs are changing so rapidly that an entirely new approach is needed. Understanding customers' needs is the first and most crucial step in dealing with losing your customer to a competitor" (P4, February 2020).*

*"I can tell you that our customer base is constantly changing, their expectations evolving and, alongside them. We as an enterprise must advance, adapt and adhere if we intent to stay ahead of the competitive pack" (P7 March 2020).*

*"In business, we generally believe that our target customers' needs and expectations changes over time. The better we understand our target market, the better we'll be able to target them (with relevant content, messaging, and ads). We mostly focus on getting customer insights" (P5 March 2020).*

*"Everybody perceive value differently and that is highly influenced by their needs what they currently looking for. To give you an example of what I mean by perceiving value differently. Imagine that you are thirsty after the long run so you pop into a local supermarket to get some water, but the worker there tells you, that they do not have any water and instead he offers you a great value combo snack which is honestly a really good deal. Would you see the value in this? Of course, you would not. Most likely, you would leave the store upset that you want to get water, and someone is offering you salted snacks, so insensitive. To stay on track, we try as much as we can to identify what our customers want, who the people are, and how our offerings can meet their needs" (P7 March 2020).*

As the findings indicated, businesses seeking for ways to remain competitive, must demonstrate the capability to accurately understand of their target audience. Achieving this goal requires an in-depth knowledge of customer, understanding their motivations for taking a decision or making a change.

#### ***4.3.2.4 Perceived Quality***

In this section, researcher asked the respondents "what buying journeys their customers take, and to explain the critical moments of those journeys? From the data collected, perceived quality of product or services emerged as a high-level theme with sub-themes such as process delivery, point of contact, communication channels, product/service quality, emotional appeal, and vendor value. B2B buyers do not buy a company's product; they purchase the approach to solving their problem (Katherine N. Lemon & Peter C. Verhoef, 2016). Perceived quality represents the customer's perception of the overall superiority of a product or service received from an organization with regards to its intended purpose (Haksever et al, 2000). Here are some of the statements from the respondents:

*"In my company, we call it "Moments of truth" (MoTs) and it represents the points in a customer journey when a key event occurs and an opinion about the product is formed. In other words, these stages occur when the customers either falls in love with our product or turn away and leave. For example, in a high-touch sales process for a software product, especially if you are selling value, your first conversation is likely a critical moment"" (P1, January 2020).*

*"Most cases, our customers have already conducted numerous researches about their needs before making a contact or purchase. As a B2B firm, our buyers will obviously find pieces of content about a product or service. For every piece, it would incorporate that which marketing can publish or sales can deliver. Meaning that your first impression matter and should be considered as your moment of truth, as it is called in sales process.*

*"We are constantly very conscious of simplifying these journeys and recognize when a moment of truth occurs. It helps us discover ways to create positive moments and experience for our clients" (P4, February 2020).*

*[...] we have come to realize that a focus on buying cycles is not enough. We need to focus on the entire customer lifecycle. Why? Well, it is somewhat obvious, but simply winning business is not enough anymore. You need to work to make sure the customer gets value, then you can retain their business, grow your share of wallet, and ideally create an advocacy relationship with your customer" (P5 March 2020).*

From the explanation given by the respondents, they restate that a quality product or service is extremely important to today's businesses to initiate competitive edge, enhance brand image, and keep existing customers (Haksever et al, 2000; Wuest, 2001). Secondly, it was evident from the comments that there are differences between customers' expectations, which is a combination of company and customer-led activities, and customers' perceptions after interacting with a company (McLean G. J., 2017). As a result, if a customer's journey seems uncoordinated, customers are likely to walk away. According to P5 (March 2020), they affirmed that an ideal scenario for executing a meaningful experience is when customers' perceptions align and even surpass customers' expectations.

#### **4.3.2.5 Situation Mediator**

A question was asked on how quickly new information about a customer disseminates through respondents' organization? In effect, the researcher was trying to evaluate the contingent on the customer's level of expectation and the interaction with the company. From the analysis of the transcripts, sub-themes such as leadership style, organizational culture, technology, feedback, and process improvement emerged from the data. This further supports the growing evidence within the extant literature pointing to the fact that constant communication allows organizations identity and understand key drivers behind emerging trends and customer behaviour shifts (Schmitt, 1999; Mattila, 2001; Barsky & Nash, 2002; Meyer, Schwager, 2007; and Shaw & Ivens, 2002). Respondents recounted the following narratives to support the statement above:

*"As the Head of Sales and also a team lead, it is important for me to empower my team by making them aware of how everyone contributes value to the bigger picture. Information sharing within the organization is being identified as an essential constituent for corporate success. So, we take information sharing especially important within our company as it helps us deliver tailored services to our customers" (P1, January 2020).*

*"If you want to gain the edge over your competitors, you need a sales team that can capitalize on social channels to make connections and close opportunities. This starts with creating an environment where trust and collaboration are built into the culture. Knowledge sharing technology can also play a key role in making sure winning strategies and tactics are shared" (P2, January 2020).*

*"Without an efficient and swift communicating workplace policies, processes, principles, and the company's mission, employers cannot reasonably expect employees to perform their job functions. We believe that a timely and regular workplace information about an existing or new customer conveys an important message from the organization's leadership system" (P7 March 2020).*

*"I do believe that information flow within every organization is necessary for maximizing profits and performance. Sharing information or knowledge about organizational values, new or existing customers, mission and vision is essential to an organization's ability to gain a competitive advantage in any industry" (P8 March 2020).*

Looking at the narratives, it is evident that efficient internal communications can uncover behavioural patterns across any aspect of customer interaction (Shaw & Ivens, 2002). Organizations can then act on these timely insights on customer information to increase acquisition and retention rate (Katherine N. Lemon & Peter C. Verhoef, 2016). According to P3 (January 2020), "every interaction between a customer and a company can lead the next interactions. It all depends on how the company manages information across touch points and engages them. Today's multichannel business environment has opened up more opportunities for potential customer interactions, offering important clues into customer behaviour (Katherine N. Lemon & Peter C. Verhoef, 2016). Therefore, generating this information requires that companies develop the capabilities to share and monitor customer behaviour across various touchpoints. Subsequently, integrate insights across the organization to ensure customer needs are met at all points (McLean G. J., 2017).

