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**Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence the perceived value of custom-made athletic clothing product at a product, experience, and brand level. Perceived value was examined in the context of a case company offering customized clothing products specially for trotting sport. Three models formed the theoretical framework for this study: FEA consumer needs model (Lamb & Kallal 1992), Consumer Perceived Value Tool (Merle & al. 2010), and Measures defining brand loyalty (Vera & Trujillo 2017). According to these models, the value factors of a customized clothing product are explained by functional, expressive, and aesthetic considerations added with the hedonic and creative achievement value derived from the design process. The value factors related to the supplier were identified by using the dimensions of consumer involvement, perceived brand value, and satisfaction (Vera & Trujillo 2017).

Semi-structured personal theme interviews were used as a primary data source for this study. The sample consisted of trotting professionals and sales representatives, total of 11 persons from Sweden and from Finland. The findings of this study show that the sources of value are based on product-related and brand-related factors and are generated both before and after the purchase. As a result, a customized athletic clothing product value model was proposed. On the product level, aesthetic, expressive, functional, and experience factors influence the perceived value. On the brand level, satisfaction, brand value, and customer involvement impact on the perceived value of customized clothing product.

The research results confirmed the prior academic understanding that the sources of value are multidimensional and subjective in nature. The results of the study showed that in the context of trotting sport the sports tradition, the rules placed by sports federations, and the involvement of personal sponsors limit the freedom of self-expression in the customization process which can potentially limit the generalizability of the results. However, the data indicated that it was important for the athletes to have the possibility to influence on the clothing design and take part in the design process. Overall product satisfaction and the supplier's ability to create trust became essential factors in determining the continuity of the customer relationship. The trust built with the supplier on previous customer encounters lowered the perceived risk associated with the purchase decision leading to repurchases and increased brand loyalty. Especially, the service recovery was considered important factor in building trust if the delivered product was not what the athletes expected.

Key words	value, custom-made, customization, apparel, sports clothing, athletic clothing, brand
Further information	





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#### Tiivistelmä

Kyseisen tutkimuksen tarkoitus oli lisätä ymmärrystä niistä tekijöistä, jotka vaikuttavat asiakkaan kokemaan arvoon kustomoidun vaatetustuotteen, kokemuksen sekä brändin tasoilla. Koettua arvoa tarkasteltiin raviurheiluun mittatilausvaatteita tarjoavan tapausyrityksen näkökulmasta. Kolme mallia muodostivat tutkimuksen teoreettisen viitekehyyksen: FEA consumer needs model (Lamb & Kallal 1992), Consumer Perceived Value Tool (Merle & al. 2010), sekä Measures defining brand loyalty (Vera & Trujillo 2017). Mallien perusteella kustomoidun vaatetuotteen arvotekijät perustuivat funktionaaliin, ekspressiivisiin sekä esteettisiin tekijöihin, joiden lisäksi huomioitiin suunnitteluprosessin johdosta syntyvät nautintoon sekä luovaan saavutukseen perustuvat näkökohdat. Brändiin liittyvät arvotekijät osaltaan perustuivat kuluttajien osallistumiseen, havaittuun brändin arvoon ja tyytyväisyyteen.

Teemahaastatteluihin valittu tutkimusjoukko koostui yhdeksästä suomalaisesta ja ruotsalaisesta raviammattilaisesta sekä tapausyrityksen kahdesta myyntiedustajasta. Tutkimustulokset osoittavat, että koettuun arvoon vaikuttavat tekijät perustuvat itse tuotteeseen sekä brändiin liittyviin näkökohtiin ja koettu arvo muodostuu sekä ennen tuotteen hankintaa että sen jälkeen. Tutkimustulosten perusteella esitetty malli havainnollistaa koetun arvon muodostumista kustomoidun urheiluvaatetustuotteen kontekstissa. Tuotteen tasolla kustomoitu vaatetustuotteen arvo muodostuu esteettisistä, funktionaalisista sekä kokemukseen perustuvista näkökohdista. Brändin tasolla tyytyväisyys, brändin arvo sekä kuluttajien osallistuminen vaikuttavat kustomoidusta urheiluvaatetustuotteesta koettuun arvoon.

Tutkimustulokset vahvistavat käsitystä siitä, että arvon lähteet ovat usein luonteeltaan monitahoisia ja subjektiivisia. Tutkimustulokset osoittivat, että raviurheilun kontekstissa urheilulajiin liittyvät perinteet, lajiliittojen asettamat säännöt sekä sponsorointi rajoittavat raviurheilijoiden itseilmaisua kustomointiprosessissa mikä voi osaltaan vaikuttaa tulosten yleistettävyyteen. Urheilijat kokivat kuitenkin tärkeäksi mahdollisuuden vaikuttaa kilpailuissa käyttämiensä vaatteiden ulkonäköön ja osallistua henkilökohtaisesti suunnitteluprosessiin. Tyytyväisyys kustomoituun tuotteeseen sekä valmistajayrityksen kyky luoda luottamusta muodostuivat tärkeiksi tekijöiksi asiakassuhteen jatkuuvuden kannalta. Aikaisemmissa asiakaskohtaamisissa luotu luottamus yrityksen ja urheilija-asiakkaan välille vähensi koettua riskiä ostopäätöksen suhteen toimien näin ollen vaikuttavana tekijänä brändin valinnassa ja brändiuskollisuuden muodostumisessa. Tutkimustulosten mukaan virheiden korjaaminen muodostui erityisen tärkeäksi luottamuksen rakentajaksi silloin, kun asiakkaan vastaanottama tuote ei täyttänyt hänen odotuksiaan.

Asiasanat	arvo, kustomointi, mittatilaus, vaate, urheiluvaate
Muita tietoja	





**UNIVERSITY  
OF TURKU**

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Economics

**"I WANTED THE BEST": PERCEIVED  
VALUE OF A CUSTOMIZED ATHLETIC  
CLOTHING**

Master's Thesis  
in Marketing

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 The concept of customization

The attempt to sell the same standardized product to masses has become less profitable in tightening global competition. Consumers want more personalized products and more variety in product offerings while they have become less tolerant towards products that do not meet their expectations (Pu et al. 2015, 59–60; Satam et al. 2011, 353). Mass customization places consumers at the beginning of the value chain, integrating them into the product development process. By using the customization option, consumers are able to fill sacrifice gaps which are the trade-offs between the market offerings and what each individual truly wants. (Berman 2002, 53–54.) From the company's perspective, the key to succeed in this strategy is to view consumers as individuals with personal requirements instead of a collective group that are offered standard products.

Mass customization was first identified in 1986 by Davis, and then further explained by Pine (1993). Since these early works, numerous studies have investigated the phenomenon and refined the definition. In the academic discussion, mass customization is considered as a business strategy that enables companies to differentiate themselves in highly competitive and segmented markets by providing consumers with higher value by serving smaller market segments with more specialized products and unique product features (Parrish 2010, 546–547; Zipkin 2001, 86). Customization enables companies to serve the markets of one by producing unique products for each customer due to the modern production technologies and supporting information systems (Von Hippel 2001, 247).

The primary motives for consumers to buy mass customized products have been identified as a better fit between individual needs and product characteristics (Satam et al. 2011, 359; Schreier 2006, 323), meeting the consumers' subjective sense of beauty (Lai 1995, 384), gaining satisfaction consuming the customized product (Harzer 2013, 21), uniqueness of the self-designed product (Franke & Schreier 2008, 102–105; Schreier 2006, 323), gaining enjoyment of the self-design process, and pride of authorship (Schreier 2006, 323). Acquiring customized product is also shown to have entertainment value and surprise value because of the newness of the product (Zipkin 2001, 85).

Customization leads to improved product performance, less need for product modifications after purchase (Berman 2002, 53), increased customer loyalty, stronger affective relationship with the company (Loginova 2012, 8–16; Anderson-Connell et al. 2002), and increased willingness to pay (Franke et al. 2009, 111–118). By offering customized products, companies deliver a better match to consumer preferences than standard prod-

ucts and therefore deliver more value (Grimal & Guerlain 2014, 108; Loginova 2012, 8–16; Du et al. 2006, 405).

Academics have studied and specified the concept of value without yet reaching an unanimous conclusion. In the marketing literature value is linked to the consumer behavior with an economic and a psychological dimension. The economic dimension often measures value in transactions: the tradeoff of money and product benefits. The psychological dimension relates value to the cognitive and affective influences on product purchase and brand choice (Gallarza et al. 2011, 181). Holbrook (1996) has concluded that value is based on the experience during consumption and it is personal depending on subjective preferences. Value is also comparative in utility among other objects and situational depending on the context of judgment. (Holbrook 1996, 138.) Consumer value is often defined as the perceived value based on subjective preference on a product attribute (Gallarza et al. 2011, 183).

