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**VALUE CO-CREATION IN CORPORATE ESPORTS
LEAGUES PLAYERS' EXPERIENCES**



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TIIVISTELMÄ

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Arvon yhteisluonti elektronisen urheilun firmaliigan pelaajien kokemuksissa

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Tämä Pro gradu -tutkielma tutkii elektronisen urheilun firmaliigan pelaajien kokemuksia ja tarkastelee näiden kokemusten vaikutusta koettuun arvon yhteisluontiin. Tutkimuksen tavoitteena on ymmärtää millaisia suomalaisen elektronisen urheilun firmaliigan, Kanaliigan, pelaajien kokemukset ovat, ja miten nämä kokemukset vaikuttavat koettuun arvon yhteisluontiin. Palvelukeskeisen logiikan ja arvon yhteisluonnin teoreettinen tausta osoittaa, että pelaajat ovat toimijoita arvon yhteisluomisen prosessissa ja Tuunanen, Cassabin ja Mayersin vuoden 2010 viitekehys arvon yhteisluonnista kuluttajatietojärjestelmissä tarjoaa linssin ymmärtää kuinka järjestelmän arvoehdotuksia ja asiakkaiden arvoajureita voidaan tarkastella pelaajien kokemuksista. Tutkimuksen empiirisessä osassa käytetään laadullista lähestymistapaa suorittamalla kahdeksan puolistrukturoitua haastattelua ja temaattinen analyysi. Tuunanen, Cassabin ja Mayersin vuoden 2010 mukautetun viitekehysten avulla tarkastellaan aineistosta esiin nousseita teemoja, jotta voidaan ymmärtää miten pelaajien kokemukset vaikuttavat koettuun arvon yhteisluontiin. Tämä tutkielma täydentää elektronisen urheilun kirjallisuutta tutkimalla aiemmin tutkimatonta firmaliigan näkökulmaa, sekä tuottamalla lisää tietoa elektronisen urheilun arvon yhteisluonnista. Tutkimus tunnistaa pelaajien kokemuksista seitsemän teemaa: työnantajien tietämättömyys, työntekijälähtöisyys, harrastuneisuus, hauskanpito, kilpailullisuus, yhteisöllisyys ja helppokäyttöisyys. Lisäksi tutkimus osoittaa, että esiinnousseet teemat vaikuttavat myönteisesti koettuun arvon yhteisluontiin ja, että pelaajien yleiset käyttäjäkokemukset ovat positiivisia.

Asiasanat: elektroninen urheilu, elektronisen urheilun firmaliiga, palvelukeskeinen logiikka, arvon yhteisluonti

ABSTRACT

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Value Co-Creation in Corporate Esports Leagues' Players' Experiences

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This master's thesis studies the experiences of corporate esports league players and explores the impact on perceived value co-creation in these experiences. The study aims to understand what the experiences are like for Finnish corporate esports league Kanaliiga's players and how these experiences impact the perceived value co-creation in the process. The theoretical foundation of service-dominant logic and value co-creation shows that the players are actors in value co-creation process and the 2010 framework of value co-creation in consumer information systems by Tuunanen, Cassab and Mayers provides a lens for understanding how the system value propositions, and customer value drivers can be viewed from the players experiences. The empirical part of the study employs a qualitative approach by eight semi-structured interviews and a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts. Adaptation of the Tuunanen, Cassab and Mayers 2010 framework is then used to review the emerged themes from the data to understand how the players experiences impact the perceived value co-creation. This study contributes to the esports literature by exploring an unstudied aspect of it, that is corporate esports leagues, and by providing more insight into the value co-creation in esports. The study recognizes seven themes from the players' experiences: unawareness of the employers, employee orientation, hobbyism, having fun, competitiveness, communality and ease of use. Furthermore, the study shows that these emerged themes impact the perceived value co-creation positively and that the general user experiences of the players are positive.

Keywords: esports, corporate esports league, service-dominant logic, value co-creation

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1 INTRODUCTION

After Vargo and Lusch (2004) introduced the concept of Service-Dominant Logic (S-D logic), that suggested a shift from goods-centric to a service-centric perspective to understand modern economic exchange and value creation, they created a reformation in how services are perceived. This shift emphasizes the importance of services and their value proposition (Vargo & Lusch, 2008), but also how markets can be viewed as service ecosystems where multiple actors interact with each other (Vargo & Akaka, 2012). It also highlights how the value is created by a joint effort (Vargo & Lusch, 2016) while the customer is always an actor in this effort (Grönroos, 2011.) Furthermore, whether being operand or operant, all participants in a service ecosystem combine their resources for value creation (Akaka, Vargo & Lusch, 2013).

“Esports” is an abbreviation of electronic sports, other widely used forms of it include “e-sports” and “eSports”. As a concept, esports has been around for a while, but according to Hamari and Sjöblom (2017) its growth has accelerated immensely for the past years (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017), for example, the value of the esports market worldwide is estimated to grow from 0.996B U.S. dollars in 2020, to 1.8B U.S. dollars in 2025 (Statista, 2022). It has been challenging traditional sports in popularity, both in spectating and participating, for example the most watched esports tournaments as of 2023 have reached peak viewers of 6.4 million for League of Legends 2023 World Championship and 5.07 million for Mobile Legends: Bang Bang M5 World Championship (Statista, 2023). Competitions are shown on major television networks in the U.S (Holden, Kaburakis & Rodenberg, 2017) and viewership of the largest tournaments are exceeding the numbers of some popular traditional sports events (McCutcheon, Hitchens & Drachen, 2018). The popularity has increased to the extent that e.g., multiple schools and universities have launched their own esports programs (Amazan-Hall, K., Chen, J., Chiang, K., Cullen, A., Deppe, M., Dormitorio, E., Haynes, D., Kernan, J., Quanbeck, K., Romine, M., Ruberg, B., Song, J., Stepan-Norris, J., Steinkuehler, C., & Trammell, A., 2018). Lately different organizers worldwide have established leagues and ladders aimed for corporates and firms to

participate in. One of these organizers is Finnish corporate esports league called “Kanaliiga”, that currently hosts leagues and ladders in different popular esports titles for hundreds of organizations and thousands of their employees (Kanaliiga, 2023). In other words, Kanaliiga is offering a modern alternative for traditional workplace recreational activities such as floorball or basketball (Kanaliiga, 2023). Its operation began in the fall of 2018 which makes it a relatively young organizer.

Mokaya and Gitari (2012) suggested that individuals and organizations have started to take into consideration the concept of planning and managing employee recreation. (Mokaya & Gitari, 2012). According to Chohan, Butt and Chohan (2019) the meaning of cultural and recreational activities is being underestimated. In their research, that evaluates the influence of recreational activities on employees’ wellbeing they found that many diverse forms of recreational activities enhanced employees’ well-being. (Chohan et al., 2019). Relative to this study, one of these diverse forms could be a corporate esports league.

Despite recent interest and growth in esports literature and research, there have not been, as researchers’ knowledge, any studies conducted that involve corporate esports leagues, unlike other leagues and tournaments without the distinction of being strictly organized for company employees, e.g., Major League Gaming (MLG) that was observed by Taylor (2016), Overwatch League in Newham, Scelles and Valenti (2022) study, or many other main organization within the industry by Yuzyk and Seidner (2022). To address this gap, the purpose of this thesis is to research rapidly growing phenomena of esports’ nuanced form of corporate league and its players’ experiences within the theoretical framework of value co-creation. Out of many possible alternatives, the following research questions were selected for this thesis:

How do employees perceive and experience playing in corporate esports league?

How do corporate esports league experiences impact employees perceived value co-creation?

By answering the research questions above, this thesis aims to provide an understanding of corporate esports league players’ experiences and perceptions of participating in this activity and explore the experiences impact on perceived value co-creation involved in such an activity. Furthermore, this thesis can shed light on emerging benefits for players and firms engaging in corporate esports league activity.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The theoretical background of the study will be discussed in this chapter. First the service dominant logic (S-D logic) and value co-creation will be discussed as it provides the foundation for the study. Afterwards esports and recreational activities are briefly introduced and discussed. This study focuses on the players of the corporate esports league Kanaliiga and their experiences, since it is important to understand what value co-creation, esports and recreational activities are.

2.1 Service dominant logic (S-D logic)

The introduction of Service Dominant Logic (S-D logic) marked a paradigm shift from the previous Goods Dominant Logic (G-D logic). Introduced by Vargo and Lusch (2004) the emphasis of S-D logic is centered around the service part of offering – regardless of it being categorized as a product or service in the first place (Vargo & Lusch, 2004).

Vargo and Lusch argue that viewing marketing as exchanging of goods is insufficient in understanding the marketplace, therefore proposing a fresh way to view existing exchange through the centrality of services, a S-D logic. This logic suggests that the value exchanged between the provider and a customer in any given economy is inherently co-created between the two parties by combining their resources and capabilities – instead of simply buying/selling a product. Additionally, the framework of S-D logic emphasizes the significance of relationships and networks and suggests that by building long-term firm-customer relationships along with other stakeholders they can set themselves up for further value co-creation and innovation. (Vargo & Lusch, 2004).