#### ***4.2.3.6 Delivery***

In this section, the author asked the question; "how engaged are your other employees in delivering CX"? Paying attention to the customers is quite important for the success of a business enterprise, but managements tend to forget that delivering a great customer experience (CX) starts with having satisfied employees (Shaw & Ivens, 2002). Therefore, the aim for asking this question was to ascertain what measures respondents' companies put in place to ensure that their employees deliver an amazing customer experience. From the analysis, series of sub-themes such as employee satisfaction, organizational culture, experience design, leadership style, compensation, and reward policies emerged. Here are some of the statements given by the respondents:

*"Delivering a positive customer experience is crucial to our business, and therefore, we engage all our employees to focus on satisfying our customers. I used to tell my team that one of the hardest things for competitors to copy is the customer experience you create. Our business model evolves around our employees. Employee's performance and attitude are the most significant drivers of customer satisfaction" (P3, February 2020)*

*"We ensure that every necessary tool needed to make employees conducive are in place. I do believe that the necessary first step to providing a better customer experience, is by making sure that your employees buy into your design and are motivated to implement them. When employees are motivated, satisfied and engaged, the result is deeper customer connections and an improved customer experience" (P4, February 2020).*

*"Within my organization and as part of my role, we ensure that our employees are fully engaged in our vision and mission, process and offerings. Our HR department owns and implements strategic programs pre-recruitment and post recruitment of new teammates, so it's key that they are first looped into Employee Engagement (EE) so they can help support CX" (P6 March 2020).*

*"Whatever standards of customer experience a company delivers is a reflection of their culture and operating processes. If a company wants their customers to have an excellent experience, they need to make sure the organization is set up to accomplish that goal" (P7 March 2020).*

As Katherine N. Lemon & Peter C. Verhoef, (2016) puts it " delivering an amazing CX is dependent on the organization having the right combination of process, technology and most especially people in place to ensure that engagement is consistent and sustainable. Today's customers have numerous access to information and often times, they tend to do more and more self-service in terms of educating themselves on the company's products and services they intend to purchase (Mattila, 2001). Anytime a customer reaches out to an organization with a query, receiving a swift and accurate response to that question depends on the employees capabilities and thus, may be the only hinderance standing in the way of them making the purchase (Mattila, 2001; Barsky & Nash, 2002; Meyer, Schwager, 2007;). Therefore, the obvious takeaway here is the continuous role that employee experience plays in supporting an organization to deliver outstanding customer experiences.

#### **4.2.3.7 Measurement**

How often does your company define and refine customer experiences based on your vision and research-based customer understanding? This question was asked by the researcher with the aim of understanding how respondents' organization measure customers' overall perception of events, attributes and interactions as recommended by Du Plessis, L., & De Vries, M., (2016) and Katherine N. Lemon & Peter C. Verhoef, (2016). Sub-themes such as experience design, customer understanding, leadership style, organizational culture, technology, and need assessment all emerged from the qualitative data. Here are some captivating statements from the respondents:

*"The best way to stand out is by creating unique content relevant to the needs of your target audience, and the only way to find out how to deliver these unique experiences is my conducting a research-based customer understanding. I used to tell my team that its' high time we stop trying to guess what our customers are looking for and start listening to what they are telling us. This strategy has helped my company increase revenue while creating long-term relationships with our customers" (P1, January 2020).*

*"From my experience, successful large organizations think more and more about end-to-end transformations that focus on providing consistent quality service. We review customer experience bi-quarterly within our organization and we have a team set up to conduct surveys and collect data" (P2, January 2020).*

*"I do believe that fine-tuning and refining the experience a company offers to their customers should be a continuous process and should never stop. In our core organizational objectives, we consider defining and refining the intelligent customer experience as empathizing with the customer about the amount of time and energy they've already invested into our business process" (P3, February 2020).*

*"Just like what we have mentioned before, new technologies and innovations has handed customers unprecedented power to dictate the rules in purchasing goods and services. Therefore, understanding the customer, segment by segment, helps a business to maintain focus, have a positive impact on how satisfied their customers are, and begin the process of redesigning functions around customer needs" (P4, February 2020).*



Given the importance of constantly refining and defining customer experience, and the substantial investment involved, it is important to design a measurement strategy that aligns operationalizes a customer-centric strategy (Haksever et al, 2000; Wuest, 2001). From the narratives of the respondents, it is critical for organizations to embed customer experience measurement strategy into the organizations process. This further confirms that developing a simple and easy measurement process and reaching out to customers at the most optimal time through their most preferred channel is typically a goal for most customer experience teams (McLean G. J., 2017). Participant 5 (March 2020) mentioned that "companies should utilize customer journey analysis to identify and understand customers' preferred channels for interactions. Interviewee further stated that today's customers are typically facing feedback fatigue from being asked constantly about their opinion by every service provider at every interaction. So, customer experience team should ensure that they reach out to measure customer experience at the most important moments, also known as 'moments of truth'.