## **1.2 Purpose and objectives of the study**

This study seeks to identify the factors that affect the perceived value of customized sports apparel at the product level and beyond the product level. The aim of the study is to identify the value factors a professional athlete experiences when wearing a branded customized clothing product in his/her profession and participating personally in the customization process. In this study, consumer value is examined at the product, experience, and brand level to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence the overall value of custom-made sports clothing product. The perceived value is examined in the context of a case company offering customized clothing products specially for trotting sport. The research subjects are Finnish and Swedish professional trotting athletes who use the case company's custom-made trotting clothing products in trotting competitions and make regular repurchases from the company.

A sports competition provides an arena for viewers, fans and competitors to evaluate athletes' skills. In addition to sporting performances, athletes compete for popularity, recognition, and attention (Parmentier & Fischer 2012, 113–119). Athletes' brand personalities are strongly influenced by the success of athletic performances and non-performance related attributes, such as personal distinctiveness (Carlson & Donovan 2013, 202–204), marketable lifestyle, and attractive appearance (Arai et al. 2014, 102; Arai et al. 2013, 386–388). As a physical product, clothes are a tangible part of a person's appearance and personal style (Dashper & St John 2016, 246). Customization offers athletes an opportunity to come up with a totally unique design to increase the level of distinctiveness, differentiate themselves from other athletes, and express their personality through clothing choices (Arai et al. 2014, 102). To ensure the best athletic

performance, customized clothing fit using actual body measurements of an athlete is a necessity in many sports, such as ski jumping, horse racing, trotting, and some motor-sports.

The contribution of this study is to gain more understanding on the value factors of customized apparel products from the demand perspective. Marketing research is increasingly giving attention to the question of how product customization generates value for consumers but often concentrates on a single aspect of the customization process. Prior studies have mainly focused on the benefits of the customization toolkits and the perceived value of using them (Pu et al. 2015; Grimal & Guerlain 2014; Piller et al. 2005; Berger & Piller 2003; Franke & Piller 2002). Studies from the demand perspective have focused on the uniqueness value that results from the outcome of the product customization process (Franke & Schreier 2008, Snyder 1992), purchase intentions toward customized apparel products, the perceived risk in buying a customized product (Kang & Kim 2012), and the tradeoff of price and waiting time of a customized product (Kalantari & Johnson 2018). On the supply perspective, the prior studies have mainly focused on the financial reasons for a company to adopt a customization process in their operations, the customization process itself (Kincade et al. 2007), consumer involvement in the design process (Grimal & Guerlain 2014; Loginova 2012), or the willingness to use a mass customization option (Fiore et al. 2004). Studies focusing on the manufacturing process of customized clothing often concentrate on improving processes by adapting new ways to operate (Dong et al. 2012), new technologies (Song & Ashdown 2012; Xiu et al. 2011; Cho et al. 2006) and the allocation of resources in the process (Wynn et al. 2011).

This study offers a framework for understanding the value factors of a customized apparel product specifically targeted for niche sports apparel markets. The research topic is an assignment from a company manufacturing custom-made sports clothing for trotting sport. The context of trotting sport is ideal for this study because the rules of the sport dictate that the design and the colors used in trotting clothing need to be individually designed for each professional and therefore the sporting outfit needs to be custom-made. The sport context ensures that the study subjects share similar functional and aesthetic requirements for their clothing and their customized clothing products are somewhat similar in terms of design, materials, and functionality. The company context ensures that each interviewee shares a similar experience on the product design process. The company context also allows the researcher to conduct interviews for the company's customers and gather qualitative data on their values on customized athletic clothing products beyond the product level. The company context enables the researcher to determine the value factors that result from the personal involvement in the product design process and from the already established customer relationship with the supplier.

Consumer preferences are subjective in nature and cannot be represented in a quantitative form due to their impreciseness. Qualitative research method was chosen as it enables a deeper understanding of social phenomenon than would be obtained from a purely quantitative data (Silverman 2000, 89) and acquire a new perspective to an existing phenomenon (Koskinen et al. 2005, 43). The research design consists of two phases. The first phase aims to understand the theory behind product customization and consumer values in order to provide a theoretical framework for the study and help to come up with interview questions. The operationalization phase seeks to answer the research question by interviewing Finnish and Swedish professional trotting athletes. The research design in this study is constructed in a way that it is possible to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the value factors on a customized clothing product. Data collecting methods and data analysis are further discussed in the methodology chapter.

The study aims to answer the following research question: What are the factors that influence the perceived value of a custom-made athletic clothing product in terms of product performance, design process experience, and brand?

The study provides companies with an understanding of how customization generates value in the sports clothing context in order to direct their product-related activities to develop more successful products that create higher value for their customers. It is also important for marketers to understand the type of value consumers gain from acquiring and consuming customized sports apparel products in order to redirect marketing activities and marketing communications to reinforce the positive benefits of customizing products for existing and potential customers.

### **1.3 Trotting sport context**

Trotting is a worldwide sport where a special breed of horses race around a race track while pulling a driver in an aerodynamic two-wheeled cart called a sulky. Horse races are organized throughout the year requiring different clothing for changing seasons and weather conditions. In Finland and in Sweden, trotting races are held every day except for Christmas Eve in Sweden and Christmas Eve and Christmas Day in Finland (Suomen Hippos 2017; Svensk Travsport 2017b). In Finland, annually over 600 races are held with more than 2,000 drivers participating (Suomen Hippos 2017). In Sweden, annually over 9,000 races are held with over 4,000 drivers participating (Svensk Travsport 2017b). According to the Finnish National Trotting and Breeding Association, Suomen Hippos ry (2016), trotting is one the most popular sports in Finland. Trotting is one of the few sports where females and males compete against each other in the same race and one can still compete professionally over the age of 60.

Trotting sport offers a great context to research the perceived value on customized sport clothing because the rules of the sport dictate that the audience needs to distinguish the trotting athlete during the competition and therefore a unique clothing design for each driver is required. A trotting athlete needs to have a professional or an amateur license to take part in the race. In Sweden there are some 400 professionals and just over 4,000 amateurs registered (Svensk Travsport 2017b). In Finland there are more than 6,000 amateurs and some 140 professionals (Suomen Hippos ry 2016). The design of the competition garment is heavily restricted by national trotting associations. Each trotting driver is required to have a personal competition design, which must be approved and registered before use.

There are some basic rules that apply to colors and patterns of the racing clothing design. The trotting clothing consists of either an overall or a two-part suit. The competition design needs to be unique and have at least two different colors, since one colored suit is not allowed. The rules of the sport dictate that trousers worn during trotting competition need to be white. On the white trousers, it is allowed to have colored stripes on the side seams to make the design more coherent with the upper part of the personal competition design. Above the waist, different colors, stripes, patterns and sponsor logos are allowed. In Sweden, the personal competition design needs to be identical on the back and front side (Svensk Travsport 2017a). In all countries, it is obliged to wear a helmet during the race. The helmet can be painted to match the color of the clothing or covered with personal style helmet cover made of fabric. In Finland and in Sweden, it is also obliged to wear a safety vest under the competition clothing (Suomen Hippos 2017; Svensk Travsport 2017a).

Generally trotting drivers own several pieces of clothing for different weather conditions and seasons. The close relationship between body and athletic clothing creates a variety of needs that will materialize as subjective user expectations for the usability and the comfort of clothing. Even though the professional trotting driver is sitting on a sulky during the competition, the physical strain on the body can be compared to any other athletic performance. The clothing needs to enable body movements to enhance the performance and protect the athlete during the competition. In order to maximize the clothing functionality and fit for the user, the clothing must be manufactured according to the individual body measurements of each athlete.

In addition to a personal clothing, it is possible for a professional trotting driver to compete dressed in a clothing licensed to the stable owning the competing horse. In Sweden, the professional driver is required to compete wearing the horse owner's design when the stable owning the competing horse has registered its colors (Svensk Travsport 2017b). In Finland, the rules are not as strict and therefore it is not mandatory to compete in horse owner's design (Suomen Hippos 2017).

Trotting is categorized as a media sport with high TV exposure and sponsors present. The sport stays alive because of sponsoring and betting. In Finland, over 700,000 spectators visit trotting races every year and almost 900,000 view races outside locations of the racetracks (Suomen Hippos 2017). For sponsors, athletic clothing offers a great advertising space for audience and media exposure (Cornwell 2014, 29). The sponsor visibility on the clothing personalizes the clothing design since logo sizes and logo placing on the garment can be implemented in a distinct way. Sponsoring companies vary between professional trotting drivers and different logos create more individual look for the clothing. The sponsor logos can be placed on the front and the back side of the garment. The most common places to place logos are back, chest, sleeves, shoulders and collar. It is also possible to place logos on the waist and trousers. There are restrictions on sponsor visibility on the garment and these rules vary between countries. In Sweden, it is forbidden to place sponsor logos on the sleeves, but logos on the trousers are allowed (Svensk Travsport 2017b). In Finland, the placing of logos on the competition clothing is not restricted, but the sizes of the logos are controlled by the National Trotting Association (Suomen Hippos 2017).