While suggesting that customers are active participants in value co-creation Vargo and Lusch (2004) also present the concept of operant resources that includes the skills, competencies, and knowledge of co-creation enablers, which are the organizations and individuals involved in the process. Regarding implication of S-D logic for marketing theory and practice, Vargo and Lusch urge that the function of marketing involves the entire organization and the focus shifts from transactional to relationship marketing, which can employ the networks, relationships, and integration of resources of all stakeholders for value co-creation. (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). While supporting the adaptation of service logic perspective for marketing, Grönroos (2006) highlights the process nature of services that obviously differentiates them from physical products as the customers are directly part of this open process unlike in the closed one in traditional physical goods production. He also thinks firms should upkeep the quality of their services by constantly developing their processes and skills according to the customer's evolving needs. (Grönroos, 2006.)

To elaborate the shift in marketing concept and to answer risen confusion or inconsistencies between G-D and S-D logic and their lexicon, this table was presented, see Table 1 below. (Vargo & Lusch, 2006).

TABLE 1 Conceptual transitions (adapted from Vargo & Lusch, 2006).

Goods-dominant logic concepts	Transitional concepts	Service-dominant logic concepts
Goods	Services	Service
Products	Offerings	Experiences
Feature/attribute	Benefit	Solution
Value-added	Co-production	Co-creation of value
Profit maximization	Financial engineering	Financial feedback/learning
Price	Value Delivery	Value proposition
Equilibrium systems	Dynamic Systems	Complex adaptive systems
Supply chain	Value-chain	Value-creation network/constellation
Promotion	Integrated marketing communications	Dialogue
To market	Market to	Market with
Product orientation	Market orientation	Service orientation

Further advancing their conceptual development on S-D logic, Vargo and Lusch (2008) argue that S-D logic offers a more contemporary and relevant framework for understanding value creation and exchange in the modern marketplace. They also further emphasize the central concept of value co-creation where the value emerges from actor interactions in the service ecosystem and highlight primary focus on service as fundamental basis of exchange as it considers all acts, processes and performances that may produce benefits to consumers. Through iteration, the original eight foundational premises of S-D logic first grew into 11 and then evolved into five axioms that are shown in Table 2 below. (Vargo & Lusch, 2016).

TABLE 2 The axioms of S-D logic (adapted from Vargo & Lusch, 2016)

Axiom	Description
Axiom 1	Service is the fundamental basis of exchange
Axiom 2	Value is co-created by multiple actors, always including the beneficiary.
Axiom 3	All social and economic actors are resource integrators.
Axiom 4	Value is always uniquely and phenomenologically determined by the beneficiary.
Axiom 5	Value co-creation is coordinated through actor-generated institutions and institutional arrangements.

In addition to its roots in the field of marketing, the service dominant logic has had its effect on various other disciplines as well. For example, it became the

driving foundation for service science (Maglio & Spohrer, 2007). But more importantly, considering this study, SDL has been adopted in Information Systems science in research such as SDL perspective on service innovation (Lusch & Nam-bisan, 2015), framework for developing consumer information systems (Tuunanen, Cassab & Myers, 2010).

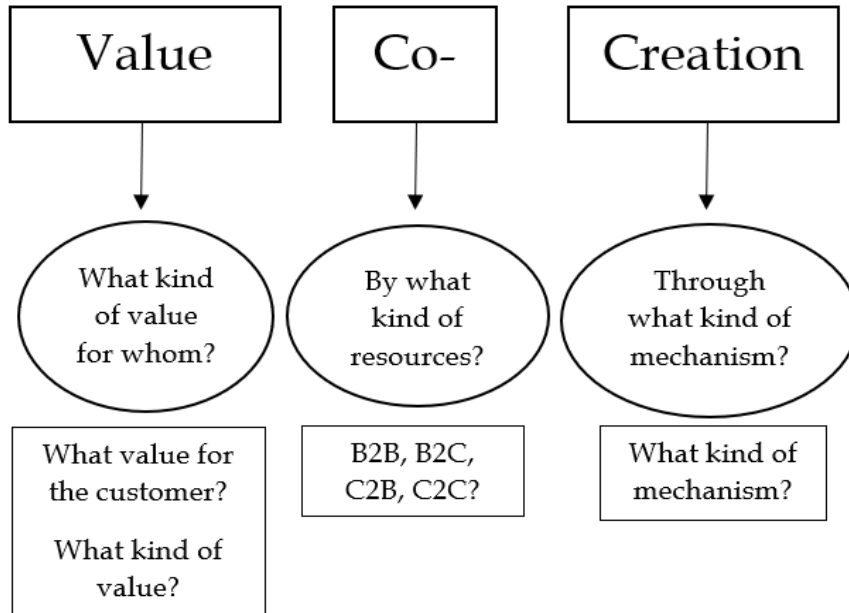
2.2 Value Co-Creation

The emerge of service-dominant logic introduced the concept of value co-creation, which is a central element in this paradigm shift from goods- and firm-centric view towards service- and customer-oriented understanding of the markets (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2006, 2008; Grönroos, 2011; Payne, Storbacka & Frow, 2007).

Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) discussed how the relationships and the concept of a market as a whole is changing, suggesting that “value will have to be jointly created by both the firm and the consumer” for competitive advantage through co-creation of unique experiences (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Vargo, Maglio and Akaka (2008) argue that from S-D logic perspective creators of value additionally includes network partners (Vargo, Maglio & Akaka, 2008).

According to Galvagno and Dalli (2014) “co-creation is the joint, collaborative, concurrent, peer-like process of producing new value, both materially and symbolically” (Galvagno & Dalli, 2014). In the early 2000’s management literature began to see the rise of the idea of co-creation which puts the suppliers and customers on the same side and through their interaction new business opportunities could be discovered. This contradicts the traditional way of value creation in capitalist economies. (Galvagno & Dalli, 2014). Saarijärvi, Kannan and Kuusela (2013) show that value co-creation has different approaches that determine the three elements: value, co-, and creation. These approaches include service-dominant logic, service science, service logic and other approaches. (Saarijärvi et al., 2013). The three elements of value co-creation are presented in Figure 1 below.

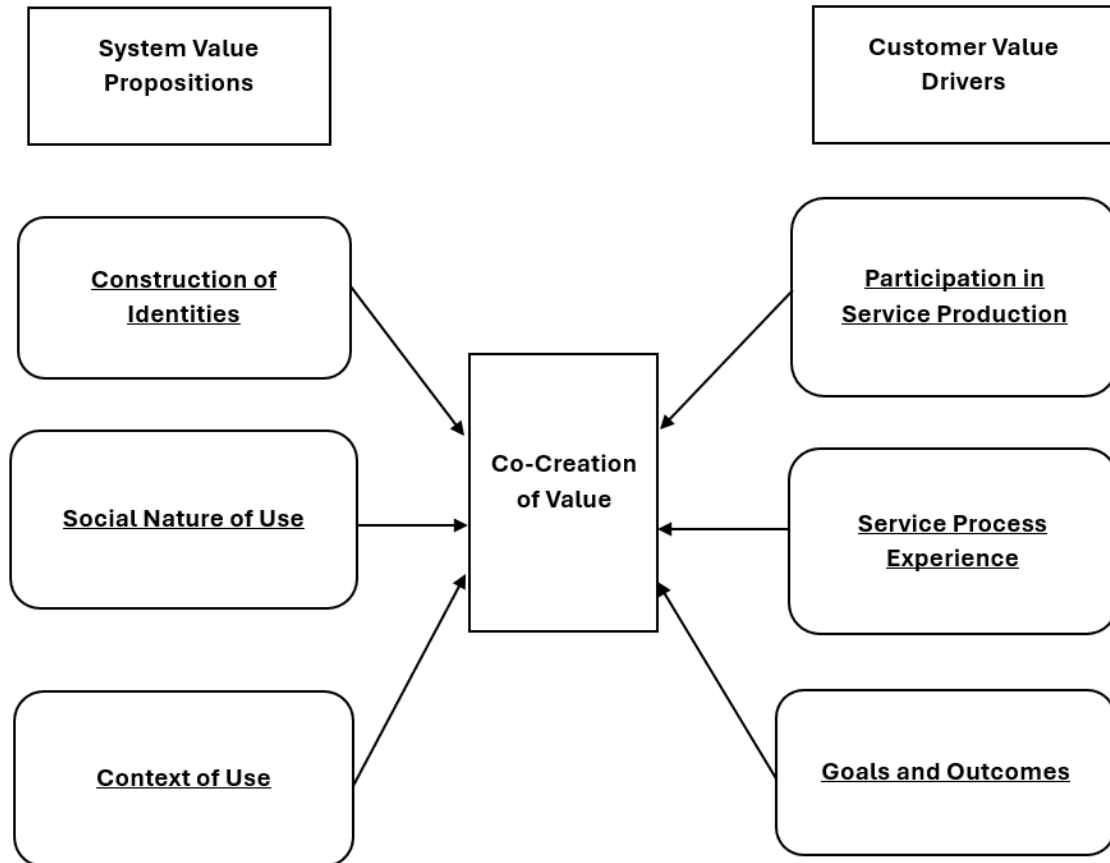
FIGURE 1 Three elements or consistent parts of value co-creation (adapted from Saarijärvi et. al. 2013)



From the service science perspective Vargo and Lusch (2004) suggested the shift from goods dominant to service dominant logic where the idea of co-creation emerges through joint interactions resulting in value creation. (Vargo & Lusch, 2014). From consumer culture theory perspective consumers and companies create value through symbolic and cultural nature of consumption (Saarijärvi et al., 2013). Other perspectives include information systems research that focuses on customer relationships, technological platforms for customer engagement and open processes among users and companies. (Saarijärvi et al., 2013).