#### ***4.2.3.8 Management's Capabilities***

Management's capability emerged from the transcripts when researcher asked respondents; what measures are in place to facilitate workflow and communications across business functions? The aim for asking this question was to investigate respondent's opinion on workflow tools used in their various organization to communicate and engage employees at all levels. From the data, sub-themes such as process delivery, organizational Culture, leadership style, organizational strategy, technology, and employee feedbacks all appeared concurrently in the statements of the respondents. Below are answers provided by the respondents:

*"Obviously, having a workflow or in other words, a process of how you get stuff done, can make work so much easier, whether it's on your own or with a team. My company (being a software company) has adopted a modern work management software solution. It's no secret that the process of getting a project/task delivered is prone to data errors and miscommunication" (P1, January 2020).*

*"Some of the technologies that our employees are being equipped with to help take the customer experience to the next level are new mobile apps and devices to help manage the customer experience. This way if there is an issue or a refund that needs to take place the managers and employees can take care of the guests immediately as opposed to making them wait or directing them to another area of the building to have their issue resolved" (P2, January 2020)*

*"In our organization, we have an open transparent, two-way communication channel within the company. The internal communication provides an open channel for employee feedback, encouraging them to share ideas and suggestions for increasing productivity within the company. We also encourage that each department consistently post on the internal blog, share news and updates on the work they are doing" (P3, February 2020).*

*"What we do is mostly by keeping everyone on the same page, preventing miscommunication, eradicating confusion, and reducing frustration. It can also be achieved by simply giving employees a sense of agency, a feeling that they are in control, that they have genuine decision-making authority and can radically increase how much energy and focus they bring to their jobs" (P4, February 2020).*

*[...] "however, the good news is that we employ some powerful software, tools, and apps out there, CRM, SharePoint, Jira and more that are specifically designed to help businesses and teams streamline their processes and workflows. These simple tools and apps offer advanced features and capabilities that make the complex business process easier than ever" (P7, March 2020).*

As Katherine N. Lemon & Peter C. Verhoef, (2016) expressed that management's capability in initiating an efficient workflow process provides a great overview of all the areas involved in delivering great experiences. Participant 7 (March 2020) explained that often, companies become overwhelmed in organizational duties that managements refuse to see the overall picture of customer experience. These statements support a quick and easy view of the capabilities across departmental boundaries. An example given by P1 (January 2020) states, "if an employee is in customer service or promotions marketing department, it is important that that they can quickly see all about customer information and also access contents from other key department".

From the narratives of the respondents, initiating an efficient workflow not only allows organizations to be more customer-centric, it gives room for these organizations to be more agile and responsive to the ever-changing markets.

### **4.3 Summary**

The chapter evaluated and presented the findings from the qualitative analysis of the study. Firstly, the data collection and analysis were briefly explained, and the results obtained of the qualitative analysis were presented. The results that emerged from the data were structured around the sub-themes identified from the literature review and the interviews. Some of the sub-themes were merged and integrated into the literature on customer experience management in B2B and placed in the context of relevant theories. The components for the implementation of customer experience management strategy was developed based on the qualitative study and literature reviews collectively. The next chapter presents the result and further discussions extensively.

## 5. DISCUSSIONS

### 5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the key findings are analysed and discussed within the context of the research objective. Thereafter, a proposed customer experience implementation framework will be presented. The primary objective of this research has been to investigate the concept of customer experience management (CEM) strategy in today's business atmosphere, while trying to understand how B2B companies can better implement customer experience management as a differentiator to gain competitive advantage. In order to achieve the goal, this research employed an exploratory technique to investigate the meaning, components, and implementation criteria of customer experience from the B2B's perspective. Table 9 presents a summary of the derived themes and categorizations:



Enterprise CX Model (Dimension)	Literature Review (Themes)	Interview Transcripts (Themes)
<b>A customer experience strategy and implementation.</b>  <b>(Service Dimension)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Experience design.</li> <li>- Customer understanding.</li> <li>- Customer experience measurement.</li> <li>- Process delivery.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Customer-centric Communication</li> <li>- Delivery</li> <li>- Experience Specification</li> <li>- Customer understanding</li> </ul>
<b>Organizational competence that promotes meaningful customer experiences.</b>  <b>(Functional Dimension)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Leadership style</li> <li>- Organizational culture</li> <li>- Strategy</li> <li>- Technology</li> <li>- Employee</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Management Perception of CX</li> <li>- Perceived Quality</li> <li>- Situation Mediator</li> <li>- Measurement</li> <li>- Management's Capabilities</li> </ul>

Table 9. Summary of Theme categorizations (Source: Interviews and Literature review)

Chapter four presented and discussed the results from both the literature review analysis and interviews. Using the themes identified during the inductive thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, supported by the literature review, a creative process was followed to design a CEM implementation framework. The discussion elaborates further into the attributes of each customer experience factor found in this research, thus, answering the investigative research questions.

## 5.2 Key Findings

An initial exploratory factor analysis generated two enterprise model dimensions of re-strategizing customer experience for competitive advantage in B2Bs'. The model dimensions include customer experience strategy implementation (service dimension) and organizational competence that promotes meaningful customer experiences (functional dimension). Based on the theories (McLean G. J., 2017; Peppers, D., & Rogers, M., 2016; Du Plessis, L., & De Vries, M., 2016; Katherine N. Lemon & Peter C. Verhoef, 2016) and interview results, there is an indication that most of the approaches incorporate elements from the two enterprise model dimensions, with themes in either one or the other, and some covering elements of both dimensions. Nonetheless, the most significant findings of this research are the influence of management's perception, proactiveness, organizational culture/leadership style, specification/delivery, customer understanding, communications, innovativeness, employees and the role of measuring in delivering a meaningful customer experience (see Figure 9). These influences provide answer to the primary research question "*how can B2B companies better implement customer experience management strategy as a differentiator to gain competitive advantage?*" Next, the findings are further examined more closely and discussed in greater details.

## 5.3 Customer Experience Strategy Implementation (Service Dimension)

Investigative question one from the interview aimed to answer "*how much visibility and control customers have on product or service through company's touchpoints?*" Data collected and findings from the interviews proposes that initiating or implementing a customer experience strategy can be influenced by several factors, which are, "*experience design and specification*", "*customer understanding*", "*process delivery*", and "*communication*". The findings were consistent with major studies on customer experience management (Du Plessis, L., & De Vries, M., 2016; Katherine N. Lemon & Peter C. Verhoef, 2016). The result indicates that these above-mentioned factors are essential elements for implementing a meaningful user experience.