## **1.4 The case company**

Globally the market for trotting clothing is quite small, and therefore it could easily be considered as a niche market. In Scandinavia, there are three major brands offering custom-made products for professional trotting drivers. One of these companies is located in Sweden, and the other two are located in Finland. In addition to these companies, there are also small independent companies offering clothing manufacturing services for trotting sport in the Scandinavian market. Also, e-commerce offers Scandinavian trotting professionals the opportunity to buy trotting clothing products from around the world and global professionals to purchase trotting clothing from Scandinavian companies.

In this study, the case company is referred as "Company M". The reason for which the company requested to remain anonymous is that only a few companies operate in the same market. It would be possible to jeopardize the anonymity of the professional trotting drivers interviewed in this study if the name of the company was revealed. The company is specialized in custom-made trotting clothing offering products for trotting professionals, amateurs, and horse trainers all over the world since the 1990s. Currently Company M positions itself as the leading brand in the European trotting clothing market by manufacturing premium-priced custom-made clothing with high quality and superior fit. Company M covers all major trotting countries in Europe with many international long-term customer relationships. The company has resellers in 14 European

countries, the United States and Russia. Most of the resellers are small sized independent companies selling products for all kinds of equine sports. The orders for custom-made clothing are placed by Company M's resellers and sales representatives who are in direct contact with customers. Once the order is placed, the customer is measured, and the parametric information is forwarded to Company M. A typical Company M customer is a professional male trotting driver, amateur driver or horse trainer aged around 20-60 years old. (Company M 2017.)

Because brand loyalty is reflected in consumer behavior, taking place in repurchases and purchase intentions, Company M is a well-justified choice to research the value factors in customized sports clothing. In this study, satisfaction is measured by interviewing Company M customers who regularly use customized clothing in their profession and frequently order premium-priced custom-made clothing products from the case company. By studying brand-loyal consumers, it is possible to understand the value factors that create product satisfaction and lead to repeat purchases. Customer satisfaction is an indicator of brand loyalty as well as the intention to buy the brand again (Aaker 1996, 108). The research subjects are Finnish and Swedish professional trotting athletes who have established a long-term relationship with the case company and have ordered a new customized trotting suit within the time period of September 2016 – September 2017.

Company M operates in a niche market of trotting apparel and it incorporates clothing customization into its production business model. The company operates in a make to order (MTO) manufacturing system, where products are made after receiving a customer order. The use of this approach offers the company significant benefits such as a high degree of flexibility and responsiveness to cope with uncertainty with market needs and changing fashions (Nayak et al. 2015, 169), lower inventory levels (Berman 2002, 53), reduced waste (Dedukh 2015, 10), reduced inventory risk, and better margins because of the minimized markdowns (Satam et al. 2011, 359).

In the context of the current study, the case company incorporates a pure customization strategy in its operations. The pure customization strategy acknowledges that the final apparel design is limited by the possibilities of production and therefore, the process is often guided by a professional designer and not necessarily lead to a completely new product outcome (Lampel & Mintzberg 1996, 26). The basic design of a trotting apparel is influenced by the sport tradition and is heavily restricted by national trotting associations. There are some basic functional features that needs to be preserved in the flat patterns even though the design of the trotting clothing product changes and therefore the trotting clothing cannot be completely re-designed by customers. Company M allows its customers to be involved early in the design process by allowing them to design the appearance of the product in varying extents and to choose materials and colors used in the final clothing product from the selection of company's offering. The ultimate

design is made in collaboration with a professional designer in order to simplify the manufacturing process.

Company M mainly offers products with high-end fit by manufacturing clothing products according to individual body measurements of each customer. Company M also offers its customers the possibility to choose clothing features such as embroideries, clothing prints, adjustment choices and tread colors for stitching. It is also possible for customers to speed up the standard production time of six weeks from the order placement to the point where the garment is finished with an extra fee. Company M also gives its customers the possibility to choose the delivery method for the finished product.

Because of the unique nature of the athletic clothing product, a large extent of manual labor is needed. All flat patterns of the clothing must be drawn separately using the accurate body measurements of each customer. The time-consuming manufacturing process limits the availability of the product and leads to higher pricing and relatively long delivery times that limit potential buyers. The brand choice is therefore constrained by the financial status of a professional trotting driver and the financial support from his sponsors to be able to pay for a higher priced apparel from the prestige brand. Although professional trotting drivers are usually not the ones paying for their products themselves, they are the ones who accept the final product. If the product does not fit well, the product will be sent back to Company M for alterations.



## 2 CUSTOMIZATION IN THE APPAREL INDUSTRY

### 2.1 User needs for customized clothing products

Customization enables consumers to design products that have unique features, are distinct from other products, and adapt to their personal needs regarding product design, materials, and fit. Lamb and Kallal (1992) have tried to conceptualize what consumers generally desire in their apparel products and presented a FEA (Functional, expressive, aesthetic) consumer needs model. The FEA model has been used as a framework for apparel design research (Figure 1). It demonstrates that consumers' basic needs regarding clothing products combine elements from functional, expressive and aesthetic considerations (Lamb & Kallal 1992, 42). This model can also be used as a framework to assess different customization needs.

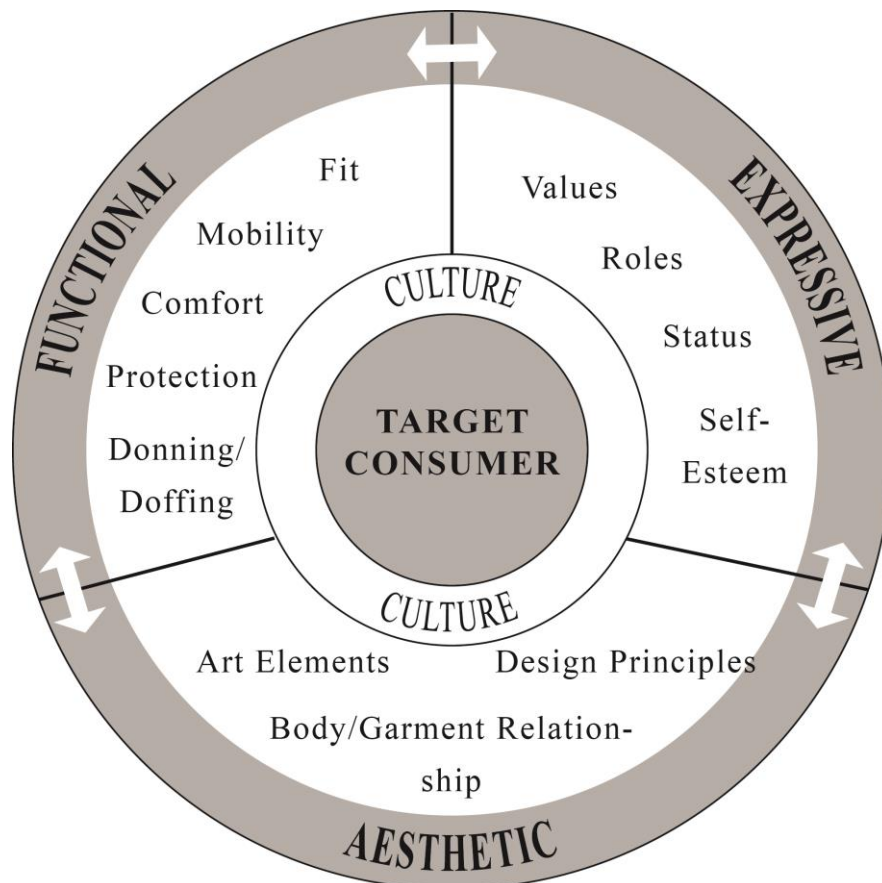


Figure 1 FEA consumer needs model (Lamb & Kallal 1992, 42)

At the core of the model is the target consumer and his/her physical characteristics, activities and individual preferences. In the FEA consumer needs model culture acts as a mediator between the target consumer and his/her requirements or desires for apparel

items. Culture influences what users consider as acceptable, and it also determines customary uses and typical forms for apparel items, and therefore the prevailing culture has a major influence on the design of the apparel product (Lamb & Kallal 1992, 43).

