

Industrial buyers' utilisation of customer references in the context of purchasing digital solutions

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Abstract

This thesis was written to expand customer reference literature by studying how organisational buyers utilise customer references and what kind of aspects affect the reference utilisation process. The objective was to fill the theoretical gap of researches about the utilisation of references from the buyers' side. Through an extensive literature review the relevant existing literature was found, combining the previous findings about the suppliers' reference utilisation and buyers information search practices. A theoretical framework was created from existing theories, which was then utilised during the empirical part.

To achieve the objectives, a qualitative approach was chosen. The empiric research was made in the context of purchasing digital solutions. In-depth interviews were held for organisational buyers and analysis was done based on the transcribed interviews.

Findings highlight the complex nature of the reference utilisation process, including different actors, affecting aspects, objectives and process phases. References are utilised to validate purchase decisions by building trust, decreasing risks, validating expertise, concretising offerings and increasing internal motivation. In the end, long-terms objectives for reference utilisation derive from organisational, strategic goals. The buyers utilise references not only during the purchase process, but also prior and post it. References are utilised as a source of inspiration, tool for sourcing suppliers, source of reliable information, tool for evaluating suppliers, and concretising offerings during the projects.

This study contributes to customer reference theory by building a theoretical model for buyers' reference utilisation, including the objectives and process for reference utilisation plus the aspects affecting reference utilisation.

Keywords reference marketing, customer references, reference model, organisational buying

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Tiivistelmä

Tämän tutkielman tavoitteena oli laajentaa asiakasreferenssi-kirjallisuutta tutkimalla, miten organisationaaliset ostajat hyödyntävät asiakasreferenssejä ja millaiset aspektit tähän käyttäytymiseen vaikuttavat. Tavoitteena oli täydentää referenssikäyttämisen teoriaa ostajan puolelta. Laajan kirjallisuuskatsauksen kautta relevantti olemassaoleva kirjallisuus kerättiin yhdistämällä aiemmat löydökset toimittajien referenssikäyttämisestä ja ostajien tiedonhakuprosesseista. Teoreettinen viitekehys luotiin olemassa olevista teorioista, ja tätä käytettiin empiirisen osion aikana.

Tavoitteiden saavuttamiseksi valittiin kvalitatiivinen lähestymistapa. Empiirinen tutkimus tehtiin digitaalisten ratkaisujen ostamisen kontekstissa. Syvähaastatteluja pidettiin organisationaalisille ostajille ja analyysi tehtiin litteroitujen haastattelujen perusteella.

Löydökset korostavat referenssiprosessin kompleksia luonnetta, tähän sisältyessä eri toimijoita, aspekteja, tavoitteita ja vaiheita. Referenssejä hyödynnetään ostopäätöksiä validoimaan luomalla luottamusta, vähentämällä riskejä, todentamalla osaamista, konkretisoimalla tarjontaa ja luomalla sisäistä motivaatiota. Lopulta, referenssien hyödyntämisen pitkän linjan tavoitteet syntyvät organisaation strategisista tavoitteista. Ostajat hyödyntävät referenssejä kilpailutusvaiheen lisäksi myös sen ulkopuolella. Referenssejä käytetään inspiraation lähteenä, toimittajien löytämisen apuna, luotettavana informaatiolähteenä, arvioimisen apuna, ja tarjonnan konkretisoijana.

Tämä tutkimus kontribuoi edeltävään referenssiteoriaan luomalla teoreettisen mallin ostajien referenssikäyttämiseksi. Malli sisältää tavoitteet, prosessin ja referenssikäyttämiseen vaikuttavat aspektit.

Avainsanat reference marketing, customer references, reference model, organisational buying

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1 Introduction

Complexity in industrial buying is increasing continuously, which is why building trust and decreasing perceived risks have become central objectives for suppliers and buyers alike functioning in business-to-business markets. For years, both suppliers and industrial buyers have utilised customer references as a reliable source of trust building information, but surprisingly in academia, references are a severely under-researched phenomenon. References have mostly been studied from the seller's point of view, resulting in frameworks for the suppliers' utilisation of references. In the organisational buying literature, however, references have been bundled together with reputation and word-of-mouth. The objective of this study is to build on existing theory and expand the academic literature by considering the industrial buyers' utilisation of references.

Industrial buying is seen as a multi-phase, multi-person, multi-departmental and multi-objective process (Johnston, Lewin 1996). The current contemporary business trends such as globalisation, complexity of offerings and markets, rapid technological development, knowledge intensity, and increasing intangibility are exponentially complicating the decision making processes of industrial buyers (Salminen, Möller 2006; Doz et al. 2001; Vargo, Lusch 2004; Moore 1999; Wolf 2004). Industrial buying situations are characterised by high complexity, profound experience, and uncertainty (Jalkala, Salminen 2009). Especially in a situation where the offering itself is knowledge-intensive, unique, intangible or innovative, the decision process becomes even more difficult, and the need for information search grows (Alejandro et al. 2011; Jalkala 2009; Aarikka-Stenroos 2012; Jaakkola 2013; Brashear-Alejandro et al. 2014).

Even though new IT solutions have enabled buyers to search for suppliers more effectively using programmes and bots to source for relevant suppliers, the markets have become more complicated, increasing difficulties in managing the found information (Alejandro et

al. 2011). Also, as business offerings shift continuously towards more knowledge-intensive and intangible products and services (Vargo, Lusch 2004), the results can often only be measured post-purchase (Aarikka-Stenroos, Jaakkola 2013), which makes the situation even more risk-averse for the decision makers responsible for the purchases.

These trends, characteristics and tendencies create a need for the sellers to build trust, decrease the buyers' perceived risks, and somehow prove their capabilities and validate their offerings (Aarikka-Stenroos, Jaakkola 2013). Buyers desire to find credible information about the suppliers to indicate satisfactory performance in the past (Jalkala, Salminen 2009).

Customer references have been regarded as crucial tools for industrial companies to communicate competency to potential buyers, and reference marketing has become an important and common practice for business-to-business companies (Salminen, Möller 2004; Salminen, Möller 2006). Customer references can be especially effective in situations, where uncertainty and risk are present, and using descriptions of successful deliveries in the past can effectively reduce buyer's perceived risk and increase trust (Jalkala, Salminen 2009; Anderson, Wynstra 2010). Due to higher complexity, bigger investments and innovative offerings, customer references seem to be more crucial and powerful in business-to-business marketing than in consumer markets (Jalkala 2009; Aarikka-Stenroos, Jaakkola 2013).

1.1 Research gap

Although reference marketing has been recognised as an essential tool for industrial marketers, the academic literature and theories are still lagging behind the practice (Jalkala, Salminen 2009; Salminen, Möller 2004; Salminen 1997). Whereas marketers have been using customer references for a long time, the development of academic theories and definitions have been difficult, fragmented and slow (Salminen 1997). The existing studies have focused mostly on the seller's point of view, with studies about how

the suppliers write and utilise customer references (e.g. Salminen, Möller 2004; Jalkala, Salminen 2009; Salminen, Möller 2006, Salminen 1997).

Only a few studies address the buyers' search and utilisation of experience-based information, including the ways used by the buyers to search for references in their information search process (e.g. Alejandro et al. 2011; Aarikka-Stenroos, Makkonen 2012; Aarikka-Stenroos, Jaakkola 2013). However, these studies bundle together the utilisation of references, word-of-mouth and reputation, and focus mostly on the ways this experience-based information can ease up the process of information search in the initial phase of the purchase process. Word-of-mouth and reputation, while closely related, must not be confused with reference marketing, because of the different nature and characteristics compared to reference marketing. Word-of-mouth and reputation merely refer to external phenomena that take place outside the supplier company, whereas reference marketing includes the actions provided by the supplier itself (Jalkala, Salminen 2009).

To gain relevant knowledge about the best possible practices of reference marketing, it is crucial to understand the buying behaviour of the customers (Johnston, Lewin 1996). It seems we need research about how the utilisation of customer references might affect the buyer's perceptions and evaluations, what kind of reference information the buyers are searching for, and how these buyers utilise the reference information in their buying processes. This kind of research does not yet seem to exist in academia, while it would appear to be of interest since many pieces of research have been interested in effective references, but only studied the phenomenon from the seller side.

We need to build on theoretical literature by studying the buying behaviour of organisational buyers, and finding out how the references provided to them might affect the process, behaviour and attitudes towards the suppliers. By building a model of the buyers' reference utilisation and influencing forces, we can extend the academic theory to concern not only the behaviour of the suppliers but also the buying party.

1.2 Research objective and question

The objective of this study is to find out how industrial buyers utilise customer references and how the references might affect their overall information search, sourcing and evaluation process – finally affecting their purchase decision. The overall goal of the study is to gain knowledge about what kind of processes underlie in the purchasing companies, and what kind of information the buyers are looking for in the customer references. In order to achieve the given goals, the modes of reference utilisation are studied together with purchase processes of the buyer organisations. From these analyses, a theoretical model for buyers' reference utilisation is built. To achieve the objectives, the following research question is applied as a guide throughout the whole research process:

How do industrial buyers utilise customer references?

To address the research question and gain the wanted knowledge, an extensive qualitative study in a single case setting is applied. Given the goal is to gain in-depth knowledge about perceptions, behavioural habits and underlying processes, interviews can be seen as an applicable choice of method. Interviews were held for different industrial buyers that had gone through the process of purchasing digital solutions. From these semi-structured interviews, knowledge was gained about the ways and processes of utilising customer references, and how these references affect the buyers. The interviewees were carefully decided through theoretical sampling to represent different types of organisational, strategic, industrial, situational and personal backgrounds. Interviews lasted in average one hour and resulted in over 70 pages of verbatim transcribed empirical data.

The study focuses on the process of buying digital solutions, since references are suggested to have higher importance and bigger effects when the offerings are intangible and technically complex (Alejandro, Kowalkowski et al. 2011; Aarikka-Stenroos, Jaakkola 2013), both which digital solutions can be described as. To achieve applicable results from the study, it is also important to focus on one type of purchase situation, where all the

interviewees have experience from the same type of problem solving situation and decision making process (Johnston, Lewin 1996).

To maintain a coherent paper and manage the scope, this study focuses on existing theoretical literature on solely reference marketing. Organisational buying literature, while partly relevant, is mostly out of scope, and hence organisational buying literature is addressed only through organisational buying literature including the utilisation of references. Due to lack of research done about buyers' utilisation of references, this study is based on reference literature concerning both the suppliers and the buyers. Through empirical data, the buyer's point of view is addressed.

