Customer Intimacy and Key Account Management: building the foundation for B2B Customer Experience

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Abstract for Master's Thesis

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Abstract:

Customer experience management keeps intriguing both scholars and practitioners as it provides a foundation for long-term customer relationships. Despite B2B organizations focus on long-term customer relationships, past research has overlooked the area and focused on consumer markets, which has resulted in a lack of understanding of how B2B organizations utilize efficient customer experience strategies.

This thesis aims to explore how the customer experience should be managed in B2B markets and whether key account management and customer intimacy can be perceived as building foundations of customer experience management. Based on previous research customer intimacy and key account management have received recognition in scholars, but rather as separate topics, instead of variables influencing each other. The research is prepared as an assignment for a multinational corporation. A qualitative research method was utilized, with nine semi-structural interviews conducted with professionals of the case company.

The results show that a shared vision can be observed, with a mutual aim to improve the selling companys' competitive advantage in the long-term. The findings imply that key account management, customer intimacy, and customer experience share mutual value drivers, such as *trust* and *consistency*. The results elaborate that customer intimacy and key account management can be perceived as building the foundations for B2B customer experience management. Yet, customer insight is perceived to deliver the foundations for customer intimacy and key account management.

In conclusion, this thesis introduces a theoretical framework that presents customer experience management as an ongoing and dynamic process with elements influencing each other.

Key definitions: Customer Experience Management, B2B Customer Experience, Key Account Management, Customer Intimacy, Customer Insight

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1. Introduction

In a global business environment filled with competition and price pressure, organizations need to adapt to the evolving markets to meet the needs of the modern business world. Today, globalization, technological development, and demographic changes are creating new opportunities and threats for organizations. The evolving business environment with multiple options available has intensified the role of the customer (Walker, 2014). Hence, the product, price, place, and promotion are not driving the competition. Instead, customer relationships and service design are vital to notice. In business-to-business (B2B) markets, the transition towards relationship-based interactions is noteworthy. Consequently, B2B markets have evolved towards customer focus providing value in use for the customers. (Hakanen, Helander, and Valkokari, 2017)

The growing interest in customer experience has arisen from marketing studies in the 1970s along with differentiation strategies to customer satisfaction and service quality (Palmer, 2010). However, customer experience interprets the customer journey as a whole, not necessarily dividing it into good or bad. Despite the greater emphasis on service dominance in the B2B markets the focus of customer experience in academia has mainly focused on consumer markets (McColl-Kennedy, Gustafsson, Jaakkola, Klaus, Radnor, Perks and Friman, 2015). Hence, the B2B markets have a lack of sufficient evidence of customer experience strategies.

B2B customer relationships exceed organizational boundaries to achieve improved cooperation. Noticeably, knowledge sharing has become a vital tool within industrial customer relationships and is considered to improve the customer experience. (Hakanen et al., 2017) The B2B markets are traditionally dependent on fewer customers who contribute with greater profit (O'Brien, Liu, Chen, and Lusch, 2020). Therefore, a greater value should be emphasized in maintaining these relationships. With customer experience management, the selling company could receive valuable information and extend the length of the relationship.

Customer experience is an interactive process consisting of the customers' response towards the received performance (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016; Rantala, Vuori, and Kärkkäinen, 2017). Today, customer experience is an important aspect of organizations' overall competitive advantage to understand the customers' needs and

desires, in order to create long-term customer relationships (Zolkiewski et al., 2017). The complexity of customer experience management, thus, creates challenges, as customer experience consists of several senses and is a combination of various elements contributing to an individual experience during the entire customer journey (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015; Zolkiewski et al., 2017).

To profoundly understand the customers' experience, customer insight should be collected continuously (Rantala et al., 2017). Customer insight enables companies to understand their customers but might be difficult to achieve due to the dynamic nature. Customer insight is gathered by active interaction with the selling company's customers through investigating the spoken and unspoken needs, wants, and desires (Price and Wrigley, 2016). Nevertheless, not all insight can be utilized to understand each of the customers better. Therefore, many companies in the B2B markets decide to focus on fewer but strategically important customers. In addition, many companies adopt key account management (KAM) to provide exceptional service for strategically important business partners in the long term. By focusing on fewer but strategically important customers, the selling company can utilize a customer intimacy value discipline, that incorporates a customer-centric approach. Customer intimacy focuses on gathering valuable customer insight to create long-term relationships and increase loyalty (Treacy & Wiersema, 1993). KAM and customer intimacy incorporate customer-centric approaches that could, further, deliver value to customer experience management by providing intimate insight from strategic partnerships.

This research is prepared as an assignment for a multinational corporation that is a producer of renewable diesel. Due to identification reasons, the company will be hereafter referred to as the case company. The case company has increased interest in customer focus and B2B customer experience, wherefore, this research is carried out in cooperation with the company.

As stated, previous academic scholars have overlooked the area of B2B customer experience. To the author's knowledge, there has not been any research conducted in the markets of renewable fuels and customer experience nor in investigating customer intimacy and KAM through the lens of customer experience. Hence, this research is important both for academia and practice.

1.1 Aim and research questions

This research aims to provide a clear understanding of how the customer experience should be managed in B2B markets. The specific purpose is investigating whether KAM and customer intimacy are building the foundations for B2B customer experience management. Therefore, customer experience management together with customer insight, KAM, and customer intimacy are marketing literature incorporated in this research.

This research strives to disclose how the customer experience should be managed with a customer intimacy value discipline and, further, how key accounts should be managed to execute it. The focus lies on investigating how customer insight should be collected and applied to understand the customers' experience. Moreover, the practical goal is to elaborate on suitable solutions for the case company to utilize in customer experience management.

This thesis focuses on answering the following research questions:

[1] How can organizations improve the B2B customer experience when adopting customer intimacy?

[2] How can key account management support the realization of successful customer experience and customer intimacy?

[3] What are the implications of key account management and customer intimacy for B2B customer experience management?

1.2 Terms and definitions

This thesis is supported by academic literature that provides the theoretical framework for the study. Furthermore, the thesis will consist of several key terms, introduced next. The definitions aim to provide foundational understanding to the reader. These topics will, further, be discussed in the literature review.

The following key terms provide a basic understanding of the research.

Customer Experience is the customer's repeated response consisting of any direct or indirect touchpoints with the selling company, during the entire customer journey (McColl-Kennedy et al. 2015; Lemon and Verhoef, 2016).

Customer Insight refers to customer knowledge that profoundly understands the needs, wants, and desires of the customer now and in the future. Customer insight captures both spoken and unspoken information. (Price and Wrigley, 2016)

Customer Intimacy is a customer-centric value discipline, that emphasizes gathering valuable customer insight, to create long-lasting relationships with the customers (Kai-Uwe Brock and Yu Zhou, 2012).

Customer Relationship Management (CRM) can be seen as a competitive advantage that increases customer satisfaction. With the help of CRM, companies can track their customer journeys and provide suitable offerings for individual needs and desires. (Chen and Popovich, 2003)

Key Account Management (KAM) emphasizes the importance of managing strategically important partnerships in the long term. For the selling company, the key customers in the customer portfolio are particularly important for the future development of the company (Svens, Leischnig, Pardo, Niersbachd, 2018).

Renewable fuels refer to fuel that is fully produced from renewable raw materials and, hence, contributes to reducing greenhouse gas emissions (Rainey, 2010).

1.3 Limitations

In this research, the focus lies on investigating the customer experience management of the case company's customers in Europe and America. Yet, the focus of customer experience management only incorporates the perspective of the case company. Consequently, any customers of the case company will not be contacted for this research.

Customer experience is a multidimensional topic that further reforms depending on the complexity of the customer journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Often the B2B customer journeys can be complex with the "end-user" being a customer of the customer. As the case company is a producer of renewable fuels the supply chain can be complex. Therefore, the research will only focus on customer experience management regarding the case company's direct customers.

The research will focus on a holistic approach that covers essential theories associated with customer experience management. The focus will lie on capturing

marketing literature adopted in B2B customer experience management, rather than finding one suitable tool to manage customer experience.

1.4 Structure of the thesis

This research consists of six main chapters that are presented next. Initially, the thesis starts with a coherent introduction to the topic, presenting the research aim and research questions. The introduction is followed by a literature review that incorporates relevant academic literature. The literature review will consist of four main topics, customer experience, customer insight, KAM, and customer intimacy supported by needed subheadings. The literature review presents the key implications for this research, which are gathered from academic journals, books, e-sources, and previous research. The literature review includes a summarizing chapter that concludes the theoretical implications and provides a theoretical framework for this research.

In the third part of the thesis, the research method is introduced. The method aims to provide the reader with a clear understanding of how the research is conducted. It, further, explains the validity and reliability of the research.

The empirical findings introduce the implications of the interviews and provide meaningful research data. The fifth chapter introduces the results of the research and combines the literature review findings and empirical findings. Finally, a comprehensive summary of the research is prepared to conclude the final recommendations. Lastly, the research will end with a Swedish summary.

2. Literature review

This chapter presents a comprehensive literature review on the most important topics related to the research questions presented above. The literature review is divided into four main sections starting with introducing customer experience.

2.1 Customer Experience

Today, customer experience is a vital part of organizations' overall competitive advantage to understand the customers' needs and desires, to create long-term customer relationships (Zolkiewski et al., 2017). Customer experience is a crucial part of the whole customer journey and captures all direct and indirect interaction the customer has with the organization. It also contributes that the selling company cannot control all the interactions. (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015) According to Schwager and Meyer (2007), the direct interactions occur during the purchase or usage of the company solutions, while the indirect interactions occur uninitiated by observing the brand or via word of mouth. Customer experience can, further, be described as a holistic response that occurs from an interaction between the customer and the company (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015). Customer experience can also be perceived through the customer's capability to distinguish the received advantage (Ojasalo, 2001a).

Customer experience has received notably more attention in academic scholars focused on consumer markets. Whereas the recognitions towards customer experience in B2B markets still intervene on sufficient understanding. (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015; Zolkiewski et al., 2017). In a B2B customer relationship, the selling company is dependent on fewer customers that contribute with greater profit (O'Brien et al., 2020). Therefore, a greater value should be emphasized in maintaining the relationships. However, the complex nature of B2B markets is vital to observe.

According to Rantala et al. (2017) customers in B2B markets emphasize different aspects of the customer experience than in consumer markets. The authors highlight that bigger emphasis is put on the value in use. Therefore, selling companies should obtain information on how to create added value for their existing customers. The customer journeys also vary from the consumer markets, as complex relationships.

Yet, a great customer experience can add value to each part of the customer journey (Schwager & Meyer, 2007). The customer journeys involve several parties from the customer and the selling company. It also increases the number of interactions and touchpoints between the parties and contributes to a multidimensional nature. The selling company can control some of the interactions but is unlikely to control many, such as the influence of others. (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015)

Previous academic scholars have focused on reviewing customer experience through the moment of truth and service blueprinting, as a part of service marketing. The approach has later been disapproved to focus on consistent unchanged variables, rather than an ongoing process that continues to evolve during the customer journey. This is prevalent since the relationship also evolves with the maturity of the relationship. (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015). The evolving relationships have, thus, been observed by authors before. Ford (1980) argues that companies need to understand the difference between customers in different maturity stages to proceed with suitable management of the relationship, as the requirements may vary across their development. Therefore, relationships should be categorized according to their maturity by the selling company, to being able to manage the relationship as efficiently as possible.

Lemon and Verhoef (2016) identify customer experience as a repeated response consisting of all touchpoints the customer has with the selling company. Customer experience, further, evolves and reshapes during the evolution of the customer journey, wherefore, the different stages of the customer relationships should be observed. Major variations can be observed in how new customers versus mature customers evaluate the customer experience (McColl-Kennedy et al. 2015; Ojasalo, 2001a). As the relationship evolves during the journey, various touchpoints also impact the overall experience. Ojasalo (2001a) states that new customers often might have unrealistic and even unclear views on the experience, while mature customers have more demanding expectations. Nevertheless, new customers often emphasize the outcome of short-term benefits, while mature relationships emphasize the long-term value. Ojasalo (2001a) urges to highlight both the short-term and long-term benefits to the customers, not depending on the maturity of the relationship.

Zolkiewski et al. (2017) explain that the relationships often cross organizational boundaries and might involve several client-customer relationships. Therefore, different stakeholders might have different perceptions of the overall experience, due to their different roles. Hence, suitable measurement tools need to be adapted to evaluate the overall experience on various levels. The experience consists of several individual perceptions, that most likely differ from each other due to different customer journeys. According to Zolkiewski et al. (2017), the aim is to utilize the captured knowledge of customer experience to reinforce the positive implications that contribute to extended customer relationships. The authors, further, explain that in a B2B context, customer experience is more likely to focus on factors, as decreased costs, and easiness of doing business (Zolkiewski et al., 2017).

2.1.1 Customer Experience Management

Customer experience has been identified to vary between time and people. This also creates challenges in measuring customer experience. According to Palmer (2010), customer experience is difficult to measure due to the complex nature and interactive characteristics. Therefore, the typical questioners were perceived as insufficient to measure customer experience. (Palmer, 2010)

Zolkiewski et al. (2017) criticize that organizations gather massive amounts of data regarding their customers but are unlikely to measure the aspects that matter. The authors stress that measuring customer experience both requires determination and time from the selling company and the customer company. Hence, the frequency of evaluations should be thoroughly planned. To gather the information, utilization of technology is also needed, to capture and analyze large amounts of data. (Zolkiewski et al., 2017)

Today, the customers receive an intensified role in the relationship, as they can be perceived as co-creators that even have a greater influence on the selling company itself (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015). The authors, further, explain the expanded role of the customer in the measurement of the customer experience, allowing the customer to determine how involved they want to be, depending on their resources. This means that the customers can determine how important they consider being involved in the selling companies' customer experience management.

McColl-Kennedy et al. (2015, p. 431) highlight three urgent aspects to consider while managing customer experience; "*[1] broadening the role of customers in customer experience; [2] taking a practice-based approach to customer experience; [3] recognizing the holistic, dynamic nature of customer experience across all touchpoints and over time.*" McColl-Kennedy et al. (2015) suggest a practice-based approach to highlight the incorporation of multi-actor dimensions, meaning that all parties involved influence each other. The holistic nature of customer experience should be captured as the relationship evolves. The selling company needs to capture data from various channels to determine characteristics that affect the experience in various stages of the relationship. For the selling company to understand the customer experience, all touchpoints and interactions with the customer company should be identified and observed, both direct and indirect. (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015)

Zolkiewski et al. (2017) stress that the B2B markets create challenges for customer experience management since the relationship often involves multiple parties and touchpoints. Therefore, direct, and indirect interactions are various, and the overall experience is difficult to capture since it consists of several individual assumptions during the whole customer journey. The authors criticize that customer experience is rarely measured as a whole, but rather as a defined part of the customer journey. The authors stress that it does not necessarily give accurate and trustworthy results, as the customer is most likely unable to distinguish some part of the experience and rather views it as a holistic overall experience. (Zolkiewski et al., 2017)

Today, two simple metrics that evaluate the customer experience are Net Promoter Score (NPS) and Customer Effort Score (CES). However, these metrics are not investigating which part of the experience the customer is rating, as the focus lies on a holistic approach, whether the customer is happy or not with performance. (Zolkiewski et al., 2017) Since these two measurement tools fail in investigating the experience thoroughly, alternative solutions have arisen.

As we can see, the evaluation of the experience also requires time from the customer. Hence, filling complex surveys regarding the experience might not be seen as particularly important for the customer. McColl-Kennedy et al. (2019) suggest involving both qualitative and quantitative data to guarantee accuracy. Thus, the

focus should be on quality rather than quantity. Companies should focus on capturing higher response rates through fewer questions to rise accuracy. Palmer (2010) identifies that customer experience should be measured from a phenomenological perspective, overseeing experience only as an activity by incorporating characteristics such as emotion and hedonism.

As McColl-Kennedy et al. (2015) explain, to further understand the customer experience, the selling company needs to capture all the interaction with the customer company. The customer experience also varies depending on the purpose the customer has to execute, which for the selling company is difficult to distinguish. Therefore, all direct and indirect interactions should be captured, for the selling company to be able to understand the comprehensive ideology of the customer. Rantala et al. (2017) explain that customer experience can be obtained through online and offline interactions. Online interactions are often numerous and not limited to a specific time, whereas offline interactions are limited to business hours and are specifically shaped by personal contact (Rantala et al., 2017). The authors stress that customer experience is both verbal and nonverbal, as the experience is shaped by interactions and presumptions with the selling company and its brand.

For the selling company to grasp the most accurate data regarding the customer experience, new and up-to-date data should be collected continuously, to capture how the customer experience evolved during the customer journey. (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015) Similar implications are observed by Ojasalo (2001a) who argues that constant evaluation of the customer journeys is required for the selling company to please the needs of the customers. Ojasalo (2001a) states that companies need to embrace the changes occurring during different stages. McColl-Kennedy et al. (2015) highlight that research should be conducted to evaluate which measurements have a positive impact on the customer experience, considering various channels. By gathering valuable insight from the customer's perspective, the selling company maintains a valuable asset. Therefore, various channels should be conducted to gather valuable information with a systematic approach. However, many organizations fail to do so, as customer insight is seldomly collected systematically. (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015)

In this research, the different phases during the customer journey are perceived through touchpoints. McColl-Kennedy et al. (2019) argue that the journey should be observed from the customer's perspective. McColl-Kennedy et al. (2015) suggest that the selling company should first obtain information through all existing touchpoints and interactions across the entire customer journey. Next, the selling company should investigate how the customer experience evolved during the entire customer journey. Rantala et al. (2017), however, criticize that customer experience should not only be managed through tangible touchpoints.