The apparel product needs to fill the functional, expressive and aesthetic user needs, which may vary between different users and markets. Functional considerations such as protection, comfort, fit, and ease of movement relate to clothing product's utility in the intended use. The concept of customization in the apparel industry most often refers to the functional need by creating clothing that can accommodate variations in size and body shape (Cho et al. 2006, 646). Apparel customization is seen as a prerequisite for non-standard sized consumers to find well-fitting clothing since the standard pattern grading to sizes S, M, L, XL is not enough to fill the needs of all population. The sizing does not take into account differences in body shapes and proportions, such as long or short back, body posture or differences between age groups (Nayak et al. 2015, 168). The need for customized clothing products applies especially to people with larger body types or body deformities who cannot find suitable clothing in regular stores (Durá-Gil et al. 2016, 724). Even a standard sized consumer may find it difficult to find well-fitting clothing since the measurements that determine the clothing size vary between clothing brands (Anderson-Connell et al. 2002). The clothing size L manufactured by one brand can be completely different from another brand labeled with the same size. Therefore, clothing customization is a way to achieve the right clothing fit at once.

The concept of customization may also refer to the aesthetic and expressive needs by providing the market with more special designs that allow consumers to show their individuality (Piller & Kumar 2006, 40), tastes, values, and status. Clothing provides a means to identify different social roles as it helps individuals communicate, interpret and evaluate other members of the community (Craik 2009, 5). With clothing choices, it is possible to make a person acceptable in various social roles and to adapt to different social situations. The expressive consideration relates to these communicative, symbolic aspects of the clothing product. Customization in the apparel industry allows consumers to design products in regard to their individuality, gender, lifestyle and their individual goals to conform or to resist the norms of society and what is considered acceptable in various social roles, occasions and professions.

Aesthetic considerations deal with the subjective desire for beauty (Lamb & Kallal 1992, 43). The concept of aesthetics is often referred to as the appearance of a product but aesthetics can also be associated with everything that pleases or delights the senses on a subjective level (Stanton 1998, 178, 183). Clothing choices communicate about the personal taste of the wearer and by using the customization option a product can be designed according to one's personal taste and style preferences on how the product looks or feels. By clothing choices it is possible regulate how much one wants to cover and reveal and determine how much one wants to be seen or remain invisible. It is possible

to design an apparel product to highlight favorite body parts and hide negative aspects of the body while using favorite colors and materials with personalized clothing prints.

The white arrows between the functional, expressive and aesthetic components in Figure 1 present the interrelations between the three functions. Functional and expressive pairing acknowledges the need for clothing usability while it sends a message about the wearer. Functional and aesthetic pairing acknowledges the specific purpose of product utility while taking in consideration aesthetic concerns of product beauty. The expressive and aesthetic pairing deals with messages conveyed by apparel and the sense of pleasure obtained from the beauty of the garment. Depending on the situation, one need will outweigh the other in the three pairings. (Lamb and Kallal 1992, 43.)

## **2.2 Apparel customization strategies**

### ***2.2.1 Four approaches to mass customization***

While standardized production places consumers at the end of the value chain, mass customization places them at the beginning of the product development. Consumers engage in a dialogue and interaction with their suppliers during product design, production and delivery to create products that suit their requirements and preferences. Product customization orders can be categorized either to those which require a full redesign process or to those that require only simple alterations to the original design (Wynn et al. 2011, 8). Gilmore and Pine (1997, 95) and Lampel and Mintzberg (1996, 24) have presented strategies visualizing the extent of product modification and customer involvement in the product customization process.

Gilmore and Pine (1997, 95) present four different approaches to customization named collaborative, adaptive, cosmetic, and transparent (Figure 2). Their model concentrates on the extent of product modification and customer involvement in the customization process. Gilmore and Pine (1997, 92–95) suggested that in order to succeed in mass customization, managing decision-makers need to understand what type of customization their customers will value.

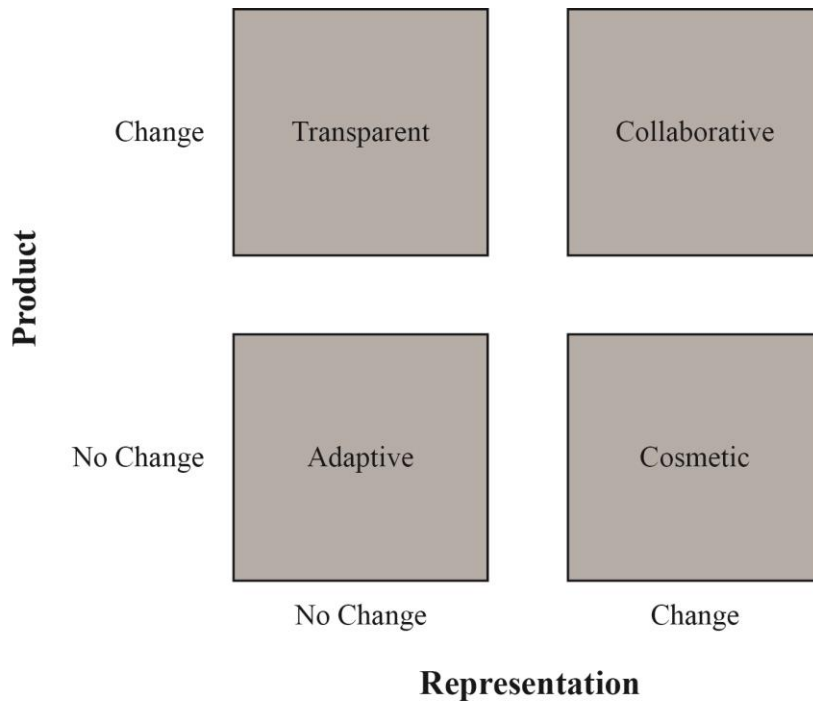


Figure 2 Four approaches to mass customization (Gilmore & Pine 1997, 95)

The physical product is the least changed and the least matched with individual consumer's needs in the cosmetic customization approach. In this approach, companies produce a standard physical product which is then customized by packing it differently for each customer. In the adaptive customization strategy, a company produces a standard product core which can be easily altered by the consumers on their own.

In transparent and collaborative customization approaches, companies produce customized products that are matched with their customers' needs. In the transparent customization strategy, the company provides its customers with unique products without involving them in the product development process. Instead of requiring consumers to describe their needs, product developers observe and assess consumer behavior and offer them tailored products without letting customers know they are receiving customized products. The collaborative customization approach is best suited to individual consumer preferences as it provides the consumer with the most customization options and includes consumers in the product development process with direct interaction with the manufacturing company. (Gilmore & Pine 1997, 92–95.)

The term mass customization is most often associated with this collaborative customization strategy where consumers are involved in specifying the characteristics of their ideal product leading to an unique outcome (Gilmore & Pine 1997, 95–98). The case company Company M incorporates the collaborative customization strategy where consumers are involved in the design process with the manufacturing company in order to acquire unique sports apparel products.

### ***2.2.2 A continuum of customization strategies***

The collaborative customization in the apparel industry allows consumers to be involved in specifying the characteristics of their ideal product during the design process (Gilmore & Pine 1997, 95–98). The larger the degree of design freedom for the consumer, the more personal the end product is formed. On the other hand, the complexity and cost of the manufacturing process will increase as customers participate in the design process. In order to reduce costs and the complexity of the manufacturing process, the manufacturing company should limit the points of customization offered to their customers. (Senanayake & Little 2010, 291.)

Lampel and Mintzberg (1996, 24) present five different individualization strategies depending on the extent of design freedom in the product development process: pure standardization, segmented standardization, customized standardization, tailored customization, and pure customization. Lampel and Mintzberg (1996, 24) take the constraints of production into account and present the five strategies as a continuum from a viewpoint of a manufacturing company with four stages in the value chain: design, fabrication, assembly and distribution (Figure 3).

The point of customer involvement in the production cycle plays a critical role in determining the degree of uniqueness of the product. Standardization begins at the upstream operations, starting from the core design of the product, while customization starts at the downstream operations. These two opposite poles form the base of the continuum. The oval shapes visualized in Figure 3 illustrate the points of customer influence in the customization process. Moving down one stage along the chain gives rise to different strategies. Incorporating a customer into the initial stages of the production cycle the more personalized and unique the end product is formed.