1.3 Structure

In order to achieve the objectives of this thesis, literature needs to be studied thoroughly from two sides of the purchase process. Combining the existing theories from the supplier's side to the little findings about the buyer's search of information through references, a base for this study can be built. Chapter 2 gathers the relevant theories together and discusses the research gap in-depth. In the end of chapter 2, the existing theories and suggestions are combined into a theoretical framework, based on Salminen and Möller's (2006) reference model, complemented with other existing theoretical aspects. This theoretical framework is the base for this thesis, and will work as a guide throughout the empirical study. Chapter 3 discusses the methodological choices of this study and explains the design, paradigm and ethical issues emerging from the study. In chapter 4, empirical results are explained and analysed through an extensive content analysis. Chapter 5 concludes the thesis by explaining the theoretical contribution of this study – the buyer's reference model – and answers the research question by explaining how buyers utilise references through the theoretical model. Finally, implications, limitations and future research are discussed.

2 Literature review

2.1 Defining references

References have been seen as a central tool in industrial marketing for years, and they are a familiar concept to marketers globally. In academia, however, references have been defined in multiple ways, and the most often used definitions remain quite broad and vague.

References have been described in various terms in previous studies, including terms such as client lists, supplier references, client references, user references, and customer references (Salminen 1997). In this paper, the terms customer references and references will be utilised to keep things clear and coherent.

Definitions of references vary, depending on the type of information source. One of the earliest descriptions can be found in business dictionaries:

“When a business wishes to open an account with a new supplier, the latter will usually ask for trade references, i.e. the names of other firms supplying that business which can be contacted in order to establish the creditworthiness of the applicant.” (Greener 1988, 296)

Marketing textbooks also have some definitions for customer references, varying in focus. For example, Räsänen (1994) defines references as *a practical evidence of one’s capability of delivering reliable, safe and well-functioning system solutions in this highly risk-averse industrial setting*, whereas Ahmed (1993) suggests references to be *projects executed by the supplier and deemed to be as much similar in nature as possible to the project in question*.

These definitions, while created a while ago, already include some of the same characteristics as the most recent definitions made by academic researchers. In academic

studies, references have been defined as the *supplier's relationship with its existing or former customer that can be evaluated by the said customer regarding the supplier's product, service, management and cooperation performance* (Salminen 1997; Salminen, Möller 2004). References can be also described as an *indirect proof, based on some practical or concrete evidence, like product, service or systems delivery, of a supplier's capability of delivery* (Salminen, Möller 2006).

Whereas Greener's (1988, 296) dictionary definition suggests references to actually be tools provided by the buyers to the suppliers to establish the trustworthiness of the purchasing party, the newer definitions have a different approach. Räsänen's (1994) definition is focused around the risk reducing aspect of references, as Ahmed (1993) provides an angle on relevancy of the references. In scientific literature, Salminen (1997) brings out the relationship aspect of the reference customer and the supplier, when Salminen and Möller (2006) again focus on the trustworthiness through utilising references as proof of capability. *None* of these definitions, interestingly, include the buyer's utilisation of references. Hence, we need information about how the purchasing party utilises references to fill out the gap in the basic definitions of the phenomenon.

2.2 Reference utilisation

Reference utilisation is a complex phenomenon, and to this date, researchers have not thoroughly studied all the different actors and aspects of reference utilisation. Reference utilisation includes three actors; the supplier, buyer and the reference customer used as a proof of delivery (Salminen, Möller 2006). Between these actors, different practices of reference utilisation take place, and these actions are done with different objectives in minds. How these said actors behave and utilise references, is affected by several internal aspects, which can be environmental, situational, personal or organisational.

Salminen and Möller (2006) constructed a theoretical framework for identifying the modes, goals and practices for suppliers' reference utilisation in industrial marketing as well as different internal and external characteristics affecting the utilisation. They found

out that suppliers' utilisation of references depends on several factors shown in their reference model. First, a company's internal strategies, processes and practices and objectives are a major part affecting reference utilisation. Secondly, external factors such as environmental characteristics, supplier characteristics, purchase problem characteristics and the potential buyer also affect the supplier's utilisation of references. Supplier characteristics mean that size, phase of internationalisation and reputation all affect on how important reference utilisation is – the bigger, more international and more respected the firm is, the fewer effects references have. Environmental characteristics mean that the home country image and intensity of competition affect the reference utilisation – if the country image is poor and the market is very competitive, references are crucial. Purchase problem characteristics are more contextual and situational, and they are merely dependent on the buyer. This means that high importance, complexity and innovativeness of the offering results in growing need for reference utilisation, as familiarity and purchase frequency can lower the reference need for the supplier.

Salminen and Möller (2006) also found out four phases of reference utilisation that occur between the supplier and the buyer. First, the suppliers must create preconditions with the existing customer to create a reference relationship. Next, the suppliers influence comparison between the current and potential customer, after which the reference is signalled to the potential buyer. Finally, effects are examined through straightforwardly the purchase decision.

Reference model gives a clear picture of the supplier's utilisation of references, but it lacks from the buyer's side. Studying the different affecting characteristics suggested for the supplier's side, we could anticipate that there are similar blocks affecting the buyers' utilisation of references, which is why this model is used as a base for the theoretical framework of this study. As the processes and practices of reference utilisation are only modelled from the supplier's side, it's important to find out how the processes work the other way, from the buyer to the supplier. The goal for this study is to flip the previous model to showcase the different aspects that affect the reference utilisation from the buyer's side. We need information about the buying behaviour when it comes to using customer references and aspects affecting the utilisation.

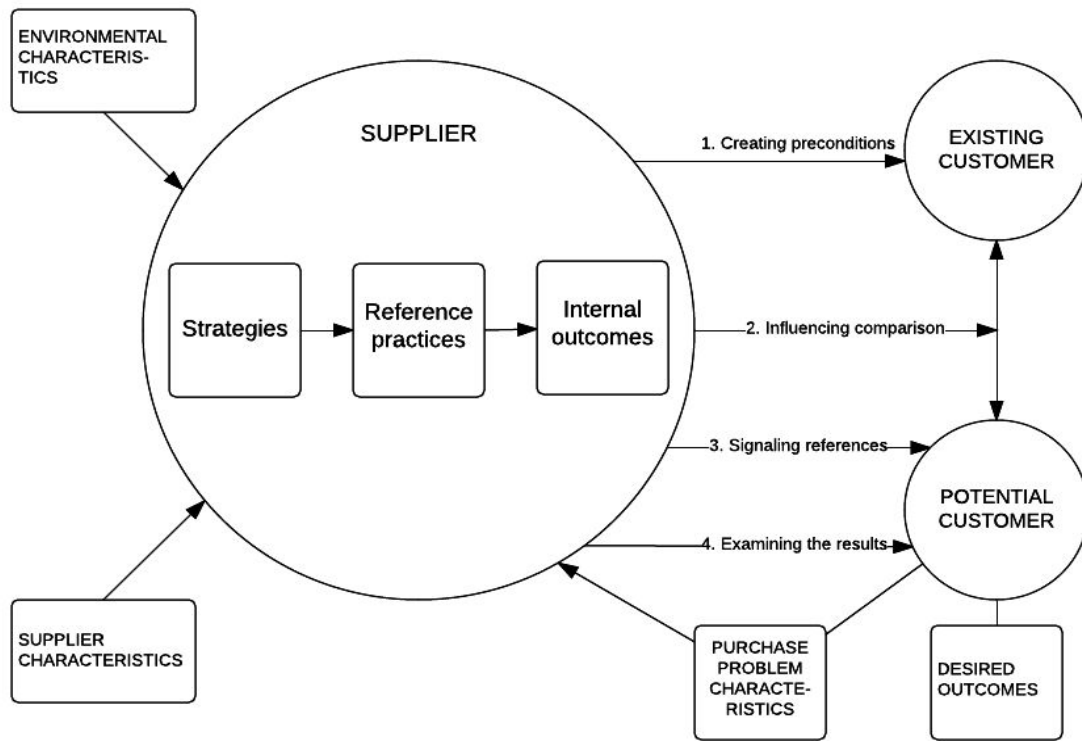


Figure 1: Simplified reference model (Salminen, Möller 2006)

2.3 Objectives for reference utilisation

Multiple objectives for suppliers' reference utilisation have been found in scientific literature. Many have recognised the way reference utilisation can be an efficient practice for the suppliers to decrease uncertainty, establish credibility, communicate competency and reduce the buyer's perceived risks (e.g. Salminen, Möller 2006; Salminen, Möller 2004; Salminen 1997). As long-term goals for reference utilisation, the previous studies have suggested establishing reputation, arousing interest, re-establishing credibility amongst old customers and serving as a strategic criterion in bidding situations (Salminen 1997, Kumar et al. 2013, Helm, Salminen 2010, Ford, Gadde et al. 2003).

Buyer's objectives can be somewhat linked to the supplier's desired outcomes, as references can be utilised as a part of the information search process (Aarikka-Stenroos, Makkonen 2012; Aarikka-Stenroos, Jaakkola 2013). As industrial buying has become an

extremely complex process, buyers come against a growing need for extensive information search (Alejandro et al. 2011, Aarikka-Stenroos, Jaakkola 2013, Jalkala, Salminen 2009). References can be seen as a useful and credible source of information, especially if the offering is very complex, or the results can only be measured post-purchase (Alejandro et al. 2011). Buyers aim to obtain information on previous experience, offering, similar problem situations, past customers, pricing, long-term impacts, risks, and relationships (Aarikka-Stenroos, Makkonen 2012, Aarikka-Stenroos, Jaakkola 2013).

When studying the long-term goals of reference utilisation, researchers have found out that the ultimate objectives for suppliers' reference utilisation are often closely in line with fundamental business goals of the seller company. Suppliers are looking to achieve improved profitability, strength, efficiency, flexibility, stability and growth (Salminen 1997). These goals can be achieved by utilising references to pursue new customers (Jackson 1985, Hutt, Speh 1992), sell new products to existing ones (e.g. Hanan 1995) or focusing on new markets (Salminen, Möller 2004). Reference marketing can increase efficiency in sales and sales management, marketing, relationship management and internal learning (Salminen 1997, Jalkala, Salminen 2010), which is why it's seen as an important marketing practice to result in good business performance.

While the suppliers seem to have various goals for reference utilisation from practical tasks such as pleasing different clients to bigger, strategic objectives linked with the ultimate business strategy, we are lacking findings about the buyers' objectives for reference utilisation. References have been suggested as a crucial source of information for the buyers (Aarikka-Stenroos, Makkonen 2012; Aarikka-Stenroos, Jaakkola 2013; Alejandro et al. 2011), hence being an important tool for purchasing, but the bigger means for buyers' reference utilisation have not been addressed. We need to examine other objectives for reference utilisation than information sourcing and management, and investigate these objectives in relation to the buyers' business goals to expand reference theories on the buyer's side.