Lemon and Verhofen (2016, p.85) categorize four touchpoints to determine the customer experience: *brand-owned, partner-owned, customer-owned, and external.* The *brand-owned* touchpoints are controlled by the selling company while *customer-owned* touchpoints are controlled by the customer company, which the selling company has no control over. The *partner-owned* touchpoints can, for instance, be loyalty programs. The *external* touchpoints again are interactions that either have a positive or negative impact on the overall customer experience throughout the entire journey.

McColl-Kennedy et al. (2019) state that the knowledge regarding customer experience is not utilized as efficiently as possible, due to a lack of understanding of which customer insight improves the customer experience. Therefore, the authors identify new ways of capturing, managing and improving customer experience with customer insight. Lemon and Verhoef (2016) suggest investigating customer experience throughout customer journeys, by focusing on certain touchpoints from the customer's perspective during the customer journey. McColl-Kennedy et al. (2019), thus, identify that a conceptual framework is needed to manage the customer

experience in B2B markets. The authors introduce a model that investigates brand-owned post-purchase.
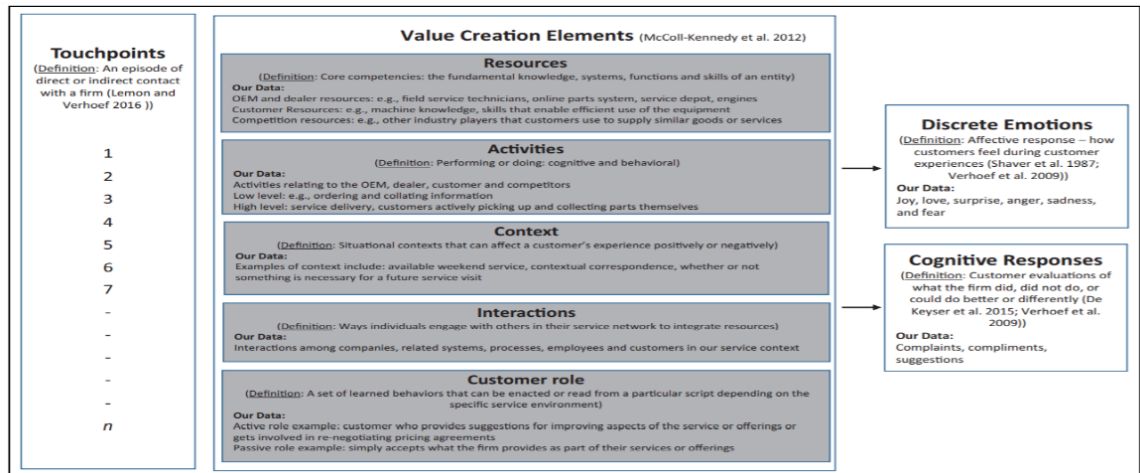

Figure 1. A conceptual framework to manage customer experience in B2B markets (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2019, p. 12)

McColl-Kennedy et al. (2019) identify four ways of evaluating customer experience from the customer's perspective. The implication is that the customer experience is perceived *[1] through various touchpoints that investigate [2] value creation elements such as, resources, activities, interactions, context, and the customer role, [3] discrete emotions such as joy, love, surprise, anger, sadness, and fear and finally through [4] cognitive responses including complaints, compliments, or suggestions* (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2019, p.12)

As the model perceives customer experience through customer journeys, McColl-Kennedy et al. (2019) identify the six advantages as a result of adopting the model. First, companies receive specific information regarding the experience in specific touchpoints, from the customer's perspective. Second, companies can identify the underlying meaning in how value is co-created. Third, companies receive knowledge on what created unsatisfied relationships. Fourth, better customer understanding can be achieved by evaluating their responses. Fifth, companies can identify decreasing customer value in time, and finally, improved customer prioritization that translates to improved customer experience.

As discussed, customer experience management is an evolving metric that can increase the selling companys' value tremendously, by understanding the customer experience. However, various tools need to be utilized to maintain a high score in

customer experience. To receive a high score of customer experience companies need to maintain the relationship by interpreting customer information. Therefore, customer insight should be collected to succeed in customer experience management.

2.2 Customer Insight and Customer Relationship Management

Customer insight is gathered by active interaction with the selling company's customers, through investigating the customers' spoken and unspoken needs, wants, and desires (Price & Wrigley, 2016). Companies that have achieved a high level of customer insight are also stated to receive a better understanding of customer experience. Hence, companies are encouraged to view customers as individuals rather than segments or regions. (Liedkta, 2011).

Customer insight is vital for companies to understand their customers (Rantala et al., 2017). The authors highlight that customer insight in B2B markets can improve innovation, as customer needs can be met more accurately. In B2B markets, customer insight can be collected from various channels. Today, digital channels are one of the main sources of information. (Rantala et al.,2017) However, it is a challenge to capture customer insight from various sources.

Rantala et al. (2017) differentiate customer insight from customer information, as an approach that focuses on customer knowledge by gathering valuable data that is hard to imitate. To be able to retain long-lasting customer relationships, customer insight is crucial. In B2B markets the customers are stated to emphasize more the value in use. (Hakanen et al., 2107; Rantala et al. 2017) Therefore, the selling company should focus on understanding how to create added value for the customer. With customer insight, greater value can also be delivered to customers (Price & Wrigley, 2016).

Rantala et al. (2017) highlight the challenges in receiving data from various digital sources as digital channels also increase the number of touchpoints. The channels should be thoroughly categorized, for the selling company to collect relevant data from their customers. Due to the complexity of customer insight, selling companies need to understand which channels to utilize in specific stages of the customer journey. Rantala et al. (2017) explain that different touchpoints throughout the customer journey provide fluctuating insights of the customers.

A high level of customer insight is still the goal companies want to achieve. Nevertheless, customer understanding is vital for companies to retain their position in the market. To receive customer insight segmentation and customer relationship management (CRM) programs are required. With the help of CRM programs, companies can maintain their competitive advantage in the market filled with competition and price pressure. (Bailey, Baines, Wilson, & Clark, 2009) In mature customer relationships, customer insight enables to provide solutions that increase the value in use for the customer. Often selling companies hope to achieve a better customer experience with it. (Ojasalo, 2001a)

Greenberg (2010) explains that with the evolvement of CRM, more accurate, and vital customer insight can be gathered. As a result, CRM can be seen as a valid source for customer insight. Greenberg (2010), further, explains that today traditional ways of achieving customer data are no longer enough to retrieve accurate customer knowledge. Companies must customize the interactions with their customers, to encourage customers to share the insight. Greenberg (2010) states that previously CRM tools were not helping to receive customer insight as they mostly emphasized the amount of data. Later, the accuracy of customer insight became vital, and many companies emphasized true customer knowledge provided even voluntarily by the customers.

Chen and Popovich (2003) highlight CRM as a vital part of a company's overall performance measurement. It can be perceived as a strategic approach to acquire, maintain, and improve customer relationships by understanding them. Moreover, emphasis should lie on how CRM can improve the customer experience. Ojasalo (2001a) explains that while wanting to maintain long-lasting relationships, customer experience should be seen as a vital part of CRM. Rodriguez and Honeycutt (2011) explain that CRM aims to gather relevant data from customer interactions that the company can utilize to provide suitable solutions for the customer and improve the customer experience. A comprehensive CRM system enables the company to learn from its customers and to use the knowledge to provide better value for the customer. CRM facilitates all the interaction between the parties to improve the customer relationship during the entire customer journey. The aim is to increase value for the selling company and the customer company by increasing productivity and improve the overall performance. (Chen &Popovich, 2003) To maintain successful CRM

systems, companies need to utilize a well-working technology to capture the data (Chen &Popovich, 2003). Rantala et al. (2017) explain that purchase decisions in the B2B markets are more rational than subjective. Through various digital channel's the customers also have several ways to share their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the selling company.

Often CRM is perceived as the operating power for building and maintaining customer relationships. Today, CRM is considered as a competitive advantage and as an important element of company strategies (Zeynep & Toker, 2012). With CRM the selling company can capture customer knowledge in real-time and offer individual and unique solutions. CRM also enables managing different customers in different stages more efficiently. Furthermore, the focus should lie on implementing a tool that manages customer behavior and interactions. (Zeynep & Toker, 2012).

Rantala et al. (2017) conclude that while using multiple tools to improve customer knowledge and relationship management, one common issue occurs. Companies collect huge amounts of data that need to be evaluated before proceeding into customer insight. Nevertheless, not all knowledge can be utilized to understand the customers better. Therefore, many companies operating in B2B markets decide to focus on their most important customers. Hence, key account management is widely used to improve the customer experience for strategically important business partners by gathering customer insight from these strategic relationships.

2.3 Key Account Management

Key account management (KAM) plays a crucial part when managing customer relationships in the B2B market environment. KAM refers to strategic partnerships, with an initial aim to create long-term customer relationships by providing customers with unique solutions (McDonald, Millman, and & Rogers, 1997). The authors define KAM as a customer-centric approach in B2B customer relationship management. KAM is particularly important due to the complex nature of the B2B customer relationships, consisting of several parties involved in the decision-making. Today, companies have put greater emphasis on managing their most important customers that often contribute to greater revenue. (McDonald et al., 1997) With KAM a set of employees are set together to provide exceptional service for the customer, often consisting of sales, marketing, and procurement (Homburg,

Workman, & Jensen, 2002). Gosselin and Bauwen (2006), thus, argue that many companies consider KAM as an activity only managed by the sales team. The authors state that companies should view KAM as an integrated process covering multiple departments associated with the customer company. Gosselin and Bauwen (2006) continue, that strategic partnerships are often initiated by the selling company and, hence, explain KAM as a proactive approach towards customer-centricity. Yet, Ojasalo (2001a) explains that KAM can be seen as a vital tool for improving the customer experience.

McDonald et al. (1997) state that strategic KAM is a vital part of organizations' strategic approach in maintaining their competitive position. Wong (1998) explains relation improvement as a vital part of account management to create strong cooperation. Similar observations are made by Ojasalo (2001b) who claims KAM to be a vital tool for relationship marketing. Ojasalo (2001b) continues to explain KAM as:

> *"...the selling company's activities including identifying and analyzing their key accounts and selecting suitable strategies and developing operational level capabilities to build, grow, and maintain profitable and long-lasting relationships with them." (Ojasalo, 2001b, p. 201)*

Various KAM definitions were presented above. In this thesis, KAM will be defined as the case company's strategic tool to build, maintain, and improve strategically important partnerships in the long-term, to increase the mutual value.

KAM emphasizes the importance of managing partnerships that in the long term are strategically important to the selling company. For the selling company to maintain its competitive advantage in the future, the key customers are a necessity (Svens et al., 2018). Kumar, Sharma, and Salo (2019) explain that key accounts evolve from existing customer relationships due to their strategic importance with an initial aim to increase the value of the dyad. Gosselin and Bauwen (2006) explain KAM as a competitive strategy that focuses on the 20/80 approach, meaning that 20 percent of the company's customers contribute with 80 of the revenue. Therefore, companies are urged to focus on fewer customers with greater strategic importance. McDonald et al. (1997) explain that due to KAM, partnerships become more significant, and cooperation between organizations increases.

Peters, Ivens, and Pardo (2020) explain that KAM exceeds organizational boundaries and, hence, cross-functional methods are adapted. Cross-functional methods are adapted to manage the resources externally with the customer company and internally between peers and departments. (Guesalaga, Gabrielsson, Rogers, Ryals, and Marcos, 2018) Similarly, Kumar et al. (2019) suggest incorporating a strategic KAM model including internal and external approaches. To evaluate the performance Kumar et al. (2019) suggest interpreting both the created and received value, by interpreting factors such as sales, extended customer relationships, and utilization of customer insight. In addition, portfolio management is introduced to evaluate existing key accounts (Gök, 2009; Terho, 2009). The evaluations should interpret both the relationship strength and business potential (Gök, 2009). According to Gök (2009), previous scholars have not utilized customer insight as a source of information enough but rather focuses on external forces affecting the relationship, such as globalization. Zupancic (2008), however, argues that soft skills, such as trust, are not emphasized enough in KAM. Previous scholars have focused on categorizing customers according to their strategic contribution and later by the profitability and growth potential. Today, the approach has evolved towards a competitive advantage, where customer accounts are seen as long-term partners, contributing with mutual benefits. (Zupancic, 2008)

According to Gosselin and Bauwen (2006, p. 377), five forces affect the transition towards KAM, namely *globalization, structure in B2B markets, the maturity of markets, customer's power,* and *development of technology.* Kumar et al. (2019) (2018) reinforce that increased competition has, further, enhanced the importance of KAM. Major changes can be also seen in consumer behavior and technology adaption. Hence, greater emphasis should be acknowledged on the resources required for account management. (Guesalaga et al., 2018)

Gosselin and Bauwen (2006) introduce an account classification model that provides the structure for four different account management models depending on their value contribution.
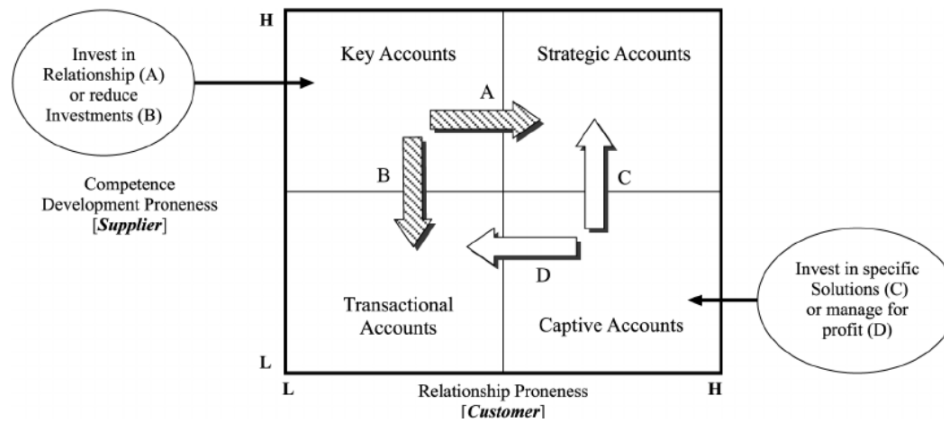
Figure 2. Account classification and account management strategies (Gosselin & Bauwen, 2006, p.379)

Four different account models are identified: *key account; strategic account; transactional account; or captive account* (Gosselin & Bauwen, 2006, p.379). The authors, thus, state that often the way is either towards strategic accounts or transactional accounts. Gosselin and Bauwen (2006) conclude that not all accounts require the key resources, as the selling company should carefully select which account to focus on. If the company is determined to invest in the customer relationship and unique solutions the account is considered as a strategic account. With a reduced relationship effort and a focus on profit, a transactional account model is applied. Gosselin and Bauwen (2006) stress that companies should decide to either focus on customers, or on the efficiency of the company.