In the field of information systems science Tuunanen, Myers and Cassab (2010) present a framework of value co-creation in consumer information systems that highlights value propositions of the system and value drivers of the customers required for value co-creation. The framework is presented in Figure 2 below.

FIGURE 2 Value co-creation in Consumer Information Systems (adapted from Tuunanen et. al., 2010)



3 ESPORTS

Cranmer, Han, Van Gisbergen & Jung (2020) state that despite its rapid growth these past years, esports definition and classification remains uncertain and that its understanding is affected by diverse fields. (Cranmer et al. 2020).

According to Reitman, Anderson-Coto, Wu, Lee, & Steinkuehler (2020) esports still lack a definite definition, although there are themes and aspects that are recurring in different research. To determine what esports is, most often consideration of the context is needed. Depending on the field of science, the definition of esports varies with the emphasis on the more interesting aspects regarding the field researching or defining it. E.g., the emphasis can revolve around computer mediation, physicality, institutional infrastructure, or spectatorship. (Reitman et al. 2020).

Esports has been studied in multiple fields of science as an extension to existing theory or phenomena, these fields all have their distinct focus and key aspects they tend to emphasize when concerning esports in their research. Esports has been studied at least in the fields of business, sports science, cognitive science, informatics, law, media studies, and sociology. (Reitman et al. 2020)

Reitman et al. (2020) say as a sports-focused example that one of the most cited definitions of esports is that it is “an area of sport activities in which people develop and train mental or physical abilities in the use of information and communication technologies” (Wagner, 2006).

Hamari and Sjöblom (2017) refer to esports as coordinated competitive video gaming, both in professional and amateur level where the players act as a part of a team or similar organizations that have a sponsorship agreement with different business organizations. (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017).

Although different researchers in their fields tend to emphasize different aspects when defining esports in their research, the principle of game design and video games remains uncontested which means that the description of competitive gaming is widely accepted. (Reitman et al., 2020). Different definitions or considered key aspects of esports with the emphasis and authors are presented in Table 3 below.

TABLE 3 Different definitions of esports

Definition/ key aspects	Emphasis	Author(s)
Esports is as “a form of sports where the primary aspects of the sport are facilitated by electronic systems; the input of players and teams as well as the output of the eSports system are mediated by human-computer interfaces.”	Aspects of traditional sports	Hamari & Sjöblom (2017)

"An organized and competitive approach to playing computer games"	Competitive video games	Witkowski (2012)
"eSports" is an area of sport activities in which people develop and train mental or physical abilities in the use of information and communication technologies."	Aspects of traditional sports	Wagner (2006)
"In esports, players compete individually or in teams on video game titles..."	Competitive video games	Amazan-Hall et al. (2018)
"eSports is situated at a unique intersection that combines recreation, interaction, task, competition, and collaboration: It is task-based with serious purposes (e.g., collaborate to complete tasks and win); it also happens in an intense fictional virtual environment that requires fast decision-making and response rate."	Performance and virtual environment	Freeman & Wohn (2017)

Freeman and Wohn (2017) suggest researchers tend to interpret esports in three major ways: 1) as computer mediated sport when they emphasize aspects of traditional sports, 2) as competitive computer gaming when the gaming elements are considered and 3) as a spectatorship which is a distinction for regular gameplay. (Freeman & Wohn, 2017).

For the sake of this thesis, it is appropriate to consider esports simply as competitive gaming facilitated in an organized virtual environment (leagues and ladders) between individuals and teams at amateur level.

3.1 Recreational Activities

The fundamental idea and effect of a company provided or enabled recreational activity is to enhance the employee wellbeing, job satisfaction and productivity (Ali et al., 2012; Cheema et al., 2010).

According to Khasnabis, Heinicke, Achu et al. (2010) recreation points to all kinds of activities with the nature of enhancing physical and mental wellbeing of the people conducting these activities in their free time. Examples of these kinds of activities they mention include walking, swimming, meditation, reading,

playing games and dancing. Additionally, they say that “Recreation, leisure and sports activities may involve individuals, small groups, teams or whole communities”. (Khasnabis et al., 2010).

The spectrum of recreational activities provided for employees is vast. It ranges from traditional forms of sports, company trips, picnics etc. (Cheema et al., 2010) to more modern alternatives such as esports.

In the context of this study, recreational activity is referred to as an activity that is being provided or enabled by the company and aimed for the employees to have a way to spend their free time and enhance their wellbeing and job satisfaction.

3.2 Corporate Esports Leagues

According to McCutcheon et. al., (2018) “esports leagues are a central feature of the esports communities and growth of the phenomena” (McCutcheon et al., 2018). In esports leagues teams and individual players compete against each other in different games (Hallmann & Giel, 2017). In addition, for professional level, these leagues coordinating competitive gaming exist for amateur level of competition as well (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017).

One form of these leagues aimed for non-professional level of competition is corporate esports leagues. In these leagues different companies can compete against each other in a variety of games with the teams consisting of employees of the company or corporation. A few examples of corporate esports leagues and tournaments include Corporate Esports Association (CEA), Swedish Corporate Esports Championship (SCEC), Esports Corporate Championship (ECC) by Digital Crusade and Kanaliiga.

Gaming has been recognized as a common factor in companies and especially for young adult employees. Corporate esports leagues aim to provide companies with an alternative and fun way to turn employee’s hobbies and interests of gaming into teambuilding experience, brand exposure and networking opportunities. (Kanaliiga, 2023a; Digital Crusade, 2023).

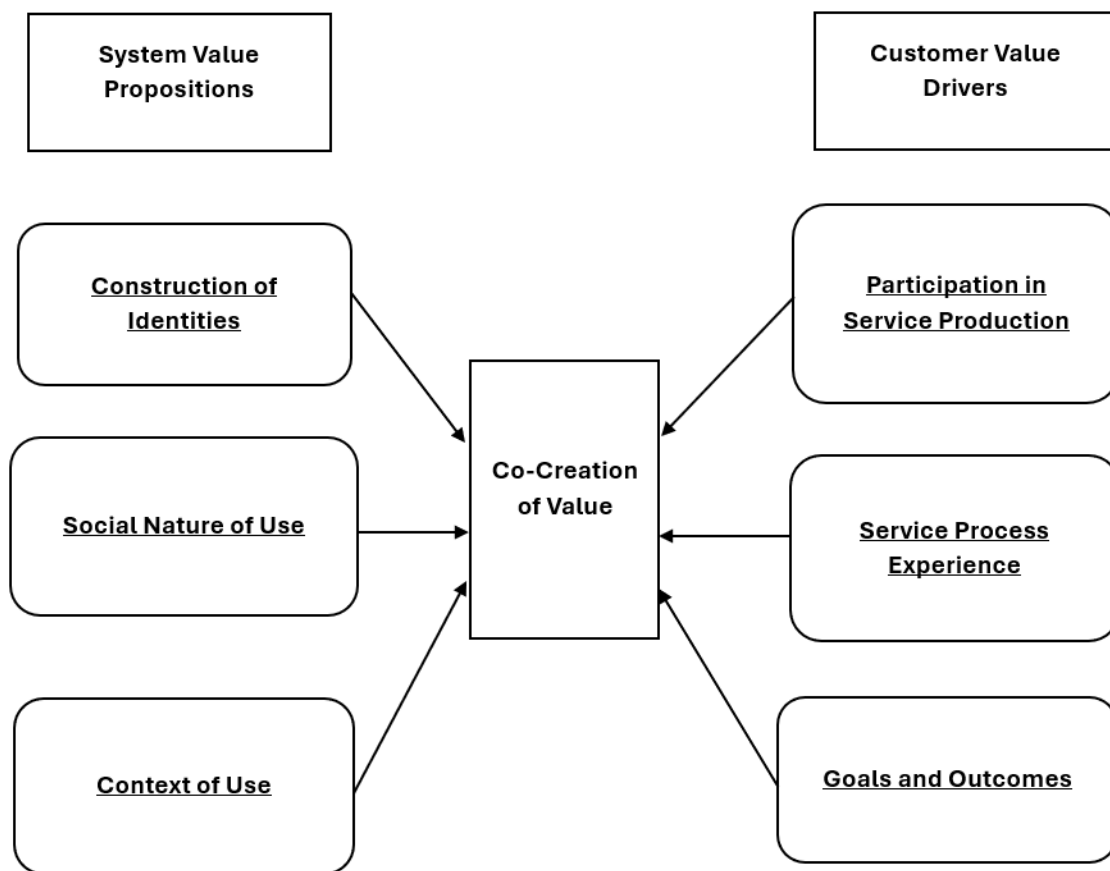
Kanaliiga is a Finnish corporate esports league and tournament organizer whose players were interviewed for the purpose of this study, which will be later discussed in methodology section below. Kanaliiga began their operation in 2018 as a small-scale tournament and has grown to facilitate hundreds of teams and thousands of players since. At the moment, featured games include: PUBG: Battlegrounds, Counter-Strike 2, Rocket League, Dota 2, League of Legends, Teamfight Tactics and Overwatch 2. Operations are based on volunteering and are constantly being developed based on feedback from the community and partners. It is also emphasized that you do not need to have vast prior experience in