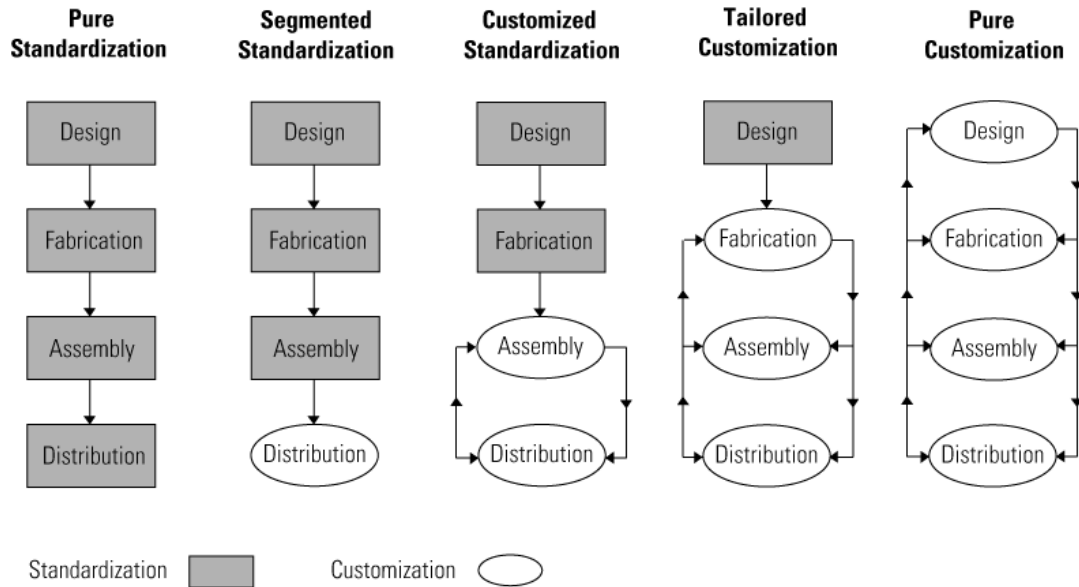


Figure 3 A continuum of strategies (Lampel & Mintzberg 1996, 24)

In the pure standardization strategy, the standard product is targeted on the broadest group possible of consumers and distributed commonly to all. Segmented standardization allows consumers to influence on the product distribution and packaging while the actual product is standardized. Consumers are offered customized delivery services where they can define the delivery schedule and delivery location. Without some degree of customer involvement in the process, the end product cannot be considered customized. (Lampel & Mintzberg 1996, 25–26.)

Companies using a customized standardization strategy usually offer their customers an existing standard product core and a number of mass-produced modular components for consumers to assemble a wide variety of unique customized products. In the customized standardization strategy, the modular parts of the products are already produced and consumers are only allowed to assemble a set from already existing design alternatives offered by the manufacturing company. The strategy can also be called modularization. (Lampel & Mintzberg 1996, 26.)

In the tailored customization strategy consumers are given more design freedom to adjust the materials and fit according to their requirements. Companies using tailored customization strategy provide consumers with a number of standard product designs that can be modified to meet customer requirements. These products are manufactured after the order has been placed. (Lampel & Mintzberg 1996, 26.)

The pure customization strategy aims to maximize customer satisfaction by allowing consumers deeply into the design process. Consumers and manufacturers form a genuine partnership in which both sides are involved in each other's decision making. The product is made to order according to consumer specifications, while maintaining the

efficiency of mass production. The pure customization process is also referred as one-of-a-kind production. This production method is characterized by large variations in product design and manufacturing processes, and in extreme situations each product is designed and manufactured differently for each customer. (Lampel & Mintzberg 1996, 26.)

### 2.2.3 Apparel customization points

The continuum of customization strategies presented by Lampel and Mintzberg (1996, 24) illustrated in Figure 3 was developed for a manufacturing company with four stages in the value chain: design, fabrication, assembly and distribution. Subsequently, Senanayake and Little (2010, 291) presented a framework developed specifically for apparel customization with five points of customer involvement in the customization process. Consumers can affect the uniqueness of an apparel product in design, fit, feature, fabrication, or post-production customization stages. The five distinct points in apparel customization practices used by the clothing industry are illustrated in Figure 4.

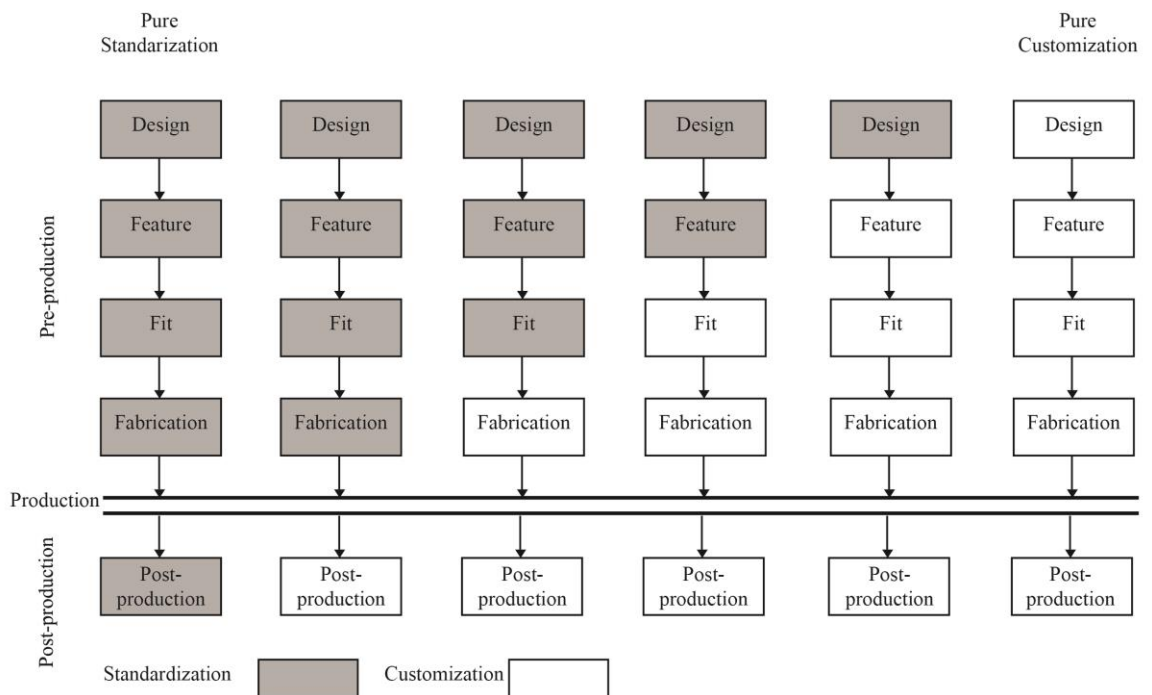


Figure 4 Points of customization (Senanayake & Little 2010, 291)

The illustration visualizes the pre-production stage and the post-production stage in the apparel customization process with sequential operations of design, feature, fit, fabrication and post-production in the form of continuum as illustrated in the continuum of

strategies presented by Lampel and Mintzberg (1996, 24). The darkened rectangles represent the standardized production phases, while the white rectangles represent the points of customization with consumer involvement.

Post-production customization point allows customization possibilities for a standard clothing product after the production process (Senanayake & Little 2010, 291, 293). Customized packing with custom-made labels, hangtags and boxes is included in this customization point.

Fabrication customization point allows consumers to take part in the actual design process by selecting materials used in the final clothing product. Consumers are typically allowed to select materials, colors and fabric finishing from the offering provided by the manufacturing company. Companies offering high-end customization may give their customers the opportunity to decide the materials and prints used in the final product even outside the company's standard offering. (Senanayake & Little 2010, 291–294.)

Fit customization point allows the consumer to decide on the extent of fit, such as the garment size, general fit, ease, and silhouette related to fit. The fit is divided into two categories based on the extent of fit customization options available for the consumer. Companies offering general fit options such as the typical grading in sizes S, M, L, XL or tight, loose and regular, are regarded as offering low-end fit. Companies drawing flat patterns based on individual body measurements of a customer are regarded as offering high-end fit. (Senanayake & Little 2010, 291, 293.) In many sports which require increased safety, aerodynamics, and the ease of movement, the high-end fit customization option is required. Motorsports racewear, ski jumping overalls, shooting clothing, dance costumes, and trotting overalls to name a few are traditionally manufactured according to the actual body measurements of the athlete.

Feature customization allows a consumer to select or define special features such as embroideries, special stitching, finishing or special adjustments on the garment. Consumers can demand additional features or select from various adjustment choices such as elastic bands, draw cords or velcro fastenings to adjust the fit for various body types. (Senanayake & Little 2010, 291, 295.)

Design customization point involves the consumer in the customization process at an early stage by allowing the consumer to design the apparel product in varying extents. In the context of apparel customization, the consumer does not usually have unlimited control over the design. The process is often done in co-operation with a professional designer in order to achieve less complexity in the manufacturing process. (Senanayake & Little 2010, 291.)