Guesalaga et al. (2018) describe KAM as a dynamic process that evolves during the existence. Consequently, KAM should be seen as a strategic tool to find, establish, and maintain customer relationships. Guesalaga et al. (2018) urge companies to adopt a resource-based approach in KAM. To achieve it, resources and capabilities contributing to KAM should be identified. *Resources* refer to tangible or intangible company-based assets and *capabilities* to operational or dynamic abilities that utilize the resources efficiently in the performance. (Guesalaga et al., 2018)
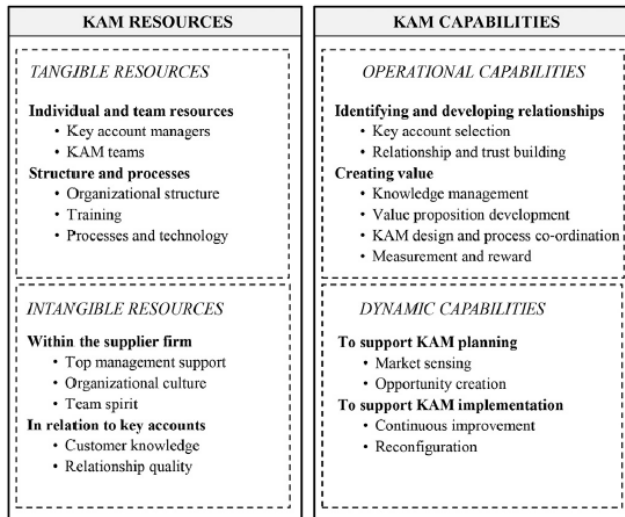
KAM RESOURCES	KAM CAPABILITIES
TANGIBLE RESOURCES **Individual and team resources** • Key account managers • KAM teams **Structure and processes** • Organizational structure • Training • Processes and technology	*OPERATIONAL CAPABILITIES* **Identifying and developing relationships** • Key account selection • Relationship and trust building **Creating value** • Knowledge management • Value proposition development • KAM design and process co-ordination • Measurement and reward
INTANGIBLE RESOURCES **Within the supplier firm** • Top management support • Organizational culture • Team spirit **In relation to key accounts** • Customer knowledge • Relationship quality	*DYNAMIC CAPABILITIES* **To support KAM planning** • Market sensing • Opportunity creation **To support KAM implementation** • Continuous improvement • Reconfiguration

Figure 3. Resource-based KAM framework (Guesalaga et al., 2018, p.163)

Figure 3, introduces the resources and capabilities affecting strategic KAM. The tangible resources highlight the importance of personnel and cross-functional teams, providing added value for the customer. Nevertheless, organizational structure, integrated processes, and training should be emphasized, to ensure the flow of information. The intangible recourses have a great impact on the efficiency of KAM. With support from the top management the company can ensure that the resources are allocated correctly and in organizational alignment. Furthermore, the company culture should have a customer-centric focus with support for cooperations and cross-functional teams. Customer knowledge and relationship quality strive to deliver value to the customers that competitors cannot copy. Hence, relationships should involve trust and commitment. (Guesalaga et al., 2018)

The operational capabilities presented in figure 3, include *key account selection, relationship and trust-building, knowledge management, value proposition development, team design and process coordination, and measurement and reward* (Guesalaga et al., 2018, p. 167). First, suitable key accounts should be recognized towards identified criteria. Further, the relationship should be managed accordingly. Yet, knowledge management is seen as vital to be able to convert customer information into insight. By doing so, the company can implement KAM processes to support the relationship which, further, improves the value proposition development and customer experience. KAM design and process coordination can improve sharing of customer insight between the cross-functional teams. Finally, the

performance measurement should consist of tools to evaluate the outcome of the partnership, both covering shot- and long-term results. (Guesalaga et al., 2018) Dynamic capabilities are required to co-operate with the changing market environment and require capabilities, as *market sensing, opportunity creation, continuous improvement, and reconfiguration* (Guesalaga et al., 2018, p. 168). With market sensing the company strives to predict the future for its key customers by investigating matters, such as financial numbers and the market environment. With the help of market sensing, opportunity creation can be utilized, often with problem-solving skills and trust-building. To reach continuous improvement, portfolio management should be conducted to predict which account to continue focusing on. To overcome the turbulence in markets reconfiguration is needed, by focusing on new approaches with innovation and flexibility.

As a result, KAM should be perceived as a dynamic approach that integrates, maintains, and reshapes customer relationships in a constantly evolving market environment. Nevertheless, both internal and external resources should be included. (Guesalaga et al., 2018)

Zupancic (2008), thus, argues that companies do not have a mutual way to manage their key accounts, since various models are implemented depending on the account in question, as many organizations treat their key accounts differently. Previous research also argued that organizations should separate on operational and corporate KAM (Ojasalo, 2001b; Zupancic, 2008). In operational KAM, the focus lies on individual customers, where the teams should primarily analyze the market and provide suggestions depending on customer needs, company resources, and more. Operational KAM consist of the realization of the applied strategy. Hence, companies should decide on mutual ways of working with the customer. However, corporate KAM perceives the whole KAM process holistically, as it should be integrated and aligned with the corporate strategy and culture. Nevertheless, it should be noted that organizations are not urged to implement a similar approach to manage all key accounts (Zupancic, 2008). Five dimensions were identified that affect the way organizations choose the key account model: [1] the company's overall business strategy to serve the customers [2] solution offered [3] people working in the company [4] resources and ways of working [5] approaches and tool to interpret and understand acquired data (Zupancic, 2008, p. 327).

As discussed, the management of key accounts can contribute with a greater value for both the selling company and the customer company with close cooperation. The choice of KAM depends on multiple factors, such as the resources and capabilities of the selling company. Still, the purpose remains the same; to establish and retain a strategically important partnership to improve both the competitive advantage. To maintain the relationship, continual management of the relationships is required, therefore, many organizations today adopt customer intimacy to better serve their key customers with solutions offered to their personal needs. As stated by Gosselin and Bauwen (2006) companies should either focus on customers or the efficiency of the company. With customer intimacy, the focus is on customers. According to Cochran (2004), customer intimacy can be seen as the relation between two parties, where the selling company gathers actively knowledge of the customer to improve the offerings. Furthermore, a customer intimacy value discipline becomes a business model that many companies emphasize while wanting to maintain a customer-centric approach and gain intimate knowledge of their key customers.

2.4 Customer Intimacy

Today, companies have needed to scale down their focus to become market leaders in one of the value disciplines (Treacy & Wiersema, 1993). Together with operational excellence and product leadership, customer intimacy is one of the three value disciplines and incorporates a customer-centric approach. The aim is to create long-term relationships with customers and increase loyalty. Yet, while focusing on one value discipline the remaining two should meet the industry-specific requirements. (Treacy & Wiersema, 1993) The roots of the philosophy establish from relationship marketing and service dominance, where customers have high expectations, which companies are trying to predict, to meet the need and desires with unique solutions (Habryn, 2012). The emphasis should lie on the relationship with a great impact on customer experience (Gobble, 2015). Customer insight provides the foundation and the guiding idea for customer intimacy (Treacy and Wiersema, 1993). Yet, customer intimacy goes beyond customer insight and focuses on creating loyalty and commitment. (Gobble, 2015) By understanding the customer in depth, more suitable solutions can be provided. Noticeably, customer intimacy refers to gather customer insight that matters. Kai-Uwe Brock and Yu Zhou (2012)

define customer intimacy as a tight relationship between the two parties, involved with understanding and appreciation. The authors continue to explain customer intimacy as vital for maintaining business relationships. Cochran (2004) explains customer intimacy as a customer knowledge approach, where the company sees the customer as their key asset. Customer intimacy is, further, stated to replace CRM and create new opportunities for organizations, such as a stronger market position (Osei, 2017).

According to Habryn (2012, p. 42), four main characteristics can be noticed in a customer intimacy strategy. The implications are that the discipline [1] creates value to the customer, [2] is built on relationships, [3] does not necessarily separate products and services, [4] and utilized insight to maintain the competitive advantage. As a result, companies adopting customer intimacy want to achieve a market-leading position by understanding customers thoroughly. Habryn (2012) emphasizes that customer intimacy should be interpreted both by managing the relationship and managing customer knowledge.

Habryn, Blau, Satzger, and Kölmel (2010) state that to achieve a competitive advantage from customer intimacy, companies need to carefully observe customer insight. Similarly, Treacy and Wiersema (1993) explain that companies focusing on customer intimacy can offer tailored products for individual needs, which is more likely to extend the customer journey and increase loyalty. Therefore, the emphasis often lies on the overall customer relationship value, rather than on a single purchase. Consequently, the relationships are perceived in the long term.

As observed, customer intimacy is built from markering scholars and customer insight. In this research, customer intimacy is perceived as a customer centric-approach that aims to create long-term relationships and increase loyalty to improve the competitive advantage.

With customer intimacy, the selling company can offer unique solutions to increase customer value. This requires a well-designed relationship, and a close understanding of the customers' needs and wants. Customer intimacy strategies are, hence, well adapted in developed markets with high competition. (Habryn et al., 2012) The authors argue that to become a solution selling market leader, customer intimacy should be adapted in the overall strategy to meet the high expectations of the

customers. Cochran (2004), thus, argues that receiving insightful information regarding customers might be challenging, as a customer might not be willing to provide the information nor understand what the information is utilized for. Cochran (2004) continues to explain that while gathering the intimate information various tools are acquired to manage the knowledge accordingly. Habryn (2012) stresses that CRM systems alone do not provide enough information to utilize a customer intimacy strategy, as much more emphasis should be put on managing the degree of customer intimacy.

Furthermore, Kai-Uwe Brock and Yu Zhou (2012, p. 371) reinforce customer intimacy with three dimensions that are all required, *closeness, value perception*, and *mutual understanding.* The authors state that by implementing a customer intimacy approach, positive implications can be observed. The outcome is that commitment, loyalty, and availability of customers increases. Moreover, the research implicates that trust and commitment are seen as crucial factors contributing to customer intimacy. (Kai-Uwe Brock and Yu Zhou, 2012) Customer intimacy enables organizations to provide unique solutions for their customers and, hence, helps the organization to stand out from competitors (Habryn et al., 2012). According to Treacy & Wiersema (1993), a customer intimacy value discipline focuses on building long-lasting customer relationships, that pay themselves back as loyalty towards the selling company. Often decentralization is a common way to respond to the demand of fewer customers with individual solutions available.

According to Habryn et al. (2012) measurement of customer intimacy requires a well-designed technology around it. Thus, the multidimensional nature of B2B markets contributes to difficulties in collecting the required customer insight. Therefore, *customer interaction* is the most vital part while implementing a customer intimacy strategy. By gathering valuable knowledge from the interaction, a broader understanding of the customer's desires and needs can be achieved. Hence, tailored solutions can be provided, and customization and cross-selling can be adopted and measured. Efficient customization and cross-selling were also seen to deepen customer knowledge and extend customer journeys.

Habryn et al. (2012) provide a model to capture and measure customer intimacy. The model is divided into three sections that all capture different parts of the customer

relationship. The first section of the model is *customer intimacy* that captures two different parts. Initially, the *acquired customer intimacy* referring to understand the customer knowledge to develop a value proposition, to pleases the needs of the customer. With customer knowledge and understanding of the relationship, the selling company has the opportunity to adjust the offerings by providing tailored solutions for the customer's individual needs. The *leveraged customer intimacy* focuses on the outcome of the acquired data to highlight the benefits and competitive advantage achieved. The authors highlight that both the *acquired* and *leveraged* customer intimacy should be obtained. When both the acquired and the leveraged customer intimacy are high, customer intimacy as a value discipline can be adopted. The second section of the model is *Customer Intimacy Information* which explains the calculation of customer intimacy through already existing data. The data consist of the total amount of interactions between the organization and customer. The third section *Customer Intimacy Data Sources* is the data that provides tangible assessments. The sources can be categorized as two, the *interactions*; referring to all tracked data such as emails, calls, meetings, and the organization's *internal sources* such as a CRM system or the project database. (Habryn et al., 2012)

As a summary, the model consists of three layers, where firstly the data is broken down into measurable data. Secondly, the data is evaluated carefully by defined metrics and thirdly the data is calculated towards the available sources. The authors, thus, highlight that the model in itself does not provide any actual proof of the effect customer intimacy has on the company's overall competitive advantage. (Habryn et al., 2012)

Interaction assessment is a vital part to obtain knowledge of the relationship. Habryn et al. (2012) introduce Customer Interaction Time (CIT) as a tool to calculate customer intimacy. CIT calculates the number of interactions and the time used for customer interactions across all communication channels during a specific period. The interactions assessment is vital for the organization to understand their proficiency in the interactions. Customer intimacy can be assessed more thoroughly through interactions, by calculating the value that captures interaction amounts and frequency (Habryn, 2012).

As a result, customer-centricity can be seen as a synonym for customer intimacy, as the focus lies on serving the customer with greater value. As an implication, customer insight provide the foundation for customer intimacy. Initially, the selling company can achieve a stronger market position by managing the relationship and customer knowledge with intimacy.

2.5 The Theoretical Framework

The literature review has consisted of four main topics, customer experience, customer insight, KAM, and customer intimacy. The whole theoretical framework had a mutual purpose to understand the customers more efficiently and accurately, to increase trust and loyalty, and serve the customers with greater value. Further, long-term customer relationship management was a common target in all four topics. Various models were presented to capture how the customers perceive the performance, considering customer experience, KAM, and customer intimacy. The implication is that while wanting to improve the customer experience, key customer accounts should be managed with intimacy. To increase intimacy, greater value should be put on customer insight to increase loyalty. Nevertheless, this cannot be achieved with all customers. Undoubtedly, the selling company should agree on strategically important customers, that they want to serve with intimacy to increase loyalty and build a long-term partnership with.

While adopting customer intimacy, great emphasis should be set on KAM and customer experience. Without a focus on KAM and customer experience, the company cannot fully state to implement a customer intimacy philosophy. Customer insight is, thus, a mutual requirement for all three topics. Without customer insight, the company cannot make any strategic decisions regarding its customers.

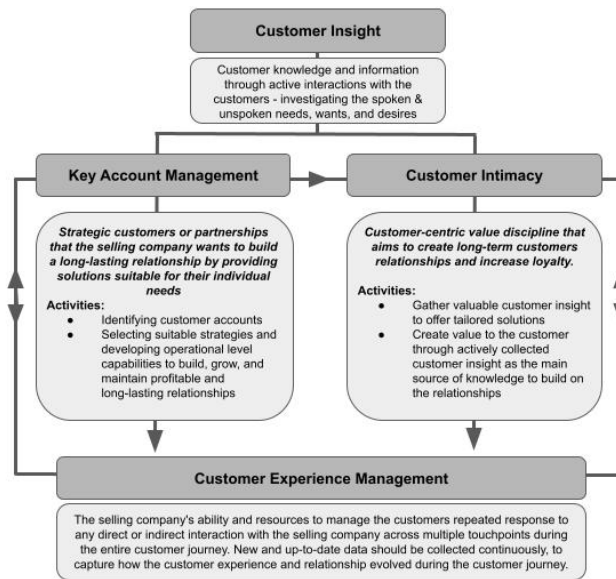Based on the theoretical implications, the following model was built up.

Figure 4. The theoretical framework applied in this study

Figure 4, summarizes the discussed theoretical concepts and presents a theoretical framework of customer experience management. In the model, the KAM and customer intimacy are perceived as equal elements that have a mutual purpose to build long-lasting customer relationships and are, hence, perceived as the foundation for customer experience management. Further, customer insight is perceived to build the foundation for KAM and customer intimacy, through active interaction with the customers to gain knowledge of the needs and wants. The model illustrates the multidimensional process between KAM, customer intimacy, and customer experience management. Without KAM, customers cannot be treated with intimacy. Therefore, focusing on fewer but strategically important partnerships enables to adopt a customer intimacy value discipline. Customer intimacy and customer experience are perceived to influence one another, as to understand the experience, intimacy needs to be applied for the customer to openly share how they perceive the performance. However, to adopt customer intimacy, customer experience should be continually collected to increase intimacy. KAM and customer experience are also perceived as interrelated variables, as customer experience can contribute to more efficient account management while understanding the value creation points of the customers. However, to collect and manage customer experience, accounts should be managed with strategic importance.

3. Research Method

In this part of the research, the focus will lie on presenting the research design. First, a short introduction to the topic will be presented, followed by an introduction to the research method applied in this research. The reliability and validity of this research will be critically reviewed to present the trustworthiness of the research.

3.1 Qualitative Research

The main purpose of qualitative research is to clarify the relationship between theory and practice (Bryman & Bell, 2005). Qualitative research is built on words, images, or symbols with an underlying meaning (Christensen, Engdahl, Grääs, and Haglund, 2001). In quantitative research, the data is usually measured with statistics, collected from numbers and quantities. Qualitative data again capture concepts that are analyzed through words or images. Often qualitative data is measured with interpretation and understanding of the respondents. (Christensen et al., 2001).

Christensen et al. (2001) describe qualitative research as a method to interpret bigger concepts to build up theories and hypotheses. The authors state that qualitative research is often collected in form of interviews to receive an in-depth analysis of the researched topic. However, the method is limited to the moderators, ability to observe and understand data. (Christensen et al., 2001) A qualitative research method is, further, utilized as a way to describe the phenomenon subjectively by interpretation to gain a contextual understanding of the topic. (Saunders, Thornhill, and Lewis, 2019)

The choice of research method depends on the wanted result. In this research, the research method is qualitative. A qualitative research method is considered to meet the research objectives, as the research questions aim to elaborate with new findings on complex topics such as customer experience and customer intimacy.

Also, it should be observed that qualitative research consists of several different forms of methods such as observations, interviews, focus groups, and surveys (Christensen et al., 2001). Bryman and Bell (2005) describe ethnography and qualitative interviews as the most important methods to observe the phenomena. Interviews will be the primary research method in this research.

Flick (2018) further explains qualitative research methods as a way to explain the inside and how they perceive "the world out there". This can be done by understanding and describing the phenomena through experiences, interactions, and documents. The underlying aim is to explain and make sense of the unseen phenomena that can be observed. Flick (2018) argues that qualitative research also consists of texts, while the moderator transcripts the findings. Bryman and Bell (2011) state that one common issue in qualitative research is the amount of data. Therefore, thematic analysis can be conducted to categorize the rich data into themes to interpret.

As discussed, in this research interviews are conducted as the primary source of research data. The primary data is supported by secondary data analysis. The choice of interview method will be discussed in-depth in the next part.

3.2 Semi-structured interview

Flick (2018) explains that qualitative interviews utilize an omnichannel approach with the question-answer setup. The interviews can either be structured, semi-structured, or unstructured. Often semi-structured interviews are utilized while wanted to create an atmosphere similar to a conversation. This means that the questions are often open-ended and followed with follow-up questions that might vary from other interviews. Guthrie (2010) categorizes interviews as the most vital part of social sciences but continues to explain that interviews are often conducted together with surveys or data analysis.