2.4 Practices for reference utilisation

Researchers have found multiple practices for suppliers to utilise references. Utilisation of references, in general, means all the different ways information about the customer reference can be provided and used. Customer references have been generally utilised in either written or oral form, and it can be sourced from the supplier or straight from the reference customer. Client lists (Usunier 1996), press releases (Bradley 1995) and articles in journals (Brierty, Eckles et al. 1998) are usually written by the suppliers, containing information about the previous clients and deliveries. Success stories and testimonials (Salminen 1997) are suggested to be a good way to provide positive, reliable information with some comments from the reference customers, whereas on-site reference visits mean a situation where the potential buyer and reference customer meet personally to talk about the delivery (Hutt, Speh 1992, Jackson 1985). References can also be utilised through oral presentations (Salminen 1997), or conferences and seminars (Salminen 1997, Hutt, Speh 1992). In the recent years, references have often been utilised through the internet (Ford, Gadde et al. 2003), which is seen as an effective platform for providing real-time reference information.

Salminen and Möller (2006) restructured the previously found reference practices to 4 different phases, as presented previously. These 4 phases include different practices, and hence represent bigger meanings for different reference practices.

For the buyers, especially on-site reference visits have been seen as crucial practices, due to their more honest, reliable nature when compared with polished, supplier-provided information (Aarikka-Stenroos, Makkonen 2012). More information about the practices for reference utilisation from the buyer's side is needed, and we need to study which types of practices the buyers of digital solutions prefer. Even though existing literature clearly lists the practices for reference utilisation, there is a lack of theory of which types of practices the buyers utilise for achieving different objectives. Also, current research does not look into the different phases of the purchasing process, hence does not manage to provide findings on how the buyers utilise these practices throughout their purchasing process.

2.5 Aspects affecting reference utilisation

To get the most out of the utilisation of references, fundamental conditions for the references are openness, experience and satisfaction (Salminen 1997). The suppliers must be able to share their deliveries to the potential buyer to call them references. Also, the effectiveness often increases over time – references are used only after the delivery, not before, and their reliability improves after the delivery has been in use for a while. Satisfaction means that the supplier should only use references when the customer has been happy with the delivery. Some researchers have found that even bad or unsuccessful deliveries can be used as references (Salminen 1997), but in general, suppliers rather choose successful deliveries to make sure the effects are positive.

In the context of digital services, especially the effectiveness over time is an interesting measure – whereas many industrial solutions might indicate applicable results after a few years in use, the digital industry tends to change in a matter of a few years, which is why we need more research about the effectiveness over years in this context. Also, whereas some researchers have addressed the possibility of utilising not only satisfactory deliveries, but also the less successful ones as deliveries, we need to find out whether the satisfaction of the client is a crucial aspect for the buyers.

After the fundamental conditions have been achieved, it is important for the suppliers to segment their references according to the potential buyer. Gathered customer references can be divided and categorised into different segments by application, product, size, industry, type, technology or areas to suit the potential customers and their problem better (Salminen 1997; Salminen, Möller 2006). The found segmentation methods seem relevant, while quite practical and rational, which is why we need to find out more about how the reference customers and hence segmentation of these references might affect the buyers' reference utilisation. Researchers have not thoroughly studied the different aspects affecting the buyers' behaviour, which is why the segmentation characteristics might be lacking. We need more information on how the reference companies might affect the buyers' utilisation of references to find out more about how references could be better

matched.

The buyer's have been found emotionally keen on information provided by a credible, charismatic and familiar source, which suggests that the reference companies should fill out these characteristics. Credibility can be achieved through similarity (either personal, situational or environmental) and familiarity through previous experience, whereas prestige, size and reputation of the reference company affect charisma. (Aarikka-Stenroos, Jaakkola 2013) While the found credibility sources seem relevantly natural, it's interesting to find out what kind of other personal or emotional aspects there are affecting the buyers while utilising customer references.

Salminen and Möller (2006) presented the affecting aspects in their reference model. The characteristics of all the three actors affect the need and relevancy of reference utilisation vastly (size, strategy, familiarity, reputation), but there are also external factors affecting the process. Environmental factors (e.g. home country image) might affect the supplier's need for referencing, whereas the situational factors might affect the buyers (e.g. purchase problem).

Although there are some factors the supplier can and should consider about references, the final evaluation of the effectiveness comes from the buyer – they are the ones making the decision of whether the references provided are satisfactory (Salminen, Möller 2006, Salminen 1997). It is important to study how the buyers are making their evaluations of references to find out how these final preferences or decisions about references are made.

2.6 Theoretical framework

Concluding the literature review in the table below (Figure 1), we can see that reference marketing theory is lacking from the buyer's side. We need to build on the existing theory by creating a model for the buyers' reference utilisation and find out what kind of aspects affect the behaviour of the buyer organisations. By focusing on the existing theories, but applying them to find out information about the buying behaviours and combining these

findings with the existing literature about information search including the search of customer references, we can build on the current reference theories and create a reference model for the buyers.

Literature	Main Research Question(s)	Key Findings	Theoretical Contribution
Salminen 1997	What are the factors affecting a supplier's reference behaviour? How are references actually utilised?	References have both external and internal tasks for a supplier company. They're used for increasing efficiency in sales and sales management, business, marketing and establishing and managing relationships.	Proposing concept of reference, developing a framework of a supplier's reference behaviour.
Salminen & Möller 2004	What is the utilisation process of written reference marketing process?	Suppliers seem to have developed a highly structured decision making process with several decision stages and branches.	Constructing a decision flowchart for suppliers' reference utilisation.
Salminen & Möller 2006	How are reference used by suppliers, and what kind of factors influence the need and relevance of referencing?	Both internal and external factors affect the need and relevance of referencing.	Contextual framework for suppliers' use of references plus the factors affecting its need and relevance.
Jalkala & Salminen 2008	What discourses and rhetorical practices can be found in companies' reference descriptions?	Companies' reference content seems to focus on describing individual deliveries, and a structure repeats. Three different found discourses: discourse of benefits, discourse of relationship commitment and discourse of technological expertise.	Exploring the content and short-term objectives of customer references.
Aarikka-Stenroos & Makkonen 2012	What kind of information do buyers seek? How and through what kind of practices is this information sought to the buyers?	Experience-based information provides information on offering, supplier and decision situation itself, and references, word-of-mouth, and reputation have all different roles in problem solving.	Exposing the role of experience-based information for the buyer's side.
Aarikka-Stenroos & Jaakkola 2013	Which sources do buyers prefer for information and why?	Buyers appreciate information gained from people or companies that are familiar, charismatic and similar or prestigious. They look for information on the suppliers, offering and risks.	Studying the sources, content and nature of experience-based information search of buyers.

Table 1: Key papers used for literature review

Combining the main studies from the literature review, a theoretical framework for this study can be built. Even though most of the previous findings and insights from the previous literature are based on theory from the supplier's side, we can expect similar

aspects affecting the buyer side as well. The following framework is loosely based on the simplified reference model of Salminen and Möller (2006), but it's simplified to the point where the supplier is not in the centre, but all the different actors are given equal importance and focus. Through the previous findings from the past studies, an extremely general, simplified framework is created to present the reference utilisation as a theoretical phenomenon. This framework works as a base for the thesis and its empirical part. The empirical research is designed to build on the theoretical framework, and the goal is to expand the model to focus on the buyer.

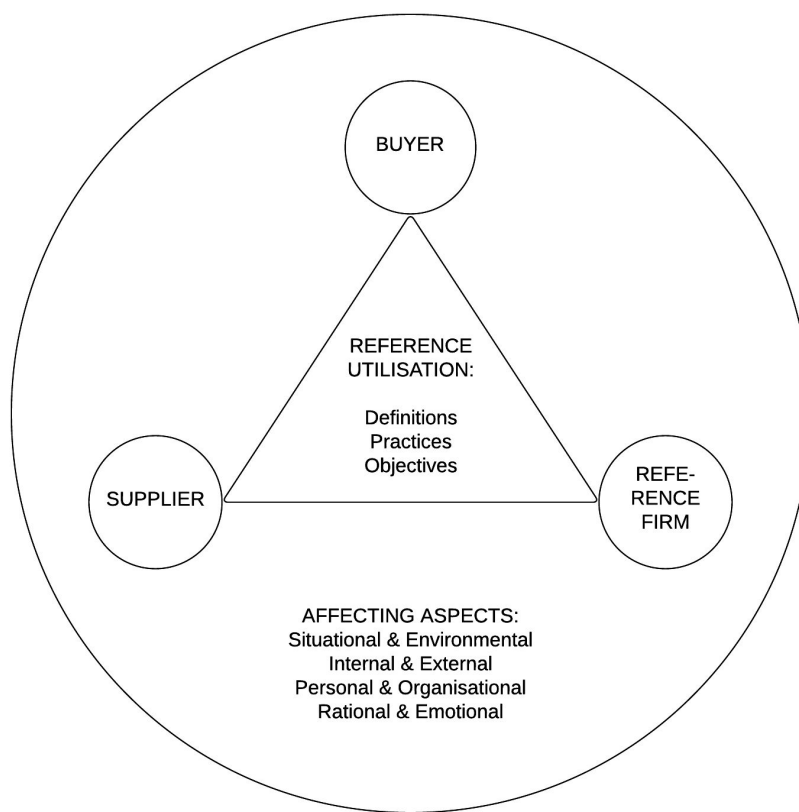


Figure 2: Theoretical framework

As said, the reference utilisation process includes three actors; the buyer, supplier and the reference company. Whereas the previous literature has focused mostly on the supplier and its relationship with the reference company, the theory is still quite lacking. This study's objective is to build on theory by explore the buyers and their perceptions, behaviour and habits. Reference utilisation as a phenomenon includes different definitions, objectives and

practices. The existing findings present the supplier's short-term and long-term objectives for reference utilisation, suggesting a tight link between the goals for reference utilisation and the organisational strategy (Salminen 1997; Salminen, Möller 2006; Jalkala, Salminen 2008). As for the buyers' objectives for reference utilisation, only finding good information has been suggested (Aarikka-Stenroos, Makkonen 2012; Aarikka-Stenroos, Jaakkola 2013). We need to explore the buyers more to find out what kind of different objectives they might have, and how these goals link to their organisational strategies.