### 5.3.1 Experience Design and Specification

This represents an empathetic process-oriented technique for developing products, services, and experiences with the aid of technology and creative skills to target a customer need (Meyer and Schwager, 2007; Lemon, K.N. and Verhoef, P.C., 2016; Du Plessis, L., & De Vries, M., 2016). “Within the software industry, the competition for the customer absolutely includes experiences in all sectors, which emphasized the increasing need for a more disciplined design process when creating an experience strategy” said Participant 5. In trying to do so, organizations can adopt design experiences that will differentiate their processes from other brands, while keeping up with real-time consumer expectations. It also allows the organization to create an empathetic alignment with the end user. This dimension was clear in Interviewee comments (see appendix).

*"To success in today's business world, companies must incorporate multiple rounds of testing, collect customer feedback in order to understand user experience and reduce their challenges across touchpoints. Meaning that customer experience design should be co-created, so they not only operate seamlessly, but also incorporates all relevant information and anticipates customer's need" (P7 March 2020).*

*"Good communication is vital in B2B if a company wants to improve and grow in business. Therefore, it is important to understand your customer's most preferred medium of communication. In our organization, we believe that when our sales reps communicate well with our customers, we close more deals and our chances of success in business increase exponentially" (P3, February 2020).*

### 5.3.2 Communication

The result emphasized its distinctiveness and highlighted that communication in service experience dimension refers to both internal (i.e. management and employees), and external sources of information that the customer receives prior to purchasing a product or service. It further reiterates that these factors are regarded by the respondents as an important aspect of delivering customer experience in their various firms. They also

provide empirical support to the claim that customer experience occurs at multiple touch points, from advertising campaigns to post-purchase support.

### **5.3.3 Customer Understanding**

By combining the experience design, customer understanding and communication, it allows the company to identify users' goals, tasks, working process, and interactions on their touchpoints. This is also consistent with Katherine N. Lemon & Peter C. Verhoef, (2016), which proves that it is possible to determine what users want and their preferred channel of communication, what technology should be applied, and how companies can develop the ideal interaction experience. Therefore, organizations need to design and implements systems, processes, and infrastructures that puts customers as a focal point (Meyer and Schwager, 2007; Lemon, K.N. and Verhoef, P.C., 2016; Du Plessis, L., & De Vries, M., 2016).

### **5.3.4 Delivery**

The core findings relate to customer experience delivery and enablement within an organization. B2B companies depend on their employees to provide high-quality customer experience (CX), and in turn, employees rely on companies to provide the necessary design processes, atmosphere, and tools, that would enable them to effectively serve the customers. Delivering a meaningful customer experience can be challenging, as it often requires organizational, managerial, and technological transformation (Katherine N. Lemon & Peter C. Verhoef, 2016). *"For B2B enterprises, it's about time to reclaim this lost component of delivering customer experience within the sector"* said Participant 6. *"Organizations should embrace the transformation of the purchase process and place more emphasis on the delivering experience to customers to ensure competitiveness"* said Participant 7.

These findings make it crucial for B2B firms to develop an effective strategy with a more structured approach to enhancing customer experience. B2B firms need to have a clear understanding of who their customers are, situations the customers face, and maintain a record of all surveys and personas. Secondly, designing a process that will provide visual overview of the customer's interactions with the company from start to finish.

Thirdly, initiating an effective process that enables proper communications between the firm and customers. Communication is a major factor that influences the overall customer experience (Meyer and Schwager, 2007). Availability to customers no matter what channel they choose to be on can be the key to a successful CX strategy.

#### **5.4 Organizational Competence (Functional Dimension)**

This section seeks to provide an answer to investigative question two from the interview, which is "*how quickly does new information about a customer disseminate within a B2B enterprise?*" The main goal for asking this question was to ascertain how these organizations collaborate cross-functionally to deliver a meaningful customer experience. According to Katherine N. Lemon & Peter C. Verhoef, (2016), one of the vital touch points which the customer is likely to interact with is the employee of an organization. It should be noted that a high level of employee engagement can transform to creativity within the organization, customer retention, product or service efficiency and increased profitability (McLean G. J., 2017; Peppers, D., & Rogers, M., 2016; Du Plessis, L., & De Vries, M., 2016). Data collected and findings from the interviews identified several factors that influences organizational competence to deliver CX. They are *management perception, measurement, organizational culture (leadership style), proactiveness (innovativeness) and employee.*

##### **5.4.1 Management's Perception**

Lemke et al. (2006) established that the combination of customer's pre- and post-purchase interactions with a company represents the crucial dynamics of the customer experience. Therefore, a successful customer experience is generally determined by the organizations perception or understanding of customer's positive expectations. The truth



is, a large part of the organization does indeed influence the customer experience, meaning that everybody needs to step up and improve things within their own territory (Meyer and Schwager, 2007; Schembri, 2006; Kesavan and Bernacchi, 2006). Participant 5 from the interview emphasized that *"we believe that a timely and regular workplace information about an existing or new customer conveys an important message from the organization's leadership system. It means that we as a company cares enough about our employees to keep them well-informed about the organization and its direction"*.

Participant 7 stated that *"sharing information or knowledge about organizational values, new or existing customers, mission and vision is essential to an organization's ability to gain a competitive advantage in any industry"*.

It signifies that the top management commitment is critical for any structural change to happen. Top management represents the decision-makers or leaders of the company. If the management sees customer experience as a priority, engage and show an example, in most cases, the whole company takes customer experience as a priority as well.