In a semi-structured interview, the respondents are free to express themselves, which contributes to a relaxed atmosphere (Christensen et al., 2001). Flick (2018) further states that a good interview consists of mutual communication. A semi-structured interview is structured as an interview guide, with a list of themes and questions that will be addressed during the interview. The questions in a semi-structured interview can be presented in varying order, to build up a theoretical model. (Christensen et al., 2001) In this research, the questions are, thus, asked in the same order for all respondents to ensure the reliability of this research.

In this research, the research method is semi-structured interviews, to get a holistic understanding of how the respondents perceive the research phenomena. In this

research, nine (9) different interview sessions are arranged. Each interview is individual. As a semi-structured method, participants have the opportunity to express themselves freely, but the moderator has to ensure that the common redline remains throughout the interview. An interview guide should be followed during the semi-structured interviews. (Christensen et al., 2001) In this research, the interview guide includes a set of open-ended questions, that are followed. The interview guide for this research can be found in Appendix 1.

According to Christensen et al. (2001), the ethical aspects are noteworthy in the qualitative research method, as there is a lot of information from fewer respondents. Therefore, the moderator should ensure that the information cannot be identified. Hence, the names of the companies or the respondents will not be published in this research.

3.3 Probing

Given (2008) define probing as a specific interview technique applied in qualitative research, adapted both in induvial interviews as well as in group interviews such as in focus groups. Given (2008) explain that the aim is to understand the research phenomena in deeper means by gathering insightful information. Probing is used as a technique to gather more information about the respondent (Patton, 2015). Probing can be used both in verbal and nonverbal communication, often, in form of follow-up questions or gestures (Given, 2008). Given (2008), further, explain that probes can be various, such as silence while letting the respondent speak freely or facial expression or head nodding. Nevertheless, nonverbal probes or elaboration probes, strive to lead the conversation to gather more knowledge but not specified what kind of knowledge. Verbal probes or clarification probes, on the other hand, strive to lead the conversations towards the desired direction. (Given, 2008) Verbal probes, further, include questions related to the discussed topic, such as, asking the respondent to describe a certain situation in more detail. Patton (2015) highlight that verbal probes often include questions as, *who, what, when, where,* and *how.*

Probing is, thus, limited to the moderator's ability to listen and understand the respondents. Furthermore, the moderator needs to determine whether certain topics should be discussed in-depth or not. (Given, 2008)

During the nine interviews, several probes occurred, both verbal and nonverbal. Therefore, many follow-up questions were utilized to understand the topics in detail. One example that occurred in several interviews was a follow-up question in RQ1: *If you choose one account as the best example, from your perspective, how is the relationship with that accounts managed?* One probe was identified: *what led to it being the "best example".*

3.4 Validity & Reliability

Daymon and Holloway (2011) highlight the importance of ensuring the quality of research. Hence, validity and reliability often need to be ensured while presenting the trustworthiness of the research. Reliability is, thus, hard to ensure in qualitative research since the moderator presents the results through interpretations, rather than through statistics. Bryman and Bell (2011) define validity as the accuracy of the research as it investigates if the obtained results further succeed to meet the research aim.

Furthermore, the quality of qualitative research is evaluated through trustworthiness and authenticity (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). *Authenticity* refers to the sharing of knowledge and fairness and is yet less researched than trustworthines*s*. Trustworthiness is evaluated through *credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability*. (Bryman and Bell, 2011; Daymon & Holloway, 2011) Hence, the results of the research are presented as consistent and neutral. Credibility empowers trustworthiness by ensuring that qualitative research is validated by the participant and conducted in a good manner. Transferability again urges the utilization of thick descriptions to prove the accuracy of the received research data. Dependability urges to justify the result by ensuring all research material being available. Finally, confirmability requires that personal beliefs can be proved to not have had an impact on the research. Moreover, Bryman and Bell (2011) also highlight authenticity as an equal social setting that further empowers trustworthiness. Given (2008), however, explain authenticity throughout the impact the research has on the social settings. Therefore, fairness is seen as a crucial part*,* by ensuring that the participant has the same qualifications in participating in the research.

To ensure the quality of the interviews one pilot interview was conducted, with an employee of the case company. The pilot interview aims to ensure that the questions

are relevant and understood by the participants. After the pilot interview, two small adjustments were made in rephrasing question one.

During the individual interviews, credibility was reached as the trustworthiness and transferability were validated by participants in form of member checking with concluding the discussed topics with the participants. To ensure authenticity, all participants also received a brief introduction to the research topic in advance by email. The brief introduction included a short explanation of the research topic and aim. With the help of the brief introductions, one could ensure that the participants are aware of the phenomena being researched in a fair and equal manner. Therefore, more trustworthy assumptions could be conducted, which the case company also receives greater benefits from as the research tends to find out how the employees involved in the customer relationships perceive the topics.

3.5 Data Sources

In this research data is collected from various sources and the moderator is in charge of the accuracy of the data. In qualitative research, primary data is commonly gathered from interviews. Other relevant forms of primary data in qualitative research are observation, focus groups, and pictures. (Hox & Boije, 2005).

In this research, the research data consist of primary data, collected from semi-structured interviews and, of secondary data in form of documents. The primary data is collected through recorded interviews that are further transcribed and carefully analyzed. The secondary data is provided by the case company. The secondary data is a model for account management. The secondary data will also be thoroughly analyzed by the moderator.

The aim of data collection in qualitative research is to provide evidence for the empirical findings (Flick, 2018). Thus, awareness of the moderator is required for interpreting complex topics. Flick (2018) highlights that interviews as the primary method might create narratives. Therefore, the recommendation is to utilize various methods to prove the accuracy of the research. This can be done by organizing multiple interviews over time as a method of data triangulation. Given (2008) define triangulation as an approach to increase the trustworthiness of the research through perceiving the phenomena from various perspectives to understand it better.

Triangulation can be collected from interviews, existing documents, photographs, or by adopting various interview methods. Bryman and Bell (2011) further define triangulation as an approach to utilize various empirical sources, with the initial aim to achieve more accurate results in research. Given (2008) continue to explain, that triangulation can both be adapted in data collection and data analysis.

In this research, the method has been methodological triangulation as the data is collected from various sources. More specifically the data consists of information collected from the semi-structured interviews and existing data, in form of a model provided by the case company. Data analysis is also conducted as a triangulation approach, as the interviews will be analyzed through data sampling and coding. Data analysis will be explained more thoroughly in the next sub-heading.

As mentioned, in this research nine (9) semi-structured interviews are conducted. Each of these interviews is held virtually through Zoom, due to the global pandemic Covid-19. The estimated time for each interview is a maximum of one hour and the whole interview is recorded. As the research is made as an assignment for the case company, the participants are chosen by the case company from various departments to get a holistic understanding of the phenomena. Each of the participants works in close contact with the customers and has a great understanding of how customer relationships are managed in the company. The research questions, without the probes, were sent out to the participant before the interview to guarantee accuracy.

The participants are presented below in table 1.

	Title of the respondent	Work location of the respondent	Duration of interview
Respondent A	Strategy Development Manager	USA	32:41 min
Respondent B	Sales Manager EU & APAC	Switzerland	40:48 min
Respondent C	Sales Manager, Distributors Europe	Netherlands	44:05 min
Respondent D	Key Account Manager	Finland	40:36 min
Respondent E	Key Account Manager	Sweden	57:48 min
Respondent F	Strategy Deployment Manager	Finland	39:25 min
Respondent G	Key Account Manager	Finland	54:55 min
Respondent H	Head of Branded Sales	Sweden	48:06 min
Respondent I	Market Development Manager	Switzerland	33:07 min

Table 1. The participants.

3.6 Data Analysis

Data analysis in this research will be conducted by listening to the recorded interviews. As the interviews are semi-structured and similar to a conversation the amount of data is vast. Saunders et al. (2019) urge to make conclusions in bigger means to simplify the outcomes. Therefore, data sampling will be conducted to analyze the results of this research. Data sampling is a tool where the moderator listens to the recorded interviews and highlights the most crucial aspects that contribute with findings to the research. To find the most meaningful and relevant insight the moderator is urged to go through the recording several times to avoid that any relevant information does not get left out. (Saunders et al., 2019) In this research, each recording is listened to three to five times depending on the length and depth of the interview. With the help of data sampling, the main findings are transcribed. The recordings are listened to several times to catch any essential findings contributing to the research.

Bryman and Bell (2011) introduce two strategies of analyzing qualitative data: the analytic induction strategy and the grounded theory strategy. The analytic induction strategy is based on building up and testing a hypothesis while the grounded theory strategy focuses on building up theories from newly collected data. In this research, a grounded theory strategy is applied as no hypothesis was set up. The results origins from the collected data. Further, the results will be discussed as an ongoing discussion between theory and data analysis, and, hence, a grounded theory structure is followed. As the discussions move between data and theory and abductive research method is furthermore utilized. Timmermans and Tavory (2012) explain abductive research as a method where theory and data influence each other through a discussion between the findings and theoretical implications.

With the help of data sampling, interviews will be transcribed. Subsequently, coding is also used in the data analysis for this research. Coding is considered to be an element of the grounded theory strategy. With coding data is broken down into smaller categories and themes to interpret the specific topics. (Bryman & Bell, 2011) According to Given (2008) coding refers to a certain way to interpret the collected data, with diving it into themes and categories. Given (2008) argues that codes can be identified before data collection, but in this research, codes were identified during

data analysis. During data coding, four main themes emerged: account management, customer experience, customer intimacy, and customer insight. On the other hand, codes could have been identified before the interviews, as it did not come as a surprise that these four categories repeatedly were discussed from different angles during the interviews. As the data was coded, the transcripts were highlighted with theme-specific colors to separate the codes and highlighted with the most important findings. This is done to pinpoint the most important contributions to the research and enables to easily find connections between the individual interviews.

The secondary data is applied as support for the primary data. The moderator has thoroughly identified the account management process of the case company, introduced in the document. The interviews finding are supported by the secondary data.

4. Empirical Findings

During the nine interviews, many similarities occurred, while coding the findings. The main findings will be presented next. The findings are divided into four main headings: key account management, customer insight, customer experience, and customer intimacy.

4.1 Data Analysis

The analysis is presented in a different order than the literature review as key account management was perceived as the foundation for managing customers.

4.1.1 Key Account Management

The case company's business is based on long-term accounts. Many of the customer relationships have lasted over decades and the persons on both sides of the dyad have worked closely together for years, which was seen to have positive implications on the relationship. In the case company, strategic accounts are considered as partnerships, as they live in close symbiosis. With particular key accounts, the case company has a high share wallet. Many of the customers purchase both from renewables products as well as from oil products, which, further, is an important factor contributing to the KAM. Nevertheless, these customer accounts are seen and managed as one.

The customers of the case company are divided into two customer segments. First, the branded channel partners, who utilize the companys' brand in selling the product. Second, distribution sales, with selling the product renewable diesel, to selected wholesalers and traders. Many of the distribution sales are oil majors, who also procure the product due to mandate fulfillment to reach the governmental restrictions with a required blending ratio of fossil- and renewable fuels. Therefore, the difference between these two customer segments is vital to recognize.

According to respondents, the key difference is that with the branded channel partners, the end customers are involved to a certain extent. While with traders and distributors, the relationship type is solely B2B, dealing with counterparties. According to respondent B, the relationships with counterparties are truly based on *quality, speed, dependability, flexibility, and cost*. With the branded channel partners,

the relationship involves *engagement in the value proposition development* and also *maintaining the value propositio*n. Finding solutions and joint ways of growing in each other's interest is seen as a foundational element in the relationship with branded channel partners. Furthermore, notable differences in the relationship type should be observed, due to the different natures and requirements of the customer relationship.

Many of the respondents also argued that clear classification between customers has not been done based on their strategic importance. Respondent E mentioned that customer categorization has not been quantified, especially between, accounts, key accounts, and strategic accounts. The respondent states that the majority of internal employees are aware of which customers belong to each segment, but the process is not formalized. To align counterparties on long-term strategy, decisions should be made on which strategy to deploy on each specific accounts. Respondent H, thus, explains that the Nordic teams have already worked on setting up the structure between different accounts. The work included building up the account plans, establishing a yearly clock, and finding the structure and a way of developing the accounts. The sales teams in the Nordic consist of different kinds of accounts, on different levels, both in terms of volume and their strategic level. Today, discussion on similar topics has arisen again, to classify what it means to be a strategic account or a key account. Therefore, the case company focuses on evaluating the customers and how activities should be prioritized accordingly.

Many of the respondents argued that while the accounts are managed through dedicated sales teams, the lack of customer segmentation is noteworthy. The respondents explained that they often utilize the same approach for all customers. Nevertheless, more efficient recourse management was seen as a result, if accounts would be formally segmented due to their strategic importance, to ensure that the right resources and allocations are delivered in a prioritized order. The secondary data provided by the case company also supports that a model for account management already exists. The customer categorization is divided into; *key accounts,* who require lean account management; *growth accounts,* who are provided with growth account management; and finally prioritized the *strategic accounts* that receive strategic account management. The prioritized strategic accounts receive increasing effort from the case company.

As the Nordic region has decided to focus on fewer customers with a more focused customer group, the number of customers has decreased by half, as the case company could not grow intimacy with all the account. Therefore, strategic decisions were made on who to continue the partnership with. The decisions were based on long-term sight, with customers who perceived the world in similar ways, with similar ambitions, goals, and priorities. Respondent H states the following:

> "It hasn't been a golden forest all along it has been a gradual sort of buildup of trust and bringing our targets closer together to understand each other's business drivers and ambitions and priorities along the way. So, I mean we have developed over the years to become what it is today." (Respondent H)

According to respondent C, significant differentiation can be seen between the key accounts, as each of the key accounts needs different treatment with an individual approach. Mostly depending on their maturity in the relationship. The size of the customer company was also stated to affect the account management, due to different needs. Respondent G argued that accounts are managed systemically, as they follow an account plan, with common targets. Thus, accounts are treated quite similarly, with the same importance, whether they are a billion-size company or a small company. According to the respondent similar treatment is seen as positive. Respondents also highlighted that the account teams have a good balance between resources and accounts at the moment, which enables account managers to have time to focus on specific customers. Respondent D feels that in the role as a key account manager clear separation between customers already exists. The KAM principle was first introduced some years ago, with building key account teams internally, by introducing the CRM system and the yearly planning clock that provide the structure and discipline for account management.

Respondent E, also as a key account manager, states the accounts are managed through cooperation, by providing tools for the ease of doing business, to build up relationships, fulfilling expectations and needs from customers, covering everything from small obstacles in day operational practices to bigger things, like information sharing between parties. Furthermore, the respondent highlights *listening* as an important element as you need to ensure that the product fulfills all the technical needs and expectations. Other crucial aspects are understanding customer needs, pain points, obstacles, and how their competition looks like. These elements were seen as

the key factors for building the foundation, for solid good account management. *Information sharing* was stated to be an important element, both understanding what information you get from your customers but also, providing information for them, for instance, regarding the market. Therefore, relationship building is vital, to receive detailed information regarding long-term company strategies for instance.

As mentioned, in the case company accounts are managed through a dedicated sales team in each territory. These accounts are nurtured by ensuring that the reseller or channel partner has the right allocations, technical expertise, and market expertise. The relationships are managed as more of a partnership, in collaborative views. It emphasizes an ongoing, mutually strategic relationship. In a sense, as the customers grow, the case company grows, by enabling their customers' growth. Best-in-class accounts are managed with very close open line communication, on daily basis. *Flexibility* was also seen as a vital tool to maintain the account, with ongoing contract updates due variety of issues. Close monitoring of operations was seen as a key factor in account management. Respondent I also highlighted regular meetings as a vital tool for successful account management.

While discussing KAM during the interviews one common phrase occurred in the majority of interviews, *trust-building.* The long-term sight was also mentioned in all of the interviews. Further, relationships should be considered as respective partnerships, with mutual goals, targets, and ambitions, that create value for both parties. The majority of the respondents also highlighted *loyalty* as a key factor as well as *honesty*. To build up trust, *transparency* is essential, to ensure that the selection is done on fairgrounds and governing the strategic decisions. To gain the trust, respondent E argued to be honest in communication, since eventually during years of doing business, obstacles will occur.

> "Then when the problem occurs and how we solve it with the customer and how the end result would be, is the key to build a trust and the cooperation going forward." (Respondent E)

Showing interest in solving the customers' problem is crucial, as well as building a solid foundation for the relationship. The most crucial factor for the case company while selecting customers is the *fit of doing business*, as it contributes to long-term strategy.

Respondent C also stated that the success of the relationship is, further, depending on the customer companys' resources and of their interest in working together. How important the customer perceives the renewable fuels also affect the relationship. Respondent C perceives open communications as a milestone to reach a good relationship, consisting of information sharing, knowledge sharing, and transparency. Especially in the early stages of the relationship trust-building was perceived as the foundation for a successful relationship. As the relationship evolves, personal relationships also develop. Therefore, *eagerness* was mentioned to be a key for great relationships, so as being *proactive* instead of reactive. Respondent D also considers relations as a vital part of account management.