Several practices have been suggested for reference utilisation (e.g. Salminen 1997), and these practices take place between the different actors of the reference utilisation framework. Even though this study takes into consideration these existing practices, it is expected that the practices are relevantly given, and the buyers might not have much affect on them, as the suppliers are finally the ones making the decision of the practices made possible. It is, however, interesting to find out the bigger means of reference practices, and to study whether the buyers have created similar – although flipped – phases of reference utilisation, as the suppliers (Salminen, Möller 2004; Salminen, Möller 2006). This study tries to find out how the reference practices take place during the purchase process, and which types of practices are utilised for which objectives.

On the outside of the theoretical framework, there are multiple aspects affecting the need and importance of reference utilisation (Salminen, Möller 2006). The before-mentioned aspects have been studied solely from the supplier's point of view, and we need to investigate whether similar aspects affect the buyers as well. Even though the existing view on the affecting aspects does include some relevant-seeming aspects, such as organisational, environmental and situational characteristics, there might be different aspects affecting the buyers. For example, the aspects affecting the suppliers' reference behaviour seem often rational and organisational, whereas the buyers are said to be keen on charismatic sources of information (Aarikka-Stenroos, Jaakkola 2013), suggesting them to be affected by more emotional, personal aspects. It is interesting to investigate the buyers more and find out how the affecting aspects differ from the suppliers side.

As said, reference utilisation is a complex phenomenon and we are still missing crucial knowledge about it. The presented framework will act as a guide for my empirical study, and hence as a base for the theoretical model built in the end. The objective is to find out and highlight the similarities and differences between the supplier's and buyer's reference behaviour, and build general theory about the buyers' reference utilisation.

3 Research design and methodology

3.1 Approach

The objective of this research is to find out behavioural themes, evaluative meanings and values of industrial buyers in the process of purchasing digital solutions. As the situation and processes of buyers can differ from one another, and the phenomenon itself can be described as complex, the point of the research is to find out emerging themes and modes of behaviour. The objective is to extend understanding about the buyers' utilisation of references by building on the existing theory. Hence, the combination of literature review and empirical research is applied.

In order to make the relevant choices and decisions during the research, the research philosophy should be addressed first. Research philosophy works as a framework for the whole research, and all the decisions and approaches should be based on the different aspects of the research philosophy; ontology, epistemology methodology and paradigm. (Eriksson, Kovalainen, 2008)

According to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008), ontology describes how the reality occurs in the world. Ontological assumptions can be based either on objective or subjective approaches. Objectivistic ontology means that reality is seen occurring independently, outside of the knower, i.e. the researcher. Subjectivism again means that different realities can occur simultaneously, and realities are socially built, hence the realities are based on the knower's perceptions and social interpretations. The term constructivism is often used

to describe a subjective ontological approaches. This study is based on existing reference literature, where existence and realities are a result of many different forces, and perceptual, situational, social and personal aspects play a huge role in reference utilisation (Salminen, Möller 2006). According to the theoretical framework, a constructive approach is applied, where the social nature of reality is understood.

Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) describe epistemology as the nature of knowledge. Epistemological choices go often hand in hand with the ontological approaches, and they can too be either objective or subjective. Objectivism means that the world is seen as theory neutral, and knowledge exists independent of perceptions, whereas subjectivist approach means that the world is seen as a result of own understanding, and knowledge is again a result of one's own perceptions and social approach. Based on ontological choices, a subjective epistemological approach is applied in this study – understanding that knowledge is not independent of the researcher's own observations.

Methodology, while closely related with epistemology, is more practically linked with the knowledge and research methods (Eriksson, Kovalainen 2008). As the objective is to gain information about the behaviour of buyers and the modes through which references are utilised, a qualitative approach is appropriate (Eriksson, Kovalainen 2008). Reference marketing is mostly studied from the suppliers' point of view, and there's a lack of built theories from the buyers' side, the aim is to build a theoretical framework for the buyers' utilisation of references. Aiming at building new theory through qualitative, empirical research by recognising emerging and repetitive codes, themes and categories, qualitative content analysis was seen as an applicable methodology. According to content analysis methodology, this study applies both inductive and deductive thinking, forming hypothetical questions and discussions throughout the literature review, then researching these through empirical qualitative research. To maintain focus and scope, a single case setting was chosen to make sure all the interviewees had experienced the same type of problem solving situation (Johnston, Lewin 1996). The context of purchasing digital solution seemed appropriate for researching reference marketing due to its technical complexity and intangibility (Alejandro, Kowalkowski et al. 2011; Aarikka-Stenroos, Jaakkola 2013).

Paradigm combines the ontological, epistemological and methodological choices into a bigger philosophical approach of the research, and it's often divided into positivism, post-positivism, critical theory and constructivism (Lincoln, Guba 1994; Eriksson, Kovalainen 2008). In this study, constructivism can be best applied to describe the paradigm of the study, as the view is focused on shared and emerging meanings and social behaviour (Eriksson, Kovalainen 2008). According to Sobh and Perry (2006), realistic philosophy is applied, where the aim is to build a shared reality even though many aspects and actors might affect the reality, which must be addressed when constructing theories.

3.2 Methods

Research methods can be divided into data collection method and data analysis method (Eriksson, Kovalainen 2008). Methods mean the practical ways of how the research is conducted and they present the modes of both finding the data and analysing it. This study was conducted in the context of purchasing digital solutions to achieve coherence and focus.

To gain applicable empirical data for building theories, in-depth interviews with organisational buyers were seen as an applicable data collection method. Five independent, in-depth interviews were held to gain empirical data and achieving saturation. Interviews lasted about one hour in average, and resulted in over 70 pages of empirical data, including the verbatim transcribed interviews and observational notes from the interviews.

The interviewed persons (Table 2) were chosen through theoretical sampling, from five different types of organisations and situations. Because the objective of this study was to gain general understanding of an under-researched phenomenon, it was important to gain insights from variable situations and organisational backgrounds. All the interviewees have been involved in a digital solution project as the client and been a part of the team making the purchasing decision. The persons were specialists, directors and managers in the marketing, communication, and digital or IT departments of their organisations.

To find out interesting themes and findings, represented companies were chosen from different industries from the media industry, food industry and import and business retail to consulting and engineering, with sizes varying from 389 to 6000 employees. All the interviewees and their organisations were Finnish to achieve situational and cultural coherence of the results. To manage the scope and focus of the research, the respondents were carefully chosen to represent the clientele of a digital agency, varying in both personal and organisational backgrounds, representing different types industries, organisation sizes, organisation strategies and hierarchies. Interviewees were chosen with the help of the account directors of a single digital agency, and contacting was done with the help of these account directors to gain access to these represented interviewees through familiar contacts. My personal relationship with the interviewees was non existent, but through my employment with the digital agency, I had a good knowledge of the customer relationships, previous projects with the interviewees and overall, the industry in question. Interviewer role was kept as relevantly objective and merely as an observer rather than part-taker, but according to the subjective and realistic approach, it is addressed that my employment with the digital solution supplier might affect the research and the interviewees.

The interview questions (Appendix 1) were kept as relatively broad and general to achieve a natural discourse situation, rather than definitive questions that could have lead the discussion in a particular direction. The dialogue was kept open to enable finding out behavioural modes of reference utilisation and evaluative attitudes and preferences of the buyers. The open-ended questions evolved around three bigger themes; phases of the purchasing and decision making process, modes of reference utilisation and evaluation, and external aspects affecting the purchase process and reference utilisation. First, the personal and professional backgrounds of the interviewees were discussed to gain information about their knowledge, experiences and perceptions about the phenomenon, after which more specific interview questions about reference utilisation and purchase processes were built based on this background. Saturation was found during the interviews, and clear themes were emerging throughout the whole process, with variabilities mostly due to different backgrounds and organisational aspects.

The recorded and transcribed interviews were first analysed and coded with a combination of apriori and priori coding, with some codes already anticipated according to the literature review and some codes emerging throughout the process. After this, a more in-depth and thorough content analysis took place. Different themes were found from the empirical data, which were categorised and further developed into theoretical findings.

Interviewee	Title	organisation	Industry	Employees	Type of digital solution
Annika Boström-Kumlin	Marketing Director	Vaasan Oy	Food	1270	External website
Outi Lilja	Marketing Specialist	Algol Oy	Industrial and Pharmaceutical Supply	488	Intranet
Merja Multas	Business IT Manager	MTV Oy	Media and Broadcasting	378	External websites
Mira Oiva	Marketing Planner	Alma Media Kustannus Oy	Media and Publishing	626	External websites
Tarja Virrantuomi	Global Digital Communications Manager	Pöyry Oyj	Consulting and Engineering	5170	External website, Intranet and a brand guideline tool

Table 2: Interviewees

3.3 Evaluation

In order to create a good research, a study must achieve theoretical trustworthiness and remain ethical throughout the process. Here, the aspects affecting the trustworthiness and ethical approach of this study are discussed.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) list four different evaluative aspects for research to achieve trustworthiness; credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

Credibility means that it is important that the truth of the findings can be trusted and the author is confident in the results (Lincoln, Guba 1985). Whereas realism research does

promote confidence in the results and suggests the findings as probably true, credibility might sometimes be difficult in qualitative research, as the goal is merely to understand a phenomenon instead of generating absolute truths (Eriksson, Kovalainen 2008). In this study, absolute truths will not be presented, but trustworthiness is achieved through transparent analysis of the empirical data and thorough discussion of limitations in the end.

Transferability means the generalisability and applicability of research results, and aims at creating applicable theories that can be utilised in other types of contexts (Lincoln, Guba 1985). Whereas this study focuses on a single, extremely focused context and no unnecessary applications or generalisations will be created, the study aims at building a theoretical framework and hence extending theory on not only reference marketing, but organisational buying behaviour as well. Hence, the theory is expected to be somewhat transferable to other contexts within similar reference practices.

Dependability means showing that the findings are not dependant on a single factor, but could be repeated (Lincoln, Guba 1985). In order to achieve dependability, the interviews were kept as relatively subjective, and the results are presented through quotations as a base for the findings.

Confirmability means establishing neutral, purely theoretical findings, in which the researcher does not affect by being biased (Lincoln, Guba 1985). In this study confirmability was achieved through high level of reflexivity, which means that the study focuses on building theory from the existing literature and the empirical data, and no generalisations or biased observations were made.

Ethical aspects are important in qualitative research, since often phenomena can be highly personal and interviews might include extremely delicate information about the interviewees (Eriksson, Kovalainen 2008). There are multiple important norms, guides and rules to achieve ethics in research, mostly linked to the interviewees and their personal vulnerability.