### 2.2.4 *Co-design of apparel*

In previous studies regarding customization (e.g. Pu et al. 2015; Piller et al. 2005; Berger & Piller 2003) the term co-design has been used to describe the collaboration between the manufacturer and the customer in the customization process. Collaboration in the customization process can take place through personal interaction or non-personally online. Apparel co-design practices are often transferred from person to person interaction to information technologies that enable consumers to customize products online without the assistance of a professional designer. (Grimal & Guerlain 2014, 106.) This type of customization refers to the tailored customization strategy presented by Lampel and Mintzberg (1996, 24) to enable consumers to modify a standard product to meet their personal requirements.

People have special feelings for products in which they invest time and energy. The more input consumers provide in the customization process, the better the chances are that customized products fit closer to personal preferences and consumers feel more comfortable with the final product (Franke et al. 2009, 111–118). Many major sports companies like Adidas, Nike, and Reebok offer various customization possibilities for their customers. Their online customization toolkits provide consumers with a computer-generated visual display in order to help to evaluate the product before a purchase transaction (Grimal & Guerlain 2014, 107). For example, Adidas and Nike give their customers the opportunity to personalize shoes, bags and clothing using their online services (Berger & Piller 2003, 42–43). Typically, consumers and sports teams can choose the base design and a standard size, change the colors of the garment and add additional texts, logos, prints and player numbers. It is even possible for consumers to create garment prints from their favorite images.

By incorporating mass customization toolkits companies can abandon the effort of finding out customer preferences by outsourcing the design task to end-users. Companies are able to decrease costs by receiving precise information about market demands, increase customer loyalty, and produce more value to customers. (Piller et al. 2004, 435–436; Ulrich et al. 2003, 409; Von Hippel 2001, 247–249; Wikström 1996, 372.) Studies show that consumers benefit from self-designing and do not necessarily need one-to-one interaction with the manufacturing company to support with the design task (e.g. Franke & Hader 2014, 1222–1231). The personal co-design assistance may even lead to higher expectations on the final product outcome and if these expectations are not met, it will negatively affect the value of the end product (Moreau 2011, 130).

Customization programs place the consumer in the role of an expert in the production process without the help of a professional designer. The number of customization options available in customization toolkits may be overwhelming for consumers and the burden of choosing different options might lead to increased uncertainty (Moreau 2011,

124–125, 127; Piller et al. 2005, 7–20; Ulrich et al. 2003, 409–410), frustration, and confusion during the customization process (Anderson-Connell et al. 2002, 253; Franke & Piller 2002, 6; Von Hippel 2001, 250–251; Huffman & Kahn 1998, 506). Piller et al. (2005, 18–19) identify three problem categories related to customization toolkits: the burden of choice, matching needs to product specifications, and the information gap regarding the behavior of the manufacturer. Also, the information gap regarding warranty and return policies with the company offering customized products increases uncertainty about making a purchase. The custom-made product order cannot usually be cancelled afterwards because the production starts after the order has been placed. Customized products are often of premium price, which contributes to a higher perceived buying risk. Consequently, consumers might decide to delay purchasing, purchase a standard product instead, or give up without buying anything. (Piller et al. 2005, 7–20; Huffman & Kahn 1998, 506.)

Expert consumers are not highly affected by the complexity on mass customization toolkits which makes them a potentially attractive target segment for mass customization (Dellaert & Stremersch 2005, 226). Consumers who favor a certain brand would possess more knowledge of the brand's products and can more easily transfer their needs into product characteristics than less knowledgeable ones (Loginova 2012, 8). The collaboration among consumers in online communities can also provide support during the customization process. These co-design environments might also increase creativity, product innovation (Piller et al. 2005, 7–20), and create more sales by sharing ideas, feelings and experiences on how to improve or customize products (Ramaswamy 2008, 9–14).

### **3 TYPES OF VALUE IN CUSTOMIZED CLOTHING**

#### **3.1 Consumer Perceived Value Tool (CPVT)**

The concept of value has different meanings expressed by consumers, as values are highly subjective in nature (Harzer 2013, 20; Squire et al. 2004, 462). Perceptions of objects are influenced by consumers' individual cognitive traits: personality, attitude, values, and demographic factors (Lai 1995, 382). In the academic literature, the concept of consumer value is defined as people's valuation on the consumption or possession of products during the whole lifecycle of the product and not solely on the moment of purchase (Lai 1995, 381).

Consumer value derives from the tradeoff between the subjective benefits consumers gain from buying, using or consuming a product and the sacrifices which are most often related to monetary considerations. Perceived value is considered to be the overall assessment of a product's utility assessed relative to alternative comparable products. The value of customization is often defined as a preference match to various individual needs and cost or as the effort put on the customization process and the alternative products offered on the market. (Squire et al. 2004, 461; Lai 1995, 386). Customization may increase the perceived benefits, such as utility and desirability of a product (Brock & Brannon 1992, 136) but also raise the sacrifices in terms of time, inconvenience of shopping, and price (Squire et al. 2004, 462; Anderson-Connell et al. 2002; Hart 1995, 40–41). Products are assessed related to reference products, and consumers are more prone to buy a customized product the larger the gap is between the desirable product and similar products available on the market (Hart 1995, 40).

Merle et al. (2010) proposed a tool to identify the sources of value from the perspective of a consumer. The Consumer Perceived Value Tool (CPVT) consists of five dimensions of perceived benefits of a customized product and provides a theoretical framework for this study alongside the FEA consumer needs model (Lamb & Kallal 1992), and measures defining brand loyalty (Vera & Trujillo 2017). Three of the dimensions in the Consumer Perceived Value Tool (Figure 5) measure the value on the product level and two dimensions on the design experience level.

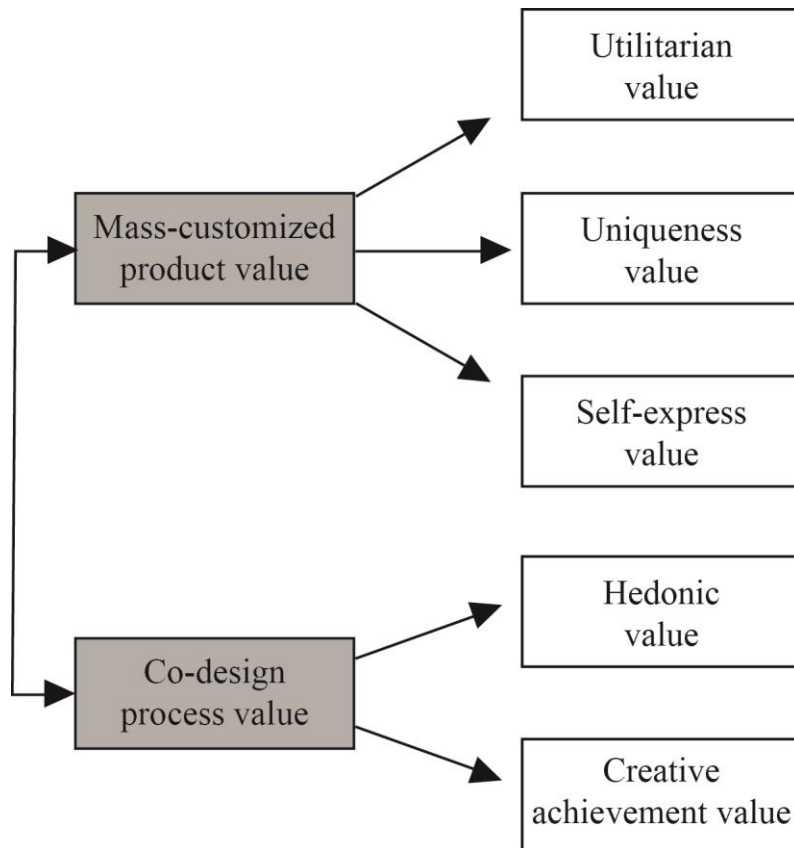


Figure 5 Consumer perceived value tool (Merle et al. 2010, 511)

The Consumer Perceived Value Tool illustrates five sources of value for the consumer. Merle et al. (2010, 506–511) have categorized the types of value to product level and experience level. On the product level, mass customized product creates three types of value to the consumer: utilitarian value, uniqueness value and self-expression value. On the experience level, the co-design process creates hedonic value and creative achievement value. The tool identifies the sources of value of generic mass customized products to consumer and does not focus specifically on a clothing product. Therefore each type of perceived value is discussed in more detail below, specifically in the context of mass customized sports clothing.