Well-managed accounts were considered as profitable both in the short and long term but the emphasis is on the long-term, as the key accounts are perceived to repeat business with the case company. A sense of partnership should be built with multiple connections between the case company and customer company, with multiple people working together continuously. Multiple connections on different levels were also considered to improve the link and cooperation between the organizations. Respondent I explained, that while having communication on multiple levels, the case company can learn more about the challenges, opportunities, and development areas from different stakeholders. By having communication on multiple levels, the case company can also learn more about the customer needs from different perspectives and, hence, develop business together. Similar assumptions were also concluded from respondent G, who perceived that successful customer relationships required communication on several organizational levels between organizations. Multiple levels of communication were also perceived to increase openness and improve the willingness to provide insight for the case company. The respondents stated that relationships should be noted as a vital part of the partnership, especially in a complex B2B environment where people create the atmosphere and interactions. The respondents state that internal trust is also vital, to ensure information flow on all operational levels.

Customer accounts are managed through cooperation with dialogue and open communication. Respondent B continues to explain that monthly meetings are arranged with specific branded channel partners. The monthly distributor meeting is characterized as a formal meeting according to Respondent B. The aim is to review

the sales performance, the supplier performance, the operations as well as the technical aspects. Furthermore, the case company will be hearing about their customers' concerns that might have occurred. Every six months a meeting is arranged, also involving senior management. The aim is to align on strategy and next steps and manage performance. The importance is to understand the customers' business and their needs and the latest market development and, in the end, bring an offer to their table and find a solution for them.

> "It's about having an interaction and having information exchange and really knowing what the customer is up to, what is their strategic ambition, how can we as a producer, be playing a part in there. In simple words, that is how the accounts are managed." (Respondent B).

Account management was also considered to be about setting the scene, making sure that everyone is on the same page, focusing on the right elements, and committed. For the case company's customers, account management should work as a platform with a structured way of interacting, involving certain elements and certain timelines, to ensure what can be expected within the next three-, six-, and twelve months. Respondent H also states that joint business plans with the customers' have been utilized instead of an account plan. The joint business plan contains customers' priorities, ambitions, expectations, and concrete actions to reach the targets. Respondent G states that the top management should also agree on what is required and meant with KAM and improve the link between the account management model and the business model.

A part of the account management was also seen to involve the follow-up and the ability to see and react to changes. Respondent H also highlighted the importance of applying more forward-looking and action-oriented review sessions. A lot of the customer insight was stated to occur directly from customers during the follow-up. Yet, the case company applies a more structured approach for customer insight, presented next.

4.1.2 Customer Insight

To be able to understand the customers' needs and wants and to turn their pain points into game points, a lot of customer knowledge must be collected through various channels. In the case company, the most common way was to collect insight, is

directly from the customer through interaction. Respondents perceived that the insight can either be collected formally through interviews or informally via interactions. Often meetings and phone calls were mentioned as the main source of information. Other methods mentioned to collect insight were mutual workshops for operational purposes with customers. With customer accounts monthly or quarterly meetings were also arranged, to go through business, to review accurate topics, and possible deviations, and how they can be avoided in the future. Therefore, interactions as meetings were considered to contribute with the most value, as the case company has the chance to ask follow-up questions and to listen to the feeling. Hence, to comprehensively collect insight, frequent meetings should be arranged with customers stakeholders. The insight gathered is saved in the case company's CRM system, Salesforce. The majority of the respondents, thus, argue that Salesforce should be used to a wider extent, to create a systemic approach to store the customer data and share information internally. By utilizing Salesforce, the company can ensure that internal personnel involved in the customer relationship have the same access to the customer information.

> "In a good world, we would type in what we perceive when we are in contact with the customer. CRM systems should be used to that, counting the contact we have with them, and what kind of insight we gather in the interactions". (Respondent F)

Many perceived that the structure for collecting customer insight is in place, as monthly meetings are arranged. The communication is on regular basis and often open, partly due to joint business plans, that allow to discuss topics openly. The case company tries to determine their customer's possible concerns, focus areas, what works well what does not work well, as a structured interaction. With evolved partnerships, the communication might be on daily basis. One issue that occurred is the amount of information, which is enormous and impossible to apply.

The biofuel industry was also stated to be a very connected industry where news is quickly spreading, therefore, and a lot of word of mouth is utilized as a tool to collect insight. In asset to the continuous interactions, various knowledge is collected internally through a market intelligence team, who on daily basis collect insight from the market. According to respondent A, the market intelligence is very data-driven, reacting to how customers perceive the fuel. Together with data-driven knowledge respondent A perceived engagement with customers as a vital tool to collect insight.

To get the information, the case company needs to keep up a certain pace, with a structured schedule of collecting certain information during the year. The insight, further, consists of literature from the biofuel industry and newspapers. The biofuel industry is very dependent on public affairs since the industry is very dependent on politics. In the case company, public affairs teams are constantly interpreting the legal aspects, rules, and regulations affecting the industry. Often new regulations are seen as an asset for the case company, due to the product, renewable diesel. The importance is, thus, to constantly collect the insight from the customers or through news and financial numbers, to be aware of what is happening on the customers' side.

Respondent E states that as a supplier, the case company should be perceived as a collaborative partner, to collect the insight from a broader perspective. To reach a win-win situation a yearly account clock should be utilized, as the company does, to clarify when for instance negotiations start. At the case company, some important gates to collect insight in autumn is through negotiations and during spring through market insight.

NPS questioners were also utilized to collect insight, regarding customer satisfaction. All of the respondents, thus, perceived it as a binary method that did not contribute with much value. The questioner is sent out twice a year to investigate how the customer perceives the cooperation. Thus, the monthly and yearly meetings were seen as a more efficient way to receive feedback. The NPS survey is sent out to various customer stakeholders, tailored to different company levels and departments, depending on the size of the customer company. The survey is connected to Salesforce to review the answers.

Currently, the case company was stated to improve their customer insight, to build customer value propositions. The case company strives to utilize the information to understand the customers' value-driving elements to serve them better. By providing value-added solutions the case company strives to increase loyalty and satisfaction. Therefore, the company wants to know what the customers value besides regular, pricing and product quality, to understand:

> "How can we make our customers life easier as a company and individuals, as counterparties have their personal objectives as well." (Respondent F)

Moreover, the logging of customer insight was seen as a crucial factor. As the needed tools have been implemented with Salesforce and MyHub, customer insight was considered to be collected more efficiently. Respondent C, further, continues to explain that customer insight should be utilized commercially, to gather insightful knowledge and information to increase sales. Moreover, with utilizing customer insight the case company was also stated to foresee upcoming issues.

MyHub is utilized as an interactive portal with the customers, where the case company can provide training to their partners regarding several focus areas, such as, sustainability, technical product knowledge, and more. The portal is used as a joint sales funnel with generating leads and forecast nominations. MyHub could be perceived as a community where the channel partners log in individually, to collect the information and to share information. In the Nordic sales team, MyHub has been utilized with three channel partners, where data is flowing between the case company and the channel partner.

The sales team was also perceived as a very good source of information because they are the ones that interact and discuss with the customer. Hence, a lot of insight comes directly from internal stakeholders. Thus, various sources should be utilized. The market intelligence team, for instance, is following the publications, and the quartal results of customers and competitors. A lot of information is also collected through internal traders. Respondent D also perceived that the case company has a good level of collecting information and centralizing it. Furthermore, cooperation internally between teams was seen as crucial to receive the best understanding of the market and customers. At the end of the day, customer insight was collected to understand the customers better to grow into more intimate partnerships.

4.1.3 Customer Intimacy

In many interviews, customer intimacy was perceived as a synonym for customer-centricity. Customer intimacy was perceived as a proactive approach, serving individual offerings, suitable for the customers' needs. Respondent C described it as *"your wish is our command kind of feeling"*. However, a structured approach and common guidelines are still missing. As customer intimacy is based on customer insight the case company perceives it as a long-term commitment. Therefore, *trust* and *loyalty* need to be built up from the first stages to ensure that the customer feels

secure to share information and being transparent. Hence, customer intimacy was seen as the connection beyond the transaction.

> "It is a customer-centric value discipline, it's about gathering information, know something, understand the needs and wants of the customer, and eventually sell your value proposition to bring the customer to success." (Respondent B)

Customer intimacy was seen to drive loyalty. If the company develops intimacy with key customers, the customers are more likely to stay as their customers. Many also saw *mutual trust* between the parties, as the foundation for customer intimacy. Customer intimacy was described as the process of gathering valuable customer insight from a well-functioning good relation. Hence, customer intimacy is perceived to start from people and then grow into the organization. Customer intimacy could, further, be translated into relations and the level of trust.

Customer intimacy was also described as a customer-based approach, where customer understanding is crucial to being able to provide tailored solutions based on customers' specific needs. Customer intimacy was also perceived through the interaction level, towards a common goal or a common set of priorities. The result of customer intimacy is considered to be a long-term relationship with loyalty and commitment.

As customer intimacy is based on customer understanding, the case company needs to utilize the gathered knowledge in the best possible way. If an issue occurs during discussions one should emphasize the need to improve the performance. Customers should also acknowledge the obtained results of sharing the intimate information.

> "If you for instance have a big workshop for customer experience and gain customer insight and find an issue or need or something to improve on the cooperation, you need to deliver that. I mean you can't just say that thank you very much for this, we appreciate that you give so much information but then nothing happens, then you would lose that". (Respondent E)

According to respondent B, customer intimacy can only be achieved through account management. Therefore, connecting the right people in the inter-organization is vital to have cooperation on many organizational levels. Respondent D, further, perceived that customer intimacy differentiates the structural account management principles, into more personalized account management. Knowing your customer on a deeper

level might translate into specialized account planning, with a personalized account management style. With customer intimacy, the case company can initiate ideas for the customers by knowing them, which improves the cooperation and translate into an improved customer experience.

Respondent A also perceived that customer intimacy requires account management and consistent customer experience. Consistency also occurred in several other interviews, as stickiness is needed to maintain the relationship. Respondent E states that increased effort is required to changes the supplier if the selling company is providing additional value besides the products.

> "Customer intimacy goes down to turning pain points into game points, it's the foundation for the value proposition" (Respondent B)

Customer intimacy is seen to create a shared understanding for everyone since it should create a structure for performance. Account managers should align with senior management to understand the high-value points in the relationship to bring the right people together, extract the information, and utilize this information. A customer-centric value discipline is a philosophy that needs to be implemented steady and steady.

Thus, customer intimacy was not a term widely used in the case company, even if many of the customer relations were intimate and long-term relationships. Respondent F perceived that the path towards customer intimacy is good, especially along with strategic accounts. Nevertheless, the majority of the respondents requested a structured process and framework for customer intimacy. Respondent D, thus, perceived that customer intimacy is well identified in the case company but requires a more structured approach. The respondents suggest investigating which of the current actions contributes to customer intimacy and which areas are seen to translate into improved customer intimacy.

Many of the respondents perceived that customer intimacy is applied in the case company, but not governing decisions. Therefore, many saw it as a part of account management rather than as a holistic strategy deployed. Also, growing interested in the strategy could be seen in the case company. One of the respondents, thus, argued that customer intimacy could be seen as a new "trendy" word attending the business market rather than as a philosophy or strategy.

> "Not neglecting customer intimacy, but it's funny how they are implementing it into the corporate world. It sounds really good that we should improve customer intimacy, but nobody has defined what does this means to us. If our vice president is discussing it, what will it mean concretely, will it change anything. Step change in account management probably because we want to increase or make better customer intimacy, but what does it mean?" (Respondent G)

The respondent perceived that customer intimacy discusses the same concepts that have been discussed for years in marketing studies. The respondent could not pinpoint any differences as the grounded rule remained the same as long as there are a buyer and a seller. Thus, the respondent explained that customer experience could be seen as a result of customer intimacy.

Activities that contribute to intimacy are genuine interactions that are not generic but personalized, honest, and transparent that ultimately deliver what the customers want and need, and do it, reliably and consistently. Customer intimacy was, further, stated to involve more emotion and feeling, as the customer has a genuine interest in being in the relationship, which contributes to a better experience. Therefore, customer intimacy was perceived as the strategy and customer experience as the outcome of how that strategy is deployed. Intimacy can improve the experience if there is a clear process and protocol that breeds intimacy.

Many of the respondents struggled to separate customer intimacy and customer experience as many perceived they lead to one another, as a positive customer experience breeds customer intimacy. Nonetheless, a high level of customer intimacy could be achieved through having a high level of customer experience, but one could have a high score of customer experience without having any customer intimacy, depending on the measurement. Customer experience was also seen to increase customer intimacy, as customer experience is stated to be the key to gain customer loyalty. Furthermore, customer intimacy was seen as one of the key building blocks of customer experience and as a foundation for customer relations.

> "It's just like being close to the customer, staying close to them, understanding them, staying in touch, being informed and that helps to anticipate their needs. That is the hypothesis that it would provide superior customer experience." (Respondent F)

As seen in the previous citation, many perceived good customer experience as an outcome of customer intimacy. Respondent A argued that if the company does not

understand the difference between customer experience and customer intimacy or how one drives the other, a clear strategy cannot be developed.

4.1.4 Customer Experience Management

Customer experience was perceived as a value that should be more formalized in the case company. Many of the respondents argued that customer experience management was still missing a clear structure in this specific department. The majority of the respondents agreed that a holistic understanding of what is meant with customer experience should be agreed on. The respondents wanted a formalized process to follow with a structured approach including guidance to a certain extent. Right tools and guidelines were specifically requested as the expectations on customer experience were unclear. Thus, many highlighted that compared to the industry-specific competition, the case company was already ahead of managing customer experience, as it tends to be forgotten in many industrial markets.

Customer experience was perceived as a pyramid, where the foundation is built on key elements to even have a customer relation. The foundation includes products, quality, operational aspects, and logistics, and should be able to deliver on what is promised. In the second layer of the pyramid, relationships and cooperation are vital. How the relationship works when everything is not going as planned, including trust and incident management. How fast the company is able to correct deviations, and how smooth the processes are, influence the customer experience. The top of the pyramid includes the most evolved relationships, consisting of trust and feeling. Here the customers are willing to provide extra information about wishes and pain points. At the top of the pyramid honesty and equal treatment are necessary elements. One crucial thing to observe is that the higher you go in the pyramid of customer experience the harder it gets to measure. On the foundational level, one can manage the set KPI's as delivery times but on the top of the pyramid, you can often only perceive the length of the relationship.

Many of the respondents saw customer experience as an outcome of the whole performance, as a form of customer response. Characteristics that were often linked with good customer experience were *quality, speed, dependability, flexibility,* and *cost*. Often *profit-making* was also associated with a good customer experience. When the customer receives a great margin, the customer experience is considered to

improve from the operations perspective. Furthermore, respondent B highlighted that customer experience should be seen as a journey, especially in the B2B environment as the dynamics are different.

Discipline to improve the relationship should exist while retaining and providing value. Respondent A also highlighted *consistency* as one of the main factors driving customer experience. Customers should be aware and familiar with the service received not dependent on country or region. Open communication was, further, seen as a key for collaboration, as customer experience was perceived as mutually beneficial, while the customer is getting something from the relationship beyond the product. Therefore, a good customer experience was seen to consist of something intangible, beyond what is physically purchased.

Customer experience was also perceived through the customers' buying behavior, as it, according to respondent I, gives accurate measurement tools for customer experience. Furthermore, respondent I, argued that customer experience should be previewed as co-created value, as the case company is seldomly seen as a supplier rather than a partner aiming for a win-win situation with growing value for the customer. Moreover, customer experience should be seen as a process covering especially the after-sales not only the transaction.

The *easiness of doing business* was also considered to improve customer experience. While the vessel arrived at the right time, at the right place, without any operational issues, good customer experience could be achieved. As a result, *information exchange* and *open dialogue* were seen to contribute to successful customer experience. Furthermore, *commitment, problem-solving, bringing new customers, and retaining customers* were seen as success factors contributing to improved customer experience. Moreover, the value proposition should be clearly presented and that the customer is valued. The respondents perceived that the cooperation should be seamless and easy. Thus, as the case company is a big corporation, dealing with procedures, risk evaluations, and enormous contracts, it not always as simple. However, the customer experience was determined to be impacted by personal relationships with the customers as well. Therefore, investments and appreciation towards the persons involved were stated to improve the experience.

To have successful customer experience in the long term one should align on goals, priorities, and value drivers for both parties involved, to later avoid conflicts in targets. Similarly, customer experience is also considered to be dependent on the case company's capability to choose the right partner who shares the same future vision. Hence, the focus should be on forward-thinking in the selection already. Customer experience was also perceived through the case company's ability to turn customers' pain points into game points.

Many of the respondents also perceived customer experience from how fast the case company was able to correct errors and incidents since the industry is very safety-driven and mistakes are a part of everyday life. Respondents perceived that customer experience is dependent on incident management and how errors are managed, resolved, and avoided. Many of the respondents mentioned follow-up as one of the key elements for successful customer experience. Aftersales were perceived to have a great impact in retaining the customer, as training the new customers is considerably more difficult. Therefore, emphasis should lie on maintaining the partnership. Many of the respondents also considered the first phases of the customer journey as particularly important to manage, as the product is very technical, which requires capability and capacity to properly explain the product. Hence, the introduction was seen as crucial, making sure you are introducing yourself, your product, and your business properly, to show them the received value beyond the product. Contract negotiations are a big part of the industry, which impacts the customer experience. Many perceived contract negotiations also an important place to build up the customer experience.