#### **5.4.2 Organizational Culture (Leadership Style)**

When an organization meet customer expectations and opinions, they develop a loyal customer connection. A lot of organizations have succeeded due to teamwork of their employees, good leadership and how team effort is encouraged. A good leader is one who not only has a vision, but also is willing to listen to his/her team member for opinions and solutions. Trust between employee and the leadership is important. Constant feedback and not harping too much on the negatives of a person is the key. A good leader's trait is to pick up the strengths of his/her team members, so that they can perform well as a team. *"The way leaders treat their people is reflective of how people treat their customers"* said Participant 6. Employees like to share their observations or feelings about the organization, leaders, or customers on an ongoing basis. This information can be collected through meetings, surveys, or internal chatrooms. "When we get a new customer or prospects, there is a term we call "collaborative networks". They refer to the types of social networks or clusters formed by my team members to achieve specific goals, and ensure we meet the customers' expectations.

Be it; product development, sales support, customer service, we all collaborate to make sure the new customer is converted and experiences a smooth process throughout the journey" (Participant 4, February 2020). Employees need to feel that their suggestion will be taken positively and that their concerns/feedback will be addressed in the best possible way.

### **5.4.3 Proactiveness (Innovativeness)**

Ultimately, what it means to deliver a meaningful customer experience is for an organization to continually evolve and ensure to stay up to date on an ideal customer experience. Organizations need to be proactive in listening to customers at scale and sharing the insights received. It should be noted that direct customer feedback is foundational for understanding and improving experiences. However, digital technologies are creating new ways to supplement this information. Thus, organizations need to be innovative to be able to develop and implement a meaningful customer experience. *"The enabler of these exceptional experiences are engineered or supported by technologies, or more accurately integrated technologies"* said Participant 3. The findings reveal that there is a strong correlation between a seamless experience and a seamlessly integrated technology stack.

### **5.4.4 Measurement**

During the interview, a sub-question was asked on "how often does participants' company define and refine customer experiences based on their vision and research-based customer understanding?". The idea behind this question was to ascertain if and how these organizations measure customers' overall perception of core customer experiences. This factor provides empirical support for the claim that customer experience can be successful if organizations evaluate activities and attributes of customer interactions that are likely to affect customer perceptions (Meyer and Schwager, 2007; Schembri, 2006). From the interview data, it was evident that organizations with meaningful customer experience measures how well actual customer experiences match the must-have characteristics for each core experience.

Information gathered are then reported to the necessary department (e.g., budgeting, design, technology) to inform future decisions. Below are some of the interviewee's statements that supports this factor:

Participant 5 expressed that *"by segmenting them via the research-based customer understanding, we are able to develop personas. Our customer support team can then recognize who they are and understand them better via the created personas. It's also an important step in becoming truly a customer-centric organization"*.

Participant 7 stated that *"understanding the customer, segment by segment, helps a business to maintain focus, have a positive impact on how satisfied their customers are, and begin the process of redesigning functions around customer needs. By refining customer experience based on research-based customer understanding, we can create an emotional connection with our customers"*.

The most successful customer experience initiative includes gathering feedback across a whole range of touchpoints. According to Participant 5, measuring CX will help to identify the key drivers and prioritize the actions that will have the biggest impact on customer's expectation. Essentially, the more data points an organization measures, the more opportunities they are presented with to identify what works, what does not and what they need to focus on to improve.

#### **5.4.5 Employee**

Ensuring that an organization has a comprehensive employee engagement plan as part of their customer experience (CX) framework is essential. That is why the author of this research asked several sub-questions such as "what measures are in place to facilitate workflow and communications across business functions?" and "how engaged are the employees in delivering CX"? Organizations are constantly paying attention to their customers but seem to forget that great customer experience (CX) begins with satisfied employees. It is the front-line employees who live and breathe it every day, and they are the ones the customers are constantly interacting with. (Peppers, D., & Rogers, M., 2016;

Du Plessis, L., & De Vries, M., 2016). Here are some crucial statements from the interviewees that supports the notion above:

Participant 5 explained that *"to engaged employees the organization's success is personal. It matters, it reflects them and what they believe in, who they are, how they show up in the world. So, to deliver a meaningful customer experience, it is mandatory to ensure that your employees or the team is rich in job safety, highly motivated, awarded and celebrated when goals are met"*. Furthermore, in a statement by Participant 7, the respondent mentioned that *"whatever standards of customer experience a company delivers reflects their culture and operating processes. If a company wants their customers to have an excellent experience, they need to make sure the organization is set up to accomplish that goal by motivating its employees"*. In a nutshell, it is important that organizations ensure that the teams throughout the business understand what their role is in the delivery of the customer experience. Organizations can start by identifying opportunities for improvement in the employee lifecycle.

Subsequently, organizations should consider mapping the journey of an employee's interactions with the workplace during personal life events (e.g. marriage, illness or birth of a child), which may have a solid impact on how an employee feels about an employer's support during those critical times. Organizations seeking to find prospects and turning them into customers, centres around keeping them happy and satisfied. According to Participant 6 (2020), happy customers is what makes businesses grow and prosper. It only stands to reason that there is a connection between these two components, and that happy, satisfied employees lead to happy, satisfied customers.