gaming as there are many divisions available depending on the specific game and the number of players of course. (Kanaliiga, 2023).

To sum up, Kanaliiga provides a platform or a service where teams formed by different companies can compete against each other in various esports titles.

3.3 Value Co-Creation in Corporate Esports Leagues

FIGURE 3 Value Co-Creation in Corporate Esports Leagues (adapted from Tuunanen et. al., 2010)



Presented above is the adapted framework of value co-creation in consumer information systems by Tuunanen et. al. (2010). The original framework illustrates how system value propositions and customer value drivers together contribute to value co-creation in consumer information systems. The framework consists of six main factors in two sections. First section being 'System Value Propositions':

Construction of Identities

Refers to that consumers tend to relate to the services they use and alter their identities accordingly.

Social Nature of Use

Consumer need in which users try to create networks and establish interactions with other users.

Context of Use

Cultural and situational context of use affects the user experience of the service and therefore the value proposition.

and second, 'Customer Value Drivers':

Participation in Service Production

The users participate in service production by e.g. providing feedback, designing applications by "drag and drop" or influencing the content in real time.

Service Process Experience

Feedback and user experiences while using the service or system.

Goals and Outcomes

Hedonic utility perceived by the customer. (Tuunanen et. al., 2010)

After examining the original framework and its factors in context of this thesis – it is evident that corporate esports leagues can be viewed through this lens that is Value Co-Creation in Consumer Information Systems, as corporate esports leagues are essentially information systems that are used by consumers. In the adapted framework (see Figure 3 above) the corporate league and its players are placed in their respective positions and examples of each action are provided in the framework. As corporate esports league and its players are viewed through this lens, the value co-creation in corporate esports league can be discovered e.g. as follows:

For 'System Value Propositions (Corporate league propositions)':

Construction of Identities

Players use profile pictures, in-game nicknames, team names and can be assigned a certain role in the team depending on the game being played. Kanaliiga also provides statistics and rankings within the league/ladder.

Social Nature of Use

Majority of the games played in Kanaliiga or other corporate esports leagues are competitive multiplayer team games, hence it could provide a platform for networking, team building etc.

Context of Use

Corporate league is advertised as an alternative to traditional recreational activity for employees. It could also be a considerable alternative for employees who already play competitive games as a hobby and don't necessarily have a team to

play with outside of such a league, to experience playing in a structured competitive environment.

And for 'Customer Value Drivers (Players' Value Drivers)':

Participation in Service Production

Corporate league could constantly develop their operation by listening to user's feedback. In Kanaliiga's case, the operations are based on voluntary work and users are welcome to participate directly by hosting livestreams and casting the matches for example.

Service Process Experience

Feedback and user experience is constantly considered to enhance the experience for users, for example accessibility is an important factor in corporate league setting.

Goals and Outcomes

Hedonic utility the users perceive, for example socializing, team building and enhanced leisure activity in a game they already play in their free time.

When it comes to researching value co-creation in corporate esports leagues, the proposed framework for consumer information systems by Tuunanen et. al. (2010) is a fitting lens to observe through. Corporate league (Kanaliiga) being the system and its players being the "customers" we can observe and find out how the co-creation of value may take place in this context and what the user experience for the players is like. In the next chapter the methodology for this research will be presented and discussed.

4 METHODOLOGY

In this chapter the methods of conducting this study are discussed. In the first subsection the research context is presented and discussed – this subsection describes some previous studies related to the subject of this study and recognizes a research gap and an opportunity for new information.

The second subsection describes the approach that was taken towards this research, this includes research methods such as what type of research is being conducted, what is the data collected and why these methods and approaches were selected.

Finally in the last subsection the data collection and analysis methods are presented, discussed, and reasoned.

4.1 Research Context

The amount of esports research has increased in recent years and the widely spread concept of value co-creation has also started to appear in esports context. For example, Kunz, Roth & Santomier (2021) conducted a multiple case study “to identify similarities and differences and to understand the different roles, relationships and multiple interactions of actors involved in value co-creation processes” in different esports service ecosystems. (Kunz et. al., 2021). Roth, Kunz & Kolo (2023) also studied value co-creation in esports service ecosystems from the player’s perspective to “contextualize, specify and measure value co-creation in esports as a reliable and valid concept” (Roth et. al., 2023). Additionally, McCauley, Tierney, Holmströmm and Andersson (2019) studied esports LAN (Local Area Network) party attenders’ motivations through co-creation (McCauley et. al., 2019).

The before mentioned corporate esports leagues have not been studied yet as for the researcher’s knowledge and therefore presents an interesting opportunity for research that combines the progressively growing phenomenon of esports with the lens of service orientated value co-creation in an unstudied environment of corporate esports league from the players perspective.

4.2 Research Approach

As mentioned above the context of this study has not been studied yet according to the researcher’s knowledge, hence the decision was made to approach this research from the qualitative standpoint to gain more in-depth understanding of the subject. Qualitative research helps to understand people in i.e., social context

(Myers, 1997), understand complex social phenomena and “how people interpret their experiences” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Moreover, an interpretive approach was chosen for this research for its general nature that meanings assigned to phenomena by people let us understand the phenomena. (Myers, 1997).

This approach is done from the user’s – or in this case – player’s perspective as the intent is to understand what the corporate league players experiences are like in this setting and how they impact the players’ perceived value co-creation in corporate esports league.

4.3 Data Collection

The empirical data collected for this study consists of eight semi-structured interviews of corporate esports league Kanaliiga’s players. First, an interview structure was developed with predetermined questions that were designed to help answer the main research questions. The structure is presented in Table 4 below.

TABLE 4 Interview Structure

<p>Preliminary information</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Name, age, job description, employer -How long have you played in Kanaliiga? -Which game(s) do you play in Kanaliiga? -Do you have prior gaming experience? For how long? From which games? From corporate leagues/work community teams? <p>Playing in a corporate league:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -How did you end up playing in Kanaliiga? -What was the process like? -How does playing in a corporate league work? -What has it been like playing in a corporate league? (What do you like or dislike?) <p>Values/experiences:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -What is important for you when playing in a corporate league? -What kind of experiences have you had while playing in a corporate league? (Good/bad) -What kind of experiences have you had with interest groups? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Has it affected colleague relationships? -What is the role of the employer? - What has it been like working with the organizers? -How has the interaction with the opponents been? (employees of other firms) -Has playing gained you some kind of benefits personally? What kind? Or for the work community? -How would you change this whole process? (Organizer/employer) <p>Why esports? (vs. other recreational activity)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Do you participate in other recreational activities? (Are they provided?) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Why esports in particular? -How is esports different from other recreational activities? <p>-Free thoughts (about the subject)</p>

A semi-structured interview method was chosen for this study as it is well suited for new context on newly presented subjects of research that have not yet been studied substantially before because of its adaptive and flexible nature (Galletta, 2013). It also allows some liberties for the interviewer and lets the interviewees tell their opinions and views with their own words (Adams, 2015). These qualities are beneficial for qualitative research because they tend to enable a more in-depth perspective and understanding of the subject of the research (Adams, 2015). The preliminary intention was to conduct 10-15 individual interviews, but due to time constraints and lack of participant interest, the total number of interviews conducted remained at eight, which is still in the recommended sample size range of 6-15 interviews for Masters or Professional Doctorate project according to Terry, Hayfield, Clarke & Braun (2017).