As mentioned, many of the customers have a long-term history, with over 40-50 years of cooperation. The customers in a mature state were also perceived as particularly important to manage, as these customers represent the top of the customer experience pyramid with high trust and loyalty. Respondents also perceived that with mature customers, an increased strategy should be applied, with increasing initiative.

The continual dialogue was mentioned as one of the key factors for customer experience. The majority also highlighted the importance of communication on different levels of the dyad. A continuous exchange of information and ongoing

discussion should exist on a wide range of company levels to improve the information flow. To be able to manage customers' experience one should have the thresholding in place, to understand the current situation, value-drivers, and what makes the customer happy as well as their pain points, that the company tries to anticipate in proactive manners. Moreover, the majority of the respondents argued that a structured process was required for managing customer experience, with standardized processes and approaches, that are clear to everyone. Therefore, account classification should be done to allocate the right resources to manage the customer experience. Customer experience management was, thus, perceived to start from customer understanding, to interpret the needs and challenges to later build up cross-functional teams that eventually deliver value for both parties. The respondents argued, that to manage customer experience right tools are required, with clear responsibilities, expectations, systems, and capabilities to support the process.

Customer experience should be built up from listening and understanding and further through follow-up, to create a value proposition that is based on customer needs and challenges. Respondent D explains customer experience as following:

> "Good customer experience translates to satisfied people at the customer side, which reflects all the way to their organization and the way, their view about us is built. And of course, then you go forward, it translates to more business, and it translates to trust on an economical side, it translates to being the preferred partner, it translates into the willingness of deepening the partnership and then kind of selecting us in a scenario where the economical levels are equal or even a bit different where they see the value of choosing us and instead of other." (Respondent D)

The frequency of contact and the trustworthiness of communication were elements contributing to successful customer experience management. Considering the customer journey early education and quick medication were seen as important to ensure a positive and consistent experience. Respondent C stated that managing the experience is a lot about "stopping fires". Therefore, how the company reacts to the complaint is a vital element contributing to customer experience. Often a dedicated person should be named to look after the customers' interests.

Respondent A also highlighted that account management has a valuable impact on the realization of customer experience, as the key account manager often is in charge of delivering most of the customer experience. In a sense executing a vision for

customer experience, since they are often responsible for communication and ensuring that what has been agreed on has been delivered accordingly. Respondent E also highlighted the importance of the account manager, as the person is the head of the account. The initiatives should be taken by the account manager, to be the one that listens to the customers' needs. One crucial element of the account manager is the capability to understand the customer and take the information back to your own company to understand whether the strategic approaches have mutual interest. To consider the long-term sight one should decide whether upcoming targets are unanimous and match between the companies. Therefore, the information should be interpreted from both sides of the dyad, continually.

Moreover, many perceived customer experience as a vital part of account management. Account management is a lot about collecting insight and building up the customer's viewpoint to the selling organization, hence, customer experience becomes a part of the account management process. Further, account management was seen as a vital tool for customer experience, since with account management one should have a structured process to deliver the service, as the mutual goals and strategy should have been set. Customer experience is further determined through execution, how well the case company can deliver on agreed terms.

Account management is seen to provide the foundation for customer experience, ensuring that the right people are engaging on various company levels. Further, the account team works closely with customer's internal stakeholders, which makes it more visible and important to understand what the customers feel. As the boundaries between companies fade and the link become stronger, one could say, that everything you do in account management contributes to customer experience.

> "With one of our customers we had a long list of logistic improvements and then they said, but we like the people, that is the most important thing for us, that we can rely on you, when you describe the market, drive your price, and drive your service, that we can believe it." (Respondent D)

Customer experience was also perceived to derive from the company strategy. Respondents perceived that to successfully implement customer experience management, the top management should highlight the importance of it. Therefore, customer experience should be thoroughly stressed on all company levels to ensure successful implementation.

Respondent D continued to explain that customer experience should be observed as a building block in everything the company does, in each part of the customer journey. Respondent D perceives that flexibility and easiness throughout the entire journey contribute to improved customer experience. Nonetheless, the focus should be put on the overall view rather than on single details as most of the customers are buying a package. In addition, the customer experience was evaluated by the case companys' tendency of translating customers' wishes and requirements into an appealing offering.

5. Results

This chapter introduces the results of this research. The chapter will consist of the theoretical findings presented in chapter 2, and of the research findings presented in the previous chapter. The results will be presented as a comparison between the literature review and data analysis.

This research aimed to find out whether key account management and customer intimacy could be perceived as building foundations of customer experience management. Moreover, the research strived to understand how the customer experience should be managed with a customer intimacy value discipline and how key accounts should be managed to live up to it. Three research questions were presented in chapter 1.

[1] How can organizations improve the B2B customer experience when adopting customer intimacy?

[2] How can key account management support the realization of successful customer experience and customer intimacy?

[3] What are the implications of key account management and customer intimacy for B2B customer experience management?

KAM, customer insight, customer intimacy, and customer experience management were discussed both in the literature review and data analysis and, hence, contributing the foundations for the results. As found out in the data analysis KAM is perceived as the foundation for customer relationship management in B2B markets. Therefore, the results will also start by introducing the findings regarding KAM.

5.1 Key Account Management

Key account management was stated to be a crucial part of customer relationship management, as it aims to build strategic long-lasting partnerships (McDonald et al., 1997). Similar evidence evolved from the empirical findings since the majority of the customer relationships have lasted over several decades and, hence, contributing with greater strategic importance for the case company. Homburg et al. (2002) explain that great emphasis on KAM is partly important, due to the customers' high revenue contribution. The empirical findings confirm it, as many strategic customers have a

high share wallet with the case company. KAM is perceived as a set of employees who are put together to provide exceptional service for the customer (Homburg et al., 2002). Similar assumptions arose from the empirical findings, as accounts are managed through dedicated sales teams, consisting of various departments. The communication occurs on various organizational levels, involving parties from operational activities to top management. Communication on multiple levels was highly valued and considered to improve the cooperation. As Gosselin and Bauwen (2006) stated, KAM should be viewed as an integrated process covering multiple departments. The authors continue to explain that KAM should be seen as a proactive approach towards customer-centricity. The empirical findings likewise highlighted the importance of being proactive instead of reactive.

KAM aims to provide solutions that create value for both sides of the partnership (McDonald et al., 1997). Similar assumptions arise from the empirical findings as the benefits should be seen on both sides of the dyad since the case company provides the tools for their customers' growth at the same time as they increase their market position by enabling the growth. Further, one crucial element that occurred from the interviews was the willingness of finding joint ways to grow in each other's interests. The empirical findings indicate that the customers should rather be seen as partners and, hence, managed through cooperation. Similar assumptions are made by McDonald et al. (1997) who argued that partnerships become more significant and boundaries between the two companies are becoming more invisible. The empirical findings imply that the company boundaries do not play a big significance as the initial aim is to grow together, through inter-organizational approaches. Therefore, joint business plans are utilized in the case company, to agree on mutual ambitions and targets.

However, as Gosselin and Bauwen (2006) explain, not all accounts require the key resources to be maintained. The selling company should carefully select which account to focus on. Similar assumptions occurred also from the empirical findings as respondents perceived that accounts should be segmented through their strategic importance so that the case company could allocate the recourses accordingly. Thus, the respondents disagreed on whether a structural account management process was in place or not. A minority perceived that an account model depending on the strategic importance of customers already existed. The secondary data, thus,

confirms that an account model exists, as the accounts were divided into *key accounts, growth accounts,* and *strategic accounts*, importance in chronological order, with least emphasis put on key accounts with a lean account management style. In the model presented by Gosselin and Bauwen (2006 p.379), the accounts were segmented into *key accounts, strategic accounts, transactional accounts,* and *captive accounts,* with the implication that strategic accounts had the highest value both in the relationship proneness and competence development proneness. The case company also perceived strategic accounts as the most important.

The most crucial factor for the case company while selecting customers is the fit of doing business, as it contributes to long-term strategy. The empirical findings highlight that relationships should be noted as a vital part of the partnership, especially in the complex B2B environment. Similar assumptions occur from Guesalaga et al. (2018) who state that companies utilize KAM as a tool to establish and maintain the relationship. The authors suggest that KAM is also dependent on the selling companys' recourses and capabilities.

The empirical findings indicate that the case company has the right resources to allocate to each customer. The resources presented by Guesalaga et al. (2018 p. 163) included customer knowledge, top management support, training, processes, and technology. These were all factors that also arise from the empirical findings. Many perceived that top management support was crucial to align, to understand what is meant and required with account management. Further, the link between the account management model and the business model should be improved. The capabilities required for KAM included according to Guesalaga et al. (2018 p. 163) relationship- and trust-building, value proposition development, market sensing, and reconfiguration. These are all elements that also resulted from the research data. Problem-solving could according to Guesalaga et al. (2018) be seen as a vital part of opportunity creation while flexibility was needed in reconfiguration. The empirical findings confirm that problem-solving and indecent management are vital tools for both KAM and customer experience. Furthermore, flexibility together with information sharing, and trust-building, were seen as crucial factors contributing to KAM.

Guesalaga et al. (2018) state that cross-functional methods should be adapted in account management to manage the resources externally with the customer company and internally between peers and departments to establish, maintain and reshape customer relationships. The empirical findings also indicate that information collection is a crucial part of account management. With the help of customer insight, the case company could translate the information into the company and align on mutual goals with the customers. Therefore, to ensure the flow and continuum of the partnerships, cross-functional methods should be applied to agree on mutual ambitions for the future.

For the case company to manage their key accounts, an account plan should be followed, preferably a long-term one. The plan should include key goals and specific targets that the case company wants to achieve with the customer. Joint business plans were also stated to be utilized, to agree on mutual priorities, ambitions, expectations. Zupancic (2008), thus, argues that companies do not have a mutual way to manage their key accounts, but rather various models are implemented. This is both confirmed and neglected in the empirical findings as one of the respondents perceived that all of the accounts needed different approaches while other respondents perceived that a structured approach was required.

Kumar et al. (2019) recommend capturing the performance as a customer-supplier relationship by implementing a network approach that perceives relationships as interlinked partnerships. The empirical findings reinforce the approach, as the case company, as a supplier, also saw the value in being perceived as a collaborative partner, to collect the customer insight from a broader perspective. Therefore, a yearly account clock should be utilized, which both parties should be aware of, to reach a win-win situation. Thus, the empirical findings highlighted the importance of personal relationships beyond the business transaction considerably more than the literature review. The respondents were unanimous that personal relationships affected the success of the partnership tremendously as the people working with people create the business.

As Ojasalo (2001a) states, customer insight enables to provide solutions that increase the value in use, especially for mature customers. Similar observations also occur in the empirical finding as respondents perceived that mature customers were

particularly important to manage, also by increasing the value proposition. The case company also stated that the goal is to improve customer insight by understanding their customers' value-driving elements to build up the customer value proposition, in order to serve them better.

5.2 Customer Insight and Customer Relationship Management

As stated, to understand the customers' needs and wants, a lot of customer knowledge must be collected through various channels. Rantala et al. (2017) also highlight the importance of collecting insight from multiple channels. This is, thus, considered a challenge. Today, digital channels are considered to be the main source of information. The research data also confirms that various digital channels are utilized, such as, the NPS questioner and CRM systems. The case company also shared their concerns in the large amounts of information, as the collected insight consists of various direct and indirect channels. Rantala et al. (2017) also highlight similar issues, especially considering the digital sources of information, which are numerous. The authors urge to thoroughly identify the most relevant touchpoints that contribute with insightful information regarding the customers. The authors, further, stress to consider which sources of information to utilized in various stages of the customer journey. The empirical findings, on the other hand, did not highlight the need for different approached during different maturity stages.

Rantala et al. (2017) criticized that customer insight is not utilized as efficiently as possible. As a result, many decide to focus on fewer customers, as the case company. The case company was stated to have a good level of collecting information and centralizing it. The information consists of interactions, word of mouth, market intelligence, and public affairs, all collecting insight from various aspects. The cooperation internally between teams was seen as crucial, to receive greater customer insight.

In the case company, the common way to collect insight was directly from the customers, through interaction and customer engagement. Meetings and phone calls were mentioned, together with workshops, as the main source of direct information. During these interactions, the case company strives to gather an understanding of their customers' possible concerns and focus areas. Price and Wrigley (2016) also elaborate that customer insight is gathered by active interaction with the selling

company's customers, through investigating the spoken and unspoken needs, wants, and desires. Rantala et al. (2017) stated that the selling companies should emphasize the value in use in customer insight and focus on understanding how to create added value for the customer. Similar assumptions arise from the research data as the case company was stated to improve their customer insight, to build up customer value propositions. The case company strives to utilize the insight to provide the customer with value-driving elements that serve them better, to increase loyalty and satisfaction. To achieve this the company strives to collect intimate customer insight that goes beyond the regular.

Furthermore, Baily et al. (2009) perceive segmentation and CRM systems as requirements for collecting customer insight. The empirical findings result that CRM systems are vital to collect and store the data. However, the case company's CRM system, Salesforce, should be utilized to a greater extent, systematically. Therefore, segmentation could be utilized to have a more structured approach in collecting customer insight. Further, the case company should align on which knowledge to collect from particular customers during the customer journey. Chen and Popovich (2003) also highlight that CRM systems should be utilized to increase value for both parties. The empirical findings indicate similar results as the case company strives to be perceived as a collaborative partner, to collect the insight from a broader perspective. The case company perceived that the structure for collecting customer insight is in place, as the communication is on regular basis and often open. Greenberg (2010) urges to customize the interactions with the customers to receive more valuable customer insight. The case company adopts the approach since they utilize joint business plans, that encourage the customer to share information more openly. Customization in the case company could also be seen in the NPS questionnaires, as the questions are tailored according to the customer and department. The case company also utilize MyHub as an interaction portal, for the personalized need of customers, to share information. Greenberg (2010), further, highlight that often the most vital insight is provided voluntarily by the customers. The empirical findings also confirm it, as the most valuable interactions were in person, where the case company had the chance to listen to the feeling. Collecting customer satisfaction was seen as a binary method.

5.3 Customer Intimacy

As Treacy & Wiersema (1993) explain, customer intimacy is a customer-centric value discipline that aims to create long-term relationships with customers and increase loyalty. The research data indicates that customer-centricity was seen as a synonym for customer intimacy. In the empirical findings, customer intimacy was, further, perceived as a proactive approach, where trust, loyalty, and open dialogue build up the foundation. Treacy and Wiersema (1993) also perceived customer insight as the foundation for customer insight. Similar assumptions also arise from the empirical findings, as customer intimacy was perceived to be based on customer understanding. In the case company, customer intimacy was described as the process of gathering valuable customer insight from a well-functioning good relation. The empirical findings also highlight that once built up an intimate customer relationship it is more difficult to change, as the customers might be receiving tailored solutions. Being able to offer tailored solutions that meet the needs and desires of customers was also according to Treacy and Wiersema (1993) seen as an outcome of customer intimacy. Kai-Uwe Brock and Yu Zhou (2012) also highlight commitment, loyalty, and availability of customers as results of customer intimacy. The empirical findings, however, highlight long-term customer relationships as the result the intimacy. Kai-Uwe Brock and Yu Zhou (2012) also urge to view customer intimacy as a tight relationship with mutual understanding. Empirical findings also result that customer intimacy was rather seen as the connection with the customers. Customer intimacy was, further, perceived to start from persons and then grow into the organization. Habryn (2012) also explains that customer intimacy should be built on relationships. The author continues that customer intimacy is a competitive strategy aiming to achieve a market-leading position by understanding the customers thoroughly to offer tailored solutions, therefore, the relationships are perceived in the long term. The results imply that the case company is one of the leading organizations in the field adopting a customer-centric approach.

KAM was also perceived as a crucial part of customer intimacy since respondents argued that intimacy can only be achieved through account management and inter-organizational structures. Treacy & Wiersema (1993) also pinpoint decentralization as a common way to respond to the demand of fewer customers with individual solutions available. The empirical findings state that customer intimacy differentiates

the structural account management principles, into more personalized account management, as the relationship is deeper, and might translate into a personalized account management style. With customer intimacy, the case company can initiate ideas and improve the cooperation. Consistency also occurred in the empirical findings, as stickiness is needed to maintain the relationship. Empirical findings indicate that customer intimacy can be seen as the foundation for the value proposition. Habryn (2012) also provided similar implications as customer intimacy should create value to the customer. Value perception was also stated to reinforce customer intimacy according to Kai-Uwe Brock and Yu Zhou (2012).

The empirical findings stress that customer intimacy discusses the same concepts that have been discussed before in marketing studies. Nevertheless, this is prevalent, as Habryn (2012) explains that the roots in the philosophy establish from relationship marketing and service-dominance but is evolved throughout a more service-oriented mindset where customers have high expectations which companies are trying to predict, to fill the needs and desires with customization.