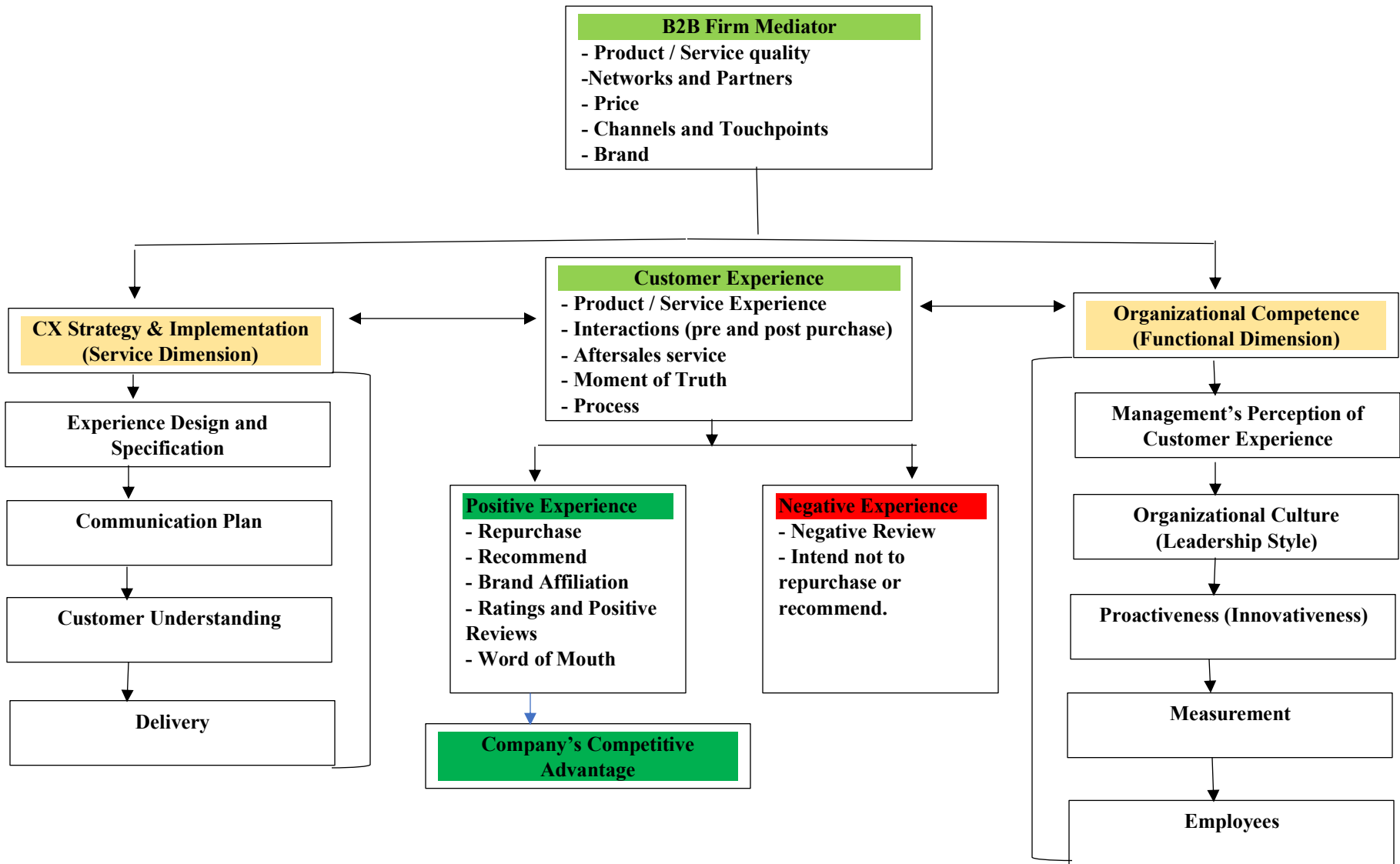
## **5.5 CEM Implementation Framework**

As can be seen from table 9, two enterprise CX model dimensions are specified i.e. *'customer experience strategy implementation'* and *'organizational competence that promotes meaningful customer experiences'*. In summary, findings from the qualitative research yielded 9 influential factors (*experience design and specification, communication, customer understanding, delivery, management's perception,*

*organizational culture, or leadership style, proactiveness or innovativeness, measurement, and employees*) of customer experience management. The findings suggest that when companies develop and prioritize the experiences they are delivering to their customers, it could lead to a competitive edge over their business rivals.

Several theories (e.g. Meyer and Schwager, 2007; Du Plessis, L., & De Vries, M., 2016; Katherine N. Lemon & Peter C. Verhoef, 2016) have been developed on the factors that guarantees a good and bad CX, but for it to have an impact on B2B enterprise, these organizations need to have a reliable and consistent method of collecting insight from customers. Insights are information an organization collects from its customers about the experiences they encounter with product, service, website, or business in general (Katherine N. Lemon & Peter C. Verhoef, 2016). This information can then be used to improve customer experience by removing or re-strategizing areas of friction and increasing positive touchpoint experiences. It should be noted that there is no single universal checklist to follow to guarantee good customer experience. However, based on the findings, a CEM implementation framework was proposed in Figure 6.

Figure 6: CEM Implementation Framework



B2B Firm mediator in this context refers to a set of quantifiable measurements used to gauge a company's overall performance within the same sector. These components help determine the strategic, financial, and operational success of B2B enterprises, especially when compared to those of other businesses within the same sector. The influential factors in CX strategy and implementation requires a continuous improvement process, since the needs, requirements, and expectations of customers are constantly changing. To offer meaningful customer experiences, B2B firms needs must periodically re-evaluated these factors listed in this dimension to ensure that the enterprise is still in position to deliver on customers' expectations.

The influential factors in the functional dimensions refers to the requirements that ensures organizational preparedness in support of the customer experience process, implementation, and delivery. It is important to note that B2B enterprises differ in terms of size, level of maturity in respect to organizational competence and capacity. Therefore, implementation of this framework does not necessarily demand full maturity of all influential factors before the CEM framework is effective. However, results or impacts may be less effective if the organizational competence are not fully developed.

## **5.6 Summary**

In this chapter, the findings from the exploratory research on how B2B firms can re-strategize customer experience to achieve competitive advantage have been discussed and critically evaluated. The goal of the CEM implementation framework is to provide guidelines to B2B practitioners on how to be more customer-centric in delivering a meaningful customer experience. Several interesting insights from the literature review and interviews were highlighted. Key finding that emerged from the data, further elaborates the need for B2B firms to carefully orchestrate the different influential factors that would lead to an enhanced experience for their customers. Conclusion, implications of findings and recommendations for future research will be presented in chapter six.