The interviews were conducted remotely via VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) software Discord for the convenience of both parties, the interviewer and interviewees, but also because it allowed a better chance of finding willing participants with a varying background as the interview occasion would not be location dependent. The participants were searched and contacted via corporate esports league Kanaliiga's Discord server by posting a query to the main channels to participate in the research. After receiving a message from willing participants, they were provided with the appropriate notices about participating in the research alongside a link to a calendar application Calendly to reserve an interview appointment that would be the most convenient for them. It is worth noting that the interview structure (questions) was not delivered to participants in advance, nor during the interview, this will be considered in the Discussion chapter later.

After the interviews were conducted, they were transcribed manually. As Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) say, there are no standardized rules on what to include in a transcription or how precise it must be, but rather they are choices that the researcher or interviewer must make (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). During the transcription process a choice was made to disregard any emphasis on intonations, pauses, tones of voices or emotional expressions as they were perceived as non-significant for the study as the focus was on the content of the participants answers, not in the verbal manner they delivered them. Additionally, the interviews were not transcribed verbatim, but rather in more formal written style for the sake of simplicity. Also, both the interviews, and transcripts were conducted in Finnish language for the sake of convenience and quality, as it was the native language of the participants and researcher. The data extracts, that will be presented in Data analysis subsection and Findings chapter, were translated into English, this will also be considered in the Conclusions chapter later.

4.4 Data Analysis

In this subsection the analysis of the collected data will be presented and discussed. As mentioned, the data consists of eight transcribed semi-structured interviews that were conducted remotely via voice chat. As the main purpose of the design of the interview structure was to create questions that would provide answers to main research questions and seek out value co-creative experiences, along with the researcher's bias, the underlying assumption is that the experiences are mostly positive and co-creative. Thematic analysis was chosen as the data analysis method as it is suitable for exploring complex phenomena and provide rich understanding of the dataset (Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017) while being accessible and simple to apply (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The choice was also supported by thematic analysis's flexible nature and unboundness of any given theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006) it can be adapted to fit this particular research and its research questions to understand the perspectives and experiences of the participants.

4.4.1 Coding Phase

First phase of coding the collected data (interview transcripts) consisted of reading through the interviews and familiarizing the content of them (Braun & Clarke, 2006) along with applying initial codes to label different parts of the transcripts (Nowell et al., 2017), these codes included both descriptive and interpretative codes. After this phase the broad and obvious themes could be seen forming already, but also some unique perceptions and mixed – even contradictory – experiences were discovered amongst the interviewees. Examples of the code assigning are presented in Table 5 below.

TABLE 5 Examples of first phase of coding

Participants answer	Assigned code(s)
But it's always nice to go play and there [in Kanaliiga] you get to know your opponents and you've started to play with them a bit in Kanamixes, so it's been fun. (Participant 2)	Networking
But having fun and joking with my coworkers and getting to know them are probably the biggest things for me. (Participant 5)	Fun, Relationship Building
...but for me in this case, the ease [is important], that you don't have to go anywhere, even to a sports center etc., instead the playing takes place at home, and it fits really well into a busy family life etc... (Participant 3)	Short Distances, Effortlessness
Actually, it's just cool to be able to play against people you know. It brought a new dimension to gaming and when you got to play against familiar guys, the sense of community that comes with it. You get to banter a little bit, it's really fun. (Participant 4)	Communality
And then the fact that gaming has always been a hobby [of mine], that's where it originates from. (Participant 6)	Enhances existing hobby

After reading through the interview transcripts and applying codes to label relevant parts of the text, in the second phase of coding the transcripts and codes were evaluated and re-examined to determine their relevance to the research questions. During this phase the existing codes were adjusted as necessary by combining them with other similar codes, changing the code name, or deducting them altogether.

4.4.2 Thematic Analysis

In addition to data familiarization and coding, thematic analysis includes a few more phases that are theme development, theme review, defining and naming of the themes and finally writing a narrative (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2013; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017; Terry, Hayfield, Clarke & Braun, 2017).

During the theme development phase, the codes were examined to discover patterns in the data that provide meaning. This meaning would become apparent for example by the quantity of the code's appearance, the similarity of the codes, the codes connection with other codes, or the underlying subjective significance. Examples of codes and reasoning of their significance towards theme development are presented in Table 6 below.

TABLE 6 Examples of meaningful codes

Code (times grounded)	Significance	Reasoning
Networking (25)	Quantity / Connection	Networking appeared in large quantities and is part of communality.
Structured Competition (13)	Connection	Structure gives meaning to competition and enhances competitiveness.
Enhances Existing Hobby (10)	Connection	Presents new aspects for existing hobby or existing hobby is part of the reason they participate in the activity in the first place.
Like-Minded Community (2)	Similarity	Similar with another code: Common Interest (5)

After development, the themes were reviewed to make sure that they are coherent and clear, they were also refined if necessary to ensure that they accurately represent the data and significance to the research questions. Next, the themes were clearly named to further emphasize their essence along with writing a

definition of each theme to capture their relevance to the research questions. The codes that contributed to each theme, and how many interviews they appeared in, are presented in Table 7 below.

TABLE 7 Codes that contributed to themes

Code(s)	Theme
Networking (100%), Relationship Building (100%), Communnality (62,5%), Positive Colleague Effect (62,5%), Bringing Colleagues Together (37,5%)	Communnality
Employers Unaware (62,5%), Passive Role of the Employer (75%), Employer Activation (75%)	Unawareness of the Employers
Competitiveness (37,5%), Structured Competition (62,5%), Competitiveness Deepens the Sport (25%)	Competitiveness
Easy Process (37,5%), Effortlessness (75,5%), Short Distances (87,5%), Flexible (25%), Appreciation Towards Organizers (87,5%)	Ease of Use
Fun (37,5%), Excitement (50%), Common Interest (62,5%), Gaming with Friends (25%), Not Too Serious (25%), Balanced Skill Level (25%)	Having Fun
Has Previous Gaming Experience (100%), Enhances Existing Hobby (87,5%), Has Played a Lot (100%)	Hobbyism
Corporate League Activity Independent from Employer (37,5%), Hopes More Involvement from Employer (50%), Colleague Recruited (75%), Self-imposed Recruitment for Players (25%)	Employee Orientation

As Vaismoradi, Turunen & Bondas (2013) state, although quantification of the data e.g., frequencies of words, categories or themes is not typically in the scope of thematic analysis, but rather in content analysis (Vaismoradi et. al., 2013) the frequency of certain codes i.e., 'Networking', 'Has Played a Lot' and 'Relationship Building' provides a direction towards the underlying meaningful data within the emerging themes. With the starting point of frequently appearing codes, the nuanced experiences of the players could be recognized with a connection to a larger entity.

5 FINDINGS

In this chapter the findings of analyzed interview data will be presented. First, the general user experience of corporate esports league Kanaliiga's players will be discussed. Next, the players experiences will be further examined in association with value co-creation to identify co-creative experiences of corporate esports league players.

5.1 Emerged Themes in Corporate Esports League

During the thematic analysis of the interview transcriptions the following themes were conducted based on their significance and occurrence. These are the result of coding the transcripts and combining the codes to create themes that represent the aspects of the data that they capture. Below, the collated themes are presented with a description of how they relate to research question of 'How do employees perceive and experience playing in corporate esports league?' along with data extracts (direct quotes) to demonstrate this.

5.1.1 Hobbyism

Hobbyism refers to previous experience and part-taking into playing video games. All the interview participants had previous experience in playing video games for extended periods of time and/or in significant amounts. This experience includes various types of games of different genres on multiple platforms and in most cases video games have been part of the participants' life since childhood:

Yes, I have. In general, I've been playing FPS games ever since I got a computer, and of course, as a kid, Nintendo was a big thing... (Participant 2)

If I start listing which games [I have played], we won't be ready in 1.5 hours. I've probably been playing since I was two years old, starting with 8bit Nintendo until now. Relatively many FPS games, some Counter-Strike: Source, PUBG for 5000 hours and Dota2 for 5000 hours, before that there was RuneScape, Wolfenstein Enemy Territory, etc. (Participant 5)

I have always played; computer games have been my own thing. Probably since... when was it when we got the first (computer) at home, sometime at the beginning of elementary school, in the first or second grade... sometime in -94, -93, -92... sometime in the early 90's when the first computer came and immediately computer games caught up and since then

I have played more or less, sometimes a lot and at some point there was a quieter phase when I had already graduated and was already working so I played a little less, but now that I have children and when I get them to sleep there is no more energy to go outside the house to exercise, then I will sit down on the computer and play significantly more than in those years in between. (Participant 3)

The theme of hobbyism captures participants' baseline of playing video games and it also reflects the participants' experiences throughout the interview questions on important things in playing in a corporate league, opponent interactions,

5.1.2 Ease of Use

The process of joining and playing in a corporate league was perceived as easy and straightforward:

Well, very straightforward, at least in my case, friend told me about this corporate league that is a bit like playing floorball, but on a computer. Are you coming along? Then we thought, let's just go [along]. Then the news came that we have a game today, it starts at eight, four maps, you come to Discord, and he will tell you everything. I describe it as very straightforward, it required that... it was simple for me, I didn't have to take responsibility or anything, it was easy to join... I can't describe the process better than straightforward, I was asked to play, I came to play. (Participant 2)

Really easy and straightforward, I don't know if it is a bit difficult to evaluate it myself because I was picked-up so to speak and almost even "forced" to play. If it were the other way around, that you started building a team yourself and had the desire to play first, it would probably be a very different experience. After all, it was really easy for me, when others kind of got everything ready. At that time, you still had to buy the game, install it, but then you just had to show up and play. (Participant 3)

The players are to follow the provided instructions to register for the team and league and connect to a game server from their computer at the agreed time. It is worth noting that there are slight differences regarding what game you and your team are playing in the corporate league: for Counter-Strike the game days are scheduled between teams and the initial setup requires a few more steps to determine the teams skill level, in PUBG however - all of the teams in a division play at the same time on the same game server on predetermined game days.