First of all, researchers must ensure that no harm is done with the research to the

interviewees (Eriksson, Kovalainen 2008). In this study, the interviewees took part in the interviews totally voluntarily, and none were in any way pressured into taking part in the research. The theme, objective and type of the research was clearly explained to the interviewees beforehand, and all the interviewees were given a chance to stay anonymous. No harmful questions were asked, where the interviewees would feel the need to share company secrets or personal information that would in any way harm them. By first finding out the personal and professional backgrounds of the interviewees and modifying the questions based on this, the interviews were kept as relevant for the interviewees and it was ensured that interviewees had a professional capability to answer these questions.

Besides ethical aspects linked to the interviewees and their integrity, there are also ethical issues to address about the interviewer and the research process (Eriksson, Kovalainen 2008). One of the most important issues is the handling and analysis of personal information and interview data. During my study, all data was handled and analysed carefully within the given context, and all interviews were analysed as whole to ensure that no comments were misinterpreted or modified. Also, results were built objectively from the interviews and backgrounds of the interviewees, enabling theoretical while ethical findings. My professional background also ensured the efficient expertise to understand the interviewees, problems and concerns and capability to address these issues.

To ensure that no unethical generalisations or misinterpretations are made, all the limitations for this study are discussed thoroughly in the end.

4 Findings

The findings highlight the previously discussed difficulties of the complex buying process, as all of the interviewees indicated that there are multiple things to concern during the purchasing and evaluation process. The held interviews provided interesting insights into the reference utilisation processes of the buyers and eventually, what types of aspects influence these methods and attitudes. The following section explains the findings from

objectives and the content of the information to the actual utilisation process and different external aspects affecting this.

4.1 Objectives for reference utilisation

Previous literature has already found multiple objectives for the suppliers' reference utilisation, all of which tend to be in line with the strategic, long-term goals of the organisation (e.g. Salminen, Möller 2006). Suppliers can utilise references through the various smaller goals discussed in chapter 2.2 to ultimately sell better and hence achieve their growth strategies.

References have been suggested as an important source of information (Aarikka-Stenroos, Makkonen 2012; Aarikka-Stenroos, Jaakkola 2013) and hence a crucial tool for purchasing. References are a credible source of information especially in a complex purchasing situation (Alejandro et al. 2011). Salminen and Möller (2006) suggest four desired outcomes for supplier's reference utilisation; increase of perceived competence, perceived credibility, perceived reputation and reduction of perceived risk. According to the empirical data collected during this study, the buyers' objectives for reference utilisation are very much in line with these desired outcomes.

Evaluating the supplier's competence

In the context of purchasing digital solutions, evaluating the suppliers' competence might be difficult, as the offerings are technical, complex and creative, which makes the assessment vague and time-consuming. Especially highly creative solutions were perceived as difficult to evaluate, and references were utilised to compare the business use of creative solutions and their results. The buyers can utilise references and reference customers to gain more concrete information about the suppliers' competence during their previous projects and hence being able to evaluate their competency better. According to the data, buyers seem to have huge difficulties evaluating the true competence of the suppliers and hence comparing the different suppliers in the market. One of the reasons for

this might be that the companies do tend to market themselves a lot which makes finding credible information difficult:

“-- maybe some kind of credibility or technical competence – it’s difficult to get behind the marketing jargon and see if they’re really capable and creative enough.” Outi Lilja, Algol

Building trust in the supplier

Another communal problem for the buyers is being able to trust the supplier and the information provided by them. Being able to trust the suppliers was crucial for making better decisions, especially if the investment is big, as the bigger the budget, the bigger the effects might be if the decision is wrong and the supplier is not credible. Trust seemed to be one of the most major issues for the buyers, due to big budgets and vague offerings. Especially if the projects are billed hourly and there are no fixed costs, it is important to gain trust building information from previous deliveries. Most of the interviewed buyers addressed the importance of numbers and results in trust building, and finding truthful calculations and results of previous deliveries made it easier for the buyers to trust the suppliers. Even though one interviewee addressed the possibility to manipulate numbers by showing just the positive calculations, these “hard” numbers and facts were still generally seen as a great way to build trust in the supplier.

“The other thing is the numbers – if you can prove that you’ve been able to make results. -- The most important thing is that you can prove that you’ve made business.” Annika Boström-Kumlin, Vaasan

Validating the supplier’s experience

Whereas supplier-provided references were seen as only relevantly reliable, the buyers saw references with a customer contact a credible source of information, which was extremely valuable for the decision making process. The data shows that especially during conversations with the reference customers, results and goals are a big factor to address –

buyers utilise reference customers to find out the results of the digital solutions by seeking information about the solutions' effect on business performance. Through successful customer references, buyers seem to validate the supplier's experience and competence to provide effective digital solutions. Buyers desired information directly from previous clients to validate the previous experience by gaining reliable information about past deliveries straight from the client.

“The best reference is a happy client. It's maybe the best if you hear somewhere that okay, everything went well with these [suppliers].” Annika Boström-Kumlin, Vaasan

Reducing perceived risks

Hand in hand with credibility, reducing the possible risk is a crucial objective for the buyers' reference utilisation. As discussed, in the context of purchasing digital solutions the results and success of the purchases can only be measured post-purchase and post-delivery, which creates massive risks for the buying party. Utilising references and reference customers, buyers were able to gain information about all the parts of a purchase, making them aware of all the aspects, reducing perceived risks. Reducing risks seemed a crucial objective for the buyers, as many of the buyers had been in situations where their projects had gone poorly, resulting in overgone budgets and schedules. Information about relevance and ability to address the correct needs is not only sought from the supplier's references, but also inquired from the reference customers personally by asking them whether their projects resulted in a solution they asked for in the beginning, and whether everything was as told.

“There have been those situations where we've gotten a huge list of resources and then there's only one developer and an account director doing work, and then the schedules have gone over and we haven't gotten what we wanted.” Tarja Virrantuomi, Pöyry

Increasing internal motivation

Many of the interviewed buyers addressed the importance of reputation. Good reputation of a supplier was a positive thing, as it could increase excitement and motivation internally and increasing trust in the partner. References were utilised within the purchasing companies to evaluate and compare reputation of the different offering parties. While reputation has been previously linked with references, it was interesting to find out how references can in the end result in building internal motivation to buy from a single supplier. This excitement building role of references highlights the personal aspects of reference utilisation and the fact that buyers are, in fact, extremely emotional actors.

“In this one project we had a supplier that was totally new and nobody had experience with them. -- They had made quite an ambitious campaign -- and it had gotten a huge amount of publicity. I do think it affected that we kind of got the feeling that we want to work with them. If they’ve done something so cool to them, they surely will do it to us, too.” Tarja Virrantuomi, Pöyry

Understanding technical offerings

Depending on the situation and the buyer background, technical nature of digital solutions seemed problematic to some of the buyers, complicating the purchase process. References can be seen as a useful tool to concretise and explain the technical solutions to buyers with less experience from digital technology or features. Especially if the references are made in a clear, explaining way with visual explanations of previous technical solutions, they can be seen as a useful tool for internal learning and better understanding.

“With these technical projects, you usually have one of us so called rural people, who doesn’t necessarily understand the technical terms, so the cases can really well shed light on the features” Mira Oiva, Alma Media

4.1.1 Link to strategy

The empirical data shows the tight link between the buyer organisation's strategy and the short-term objectives for reference utilisation. As previous research has not studied the link between the buyers' objectives for reference utilisation and their organisational strategies, this study shows that the companies' long-term purchasing or outsourcing strategies do work as a framework for reference utilisation, too. Organisational outsourcing and acquisition strategies guide all the decision making and hence all the objectives follow them. Especially the kind of content the buyers were looking for seemed to be derived from the organisational strategies, as some organisations were more technology and result-oriented, and others focused more on brand management, story-telling and communication.

The buyers' objectives for reference utilisation not only seemed to be in line with their organisational goals, but the strategic thinking seemed to be a big factor to find in the references as well. References were utilised as signalling ability to understand organisational objectives and a proof of being able to achieve them. If references contained clear information of the supplier's strategic thinking, preferably personalised to the buyer organisation, the buyers directly saw the strategic capabilities through the provided references. All kinds of personalised, strategic insights to drive business performance were seen as a positive indicator, whereas some buyers said that if no strategic insights are given, the supplier won't get far.

"With us it's often forgotten that we're run by ad income. Ads are usually a -- red cloth that's preferably left out of the designs, which is really disturbing, -- because ads are vital for us. They clearly don't understand that well enough." Merja Multas, MTV

"f they haven't understood our strategy and if they haven't done their job based on it, they won't get far." Merja Multas, MTV

4.2 Practices for reference utilisation

Previous literature has somewhat thoroughly expressed different practices for reference utilisation, including client lists (Usunier 1996), oral presentations (Salminen 1997), press releases (Bradley 1995), success stories and testimonials (Salminen 1997), articles in journals (Brierty, Eckles et al. 1998), on-site reference visits (Hutt, Speh 1992, Jackson 1985), conferences and seminars (Salminen 1997, Hutt, Speh 1992) and the internet (Ford, Gadde et al. 2003). Aarikka-Stenroos and Makkonen (2012) suggested reference visits to be especially important for industrial buyers due to their reliable nature, but this study shows that almost all the aforementioned practices are utilised. The only practices that weren't directly mentioned as a mode of the buyers' reference utilisation were articles in journals.

*“Then we start sourcing from like **Google**, but usually our crew has been to some events or **seminars** or the likes so we always think whether there has been someone **presenting** or sponsoring.” Tarja Virrantuomi, Pöyry*

*“First of course the suppliers came here and **presented** their references and -- we asked if there was someone we could contact and then we physically **visited** the customer's venue and they showed us their intranets.” Outi Lilja, Algol*

*“We start investigating, like okay **these case lists** look good and you sort of start trusting that the project will work and it'll succeed.” Mira Oiva, Alma Media*

What was interesting to find out was that all the buyers seem to utilise a combination of various reference practices. None of the buyers only used one source or practice of reference utilisation, but mixed and matched them to create a personal portfolio or reference utilisation practices.

4.3 Process for reference utilisation

The previous literature mostly focuses on the actual purchase process and reference utilisation as individual practices within that process from initial contact to making the final decision. This study anyhow suggests that references can be utilised not only during the purchase process, but also prior and post it. Also, the way buyer organisations utilise different types of reference practices to create their individual modes of reference utilisation, we should not include the reference utilisation to be a part of the purchase process, but actually see it as its own process with different phases personalised for different organisational objectives and varying based on organisational hierarchies, norms and habits.

Gaining inspiration and ideas

References were seen as a tight package with information about the problem, needs, product, technology, prices, features, results and relationship. The buyers seemed to think that references can, if well made, be a great source of basic information about the practicalities of the suppliers' projects. Before even considering suppliers or briefing a project, references could be used as a source of inspiration and ideas. Hence, references were used individually without the supplier's action as a tool for mapping the market and a help for planning future projects and development – ultimately, as a tool for positioning and differentiation.