## 3.2 Product-related types of value

### 3.2.1 *Utilitarian value*

Utilitarian value relates to the extent to which the product fits the consumer's personal preference for functional and aesthetic fit (Merle et al. 2010, 509–511). Mass-customized apparel products highlight both aspects of the utilitarian value. Functional

fit is described as consumers' preferences on product functions, product's capacity for physical, tangible performance (Durá-Gil et al. 2016, 724; Harzer 2013, 24; Lai 1995, 383) and is defined as the fitness for the intended use. Aesthetic fit refers to consumers' preferences on product design, color and subjective sense of beauty (Franke & Schreier 2008, 102–105; Lai 1995, 384; Lamb & Kallal 1992, 42–43). The perceived fit is greater the more the product succeeds to meet these requirements (Franke & Schreier 2008, 102–105).

Studies show that consumers designing their own products report an impressively high degree of perceived fit for user preferences (Franke & Schreier 2008; Randall et al. 2007, 278) and an increased product utility (Loginova 2012, 8; Franke et al. 2010, 133–139; Franke et al. 2009, 111–118). The limitation in this finding is that consumers only experience value when they have a clear understanding of their preferences and have the ability to communicate the information to the manufacturer (Franke et al. 2010, 133–139; Franke et al. 2009, 111–118). If the resulting product is perceived to have a low preference fit, the effort put into the customization process is interpreted as negative, resulting in a reduced value given to the customized product (Franke & Schreier 2010, 1029).

Sports clothing has different functional roles enhancing the athletic performance. Activities and movements performed in the garment must be taken into account in constructing garment's functional value (Neves et al. 2015, 6136–6138). The clothing needs to protect the wearer and add comfort during the sports activity by reducing air resistance, removing sweat from the skin, and keeping the body at an ideal temperature under varying weather conditions (Necéf et al. 2014, 419–422; Martínez et al. 2009, 152). Because of the great need for thermal physiology during sporting activities, sports clothing is often made from technical materials that offer maximum performance, sweat absorption, and breathability.

Clothing fit is a central element in sports clothing functionality and product customization using personal body measurements is a promising way to create well-fitting clothing (Song & Ashdown 2012, 315, 324–327). Sports clothing should not restrict body movements or degrade the sports performance (Necéf et al. 2014, 419–422). The clothing fit preference is a subjective experience but it is also determined by the sport tradition. In the context of trotting sport, the clothing worn during a trotting sports performance needs to cover the whole body. The tightness and the looseness of the athletic clothing product depends on the personal preference of the trotting athlete.

When a mass customized garment is manufactured using individual body measurements, the customization process requires a higher customer involvement, measurement information and fit preference information from the customer. Traditional tailoring involves a lot of craftsmanship and manual labor, which makes the production process time-consuming. In mass customization, the production time is similar to standard mass

produced products and therefore the prices of customized products are often comparable to mass-produced goods (Anderson-Connell et al. 2002, 242–243; Ross 1996, 260–263). This is achieved by computerized technology with computer aided design (CAD) programs, full body scanning technology, and computer aided manufacturing (CAM) programs which are used in the apparel industry (Song & Ashdown 2012, 316–317; Satam et al. 2011, 358; Xiu et al. 2011, 982–989; Anderson-Connell et al. 2002, 242–243). Full body scanning technology captures actual body measurements of a person and translates them to a digital format for more accurate pattern drafting for specific apparel products. The clothing fit is achieved by altering the basic pattern according to grading points or using a CAD program to print a completely unique pattern which is then cut from the customer's desired materials, assembled and finally delivered to the customer. (Satam et al. 2011, 358; Anderson-Connell et al. 2002, 242; 252.)

Product aesthetics forms the other part of the utilitarian value of a sports clothing product and studies show increased aesthetic fit in self-designed products (Franke & Schreier 2008, 99–102). The aesthetic fit for customized clothing is achieved when consumers are allowed to design the product based on their individual aesthetic preferences of favorite colors or the colors that highlight the features of the user. The product's aesthetics should be constructed taking the athlete and the nature of the sport into account. The clothing need to keep athletes focused on performing at their best and therefore clothes should not disturb the performance by focusing the athlete's attention on the garment during the sports performance (Necef et al. 2014, 419–422). The decorations and design details should be placed in a way which does not degrade or disturb the athletic performance and are durable enough to ensure that any details do not come off during the performance (Lamb & Kallal 1992, 45).

### **3.2.2 *Uniqueness value***

In addition to functional utility, the value of clothing products is also assessed by its symbolic value (Solomon 1983, 324–326). Concrete things among person's beliefs and experiences define person's sense of specialness. People assume that scarce objects are more valuable than available ones (Zipkin 2001, 85–86; Brock & Brannon 1992, 136–139; Lynn 1991, 47) and reflect higher status and be of better quality (Brock & Brannon 1992, 136–139). Uniqueness of a product also increases consumers' willingness to pay a higher price (Schumann 2009, 318). Uniqueness value refers to the extent the consumer is capable of showing individuality by obtaining unique products (Merle et al. 2010, 509–511). The perceived uniqueness of a product is the extent to which the customer regards the product as different from other products in the same category (Tian et al. 2001, 50).

The pursuit of differentiation from other people is a personality characteristic that drives many consumption decisions, such as buying unique, rare or personalized products (Harzer 2013, 21; Franke & Schreier 2008, 102–105; Tian et al. 2001, 50; Brock & Brannon 1992, 136–139; Snyder 1992, 20–22). Some people have an increased need for uniqueness by nature and find high levels of similarity to others unpleasant and seek to make themselves different from others. Highly competitive and status-oriented people have shown to have stronger desires for unique consumer products than others. On the other hand, some people are materialistic by nature and place a great importance on material possessions. (Lynn & Harris 1997, 603; 611–613).

Studies show that consumers who display a high need for uniqueness value the perceived distinctiveness of the self-designed product more highly than consumers who possess a lower motivation (Franke & Schreier 2008, 102–105). These consumers also have shorter product inter-replacement cycles. The satisfaction with self-expressive products diminishes faster, resulting in changes in previously adopted styles or designs and a higher rate of replacement of self-expressive products (Tian et al. 2001, 65).

Uniqueness in the context of sports clothing is highly dictated by the sport tradition. There are broader possibilities for creativity in a design of a sports clothing for an emerging sport because there are and fewer rules for sports clothing than there are in sports having a long history and established traditions in dress (Dickson & Pollack 2000, 70–71). The strong sense of tradition in trotting clothing may limit enthusiasts' expression of individuality through dress because there are some elements in the dress that cannot be changed through customization. On the other hand, the rules of the trotting sport require the competition design to be unique, which creates more freedom in expressing individuality than in many other sports.

### ***3.2.3 Self-expressiveness value***

Self-expressiveness value refers to owning a product that reflects one's self image and expresses one's personality (Merle et al. 2010, 509–511). The self-expressiveness value of a clothing product is connected with its ability to act as a communicator of personal taste, personality and values on an individual level. On a social level, clothing can act as a cultural sign, through which a person seeks to gain approval, recognition, and admiration in the social community (Craik 2009, 5).

In the Western culture, individuality, which is described as one's subjective sense of self (Mansvelt 2005, 80), is demonstrated by external indicators as dressing and other consumer choices (Mansvelt 2005, 80; Dant 1999, 107; McCracken & Roth 1989, 27–30). Clothing acts as a means of non-verbal communication by providing a means of consciously and unconsciously interpret and evaluate people in the community and dis-

tinguish different social roles (Lennon et al. 2014, 171; Howlett and al. 2013, 38–39, 45; Fiske 1992, 104; McCracken & Roth 1989, 27–30). Social norms guide dressing, as they dictate what kind of clothing is acceptable to wear in different positions and situations. Fiske (1992, 104) views clothing as a code in social interactions that can be understood only with shared knowledge and cultural background between the addressor and addressee. The more people are familiar with the social and cultural norms the social groups share, the more accurate is the judgment of the person based on their clothing (McCracken & Roth 1989, 27–30).

All sports require athletes to wear some kind of sportswear in formal sporting competitions and often the rules of the sport dictate the appropriate attire which limits the opportunities for athletes to express their individuality (Dashper & St John 2016, 237). In addition to identity expressing, clothing and other consumer choices can be used as a means of constructing identity (Solomon 1983, 325–326). People acquire and wear products that reflect on the aspired image of themselves, and therefore consumer choices are greatly affected by the aspired personality. Dressing can even be seen as an affordable identity game in which a person can change their identity by changing the style of clothing (Puustinen 2008, 37–38, 44). People might also have many parallel social roles that require different clothing for different occasions. The expressive factors of clothing become more important in individual sports when an athlete is able to use sports clothing for their role definition (Casselmann-Dickson & Damhorst 1993, 414). In their personal lives, athletes can use clothing choices and personal style as tools for brand image construction alongside their athletic success (Arai et al. 2014, 102; Arai et al. 2013, 386).