The empirical findings argued that customer intimacy requires account management and consistent customer experience. Thus, customer intimacy was not a term widely used in the company, even if many of the customer relations were intimate and long-term relationships. Customer intimacy was considered to be applied to a certain extent in the case company, but not governing decisions. Therefore, many saw it as a part of account management rather than as a holistic strategy deployed. Thus, the path towards customer intimacy was perceived as good, especially along with strategic accounts. Nevertheless, a formalized approach with a structured process and framework was requested to interpret what is meant with customer intimacy in the case company. A holistic meaning should be aligned on, starting from the senior management throughout the whole organization. Habryn et al. (2012) also highlight that customer intimacy should be adapted in the overall strategy to meet the high expectations of the customers.

According to the empirical findings, customer intimacy and customer experience were seen as interlinked processes, based on genuine interactions that are not generic but rather personalized, honest, and transparent. Customer intimacy was, further, stated to involve more emotion and feeling, which contribute to a better experience.

The respondents perceived customer intimacy as the strategy and customer experience as the outcome of how that strategy is deployed. To continuously improve customer experience, ongoing customer intimacy processes should be followed by using data and customer insights. Habryn (2012) also emphasizes that customer intimacy should be interpreted both by managing the relationship and managing customer knowledge. Therefore, Habryn et al. (2012) introduce the multidimensional models to manage customer intimacy, presented previously in the literature review. The model captures customer information and tangible assessment points that contribute to evaluating intimacy.

The empirical findings perceive customer intimacy as one of the building blocks of customer experience, and hence, good customer experience as a result of customer intimacy. In addition Gobble (2015) stated customer intimacy to have a great impact on customer experience, as it goes beyond customer insight and focuses on creating engagement with the customers.

5.4 Customer Experience Management

As stated, customer experience is a crucial part of the whole customer journey and captures all direct and indirect interaction the customer has with the organization (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015). Customer experience is, further, perceived as an overall competitive advantage. The case company, thus, argues that there is yet not a holistic process in place to manage customer experience. Clear processes, with a holistic understanding of what is meant with customer experience, should be agreed on, with tools and guidelines to support the management of it. The literature review also discussed that customer experience is implemented far more in B2C markets, than in B2B markets. The gap in customer experience management in the B2B markets was considered problematic, as the emphasis should be put on maintaining the relationships, as the industrial markets are dependent on fewer customers (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015; Zolkiewski et al., 2017). The industrial markets also consist of multiple interactions and touchpoints between the parties, which contributes to a multidimensional nature. The selling company can control some of the interactions but is unlikely to control many (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015) Similar assumptions arose from the empirical findings as the case company perceived the amount of data to be impossible to control.

Customer experience is limited to the customers' ability to perceive the received benefits as it consists of direct and indirect interactions on various levels (Ojasalo, 2001a; McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015). Rantala et al. (2017) explain that industrial markets often observe different aspects regarding customer experience, such as *the value in use*. Zolkiewski et al. (2017) also explain that customer experience in B2B markets is more likely to focus on factors, as *decreased costs,* and *easiness of doing business*. This is also prevalent in the empirical findings, as characteristics that were often linked with good customer experience were *quality, speed, dependability, flexibility, profit-making,* and *cost*. The easiness of doing business was also considered to improve customer experience as long as the business remained seamless and easy. Value in use was also perceived as crucial, as the case company argued that value proposition should be presented while showing that the customer is valued. Therefore, the value proposition should be based on customer needs but, thus, create value for both sides of the dyad.

Lemon and Verhoef (2016) identify that customer experience evolves and reshapes during the evolution of the customer journey, wherefore, the different stages of the customer relationships should be observed. Similar results occurred from the empirical findings, as customer experience should be seen as a journey, especially in the B2B environment as the dynamics are different. The respondents perceived that discipline to improve the relationship should apply while both parties retain value.

The intensified role of customers in customer experience management was also highlighted in the literature review, as the customer can determine how involved they want to be (Zolkiewski et al., 2017). Customers have also received a leading role in the relationship, as they can be perceived as co-creators that even have a greater influence on the selling company itself. Hence, customer experience management much depends on the resources and abilities of the customer company and how much they can contribute to the co-creation. (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015) The empirical findings show that customer experience should be previewed as co-created value, as the case company is seldomly seen as a supplier rather than a partner aiming for a win-win situation. The majority of the case companys' customers were even perceived as co-creators. McColl-Kennedy et al. (2019) suggest a practice-based approach to highlight the multi-actor dimensions, meaning that all parties involved influence each other. This contributes to new deeper insights with a wider mindset

and understanding of the relationship, as the relationship evolves. McColl-Kennedy et al. (2019), however, conclude that customer journeys should be observed from the customers' perspective. The empirical findings also reinforce that customer experience is seen as a result of the whole performance, as customer's response and buying behavior.

Zolkiewski et al. (2017) stress that the relationships often cross organizational boundaries and might involve several client-customer relationships. Therefore, different stakeholders might have different perceptions of the overall experience, due to different roles. The empirical findings also highlighted that customer experience should start from customer understanding, to interpret the need and challenges to then build up cross-functional teams.

Ojasalo (2001a) states that new customers often emphasize the outcome of short-term benefits, while mature relationships emphasize the long-term value. New customers might also have unrealistic and even unclear views on the experience, while mature customers have more demanding expectations. The empirical findings also conclude that the first phases of the customer journey are particularly important to manage as customer experience origins from the first phases. Hence, the introduction was seen as crucial, to introduce the value beyond the product. Yet, the case company also emphasized mature customers as particularly important to manage as the business is based on long-term relationships. Therefore, an increased strategy and initiative should be applied with mature customers to improve customer experience.

McColl-Kennedy et al. (2019) identify that new ways of capturing, managing, and improving customer experience can arise from collecting customer insight. Thus, a more conceptual framework is needed to manage the customer experience in B2B markets. The authors utilize the touchpoint approach by investigating brand-owned post-purchase. The implication with the model is that the customer experience is captured [1] through various *touchpoints* that investigate [2] *value creation elements* [3] *discrete emotions* and [4] *cognitive responses* (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2019, p. 12). The model could, further, be implemented in the customer experience pyramid introduced in the empirical findings and provide a structured process for customer experience management. The model provides various elements to interpret during the

customer journey and would, hence, contribute with tangible elements to manage, and create a structured framework for the case company.

The literature review did not interpret relationship management as a tool for customer experience. However, the empirical findings highlight it strongly. The relationships were considered as particularly important, to have relationships beyond the business transaction. By understanding the customer's experience, an improved value proposition could also be achieved. Account management was also stated to be an important element of customer experience as the account manager was stated to deliver a crucial part of the customer experience. Hence, KAM is perceived as the foundation for customer experience management. Account management has a vital part to translate the customers' wishes into the case company. Furthermore, the cross-functional teams in account management also contribute to customer experience as the boundaries between companies fade and the link becomes stronger. One could say that everything done in KAM contributes to customer experience.

Furthermore, customer experience in the case company was seen as a building block in everything the company does, in every point of the customer journey, which the senior management should align on. Good customer experience was stated to translate into satisfied people at the customer side, which reflects into the customer organization. In the long-term, the customer experience was stated to improve the business and profit as the customers could see the value in deepening the partnership with the case company since the company was seen as the preferred partner.

6. Conclusion and Discussion

This chapter presents a comprehensive summary of the research findings. Furthermore, theoretical implications and managerial implications will be given. The conclusions will also discuss limitations and recommendations for future research.

6.1 Conclusions

The research has strived to elaborate whether customer intimacy and KAM can be perceived as the foundation for the B2B customer experience. The research studies several key terms contributing to customer experience in industrial markets and interpreted the knowledge of nine professionals of the case company to reinforce the findings.

After the empirical findings, it became evident that the B2B customer experience management is a vital part of organizations' competitive advantage and requires KAM, customer intimacy, and customer insight as the foundation. The results show that KAM, customer intimacy, and customer experience share mutual value drivers, such as *trust, consistency,* and *commitment*. Furthermore, *mutual interest, transparency,* and *loyalty* were key terms strongly connected to the topics. As the result, customer intimacy and KAM can be perceived to deliver the foundations for B2B customer experience management.

Organizations can improve their customer experience by applying customer intimacy. The empirical findings indicate that customer intimacy involves more emotion and feeling, as the customers have a genuine interest to be in the relationship, which contributes to a better experience. Therefore, customer intimacy is perceived as the strategy and customer experience as the result of how that strategy is deployed. Customer intimacy together with KAM was perceived as a proactive approach towards customer focus. Yet, customer intimacy should develop KAM towards a personalized account management style, that is considered to improve the customer experience. Hence, customer intimacy should deliver the structure for performance.

The empirical findings show that customer experience cannot be managed without KAM, as KAM provides the foundation for customer experience management, by

ensuring that interactions occur on various levels continuously. In addition, KAM is considered to provide most of the customer insight, and hence, is perceived to build the connection between the customer and the selling company. As a result, KAM provides an essential part of the customer experience.

6.2 Discussion

This research has focused to elaborate on evidence for B2B customer experience management. Prior academic scholars have overlooked the area and focused on consumer markets, which has resulted in a lack of understanding of B2B customer experience management. This research confirms it since it was perceived that the case company was one of the first in the industry to emphasize customer experience. However, a structured process for customer experience management was still missing but highly requested.

The implication is, that B2B customer experience management should be seen as a dynamic process that evolves. In addition, the customer experience management approach, introduced by McColl-Kennedy et.al. (2019), should be applied, to capture (1) touchpoints, (2) value creation elements, (3) discrete emotions, and (4) cognitive responses.

Customer intimacy should include both CRM and customer insight (Habryn, 2012). The empirical findings reinforced customer intimacy to have a great impact on customer experience, and hence, positive customer experience as a result of customer intimacy. In addition, Gobble (2015) stated customer intimacy to go beyond customer insight and focuses on creating engagement with the customers. The empirical findings show that customer intimacy was perceived as the foundation for the value proposition. Yet, without a focus on KAM, customer insight, and customer experience, the company cannot apply customer intimacy as a competitive strategy.

A theoretical framework was introduced in Chapter 1. After the empirical findings, this research suggests applying the framework to understand the variables contributing to customer experience management in industrial markets on a holistic level.
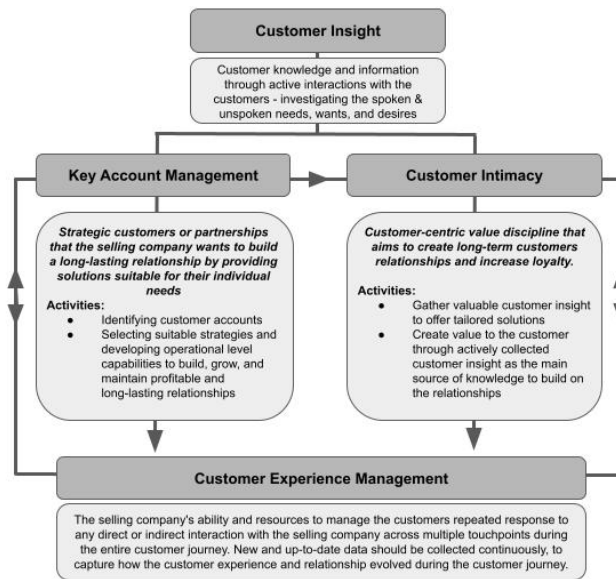
Figure 5. The theoretical framework

The model presents customer experience management as an ongoing and dynamic process with interrelated variables. In the model, customer insight provides the foundation for the framework, while KAM and customer intimacy are perceived as equal elements providing the foundation for customer experience management. Nonetheless, to adopt customer intimacy, prior efforts should have been dedicated to KAM. Customer intimacy was perceived to deliver an improved customer experience, but the customer experience was also seen to increase the level of customer intimacy. As stated, customer intimacy is, therefore, perceived as the strategy and customer experience as the outcome of how that strategy is deployed. Yet, in the model customer intimacy and customer experience are considered to have an ongoing influence on one another. Continuous influence is also observed between KAM and customer experience, as customer experience was considered to improve the efficiency of KAM, while KAM was perceived to deliver most of the customer experience.

As a result, the model should be perceived as an ongoing and interactive evaluation of customer experience.

6.3 Theoretical Implications

Previous academic scholars have perceived the research topics as independent variables influencing customer relationships from various perspectives. This research

has strived to review the topics as an interactive approach influencing one another and the customer experience management.

As observed, many similar characteristics were identified between the research topics. The findings indicate that problem solving is an important element of KAM and customer experience, while trust-building and mutual goals and ambitions were prevalent whether discussing customer experience, KAM, or customer intimacy. Similarly, customer insight and mutual value were linked to customer intimacy, KAM, and customer experience management. Hence, the findings advise creating relationships beyond the business transactions.

The results show that a shared vision can be observed, with a mutual aim to improve the selling companys' competitive advantage in the long-term.

6.4 Managerial Implications

Customer intimacy is considered to create a stronger market position for the company. However, without a focus on KAM, customer insight, and customer experience, the company cannot apply customer intimacy as a competitive strategy.

The findings indicate that the case company has a structure built up for account management, however, the model is not yet applied to all accounts. The empirical findings request for a structured approach in B2B customer experience management. Many perceived good customer experiences as a result of customer intimacy and vice versa. Yet, customer intimacy was perceived as a synonym for customer-centricity rather than as a discipline governing decisions in the case company. Furthermore, both customer experience management and customer intimacy require a structured process. Managers are advised to highlight the mutual value drivers and define the key topics to create a shared understanding in the case company. The recommendation is to define the four main topics according to the theoretical framework presented in the study, with a mutual aim to serve the customers with a greater value.

This thesis perceives the variables as forces having an ongoing and interactive influence on one another. Hence, clear ambitions levels and targets should be set for each topic. Customer intimacy was stated to improve the customer experience if clear

process and protocol existed. Hence, the managers are urged to define the expected impact level of customer intimacy. Current actions that contribute to customer intimacy should also be identified. Moreover, managers should define the wanted results with customer intimacy and align on how customer intimacy is expected to improve KAM and customer experience.

This thesis urges managers to implement customer intimacy as a structured approach, steadily. The implication is that customer intimacy can improve KAM by implementing a structure for customer-centricity. Therefore, the recommendation is to evaluate customer intimacy through tangible assessment points to measure the customer interactions. With tangible touchpoints, intimacy can be translated into more efficient KAM and improved customer experience management.

In conclusion, customer intimacy improves the customer experience, while customer experience management enables to deepen the intimacy. Finally, it should be acknowledged that customer experience management is built up from KAM, customer insight, and customer intimacy and investigates determined touchpoints during the whole customer journey, covering, direct and indirect channels. Hence, managers should perceive customer experience management as an interactive process, covering the response of several individuals from the customer's side.

6.5 Limitations and Future Research

This thesis has consisted of various limitations to contribute with accurate findings. Consequently, the results of the research can only be perceived from the case company's perspective, as no customers were contacted for this research. Therefore, it will remain unknown how the customer would perceive the researched topics. Hence, the research finding cannot be utilized without investigating the customers' perspective as well. Future research is urged to investigate the customers' perspective on customer experience management, in B2B markets.

In this study, the focus remained on the case company's customers in Europe and America, which further limits the research, as the company operates globally. Incorporating Asia, for instance, might have influenced the research findings. Nevertheless, this research only observed the case company as a supplier and, hence, the customer as counterparties, either as branded channel partners or distributors.

This, further, limits the research as the customers are not necessarily the end-users of the product. The focus remained only on the case company's direct customers, not on the end-users.

It should be observed that the market environment is highly influenced by regulations and governmental restrictions. Hence, the customers might be buying the product only due to governmental obligations and mandate fulfillment. Future research could be conducted in investigating how customer experience management is influenced by mandate fulfillment.

The collected research data included only nine semi-structured interviews, which limits this research. Further, no separation was done between the different geographical regions contributing to this research. Hence, the customers were referred to as the same, not depending on if the respondent worked in Europe or America. Moreover, no separation was done in the different roles of the respondents that, further, limited the research, as not all respondents are in daily contact with the customer.

As the thesis is written during the global pandemic, it further limits the research as all interviews were conducted online. Furthermore, all interviews were conducted in English, which could have limited how freely the respondent could express themselves, as it only was the mother tongue of one respondent. Further, the participants were chosen by the case company itself, which might have had implications on the research, as if the participants had been chosen randomly or by the author.

Furthermore, as the research is conducted as a part of the master's thesis, it further limits the depth and schedule of the research as the thesis was written during a timeframe of seven months.