“-- references can give us ideas about what should be done and how we should do our brief.” Merja Multas, MTV

Sourcing potential suppliers

When the buyers had recognised a need for digital solutions, the first thing was to start sourcing for suppliers. Buying organisations seem to source for suppliers continuously through their personal networks, industry, events and internet, and utilising references plays a part in each of these. Whether it's finding references online, or discussing new

deliveries with industry peers, references can be utilised as a crucial tool to source for new potential suppliers.

Depending on the organisation in question, modes of supplier sourcing were different. Whereas some of the bigger organisations have their own departments for sourcing for partners and mapping out the market, some buyers sourced for suppliers more individually within their own teams. References were utilised as a tool for getting to know the suppliers during the sourcing phase. Buyers utilised references to gain information about the previous deliveries, relationships and the entirety of the suppliers' offerings and capabilities. Besides sourcing for suppliers and then checking their references, some buyers went the other way, sourcing suppliers by listing good reference solutions and then finding out the suppliers behind these solutions.

“We basically went two ways. We saw good food industry sites and found out which companies were behind them and then the other way – we had some companies in mind and then went and saw which industries and companies they'd worked for.” Annika Boström-Kumlin, Vaasan

Finding reliable and honest information

After sourcing for a list of potential suppliers, most buyers turned to the reference customers and contacted them for honest and reliable information about the practicalities and satisfaction in the supplier. By studying the actual relationship, ways of working and results of the deliveries, buyers seem to utilise these reference customers to validate their decisions and build trust with the suppliers.

Either contacting the customers by phone, or physically visiting them, these reference contacts were utilised to learn more about the suppliers and their way of working. During the reference visits, the buyers tried to find out as much information about the project as possible, and especially the practicalities, such as budgets, schedules and the relationship seemed to interest the buyers. The buyers seem interested to find out as specific

information as possible about the practicalities of the digital solutions utilising customer references.

“-- we did benchmark visits to their clients and okay, ofcourse the suppliers only give us successful stories, but during the conversations you will get info about how the projects really went.” Tarja Virrantuomi, Pöyry

Comparing and evaluating the suppliers

Many of the interviewees addressed the complexity of comparing different suppliers when it comes to purchasing digital solutions. As the suppliers, offers, pricing methods, focuses and schedules are extremely different from each other, it becomes difficult for the buyer to compare different offers and evaluate them together. Findings show that references are a crucial factor in the evaluation phase of the purchase process.

Many interviewees suggested that references are utilised throughout the evaluation process to explain, showcase and present different offerings, and they can be utilised to compare different suppliers and their performance. Especially, if the reference customers were ready to provide information on budgets, schedules and the project per se, references were seen as a concrete factor affecting the evaluation of the bigger picture.

Using the information gotten in the previous phases, the buyers could more easily compare different suppliers and their offerings. References seem to have a constant effect on the buyers' perceptions of the suppliers, as they are the concrete examples and showcasing material of performance and previous experience. Depending on the organisational norms and habits, some buyers evaluated the references as an independent part of the assessment, whereas many buyers seemed to evaluate the whole supplier and their offering utilising the references to do so. In the end, references were utilised to make the final decisions between the suppliers.

“If there are two even suppliers, we examine the references extremely carefully. We go through the reference lists and visit the customers and

they tell us about these projects. We do discuss with these companies and try to milk out all the possible information about the supplier.” Tarja Virrantuomi, Pöyry

Explaining and concretising the offerings

Whereas previous literature about references has stopped in the final purchase decision, the empirical data showed that references can actually be utilised even after the purchase process, and during the project. As discussed, digital solutions can sometimes be complex technically, and if the suppliers fail to address the less experience of the project team from the buying side, references can be utilised as a source of learning, explanation and concretisation.

“References are actually relevant a lot longer than only during the purchase process. -- when we started doing the project, we often went back to the references and checked -- what they actually meant with this or that.” Mira Oiva, Alma Media

To overcome the complexity of purchasing digital solutions, buyers look for validation for their decisions in references provided to them. The buyers search for validating, trust building, risk reducing information from the references to overcome the risks present in the process, but also seek for explaining information to understand the offerings and discussed technical features better. Most frequently expressed goal for reference utilisation was to get a clearer picture of the entirety of the offering and supplier, which suggests that references are eventually utilised for evaluating all the bits and pieces of an offer.

4.4 Aspects affecting reference utilisation

Even though findings suggest that references are crucial tools for trust building, risk reducing and showcasing the offering throughout the customer life cycle, there are aspects that affect the utilisation and importance for referencing. Organisational buyers never act in a vacuum by themselves, but there are different things they need to consider during the

purchase process, which all affect the reference process and everything involved.

Purchase problem characteristics

First of all, the aspects related to the situation the buyers are in affect how they utilise references. Findings show that the purchase problem characteristics affect reference utilisation. Purchase problem characteristics are situational and linked to the purchase in hands. Salminen and Möller (2006) suggested that high importance, complexity and innovativeness of the offering results in growing need for reference utilisation, as familiarity and purchase frequency can lower the reference need for the supplier.

Data shows that besides these characteristics, high **creativity** increases the need for references, as buyers see creativity as a complex aspect to evaluate and references can be a useful tool to concretise it. Findings highlight that **familiar** and frequent purchases are made merely as a routine, trusting the previous suppliers or picking a new suitable one comes along. With these smaller and routine purchases references are not always used at all, and if used, utilisation is quick and simple. With large, **complicated** and new investments, references are utilised throughout the purchase process and the utilisation process is complex.

“-- if it's this kind of advertising type of situation, the process is very straight-forward -- the process is very short so we prefer -- existing, good partners, so in these we rarely put up a tender, but use the ones we know.”

Outi Lilja, Algol

“We have of course smaller purchases, which we do more freely --. Those we usually just buy whenever we find a suitable supplier.”

Boström-Kumlin, Vaasan

“The bigger the budget, the more we examine the references.”

Virrantuomi, Pöyry

Organisational characteristics

As already noted briefly, the buyer organisation affects the whole purchase process through norms, rules and decision making culture. The characteristics of the buying organisation affect the utilisation of references. The buying organisations have strategic goals, objectives, norms and regulations that steer the reference process from the beginning to the end. Company strategy seems to influence the orientation of the buyers and hence determine the information sought from the references.

Empirical data shows that reference process varies especially based on the **structure** of the organisation, as some companies have their own departments for acquisitions and outsourcing, being then responsible for the initial sourcing or outlines for the purchase, whereas some buyers were able to go through the whole reference process very independently.

“With us, especially our strong acquisition department affects our decisions a lot. And of course the decision making culture affects how fast and smart we can make decisions.” Annika Boström-Kumlin, Vaasan

“[The organisation] doesn’t really affect. We make decisions very independently in marketing.” Outi Lilja, Algal

Also, the **hierarchy** of the organisation might affect the reference utilisation, as some companies seemed to have very strict processes for assessment criteria, reference utilisation and ultimately, the final decision. Some organisations might have clear assessment templates and structured buying teams within the company while some of the buyers might be able to work more independently and flexibly. This naturally affects the modes of reference utilisation, as hierarchical and regulated organisations utilise references through the directions given to them.

“We go with the boss’s opinion. Sure we ask everyone’s opinions and did a sort of voting thing, but in the end the superior makes the decision.” Tarja Virrantuomi, Pöyry

Personal characteristics

Personal characteristics seem to have a vast effect on the utilisation of references. **Personality** of the buyer can affect practicalities such as effectiveness, carefulness and structure of reference utilisation, as the following quotes suggest.

“-- personally I’m usually quite fast, so -- I was fast giving feedback and making decisions. A lot faster than many others would have been, and it’s just my personality, I’m a bit impatient.” Annika Boström-Kumlin, Vaasan

“-- also the personality affects – some people are a bit like “Whatever, it’ll be fine” and others are like “What did they exactly say here and here.”
Tarja Virrantuomi, Pöyry

Besides practical aspects of personality, emotional aspects such as **preferences** and **chemistries** affect the reference utilisation. The buyers simply have personal preferences about the content and nature of good references, whereas some of them were looking for numbers and proof, and some were searching for visually appealing, story-based references.

“I personally like those references that have a good story. -- And they should promote intimacy, maybe that’s what I’m looking for.” Mira Oiva, Alma Media.

The empirical data shows that the **chemistry and relationship** between the buyer and the supplier is crucial, when it comes to purchasing digital solutions. Many of the buyers addressed the fact that as digital projects can be long and they involve a significant amount of cooperation, personal chemistries are important aspects that can affect the whole

purchase process. If the chemistries work perfectly, the buyers might be able to trust the suppliers more, which then would decrease the importance of references.

“Personal characteristics affect a lot, because the personal chemistries affect everything. -- If you have lots of hard headed people, I just don’t have the energy for that. ” Annika Boström-Kumlin, Vaasan

“ It’s enormously important that you find a partner with whom the cooperation flows, because the effortlessness of the cooperation is just very important.” Outi Lilja

Finally, **professional experience and personal background** have a big role in reference utilisation. It seems like buyers with different backgrounds seek for different types of information, but also rely on the references differently. The more experience the buyers had from similar purchase situations, the more specific and concrete information they seemed to search for in references. This seemed to be especially true for the buyers that had vast experience from the technical field – they sought for calculations, numbers and proof more than stories and explanations.

“It depends on whether they have background from other companies --, it affects the perceptions on price and profitability. So experience affects. Tarja Virrantuomi, Pöyry

“I’m personally quite aware of the market and the prices. And sure the ability to scan the repertoire in the market affects decision making. It also enables to question some things or evaluate like okay, this has been done nicely with the correct calculations.” Merja Multas, MTV

On top of the professional experience, the ability to network and the size of one’s **personal networks** seem to be important aspects affecting reference utilisation. It seems like buyers more easily contact reference customers they somehow know or have previous contacts with, but also trust the suppliers they already know through their networks. The findings

suggest that the buyers that are not extremely networked might base their opinions merely on the supplier's references, whereas well networked buyers trust in references and referrals sourced from their personal networks.

"I was raised at Satama Interactive, and there are so many people from there that the network is simply huge. Basically wherever you go or talk to, there's always someone from Satama era. So the circles are actually very small." Merja Multas, MTV

"Our type of company has so many people who have some existing relationships or -- experiences in good and bad. We do [source] pretty much through networks." Annika Boström-Kumlin

Supplier characteristics

The supplier firm and its characteristics can affect the utilisation of references. Previous literature suggested that aspects like big size, good reputation and good state of internationalisation reduce the importance of reference utilisation for the supplier (Salminen 1997; Salminen, Möller 2006; Aarikka-Stenroos, Jaakkola 2013).