## 6. CONCLUSION

### 6.1 Introduction

CEM is strategically becoming a focus area for B2B enterprises to achieve competitive advantage, especially with customer having access to information than ever before. However, a preliminary analysis conducted by the author of this research identified a persistent gap between current theoretical CEM approaches and their practical implementation within the B2B sector. The main aim of this research has been to understand how B2B companies can better implement customer experience management as a differentiator to gain competitive advantage. A systematic literature review was adopted to develop the following sub-questions:

*1. How much visibility and control do customers have on product or service through touchpoints? 2. How quickly does new information about a customer disseminate within a B2B enterprise? 3. Can B2B companies drive growth using customer experience as a differentiator?*

To answer the research questions, an exploratory research involving interviews was carried out. Based on the analysis of the qualitative data, several influential factors that can help B2B firms better implement customer experience management as a differentiator to gain competitive advantage were identified and explained.

### 6.2 Contributions

This study contributes to the existing literatures and provides recommendations for B2B enterprises seeking to implement customer experience strategy. Firstly, this study has defined customer experience management and various influential factors to be considered for successful implementation. Secondly, it has presented some empirical support and a framework for the existing customer experience implementation model. Thirdly, this research has established that the advantage for CEM implementation strategy is not just about delivering improved experience for the customer, but also importantly leads to an enhanced competitive advantage and improved experience for employees. Lastly, it has provided key critical success factors as described below.



1. B2B enterprise needs to first define their customer segments. Proper understanding of customer needs and expectations are key success indicator for implementing a meaningful customer experience strategy.
2. When designing a customer journey, B2B firms needs to identify the point of positive experience versus negative experience of outcomes or service failures. This can help to improve on early detection of gaps in customer experience, and resolution mechanisms (Katherine N. Lemon & Peter C. Verhoef, 2016).
3. Company owners and top management executives with required leadership authority must be solely committed to the development and implementation of customer experience initiatives. Management's understanding of customer experience strategy is particularly important and should be endorsed throughout the enterprise perceptions (Meyer and Schwager, 2007; Schembri, 2006).
4. B2B enterprise with the desire to implement CX strategy must ensure that the recruitment process targets motivated candidates. and how their jobs impact on the customer experience. The enterprise must ensure a customer experience culture is embedded throughout every department in the organization.
5. To deliver a meaningful CX strategy, B2B enterprise must merge their processes and technology (McLean G. J., 2017; Peppers, D., & Rogers, M., 2016). For example, toolset and technologies to aid and secure customer information and analytics and forecasting. Findings from the qualitative data suggest that creating any system or process requires that the enterprise incorporates new technology to manage touchpoints and customer journeys.

### **6.3 Managerial Implication**

The relevance of this study to managers can be traced to the emergence of a new paradigm - customer experience management (CEM). A further investigation of the paradigm and its successful design for B2B enterprises, admitted to the importance of CE in modern day business operations (e.g. Meyer and Schwager, 2007; Du Plessis, L., & De

Vries, M., 2016). To survive in today business world, it is important for a company is to differentiate itself from competitors. Obviously, it is not an easy task to accomplish, and thus, requires motivated and dedicated employees, strategies, processes, planning, implementation, and lastly good management skills (; Katherine N. Lemon & Peter C. Verhoef, 2016).

This research was able to identify the significant importance of organizational readiness in customer experience design (see figure 6). It further highlighted the role of customer understanding, experience design, management's perception, and employees in the implementation of CEM strategy. Most importantly, this study has provided a provided a road map intended to be applied in B2B enterprises across several industries. It should be noted that the target audience for the implementation framework are managements and professionals in B2B enterprises who are seeking for ways gain competitive edge by improving the experience of their customers.

#### **6.4 Research Limitations**

This research provides vital insights regarding strategic CEM implementation, using a qualitative research approach based on empirical evidence from the field. However, every research does have its limitations which has already been highlighted in Section 3.10. Some of the limitations are specific to the approaches and methodology adopted, while others are closely related to the study. The author of this research learnt some lessons during the process of conducting this study, which could have been avoided. Therefore, identifying these limitations would assist other researcher who wish to conduct future research on the topic in question. Firstly, academic research about customer experience management in B2B sector is still in its' infancy. Therefore, the different dimension, and situation-specific attributes embedded in customer experience allows for the adoption of a qualitative approach. Klaus & Nguyen, (2015) described that in qualitative research, sample sizes are often exceedingly small. However, it would have been more beneficial for this research to collect data from a bigger sample size, which would probably have enhanced and improved the reliability aspect of this research.

Secondly, the timing for the interviews. The collaborating participants were quite busy and allowed only 45 minutes for interviews. This research could have obtained more constructs had there been more time available. Lastly, measuring the uniqueness of customer experience can often time be subjective and specific to the organization's capacity. Had there been more resource available for the research, a well-defined measurement scale would have been established to investigate the internal process of customer experience application.

Despite the above-stated limitations, the whole research process has been an amazing learning experience for the author. The totality of the thesis process was an avenue to practice and improve on management skills. Another learning reflection is related to the author using a qualitative research process to collate different types of data. Conducting this research taught the author valuable skills of assessing, summarizing, and organizing information. Above all, the author of this research was able to build connections between concepts, link theory and practice with critical thinking.

### **6.5 Consideration for Future Research**

From the research findings, it has been ascertained that CEM strategies can be used as a differentiation mechanism for competitive advantage. Future considerations could seek to provide answers on how sustainable the impact of CEM strategies will be in the future competitive landscape. For example, future researches can find out how managers conceptualize and sustain CE in a specific type of market or industry. Another approach might be to evaluate customer experiences across multiple sectors to find out if the application differs from one sector to another. Furthermore, the current research focused solely on B2B enterprises (retailers and distributors) as target audience. Often times, CE is frequently discussed in relation to managing customer interactions via company's touchpoints or communication channels. Therefore, exploring how these organizations manage customer interactions via different channels was beyond the scope of this research. Therefore, it may be beneficial to conduct an analysis to see how these touchpoints affect customer experience.