7. Summary in Swedish – Svensk sammanfattning

Kundintimitet och Key Account Management: grunden för att hantera B2B-kundupplevelse

7.1 Inledning

Idag har kundupplevelse fått en allt viktigare roll inom organisationer, då företagen strävar efter att upprätthålla sin övergripande konkurrenskraft (Zolkiewski et al., 2017). Kundupplevelse är en viktig del av en kunds livscykel. Därför bör organisationer uppmärksamma sina kunders behov och önskemål under hela kundresan för att skapa långsiktiga kundrelationer. Enligt McColl-Kennedy et al. (2015) består kundupplevelse av direkta och indirekta interaktioner som involverar kundernas kognitiva, affektiva, känslomässiga, sociala och fysiska reaktion på varan eller servicen. Dock har tidigare forskningar snarare utforskat fenomenet från konsumentperspektiv (B2C) än från företagsperspektiv (B2B) med industriella kundrelationer (Zolkiewski et.al, 2017). Detta är oroväckande, eftersom B2B-marknaderna även ofta är beroende av färre kunder som bidrar med högre marginal (O'Brien, Liu, Chen & Lusch, 2020). Därför bör en högre betoning läggas på att upprätthålla de komplexa B2B-kundrelationer genom att förstå kundernas upplevelse. För att upprätthålla kundrelationer väljer flera företag att fokusera på färre kunder som bidrar med högre strategiskt vikt och är således lönsammare att upprätthålla. Följaktligen blir Key Account Management (KAM) viktigt för företagen att tillämpa. KAM hänvisar till kontinuerligt arbete med företagets viktigaste kunder för att upprätthålla de strategiska kundrelationerna. Dessa kundrelationer anses bidra med tillgångar till företagets framtida utveckling och anses således som långsiktiga. (Svens, Leischnig, Pardo, Niersbachd, 2018) För att upprätthålla relationen krävs det kontinuerlig insamling av information och kunskap om kunderna; därför är kunderfarenheter oerhört viktiga att uppmärksamma. Kunderfarenheter bör kontinuerligt insamlas och analyseras för att förstå beteendemönster och kunderna bättre. (Rantala et al. 2017). Då företagen väljer att fokusera på färre kunder som bidrar med högre värde, kan även kundintimitet som en konkurrenskraftig filosofi tillämpas. Kundintimitet grundar sig på kunderfarenheter som bidrar med mervärde och har som uppgift att förstå kunderna på en djupare nivå. Målet är att skapa långsiktiga kundrelationer och öka lojalitet.

Denna forskning har utförts på uppdrag för ett multinationellt företag, som har sin verksamhet inom förnybara bränslen samt oljeindustrin. Studien har utförts i samarbetet med avdelningen för förnybara bränslen. Företaget kommer framöver att hänvisas till företag X.

7.2 Syfte

Syftet med detta studie är att klargöra hur kundupplevelse bör hanteras inom B2B-marknader. Det specifika syftet är att undersöka om KAM och kundintimitet kan anses som grunden för hantering av B2B-kundupplevelse. Målet är att förstå hur kundupplevelse bör hanteras i ett företag som tillämpar kundintimitet som en konkurrenskraftig filosofi. Dessutom granskas hur nyckelkonton bör hanteras för att leva upp till filosofin. Vidare ligger fokus på att undersöka hur kunderfarenheter bör insamlas och tillämpas för att förstå kunderna. Avhandlingen besvarar följande forskningsfrågor:

[1] Hur kan organisationer förbättra hantering av B2B-kundupplevelse då kundintimitet tillämpas som en konkurrenskraftig filosofi?

[2] Hur stöder KAM åstadkommandet av framgångsrik kundupplevelse och kundintimitet?

[3] Vilka implikationer har KAM och kundintimitet för hantering av B2B-kundupplevelse?

7.3 Metod

I denna studie har en kvalitativ forskningsmetod tillämpats, med nio individuella semi-strukturerade intervjuer. Kvalitativa forskningsmetoder används för att tolka sammanhang och helheter och ses således som en metod vars huvudsakliga syfte är att klargöra förhållandet mellan teori och praktik. (Bryman & Bell, 2011)

Alla nio intervjuer ordnades via Zoom på grund av den rådande globala coronapandemin covid-19. Intervjuerna varade mellan en halv timme och en timme. Respondenterna var alla medarbetare från företaget och valdes av företagets initiativ. Alla intervjuer följde en intervjuguide. Enligt Svensson (2015) bör en intervjuguide följa en minneslista av frågor som moderatorn följer under intervjutillfället för att upprätthålla en struktur. Eftersom intervjuerna var semi-strukturerade användes sondering under följdfrågorna. Enligt Given (2008) är sondering en intervjuteknik

som används i kvalitativ forskning för att uppnå grundligare och med detaljerade svar. Sondering kan vara icke-verbalt och verbalt. Icke-verbala metoder är till exempel miner medan verbala metoder innefattar frågeord (Patton, 2015). I denna studie användes båda för att uppnå omsorgsfullare svar.

Alla nio intervjuer spelades in och transkriberades. Efter transkribering användes coding och datasampling som analystekniker. Datasampling innebär att moderatorn lyssnar på transkriberingar flera gånger för att hitta sammanhang som tillför forskningsresultat. Med coding bröts data ner till mindre delar genom att identifiera olika sammanhang och teman. Fyra huvudteman identifierades: key account management, customer intimacy, customer experience, och customer insight.

7.4 Empiri

I den empiriska delen diskuteras enbart forskningsresultat genom fyra identifierade huvudteman.

Enligt respondenterna ansågs KAM vara grunder för effektiv kundbetjäning inom B2B-marknaderna. Företag X baserar sin verksamhet på långvariga strategiska kunder som företaget ser en gemensam framtid med. Respondenterna ansåg gemensamma mål, ambitioner, och vision som ytterst viktiga för framtida utvecklig. Därför har företaget X valt att fokusera på färre men strategiskt viktiga kunder. Kunderna för företag X är indelade i två kundgrupper: "branded channel partners" och distributionsförsäljning. Båda kundgrupperna grundar sig på långvariga kundrelationer. Enligt respondenterna är kundrelationer med distributionsförsäljning baserad på kvalitet, hastighet, pålitlighet, flexibilitet och kostnad, medan relationen med partnerna involverar engagemang och utvecklingen av värdeproposition.

Respondenterna ansåg att framgångsrik KAM kan uppnås via samarbete, genom att lyssna och förstå kundernas behov. Dessutom är förtroendeskapande, lojalitet, samt ärlighet nyckelord som respondenterna ofta använde för att förklara framgångsrik KAM. Respondenterna ansåg att företaget måste tillämpa ett proaktivt tillvägagångssätt som går igenom flera organisationsnivåer mellan företaget och kunden för att nå effektiv KAM. Respondenterna förklarade att långvariga kundrelationer ansågs som oerhört viktiga medan de fösta faserna av kundrelationen ansågs ha en betydligt större inverkan på kundrelationen. Utöver detta ansågs kontinuerlig kommunikation och informationsutbyte som oerhört viktiga variabler

inom KAM. Majoriteten ansåg även att segmentering av kunderna bör prioriteras, eftersom alla strategiska kunder nu behandlas lika. Dessutom ansågs KAM klargöra vad som förväntas med hantering av kunder.

För att förstå nyckelkunderna bättre krävs en hel del kundinformation. Enligt företaget X insamlas information både formellt och informell från kunderna, antingen genom frågeformulär eller genom aktiv interaktion. Marknadsintelligens och offentliga angelägenheter nämndes även som nödvändiga för kundinformationen, eftersom marknaden styrs av lagar och restriktioner. Enligt respondenterna används CRM-system för insamling och lagring av kundinformation. NPS-förfrågningar skickas även ut via system till valda kunder. Dessutom använder företaget ett gemensamt program, MyHub, för att dela och lagra information, som till exempel utbildningar. Respondenterna anser att företaget har de nödvändiga verktygen för att nå kundinformation, speciellt viktiga har man ansett de varierande metoder som bidrar till en enhetlig kundförståelse.

Kundupplevelse var ett av temana respondenterna ansåg krävde förbättring. Respondenterna ansåg att en enhetlig förståelse av vad som menas med god kundupplevelse måste skapas för att klargöra vad som eftersträvas. Flera ansåg att ju intimare kundrelationen blivit, desto svårare har den varit att mäta. Dock ansågs följdriktighet, flexibilitet, kvalitet, hastighet, och pålitlighet vara variabler som bidrar med förbättrad kundupplevelse. Respondenterna ansåg även att den omständighet att det är att jobba med företag X bidrar till kundupplevelsen. Förbättrad kundupplevelse kunde iakttas då kommunikationen var öppen och det fanns engagemang mellan organisationerna. Personliga relationer ansågs också bidra med ett mervärde för kundupplevelse. Respondenterna ansåg att en avsevärd del av relationen går över organisationsgränserna och således bör kommunikation finnas på alla organisationsnivåer. Utöver detta ansågs personernas individuella intressen påverka relationen och således upplevelsen. Dock ansåg majoriteter att KAM-processen och de kundansvariga har en stor inverkan på kundupplevelsen, eftersom de ansågs utföra de främsta delarna av upplevelsen för kundföretaget.

Kundintimitet ansågs härstamma från långvariga kundrelationer, och således ansåg respondenterna att kundintimitet kunde nås genom KAM. Majoriteten ansåg att benämningen även kunde iakttas som ett synonym för kundfokus. Flera ansåg att

kundupplevelse även påverkades positivt av kundintimitet. Dock kunde företaget även ha en god kundupplevelse utan kundintimitet. Flera ansåg att pålitlighet, lojalitet och individuella lösningar var ofta förknippade med kundintimitet, eftersom de ansågs härstamma från kundförståelse. Dock ansåg majoriteten att kundintimitet fanns inom företaget men inte som en övergripande konkurrenskraftig filosofi.

7.5 Resultat

Resultaten indikerar att KAM och kundintimitet kan anses bygga upp grunden för hantering av B2B-kundupplevelse. Dock eftertraktades tydliga tillvägagångssätt inför alla fyra olika teman. Resultaten tyder på att både KAM och kundintimitet är delmoment som aktivt diskuteras och tillämpas inom företaget. Dock saknas det tydliga strukturer inom företaget för speciellt kundupplevelse och kundintimitet. För att utöva dessa i verksamheten krävs tydliga riktlinjer och tillvägagångssätt.

Det teoretiska ramverket uppmanar till att se KAM som en integrerad process som involverar flera avdelningar. Gosselin och Bauwen (2006) förklarar KAM som ett proaktivt kundcentrerat synsätt. Liknande observationer kom fram i empirin, eftersom KAM ansågs proaktivt besvara kundernas behov. Enligt McDonald et al. (1997) är målet med KAM att tillhandahålla lösningar som erbjuder ett värdeskapande förslag åt båda parterna. Empirin tyder på motsvarande resultat eftersom partnerskapet behöver vara strategiskt långsiktigt och värdeskapande med gemensamma mål samt ambitioner.

Det teoretiska ramverket föreslår att KAM upprätthålls med hjälp av det säljande företagets resurser och kapacitet. Guesalaga et al. (2018) uppmanar att använda tvärfunktionella metoder för att upprätthålla kundrelationer. Tvärfunktionella metoder observerades även i empirin eftersom företagsgränserna inte ansågs att ha en någon avgörande betydelse eftersom målet är att växa tillsammans och stöda lösningar som är lönsamma och värdeskapande framöver för båda parterna. Därför bör kundsegmentering tas i bruk för att effektivisera KAM, genom att dela resurserna jämnt enligt strategiska vikt. KAM ansågs även ha en inverkan på hantering av kundupplevelse.

Rantala et al. (2017) påpekar betydelsen av att samla kundinformation från flera källor. Detta observerades även i empirin, eftersom majoriteten ansåg att företaget har effektiva och varierande sätt att insamla kundinsikter. Price och Wrigley (2016)

påstår att kunderfarenheter insamlas genom aktiv interaktion, genom att undersöka de direkta och indirekta kundbehoven. Rantala et al. (2017) betonar att kunderfarenheter krävs för att skapa mervärde för båda parterna. Liknande antaganden kommer fram i empirin. Företaget X strävar efter att förstå kunderfarenheterna för att erbjuda kunden värdedrivande element, för att öka lojalitet och tillfredsställelse.

Treacy och Wiersema (1993) förklarar kundintimitet som en kundcentrerad värdedisciplin som syftar till att skapa långsiktiga kundrelationer samt ökad lojalitet. Genom att aktivt insamla kunderfarenheterna och fördjupa kundrelationen kan kundintimitet uppnås. Empirin visar att en omfattande förstålense dock saknas inom företaget. Därför bör företaget klargöra vad som eftersträvas med kundintimitet. Enligt Habryn (2012) bör kundintimitet uppstå i relationer, något som bekräftas även av empirin eftersom långvariga kundrelationer ansågs vara resultatet av kundintimitet. Treacy och Wiersema (1993) fortsätter och förklarar decentralisering som en metod för kundintimitet som gagnar. Resultaten tyder på att även KAM ansågs vara en metod inom kundintimitet, eftersom målet är att fokusera på färre kunder. Dessutom ansåg majoriteten att kundintimitet är grunden för kundupplevelse.

McColl-Kennedy et al. (2015) förklarar kundupplevelse som en avgörande del av hela kundresan och iakttar alla direkta och indirekta interaktioner med kunden. Utöver detta ansågs kundupplevelse inom organisationer som en övergripande konkurrensfördel. Dock ansåg respondenterna att företag X ännu inte hade en klar struktur för att insamla och hantera kundupplevelse. Tydliga processer med en enhetlig struktur efterlystes medan flera ansåg att företaget redan hade en ledande position gällande kundupplevelse inom branschen. Den teoretiska delen hänvisar till att industriella marknader ofta utvärderar kundupplevelse genom mervärdet företaget fått genom samarbetet. Minskade kostnader och enkelhet var även faktorer som påverkade kundupplevelsen positivt. Detta förstärker även empirin då kvalitet, hastighet, pålitlighet, flexibilitet och vinst var faktorer som ansågs inverka positivt på kundupplevelse. Ytterligare utvecklas kundupplevelsen genom åren, eftersom betoningen på element gällande upplevelsen även förändras under kundresan. Vidare bör kundens resurser iakttas vid mätning av kundupplevelse.

Sammanfattningsvis är kundupplevelsen sammankopplad till KAM och kundintimitet. Kunderfarenheter ansågs som grunden för alla dessa element. Företaget X ansåg att kundupplevelse borde iakttas som en grundpelare för hela verksamheten, eftersom försäljningen grundar sig på kundernas behov. I och med effektiv KAM och fördjupade kundrelationer genom kundintimitet kunde positiva implikationer iakttas i kundupplevelse. Således kan kundintimitet och KAM ses som två likvärda element som bidrar till hantering av kundupplevelse.

7.6 Diskussion och avslutning

Studien visar ett starkt samband mellan kundintimitet och KAM som tillsammans bidrar till en förbättrad hantering av kundupplevelse. Kundinsikter var en gemensam grund som tillför med information för att upprätthålla KAM, kundintimitet och kundupplevelse. Dock är det oerhört viktigt att kontinuerligt ta in nya insikter och information eftersom dessa är element som under kundresan utvecklas och ändras. Således måste tydliga processer vara tillgängliga för företag X för en effektiv resurshantering. Oerhört viktigt är även att dessa termer ses som viktiga strategiska beslut som har en långsiktig positiv inverkan på företagets verksamhet. Därför bör stöd finnas tillgängligt ända från företagsledningen. Dessutom uppmanas företaget att klargöra meningen med kundintimitet, KAM och kundupplevelse för att behålla sin konkurrenskraftiga position på marknaden.

Modellen som presenterades på sidan 26 i avhandlingens huvudtext rekommenderar att uppfatta hantering av kundupplevelse som en dynamisk process med interrelaterade variabler. I modellen utgör kundinsikt grunden för modellen, medan KAM och kundintimitet uppfattas som likvärdiga element som utgör grunden för hanteringen av kundupplevelse. Det krävs KAM med fokus på att skapa långsiktiga strategiska partnerskap för att skapa en kundcentrerad disciplin kallad kundintimitet.

Kundintimitet ansågs bidra med förbättrad kundupplevelse medan god kundupplevelse ansågs även öka nivån på kundintimitet. Därför uppmanas företaget att se kundintimitet som den övergripande konkurrenskraftiga filosofin och kundupplevelse som resultatet av hur filosofin har tillämpats. KAM och kundupplevelse anses även påverka varandra, eftersom kundupplevelsen anses öka effektiviteten av KAM medan KAM ansågs förmedla största delen av kundupplevelsen. Som resultat bör modellen tolkas som en kontinuerlig och

interaktiv utvärdering av kundrelationer och kundupplevelsen. Modellen tolkar variablerna som integrerade processer som har ett gemensamt mål genom att skapa långvariga strategiska partnerskap.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview guide for individual interviews

Introduction:

Thank you for participating in the research. The estimated length of the interview is approximately one hour. The interview will be recorded, and all information will be processed confidentially. All information is solely used for this research, and the recordings will be deleted after transcription. The interviews are anonymous, and the interview can be interrupted at any time. Finally, I kindly ask you to confirm your willingness of participating in this research.

Q1: How do you consider accounts are managed in your region? If you choose one account as the best example, from your perspective, how is the relationship with that accounts managed?

Q2: How do you collect customer insight in your region? and how is it utilized?

Q3: How would you describe good customer experience?

Q4: How should customer experience be managed? Especially among most important accounts?

Q5: Which parts/aspects of the customer journey do you consider as particularly important to manage?

Q6: How does account management contribute to the realization of customer experience in your region? E.g. what type of activities should be included to understand the customer experience.

Q7: How would you describe customer intimacy? How do you consider it is applied in your region?

Q8: How should accounts be managed to live up to a customer intimacy concept/strategy in your region?

Q9: How do you consider customer intimacy can improve the customer experience?

Q10: Any further comments or thoughts on our discussion?