It seems like especially **previous experiences** either professionally or through personal networks seem to generally decrease the importance of references. If the supplier is familiar through previous projects or personal life, trustworthiness and credibility increases, which could mean that references do not play such a big part in the purchase process.

"If a partner has been chosen and we've done work with them, then references don't matter anymore, because you know them as you have experience with them." Outi Lilja, Algol

Even though familiarity seems to generally reduce the importance of referencing, there's a risk present in being **too familiar with the suppliers**, as some buyers felt being too good

friends with the other party a risky factor, fearing for confrontation situations or being challenged from making decisions.

“We used to be neighbours. -- It was a weird situation. The personal relationship almost turned against them, because I didn’t want anyone to think we’ve chosen them because I knew them. Plus what if something would happen and we’d be forced to have some unpleasant conversations.”
Annika Boström-Kumlin, Vaasan

Finally, in line with Salminen’s (1997) suggestion of **supplier’s charisma** increasing trust seems to be true in this context, as one interviewee stated that emotions are a crucial aspect affecting the importance of references.

“Sometimes we just go with the emotions, like these seem like such good guys, let’s go with them, even if they might not have the relevant references.” Tarja Virrantuomi, Pöyry

Reference company characteristics

Besides the supplier organisation, also the reference company might have an effect on reference utilisation. Previous literature already stated the importance of segmentation (Salminen 1997; Salminen Möller 2006). Empirical data shows that the characteristics of the reference companies have a tremendous impact on the assessment of these references.

Relevancy of the reference company is an important aspect for reference utilisation.

“I personally really respect if a salesperson visits me to sell a digital service or anything, if the person has noticed that hey, we have a bit similar reference companies, it immediately impresses me” Outi Lilja, Algol

The buyers do not only look for information about the precise delivery, but about the reference customers as well. Buyers seek for information about relevance and versatility,

utilising information from references. Findings show that relevance can be achieved through a similar problem, age of relationship, size, strategy, industry or even organisational values. Buyers seem to search for references from similar **industries**, **companies** or **situations**, that would then be relevant to their situation and problem. By finding relevant information from references, buyers can trust that the suppliers understand the particular problem, industry or organisational type.

“A good reference -- from about the same industry. If it’s not the same industry, it’s the same size, when you can see the creativity and that the supplier have been able to solve a similar problem as we have.” Outi Lilja, Algol

According to the interviews, going too close in the same industry or company type can have risks, as attitudes towards sharing a supplier with a competitor vary. Depending on organisational norms and rules, some organisations do not even consider a supplier that supplies to a competitor, whereas some even think it can be a good thing.

“We won’t even consider that kind of supplier. It’s totally out of the question, we can’t use a supplier that does to us and a competitor.” Outi Lilja, Algol

“In some situations it can be difficult, but I don’t think in this small world we can think it’s a bad thing anymore. I think it can even be positive.” Mira Oiva

“I don’t know why not, at least they know the industry. If they’ve done a good job then why not, let’s just make a better one.” Tarja Virrantuomi, Pöyry

Not only does this relevant information indicate that the suppliers have experience from the specific types of situations, but the findings also show that it’s a great indicator of **capability to follow directions**.

“-- if you see that okay they’ve done some of the biggest brands of Finland, then you know that okay, they’re used to following brand guidelines, because you can’t do [big brands] if you go against their guidelines.” Outi Lilja, Algol

Salminen (1997) noted the potential of utilising not only satisfied reference customers, but also the negative ones. Whereas most researchers since have only focused on satisfied reference customers, data showed that there actually might be potential in **utilising the negative reference** information as well. To break off the polished image of marketing, as the buyers might happily utilise the references with problems and difficulties laid out honestly.

“I think that painting a super positive picture is not always the best way to go, but being able to realistically say that okay these things went well, here we had some difficulties but we solved the problems like this. Often references are super positive and the reality is just not that positive.” Merja Multas, MTV

Again lined with Salminen’s fundamental conditions (1997), **age of the customer relationship** affects a lot in the context of purchasing digital solutions, as in the digital industry, technologies and offerings can change quickly, and product life-cycles are short. Many buyers addressed how references lose their value in just few years, which means that expired references cannot be utilised.

“We also check how old the references are, -- because especially in these technical projects and why not web sites too, there are some that have been made like five or even three years ago, and they are not that relevant anymore, because time changes and they quickly lose it.” Tarja Virrantuomi, Pöyry

Finally, even the **values of the reference company** can affect reference utilisation of the buyers. One buyer suggested that because the supplier had listed many reference customers from the non-profit industry, the buyer perceived the supplier as sharing those values, resulting in improved overall perception.

“One thing that affected in the references was the way you can see the company’s values through the reference customers -- which actually affected the perceptions too. -- It was like a cherry on the cake that they’ve done sites for these types of companies that match our values.”Mira Oiva, Alma Media

Below, the results are shown in a table listing the variable emerged codes, these developed into a bigger categorisation, and finally the theoretical themes are suggested.

Codes	Categorisation	Theoretical themes
Competence	Evaluating competence	Objectives for reference utilisation
Trust	Building trust	Objectives for reference utilisation
Risks, Past problems	Reducing risks	Objectives for reference utilisation
Experience, Knowledge, Technical capability	Validating experience	Objectives for reference utilisation
Excitement, Motivation	Increasing motivation	Objectives for reference utilisation
Understand, Concretise, Explain	Understanding offering	Objectives for reference utilisation
Inspiration, Ideas, Planning a brief	Gaining inspiration	Phases of reference process
Sourcing	Sourcing suppliers	Phases of reference process
Trust, Desired information	Finding reliable information	Phases of reference process
Comparing, Assessment	Evaluating suppliers	Phases of reference process
Understanding, Concretise, Explain	Explaining offerings	Phases of reference process
Creativity, Familiarity, Complicated	Purchase problem characteristics	Affecting aspects
Structure, Hierarchy	Organisational characteristics	Affecting aspects
Personality, Preference, Chemistries, Relationships, Experiences, Background, Networks	Personal characteristics	Affecting aspects
Familiarity, Charisma	Supplier characteristics	Affecting aspects
Relevancy, Competitor, Negative references, Old references, Values	Reference company characteristics	Affecting aspects

Table 3: Results

According to the assumptions made during the literature review, there are both similarities and differences in the reference utilisation process of the suppliers and the buyers. Whereas the findings prove some expectations, there were some unexpected, emerging aspects affecting the reference behaviour of organisational buyers.

As expected according to the literature review, the main objectives for buyers' reference utilisation were closely in link with the buyer organisation's strategy – the buyers utilise references to ultimately increase business performance by improving outsourcing and purchase decisions. The short-term objectives were somewhat similar to what the suppliers are looking to achieve, as building trust, reducing risks, evaluating competence and validating experience seem to be common goals for the buyers and the suppliers alike. Interestingly, some internal, more personal and emotional short-term goals emerged during the empirical study, as buyers signaled the need of references to build motivation and increase internal understanding.

What comes to the practices and process of reference utilisation, the literature review suggested a multi-phased process of suppliers' reference utilisation. As anticipated, the buyers have created a phased process of reference utilisation, as well. What was intriguing, was how the reference process takes place not only during the purchase process, but also prior and post it. Also, unexpected was how individually the buyers look for and utilise references. Many of the buyers utilised references on their own and even contacted the reference customers without the supplier's special actions, which highlights the importance of not only the relationship between the supplier and the buyer, but also the actions between the buyer and the reference customer. The fact that reference utilisation might take place individual to the supplier's actions also blurs the borders between reference marketing and word-of-mouth.

The literature review already suggested many aspects affecting the reference utilisation of the suppliers. Some of these seemed relevant for the buyers as well, as previous experiences, importance of the purchase, and relevancy of the reference were mentioned in both the literature review and the empirical study. Anyhow, many new affecting aspects

emerged during the interviews. Notably, the buyers seemed to be affected by highly personal and emotional aspects compared to the suppliers, as aspects such as preferences, chemistries, background, values and charisma were highlighted.

5 Conclusion

5.1 Theoretical implications

Combining the literature review and empirical data from the interviews, findings show that reference utilisation is an amazingly complex phenomenon, containing multiple actors, sides, sources, modes and methods. As reference marketing has mostly been studied from the sellers point of view, we need more theoretical modelling for how the buyers utilise customer references prior, during and post their purchase process. This study is based on a theoretical framework built according to Salminen and Möller's (2006) suppliers' reference model, but with new empirical data from the buyers, a reference model focusing on the buyers' reference utilisation can be built.

In the buyer's reference model, there are five main blocks. In the centre, there's the buyer – the decision maker. The buyers' objectives for reference utilisation seem to be closely related or linked with the organisational strategy and long-term goals. The company strategy defines objectives for organisational purchasing, which then drives the buyers' personal goals. Buyers thrive for good-quality, effective purchases that in the long-term affect the business performance positively. They often seem to have difficulties due to the complexity and intangibility of digital purchases, which is why they are in big need of trust building information that might reduce perceived risks and validate their decisions. This is where references come into the picture. Through references, buyers seek to achieve trust, low-risks and well validated information about the suppliers in the market, which they can then utilise to evaluate the offerings and make decisions.

On the outer side of the reference model, there are several external factors affecting the

reference utilisation processes and assessment of these references. Firm characteristics, such as norms, goals, structure and hierarchy affect the reference utilisation by guiding the processes, principles and responsibilities of the buyer. Also, personal characteristics, such as background, networks, experiences and preferences build a framework for reference utilisation by guiding the buyer's behaviour, attitudes and perceptions. With purchasing digital solutions, primarily technical orientation and previous experience from the industry seemed to be a significant aspect guiding reference evaluation, whereas large personal networks appear to guide reference utilisation.

Problem characteristics refer to the particular purchase problem and are extremely linked to situational factors, as innovativeness, frequency, creativity and familiarity affect reference utilisation vastly. As digital solutions are often innovative and extremely creative, references are needed to showcase deliveries through concrete examples and to help buyers compare different suppliers.

Supplier characteristics, such as reputation, familiarity and size also affect the importance and utilisation of references. If the supplier is familiar through previous experience or personal networks, large, and maintains a good reputation, the buyers can more easily trust them, and reference utilisation becomes less necessary.

Besides the supplier firm, reference organisation guides the utilisation of references. The more relevant (similarity in size, industry, business-problem, strategy or values) the reference firm is to the buyer, the better the reference's effect seems to be. Previous experiences or familiarity with the reference contacts lowers the barrier of contacting and interviewing the customers, hence affecting the reference utilisation process.