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## **APPENDICES**

### **Appendix 1**

#### **Interview Guide**

- ❖ Interview as planned to take 45 - 60 minutes
- ❖ Permission to tape record the interview.
- ❖ Anonymity and confidentiality of the interviewee will be highly protected.
- ❖ There is no right or wrong answer! I am asking for experiences, opinions, and perceptions.

#### **Getting Started**

Tell me briefly about yourself, your position, and a bit of what your company does?

#### **RQ 1. How much visibility and control do customers have on product or service through touchpoints?**

- a. What are your opinions on Customer Experience (CX), and how does your company manage Customer Experience?
- b. What are your customers most preferred communication channels?
- c. Has the needs and preferences of your target audience changed over time?

#### **RQ 2. How quickly does new information about a customer disseminate within a B2B enterprise?**

- a. What are the buying journeys your customers take, and explain the critical moments of those journeys?
- b. How quickly can new information about a customer disseminate through your organization?

#### **RQ3. Can B2B companies drive growth using customer experience as a differentiator?**

- a. How engaged are your other employees in delivering CX?
- b. How often does your company define and refine customer experiences based on your vision and research-based customer understanding?
- c. What measures are in place to facilitate workflow and communications across business functions?

**Appendix 2****Questionnaire**

Please fill out the following questionnaire. Note that your response will assist me to correlate my interviews to each other, and subsequently support the reliability of the data. If you would like to remain anonymous, just leave the question about name and company blank.

Name	
Age Bracket	
Mother tongue	
Industry	
Position	
Responsibilities	
Years of Experience	
Current Employer (Optional)	

## Appendix 3

### Customer Experience Professionals Group LinkedIn Page

The screenshot displays the LinkedIn interface for the 'Customer Experience Professionals' group. At the top, there is a navigation bar with icons for Home, My Network, Jobs, Messaging, Notifications, Me, and Work. A search bar is located on the left side of the navigation bar.

The main content area is divided into three columns:

- Left Column:** A sidebar menu with sections for 'Recent' (listing various hashtags like #internationaldevelopment, #operationsmanagement, #projectmanagement, #managementconsulting), 'Groups' (listing 'Customer Experience Profes...' and 'Rice Experts for Milling & Tr...'), 'Events', and 'Followed Hashtags' (listing #internationaldevelopment, #operationsmanagement, #projectmanagement).
- Center Column:** The group's profile card, featuring a cover image, the group name 'Customer Experience Professionals', and a 'Listed group' badge. Below the profile card are options to 'Start a conversation in this group' and icons for photo, video, and document uploads. A post by Emeka Enwe is visible, with the text: 'I want to express my sincere gratitude for accepting my request to join this group. I am a Master Degree student studying International Business and Sales Management at the University of Eastern Finland, and I am currently writing my masters thesis on "how B2B firms can re-strategize customer experience as a differentiator to gain competitive advantage". I look forward to networking with other customer experience professionals, and possibly get more in-depth knowledge in the area of Customer Experience Management. Kind regards, Emeka Enwe.' The post has 22 comments and 684 views.
- Right Column:** Group statistics and details, including '28,516 members' and 'Including Emeka Enwe and 28,515 others'. It features a row of member avatars and a '+99' button. Below this is an 'Invite connections' button, followed by an 'About this group' section describing the group's purpose: 'This group will allow professionals in the customer experience field to share best practices. Topics will include collecting customer feedback, measuring customer value, driving change at critical customer touchpoints, etc.' The group admin is identified as Darin Phillips, 3rd Owner, with the bio 'Making everything awesome at itopia.com'. At the bottom right, there is a promotional banner for LinkedIn Jobs with the text 'Your dream job is closer than you think' and a 'See jobs' button.

## **Appendix 4**

**Emeka Enwe**

**University of Eastern Finland, Kuopio Campus.**

**MASTER'S THESIS**



### **Would you like to be my pro-gradu partner?**

I study at the University of Eastern Finland in master's degree programme in International Business and Sales Management and I am just starting my pro-gradu process. I will be researching on the topic *“B2B firms and their customers: re-strategizing customer experience as a differentiator for competitive advantage”*.

The main aim of the survey is to show the importance of Customer Experience in today's hyper-competitive business world and the factors, which could help companies in their progress. Therefore, this survey will cover components on customer journey and touch points, Customer experience (CX), Customer Experience Management (CEM) and different strategies for competitive advantage.

Managerial implication or benefits of this survey:

- ❖ They will be able to compare their current systems and processes regarding customer experience and understand key success factors for managing customer experience.
- ❖ They will develop strategies for better employee-customer engagement across various touchpoints and will witness increased customer conversions rate.
- ❖ They will identify customer pain point that needs to be addressed, reasons for customer churn, and customer dissatisfaction.
- ❖ They will align core strategies and policies with customer expectations through actionable insights.

If you wish to participate in a personal in-depth interview or know any company that might fit in my research, please contact me!

**Emeka Enwe**

+358465967482 ([Emekae@student.uef.fi](mailto:Emekae@student.uef.fi) or [Emeka.enwe@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:Emeka.enwe@hotmail.co.uk))

**Appendix 5****CONSENT FORM**

Title of Project: Master's Thesis Project

Name of Researcher: **Emeka Enwe**

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read the information sheet dated..... for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.
  
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, without my medical care or legal rights being affected.
  
3. (If appropriate) I understand that relevant sections of data collected during the study, may be looked at by individuals from University of Eastern Finland, where it is relevant to my taking part in this research. I give permission for these individuals to have access to my records.
  
4. (If appropriate) I understand that the information collected will be used to support other research in the future and may be shared anonymously with other researchers.
  
5. I agree to take part in the above study.

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 Name of Participant

Date

Signature

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 Name of Researcher

Date

Signature