Ease also captures the effortlessness of esports as recreational activity:

And when you liked to play anyway and people were remote, this was naturally, easily done at home with the existing equipment. (Participant 1)

Although I like board games, floorball or whatever I could be playing, gaming is so easy, I'm already home and this is fun, I'm good at this. (Participant 5)

5.1.3 Employee Orientation

Participating in a corporate esports league is initiated by the employees, all the participants describe they were either recruited to play by other employees or acted as the recruiter themselves to find like-minded coworkers to join them. In many cases coworkers have asked their colleagues to join them in playing in the corporate league in random situations such as on a coffee break or the elevator ride, some have been able to use the company intranet to search for possible players in the form of announcements:

I don't quite remember how I ended up playing for the first time, when I was playing duo (PUBG) with my teammate at the time, when we were both in X-role on Y at the time. But now the most recent activation and remaining as an active player took place through Teams at work, I was asked if I was X and if I wanted to come play [since it's the same company]. In other words, these Kanaliiga actives were looking for additions to the team and had heard from somewhere that I was working at Y. That's how the most recent happened [ending up playing in the Kanaliiga]. (Participant 5)

A guy came to work for us who was previously in another company running a team in league in question, he had apparently run that (company league) team there, I don't know if he was even more involved in the operation of the league, but maybe he created such a spark in the company when he found out that there are more people like this who might be interested in this kind of competitive gaming, so he actively started promoting within the company on the chat channels, and then - a coffee table discussion took place about the matter and after that I was recruited during a elevator ride to play there as the registration was done or the deadline for registration was getting close and they had to get a few names on the roster, so I promised to become a substitute and through that [I got along]. But uhm, my co-worker enticed me into it. (Participant 8)

...one of my regular gaming friend told me that there is this Kanaliiga where he plays. I thought that was a pretty cool thing and I want to play there myself. I actually tried a year and a half ago in January, or maybe it was two years ago, when I tried to get a team together from X for Kanaliiga, but I just couldn't find [players]. Then one team was found, but they were actually a group from another shop, who would have taken me as a backup player, to which I stated that I will play properly or not at all. I can't stand being just a substitute. It then came up when I moved to Turku a year ago and happened to find a group. My brother also came to work at X, so we got the team together. (Participant 4)

5.1.4 Unawareness of the Employers

Employers seem to be vastly unaware of the corporate esports league. All except one participant described the role of the employer to be very passive or at the most neutral regarding corporate esports league participation. For most, the only way employers have been involved in the activity, was when the employees asked for permission to use the company name and/or logo for the team and to use internal communication channels to communicate.

In practice, [the employer] has not had any role in this matter per se. We've asked HR if we can use the name and logo, that's not a given either, there are teams playing in Kanaliiga whose name has been slightly changed, because the company doesn't think it's good PR, but in our case the attitude has been quite neutrally positive... Employer is not involved in any other way. (Participant 3)

Well, let's put it this way: this activity is player/people oriented, the employees themselves have been interested in searching [players] within the company, the employer has not given any other assets than allowed us to raise awareness on the intranet. The intranet has been utilized to the extent of announcements of won matches for example. But the employer has offered nothing more than a platform where we could start looking for players. (Participant 5)

Well, just like I said, it's apparently pretty non-existent, since there has been so little information about the whole thing and at least from what I've been following on Discord, there has apparently been attempts to get participation fees etc. [to be paid] by the company and they haven't been successful. So, it's still pretty non-existent. (Participant 6)

The employer has not taken advantage of this opportunity [of Kanaliiga]. (Participant 4)

5.1.5 Communalities

Playing in corporate esports league has been a very communal experience for the participants, it has brought together like-minded coworkers with the same interests and hobbies of playing competitive video games. It has allowed employees to meet new people inside the company, often someone they had not met before or even from different branches and enhance existing coworker relationships by playing with them:

...if we get to the finals, then at least our part will be played in the office, and we were in the finals, and then we built not only a LAN-party room in the office, but then a viewing room in the kitchen, and we had a real streaming studio, a really decent production and everything, and that was probably the biggest thing that had happened inside the company within free time activity. Of course, everything else great had happened, but it was a big deal from the point of view of the company's culture, because when you looked at Slack the next morning it was full of partying and there was a big party in the viewing room, because people had really become interested in what this is all about. And our CEO was like, he likes football, so he doesn't really like esports, so for him this was such an eye-opening experience that the people are really digging this, and he's starting to understand it and started to support this whole company's esports thing a little more enthusiastically. (Participant 1)

Well, at least in the way that you have a "thing of the week", so-called highlight when there is a match. Something that you always look forward to and that you belong to something, a so-called sense of community. (Participant 7)

Well, yes [it has developed relationships with colleagues], especially when there was the tournament in Helsinki, it somehow reinforced the fact that I like to interact with whom I have played for a couple of seasons. And I've even had in mind changing jobs or starting

my own business, but those thoughts have been held back by the fact that the Kanaliiga season is starting. (Participant 7)

This communality extends to employees of other companies as the interactions between opponents have been mostly positive; friendly banter, rivalries and finding new people to play with outside the official league matches:

Actually, it's just cool to be able to play against people you know. It brought a new dimension to gaming and when you got to play against familiar guys, the sense of community that comes with it. You get to banter a little bit, it's really fun. (Participant 4)

Damn good [opponent interactions]. Such good-natured competition is born and mainly we participate in Kanamixes and joke around... it's a damn great community. I can't say I'm annoyed by any player. Everyone is playing the [same] game, no one is "heckling", everyone is grown-up people, there is no trolling, etc. I have also enjoyed the company of opponents. Sometimes you might banter in a good spirit on Discord and end up playing together [in Kanamixes], in which case a community is being built. (Participant 2)

I have noticed that the Kanaliiga community is really nice, of course there is perhaps the qualification that everyone is a bit older, when you have to already be working in a company to be able to play in this league at all. Now, especially since I have been there for a longer time, a lot of personalities have emerged and formation of arch-enemy teams has started... and that sense of community, we often go with the Kanaliiga group to play PUBG in the so-called "Kanamixes", where people inquire groups to play with, we get a [mixed] group together and go play. At least on the PUBG side, the group is really active, there are 5-6 mixed teams playing there almost every night. (Participant 3)

5.1.6 Having Fun

When asked e.g., about important things about playing in a corporate league, perceptions and perceived benefits of this activity, one of the most common answers included having fun. Since all of the participants have played and still play games as a hobby, corporate esports league seems like a natural continuum or extension for this alternative form of recreation for employees. Having fun links to different aspects around corporate league setting according to interviewees answers, most notably playing a video game with your (work) friends, organized competitive environment and socializing:

I think the most important thing is to have fun, this is meant to be fun, I think playing should always be fun and, in this setting [Kanaliiga], it has been just that, that's why I play this [league]. It's also important to me that we're doing well at least on some level, I'm used to competing in this game, so it would probably be a bit of a shame if we always lost. But having fun and joking with my coworkers and getting to know them are probably the biggest things for me. (Participant 5)

Well, it probably boils down to the reason for playing competitively against other people in the first place, it boils down to having fun. Of course, for some it's also competitiveness,

maybe in the company league I don't see it as a competitive event, but of course you keep that in mind, because whenever you play for points, it has its own interest. It's a bit like comparing to playing "ranked", because there is always a slightly different stake in playing against others. Then umm, I don't know, maybe representing your own company isn't a terribly big deal, but maybe the fact that you get to play with your colleagues, there's the social aspect, when there's a little more to it than just working together what can you do with those same people, so it is quite nice. (Participant 8)

But for me this is more about playing with friends, in this case work friends vs. traditional friends. -- The direct benefits are certainly that it's a fun leisure activity and I'm looking forward to it, but if you think from the point of view of the working community, it's these encounters with people... (Participant 3)

5.1.7 Competitiveness

Many of the participants described themselves as competitive people and having hundreds or thousands of hours of experience in competitive FPS games. Playing competitively against other players is something most of the participants described they enjoy. Competitiveness includes the organized corporate league setting which adds to the "officiality" as few participants mentioned and gives the players this experience of playing official and organized matches in a not so serious manner. This organized setting also provides trust in fairness as each player is registered with their real name and proof of their employment, because of this, the playing environment is more likely free of cheaters and other unsportsmanlike conduct, hence retaining the integrity of competition better than online public matches, according to interviewees:

Well, it always beats [the game's own] matchmaking. I don't know it's - I've always been competitive to the core, so you get to challenge yourself. (Participant 6)

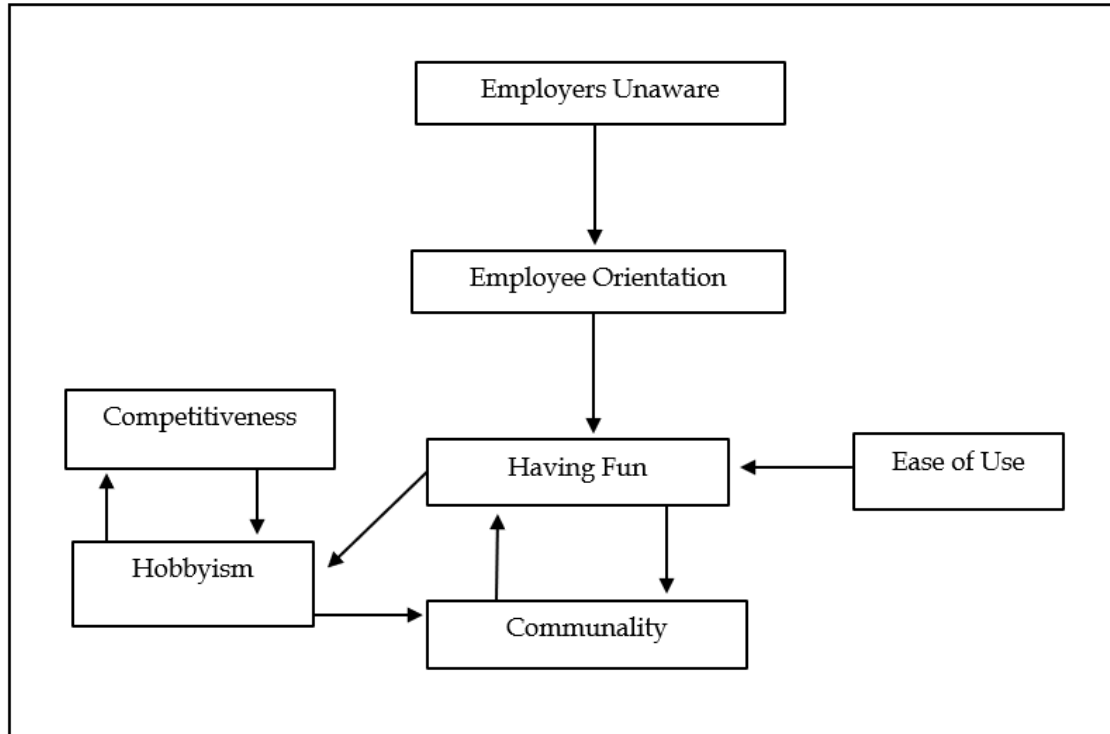
Again, a reference to golf, when you go to hit the golf ball, you also participate in competitions from time to time. It's a bit the same thing here, it deepens the sport/game. It's always a different thing when you're competing vs. just playing. Whether it's a real sport or an esport. The same thing, for example, in football, if you practice it's a bit of joking around and playing, but then in a real game against another team, you're serious. I don't know why, but many soccer teams practice, play practice matches with each other, but would never play against another team. I see it as a natural continuation. Afterall, we are talking about competitive games like Counter-Strike and PUBG. (Participant 2)

Although, for example, I have played FaceIt (third party competitive matchmaking for Counter-Strike), but basically this is still a step up from it, so it is a bit like being able to play in a slightly bigger tournament as a novice, so there is a certain kind of feel to it. (Participant 8)

...and then I've really liked the fact that there is this umm... how would I say this umm... like a systematic way for people to play games with a regular group because it might be the case that many people have friends with whom they play specific games, but the friends don't want to play Counter-Strike, so in a way this gives these people a way to play Counter-Strike in a nice group and in a fun way. (Participant 1)

5.2 General user experience of corporate esports league players

FIGURE 4 Thematic Map

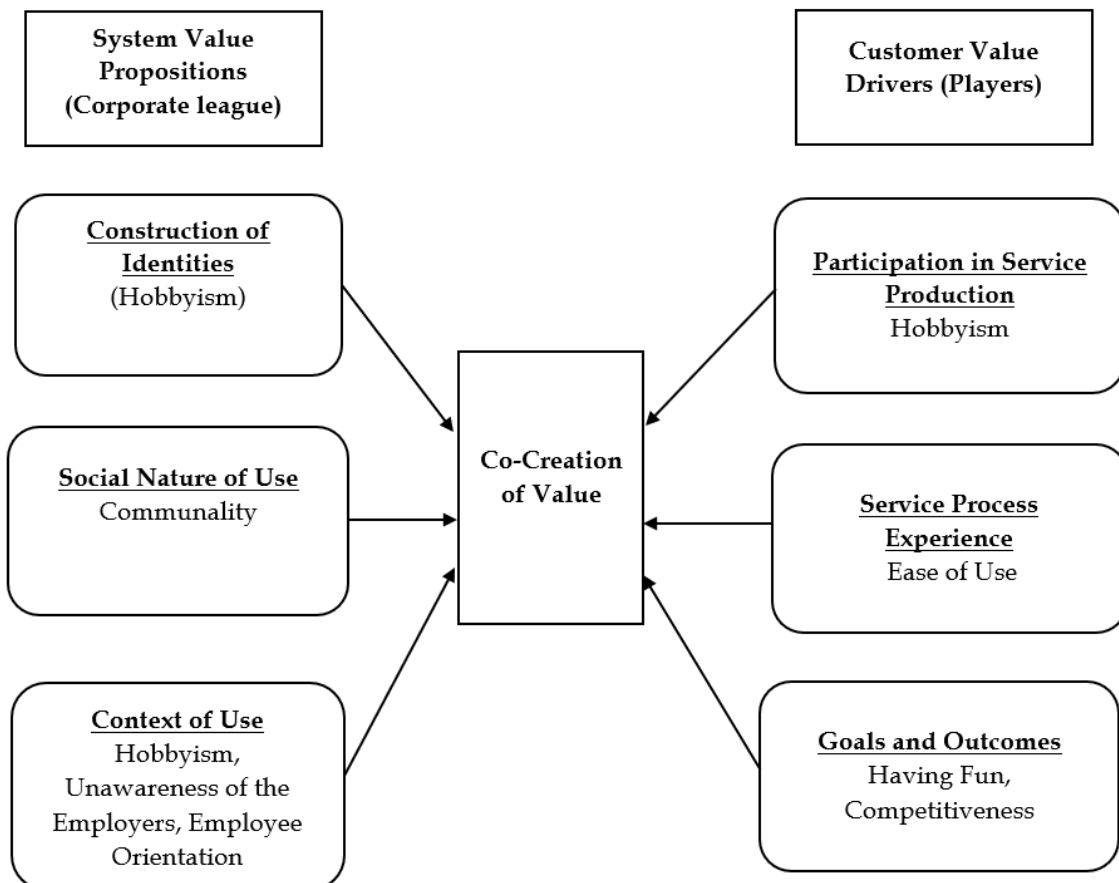


Presented above in Figure 4 is the thematic map that visualizes the connections between the emerged themes. To summarize the perceived user experience of corporate esports league players, the employers are mostly unaware of corporate esports league (Kanaliiga), hence participation, assembling a team etc. is employee orientated. Having fun is the primary goal of the players (employees) and is affected by the ease of using the service. Having fun by playing with co-workers and interacting with the opponents in a positive manner creates communality, which vice versa increases the fun to be had. For all the participants playing these kinds of video games was already an existing hobby, which is a common interest of the players that adds to the communality. Competitiveness was also perceived as an important factor, which often comes from previous experience in these games, but also enhances the existing hobby with structured competition. In the next subsection, the themes are viewed in the adapted framework of Value Co-Creation in Corporate Esport Leagues.

5.3 Emerged themes in Value Co-Creation in Corporate Esport Leagues

In this subsection, the discovered themes from the thematic analysis and general user experiences of the corporate league players will be reviewed through the adapted framework of Value Co-Creation in Consumer Information Systems by Tuunanen et. al. (2010). The conducted themes along with other user experience related aspects risen from the data will be presented in relation to the adapted framework of Value Co-Creation in Corporate Esports Leagues to answer the second research question of how value co-creation can take place in corporate esports leagues. The review consists of discussing each section of the adapted framework with the help of collected data from the interview transcripts. The themes placed in the adapted framework are presented in Figure 5 below.