The data resulted in uncovering five underlying phases of reference utilisation process. Buyers might use references not only during the purchase process but also prior and post the tender phase, which means reference utilisation can not be seen as only a part of the purchase process, but in fact, its own process that is linked with the purchasing behaviour, but occurs also outside of it. Many buyers seem to be constantly seeking for inspiration and benchmarks from good reference solutions in the market and utilising these references

to come up with ideas of their own.

When it comes to sourcing for suitable suppliers utilising references, buyers seem to use two different types of methods. Some buyers sought for good references and traced down the suppliers responsible of the good deliveries, whereas other buyers sourced for potential suppliers, and then searched their customer references.

After sourcing the suppliers, buyers utilise the references through contacting the reference companies to seek for reliable, more honest information about the references and gain information of the projects. Eventually, the buyers utilise and evaluate references to ultimately evaluate the potential suppliers and their offerings, and finally to make their final purchase decisions.

Some buyers seem to return to the references after the purchase, during the projects, to understand the supplier and their offering better and again, to gain ideas for their project.

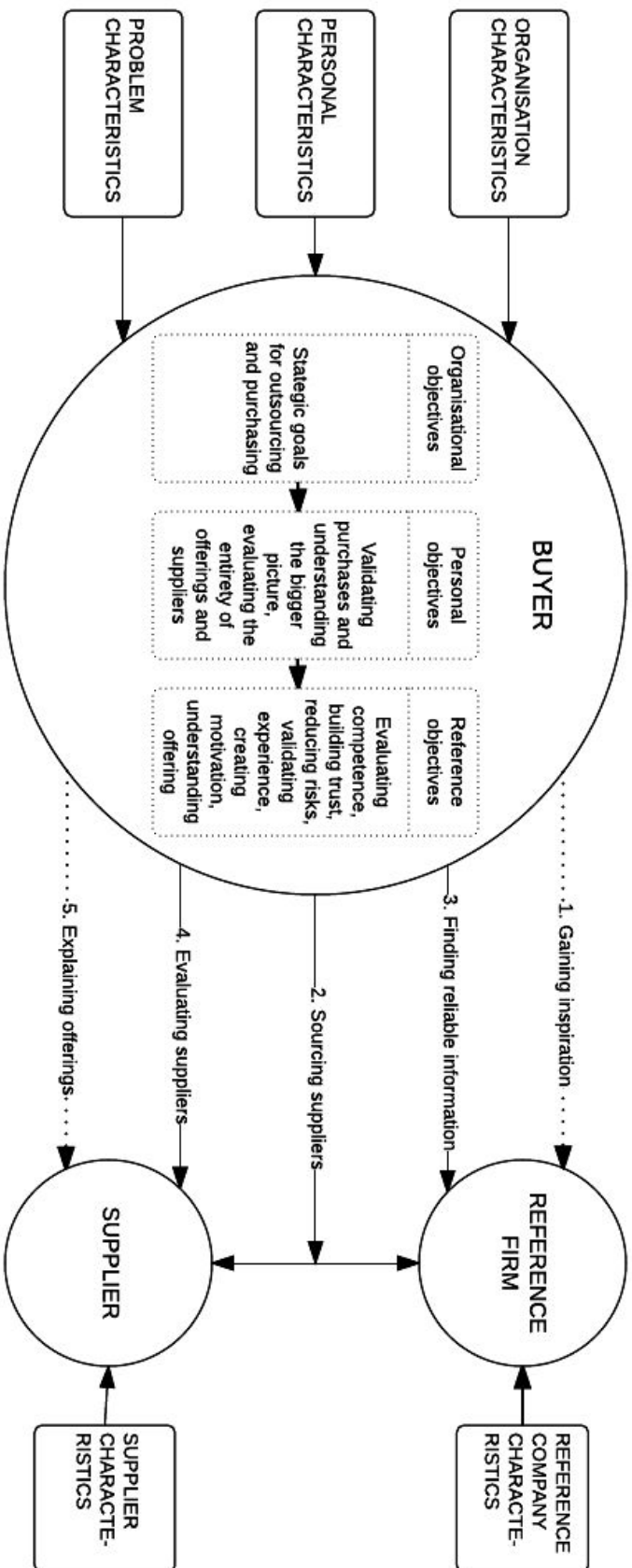


Figure 3: Reference model for buyers' reference utilisation

In relation to the suppliers, some similarities were found in the reference behaviour of the buyers, but some differences emerged as well. As expected, the long-term objectives of the buyer's reference utilisation are closely in line with organisational strategies, but new, internal short-term objectives were found. Similarly to the suppliers, the buyers have created a multi-phased process for reference utilisation, which takes place not only during the purchase process, but also outside of it. Notably, parts of the reference process might take place individually without any actions from the supplier, which highlights the relationship between the buyer and the reference customer, and also blurs the borders between reference marketing and word-of-mouth. What comes to aspects affecting the reference utilisation, the buyers seem to be highly affected by more personal, emotional and internal aspects than the suppliers, as aspects such as preferences, chemistries and personal backgrounds were emphasised.

Previous literature on customer references has focused on the suppliers and their utilisation of references. The buyer side has only been addressed in a few studies with results on reference utilisation as a part of information search (Aarikka-Stenroos, Jaakkola 2013; Aarikka-Stenroos, Makkonen 2012), but these have bundled references together with reputation and word-of-mouth. Whereas these phenomena are relevant to reference utilisation and the borders between them are not clear, reference utilisation is such a complex phenomenon that there's a great need for investigating it individually by studying all the different actors and aspects. This study builds new theory for buyers' utilisation of customer references by creating a reference model for the buyers, but accentuates that there are still unknown aspects around reference utilisation.

While many parts of the buyers' reference model were closely linked with previous literature of suppliers' reference utilisation, this research resulted in new findings on organisational buying behaviour, especially on how customer references affect organisational purchasing. The reference model created is a thorough framework modelling the buyers' objectives and process for reference utilisation, with five found aspects affecting the reference utilisation process.

5.2 Managerial implication

The results highlighted the problems of organisational buying and proved the complexity of buying behaviour. Organisational buyers have difficulties in making decisions especially when the situation is vague, creative or technically complex. The buyers feel that comparing different suppliers is difficult, and finding reliable, trust building information about the suppliers' previous performance is crucial for decision making.

Customer references proved to be an extremely important phenomenon for the buyers, which suggests that suppliers should be focusing on providing reliable information through their customer references. By providing the buyers with good reference customer contacts and letting the reference customer and buyer contact, they give the buyers the chance to gain honest and reliable information about the previous projects or deliveries. Also, suppliers should focus on the content of their own references – by using numbers, calculations and data, they can prove their competence for experienced buyers, whereas stories and visual references might be seen as a nice touch and making it easy for the buyers to understand the references better.

The findings show the importance of relevance in customer references. Suppliers should get to know their potential customer organisation by finding information about their strategic objectives, backgrounds and characteristics, and then match the used references to these aspects. By personalising the used references to match the buyers' strategic goals and finding the relevant reference customers, the suppliers can affect the buying behaviour positively and finally build trust, reduce perceived risk, validate their experience, increase the buyers' motivation and concretise their offering.

This thesis highlighted the role of customer references not only as a part of the purchase process, but throughout an individual reference utilisation process that takes place also outside the traditional tender phase. Buyers can utilise customer references already before starting the purchase process as a source of inspiration and strategic positioning, but also after the purchase decision during the project as a source for concretising the offering and

concepts. For the suppliers, this creates a need for making sure the references can be found easily and that the content is constantly good, as the buyers look for them individually.

5.3 Limitations and directions for future research

As said, buyers' reference utilisation is studied very little, and this thesis is building on this theory by creating a model for buyers' reference utilisation. Because of the theory building nature of this study, the theory does not go extremely deep into the smaller aspects, but merely creates a general framework for references' affect on buying behaviour. Future research could study the different parts of the suggested reference model independently to find out more specific results on for example the strategic objectives of reference utilisation or the network effect on reference utilisation.

This study focused on the context of purchasing digital solutions, which is a good context for studying customer reference utilisation, as references seem to have a bigger role when the offering itself is knowledge-intensive, unique, intangible or innovative (Alejandro et al. 2011; Jalkala 2009; Aarikka-Stenroos 2012; Jaakkola 2013; Brashear-Alejandro et al. 2014). The context of this study naturally affects the results, as the importance of reference utilisation is highlighted due to the complexity of the purchase situation. Whereas the model is most likely applicable in many purchasing situation, it applies best to similar types of purchases, where the offerings are technically complex, intangible and creative.

The interviewees were carefully chosen to represent a clientele of a digital agency, and they were found from as different organisations and backgrounds as possible. Saturation was achieved during the empirical interviews and the results seem coherent. To keep the thesis in scope and coherent, all of the chosen interviewees were from Finnish companies and had purchased digital solutions from the same supplier, hence all of them had experience from purchasing digital solutions. This was good for this study to keep the situational aspects as similar as possible, but future studies could go further into the situational characteristics of reference utilisation by studying different cultural aspects and also studying new buyers that have not purchased digital solutions before.

There are still many paths for research of the buyers' reference utilisation, and as the markets get more complex, technical and intangible, and the need for reference utilisation grows, we need more and more theory on the reference utilisation, too. Especially the relationship between the buyer and the reference customer seemed unexpectedly important, and the reference customer's reference behaviour would be an interesting path for future research. For the suppliers to properly learn the practices for good referencing, we need not only research on how the suppliers create the references, but also on how the buyers' *and* the reference customers utilise these provided references.

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Appendix 1: An example structure for the interviews

1. What is your background and position like?
 - a. What's your position in the company?
- b. How have you been included in purchasing your digital solution?
 - c. What type of solution did you purchase?
 - d. Were you part of the decision making team?
 - e. What type of background do you have?
- f. Did you know your supplier before the project?

2. How does your purchase process go?
 - a. What types of phases occur?
 - b. Who are included in the process?
 - c. Who has the most power in making decisions?
 - d. How do you recognise the needs?
 - e. How long does a purchase process usually take?
- f. When you recognise a need, do you already have some suppliers in mind?
 - g. What's the most difficult thing in purchasing?

3. How do you evaluate suppliers?
 - a. What's the most important thing in a supplier?
 - b. Do you have specific assessment methods?
 - c. How are suppliers chosen?

4. How do you utilise references?
 - a. Where do you look for references?
 - b. Why do you use references?
 - c. In what type of situations do you use references?
 - d. What's a good reference like?
 - e. How do you evaluate references?
 - f. What types of things are you looking for in references?
 - g. What kind of information would you want more from references?
 - h. When are references not used?