Figure 5 Emerged themes in Value Co-Creation in Corporate Esports League



For System Value Propositions (Corporate League):

Construction of Identities

The ways consumers (players) may alter their identities in relation to the service they use, in this case corporate esports league, can include traditional video game aspects such as having a personal profile picture/avatar and a nickname. In corporate league setting the teams tend to use their company's logo and name in altered or unaltered form as part of their teams' name. There could also be assigned roles within the team, for example for Counter-Strike in Kanaliiga, at least a dedicated captain and alternate captain are required for arranging matches. Another example of identity altering could be, as Participant 8 mentioned, that they noticed how their colleague was a completely different person in-game compared to the usual working environment. Also, according to Participant 2, when their team plays, the job titles are ignored, and unofficial leaders emerge in-game. Although no direct connection of the emerged themes seems to form for this system value proposition, it could be argued that possible alteration of identities is broadly related to the theme of Hobbyism, as previous gaming experience may withhold the aspects of this value proposition.

Social Nature of Use

Kanaliiga offers a platform to satisfy consumer need of creating networks and establishing interactions with other users. The emerged theme of Community can be seen fitting in this proposition. For example, numerous participants describe how they have met new people inside or outside of the company. Participants have formed new relationships with these people and existing relationships have gotten deeper. As e.g., Participants 2 and 4 state, these relationships have even extended outside of the game.

Context of Use

When it comes to cultural and situational context of use, players of corporate esports league Kanaliiga are offered an alternative for traditional recreational activity. The emerged theme of Hobbyism reflects to this value proposition well as all the participants have played and still play competitive video games, therefore affecting the user experience and value proposition favorably for them. As Participant 1 states, it is important for them that this kind of alternative is provided for people who like playing video games. Moreover, the convenience of participating in this activity from one's computer at home instead of travelling to or being physically in a dedicated location is perceived as a benefit by many of the participants based on their life situation e.g., having young children as Participants 2 and 3 point out. Interestingly, even though Kanaliiga advertises their service as an alternative for traditional recreational activity for companies (Kanaliiga, 2023), the indication of unawareness of the employers leads to employees engaging this activity independently with almost no involvement of the employers, relating the emerged themes of Unawareness of the Employers and Employee Orientation to this system value proposition.

For Customer Value Drivers (Players):

Participation in Service Production

The functioning of Kanaliiga is based on voluntary work and the organizers are running it mainly as a passion project. As it turns out, the users participate in service production in different ways such as providing feedback that allows the organizers to adjust their processes, rules and so forward, for example, Participant 5 recalls that the map pool of PUBG has been changed based on community feedback. Another example of how users have participated is by contributing to hosting livestreams and live commentary of the matches played in Kanaliiga: Participant 1 says he enjoys doing that and it provides him with additional interest and commitment to esports as a hobby, therefore tying the emerged theme of Hobbyism in this customer value driver as well.

Service Process Experience

This value driver consists of players' user experiences of the service, the theme of Ease captures a significant portion of how the players have experienced the use of Kanaliiga. Apart from a few minor inconveniences, the players said that the process of joining and playing in Kanaliiga is easy and effortless. The theme of Ease also overlaps with the value proposition of Context of Use as for most participants thought the convenience of participating from home makes the experience well fitting for them. Additionally, all participants described their overall user experience of the service as positive, they have enjoyed taking part in this activity.

Goals and Outcomes

For these value drivers, the themes of Hobbyism, Having Fun, Competitiveness, and Community provide insight of players perceived hedonic utility. By playing in a corporate league, the players can enhance their existing hobby, deepen it by adding a new dimension to playing competitively in an organized environment. The most important goals and outcomes for the players were having fun and socializing with their colleagues, and competing in a game they like.

6 DISCUSSION

In this chapter, the findings of this study are summarized by answering the set research questions, additionally, implications for research and practice are discussed briefly.

6.1 Addressing the research questions

In this study the user experiences of corporate esports league Kanaliiga's players was explored to understand how the players generally perceived playing in a league corporate league setting. Additionally, the exploration focused on looking at the phenomena through the lens of value co-creation and specifically with the help of previous framework of value co-creation in consumer information systems by Tuunanen et. al. (2010) to understand how the players experiences in a corporate esports league impact employees perceived value co-creation. These goals generated the two main research questions:

How do employees perceive and experience playing in corporate esports league?

How do corporate esports league experiences impact employees perceived value co-creation?

The empirical data of the study consisted of eight semi-structured interviews of corporate esports league Kanaliigas' players that employed questions designed to provide an insight into the players experiences and perceptions. The interviews were then transcribed, analyzed, coded and searched for emerging themes that appear in the data. In other words, a thematic analysis was conducted that resulted in recognition of seven themes along with a thematic map within the dataset, that provides an understanding of how the employees or players of the league experience and perceive playing in a corporate esports league. These themes are:

- *Employer Unawareness*
- *Employee Orientation*
- *Hobbyism*
- *Having Fun*
- *Competitiveness*
- *Ease of Use*
- *Communality*

Even though the dataset consisted of only eight interviews, the conducted themes could be considered robust and rich in data, which is more important in a thematic analysis as Braun and Clarke (2019) argue. It should be noted that all the interviewed players played one of two games in the corporate league; Counter-Strike or PUBG, and depending on the game, the experiences, especially in initial setup, would differ slightly. For example, in Counter-Strike the teams would have to schedule their matches with an individual opposing teams independently, as in PUBG there are predetermined game days where all the teams in a division would play at the same time. Overall, the employees have enjoyed playing in the corporate esports league, all the participants described good experiences with only few inconveniences or small initial troubles e.g., in the sign-up phase, but these minor negative perceptions were all resolved quickly according to the participants.

Regarding the second research question, when the corporate esports league players' experiences are observed through the adapted framework of Value Co-Creation in Consumer Information Systems by Tuunanen et. al. (2010), based on the comparison that this study provides, it can be said that the players corporate esports league experiences impact the value co-creation positively and that the players perceive that value is being co-created. The system value propositions and customer value drivers that Tuunanen et. al. (2010) present, can be seen being fulfilled by the corporate league and its players.

6.2 Implications for Research and Practice

This study contributes to S-D logic and value co-creation literature, especially in the form of employing the framework of Tuunanen et. al. (2010) and applying it to corporate esports league context. By applying the framework of Tuunanen et. al. (2010), this study further validates the frameworks capability to examine value co-creation in consumer information systems and services. The study also contributes to the rapidly growing literature of esports (Cranmer et. al., 2020; Ke, Wagner & Du, 2022; Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017) by researching the phenomenon in a new context of esports corporate leagues. As mentioned before, for the researcher's knowledge, the corporate esports leagues have not been studied before, unlike esports leagues and tournaments without the distinction of being strictly organized for employees of companies, for example, Newham et. al., (2022) or Yuzyk and Seidner (2022). Therefore, this study provides valuable insight into the new context of esports and its leagues literature.

Regarding practice, this study provides insight into the experiences and perceptions of corporate esports league players. This overall positive insight could be useful for current and future corporate league organizers or companies and corporations in general. For example, companies and corporations could take note in how simple the process of joining the league is and what possible benefits it could present for the company culture e.g., the social interactions and relationship building between coworkers, or in job satisfaction and employee

retainment as a few participants mentioned they would favor a company with corporate league team if they were to change jobs.

7 CONCLUSIONS

This study employed qualitative research with the methods of semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis to understand corporate esports leagues' players' experiences and the resulting impact on perceived value co-creation of these experiences. The findings of this study suggest that the players' experiences are overall positive and impact the perceived value co-creation positively. These findings contribute to existing literature on S-D logic, value co-creation and esports. In the following subsections, the limitations of the study and possibilities for future research are discussed.

7.1 Limitations of the study

The study also presented some limitations. Firstly, the chosen method of excluding intonations, pauses, tones of voices or emotional expressions from the transcripts, could be considered as restrictive aspect for the findings of the qualitative research, even when the emphasis was not in these factors.

Secondly, the fact that the interviews and transcriptions were conducted in Finnish, and only the data extracts were translated into English, could result in loss of meaning via linguistic, cultural or methodological problems (Xian, 2008) during the process.

Lastly, the sample size of eight interviews could be seen as a restrictive factor in this study, however, based on the data gathered from these interviews the recognized broad themes indicate robustness of the general experiences of the corporate league players - apart from very nuanced details.

7.2 Future Research

There could be several possibilities for future research regarding the topic of this study. First, the sample size could be increased and the differences between different games in corporate league setting could be researched, as according to this study, there are some differences in players experiences related to which game they played in the corporate league.

Also, as this study focused on the experiences of the players and the perceived value co-creation of those experiences, the interviews revealed that there could also be experiences that co-destroy value, hence studying the value co-destruction in corporate esports leagues players' experiences could also be an interesting topic of future research.

Additionally, the scope of the study could be increased to include more detailed points of views from other actors in the likes of the organizers themselves and representatives of different companies, not just the employees. This could

provide a larger overall understanding of how value co-creation and/or co-destruction can take place in esports corporate league setting.

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