Time is also a relevant dimension in the communication process which affects the evaluation of clothing. The product's ability to bind people in the present moment, to "reflect its time", is also an important dimension for consumers to evaluate the overall product. The cyclical nature of fashion locates people on the passing social time point, while the surrounding social culture distributes information about fashion: what is currently "in fashion" and "out of fashion". (Dant 1999, 89.) The evaluation may become difficult with fragmented concept of fashion with many legitimate and fashionable looks without a clear understanding of what is in fashion and out of fashion (Lennon et al. 2014, 170).

Even though people have the need for self-expression, and they want to be seen as individuals, a person is constantly seeking balance between expressing his/her individuality and belonging to desired reference groups (Dashper & St John 2016, 246; Kawamura 2004, 25). With clothing choices, it is possible to display an uniform look with a reference group and allow individual expression at the same time (Schiermer 2010, 84, 95). For an athletic role completion, the use of symbols is influenced by the subculture, gender, personal achievement motivation, experience and the newness of the athletic



role (Casselmann-Dickson & Damhorst 1993, 427, 429). The symbolic features of sports clothing may increase feelings of competence, and the symbolic significance can be very important for amateur athletes when they try to emulate professional athletes in order to appear competent in a certain role (Dashper & St John 2016, 245; Solomon 1983, 325–327). The amateur activities are social in nature and the activities underscore common codes of dress, behavior and values. Amateur athletes who pursue an activity with the dedication and commitment associated with a professional create a sense of identity for themselves through consumption, which then allows them to become accepted in their aspired reference group (Leadbeater & Miller 2004, 20–23, 41, 44).

### **3.3 Experience value**

The experience value is concerned with the interaction between the individual and the product supplier during a customization process. Merle et al. (2010, 509–511) have identified two perceived benefits of the co-design process: hedonic value and creative achievement value. Value is created when consumers are given the freedom to influence on the design, sizing, and materials of the customized product depending on the extent of points of customization offered by the manufacturing company. Hedonic value denotes the joy and entertainment derived from the product design experience while creative achievement value refers to the pride of authorship of the customized product. (Merle et al. 2010, 509–511.)

Customization allows consumers to be involved in product design making them co-designers of the product. Franke et al. (2010, 133–139) name the subjective value of the customized product as "I designed it myself" -effect. The feeling of accomplishment in the design task is generated even though customization toolkits may have limited potential (Merle et al. 2010, 509–511; Schreier 2006, 323–326). Main reasons why self-designed products are valued by the consumers are a significantly higher fit to the consumer preferences and the personal input in the design process (Franke et al. 2010, 133–139). Self-designed products create feelings of accomplishment moderated by the outcome of the process and the individual's perceived contribution to the self-design process (Franke & Schreier 2010, 1029–1030; Franke et al. 2010, 133–139). In addition to the feeling of accomplishment, self-designed products increase the willingness to pay the more design freedom the consumer is given to change the appearance of the customized product (Franke et al. 2010, 135–139). It has also been shown that personal involvement in the process of mass customization makes consumers to become more emotionally involved with the personalized product (Satam et al. 2011, 359).

Hedonic value refers to the joy and entertainment derived from the product design experience and the willingness to use a mass customization option (Merle et al. 2010,

509–511). A positive design experience and a flow effect, which is defined as the state where consumers become absorbed in their activity and get enjoyment from it, are strongly associated with greater customer satisfaction (Pu et al. 2015, 63–64). The effort put into the customizing process is perceived as positive when the outcome of the process matches consumer's preferences (Franke & Schreier 2010, 1029). Studies show increased product satisfaction and purchase intention when experiencing a deep level of enjoyment during the product design process (Pu et al. 2015, 63–64; Franke & Schreier 2010, 1029).

### **3.4 Perceived brand value**

#### **3.4.1 *Value of a brand name***

Brands guide consumer behavior and brand names are important factors in assessing the overall value of a product. In the Consumer Perceived Value Tool presented by Merle and al. (2010, 511) brand value stems from the needs for self-expression and product utility. By wearing a branded clothing product, it is possible to increase the sense of one's own value and to communicate certain aspects of one's personality to others. At the social level, symbols and branded products act as a means to communicate about the classifications and differences, such as social prestige, position and status, between people and different social groups. However, brand recognition, the meaning and symbolism associated with a particular brand can only be interpreted and understood within a certain reference group. (Revell DeLong 1998, 5–6, 54; Stanton 1998, 178, 183.)

In the world of sports clothing brand names are essential because they influence the clothing selection and evaluation (Franzen & Moriarty 2009, 306–320). Athletes look for particular brand names in clothing products to identify them with their sport, reflect a prestigious image, enhance their athletic abilities, and improve their sports performance (Leadbeater & Miller 2004, 45; Dickson & Pollack 2000, 70–71). Each sport has an unique look, and therefore it is possible to associate an athlete to a particular sport simply by looking at the clothing. For professional and nonprofessional athletes, it is possible to display an attachment to a specific sport by wearing sports-specific clothing and particular brands of clothing (Leadbeater & Miller 2004, 45).

Branded clothing products may also add functional benefits with distinctive design and special features that increase the product utility and use experience. Each sport requires different functionality from the athletic clothing. The season, prevailing weather conditions, body movements and the need for protection are factors that affect the de-

sign and the functionality of sportswear. Clothing brands specialized in a particular sport are desirable because they take into account the requirements of the sport as well as the sports clothing tradition. For team sports, the clothing unites the team and helps team members to identify each other. It also offers spectators and fans an opportunity to identify their team or idol at sporting events and competitions. For an athlete, dressing into a competition dress mentally prepares the athlete for the sports performance and arouses the feeling of competence during a competition. (Dashper & St John 2016, 242, 246.) The visibility of a certain color on a garment is even shown to improve sporting results (Rikkert et al. 2015, 2171).

Moreau (2011, 128–130) has studied brand influence in the context of product customizing and concluded that an existing brand equity can be leveraged for customization offerings. The presence of a strong brand lowers consumers' anxiety by ensuring a specific quality level of the customized product. Branded products also offer reduced purchase risks for consumers because brands are seen as promises of a satisfactory product performance at the level of consumers' expectations (Franzen & Moriarty 2009, 306–320).

### **3.4.2 Brand loyalty measures**

Brand value is traditionally measured as brand equity which is defined as a set of assets linked to a brand, its name and symbol that add the value of a product to a customer (Aaker 1991, 15). In addition to brand equity, brand value can also be measured with the dimensions of brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality and brand loyalty. Brand awareness and brand associations measure how well the brand name is remembered and retrieved from the memory. Brand awareness is defined as the ability of a potential customer to place the brand in a certain product category, while brand associations can be anything linked to the memory of a brand. (Aaker 1991, 61, 109.) Product quality is linked to the subjective judgment of product's overall excellence or superiority and it provides a reason for consumers to buy a product of a certain brand and differentiates the brand from competing brands (Zeithaml 1988, 3). Brand loyalty includes behavioral intention to buy the brand as a primary choice and it is defined as the customer's attachment to a brand (Aaker 1991, 39). The most common definition for brand loyalty is based on purchasing behavior and it is measured in terms of systematic repurchases and willingness to pay price premiums compared to competing brands (Kaynak et al. 2008, 343; Aaker 1996, 106).

Studies show that customization itself significantly increases consumers' willingness to pay when they design a product for themselves (Franke et al. 2010, 133–139; Schreier 2006, 322–323). However, the price premiums consumers are willing to pay

for a product are affected by the level of customization and the waiting time for the customized product to be delivered (Kalantari & Johnson 2018, 116; Loginova 2012, 15; Berger & Piller 2003, 45). Products that are matched with physical dimensions of the customer often allow a higher price premium than products that are customized only aesthetically (Piller et al. 2004, 438).

In this study, brand value is measured by the dimensions of brand loyalty which is identified as the core dimension of brand equity (Aaker 1996, 105). The limitation in using brand loyalty measure is that it can only be measured from existing customers (Aaker 1996, 109). In this study, the study subjects are existing customers of Company M with regular repurchases that show brand loyalty and satisfaction with the company's products despite the premium pricing and relatively long delivery times.

Vera and Trujillo (2017, 605) have studied different product categories, including running shoes, to propose three components that define brand loyalty. They concluded that there are four types of brand loyalty: cognitive, affective, intentional, and action loyalty which are formed by brand related measures, product related measures, and customer satisfaction. Cognitive loyalty is guided by information about the costs and benefits the consumer has about a product. Affective loyalty is defined as the bond with the brand based on accumulation of pleasing experiences. Intentional loyalty is defined as the behavioral intention towards a brand including purchase intention and complaint behavior. Action loyalty refers to the purchase action where the customer chooses to purchase a brand regardless of the benefits other brands might offer. (Vera & Trujillo 2017, 605.) The variable measures defining brand loyalty are illustrated in Figure 6.

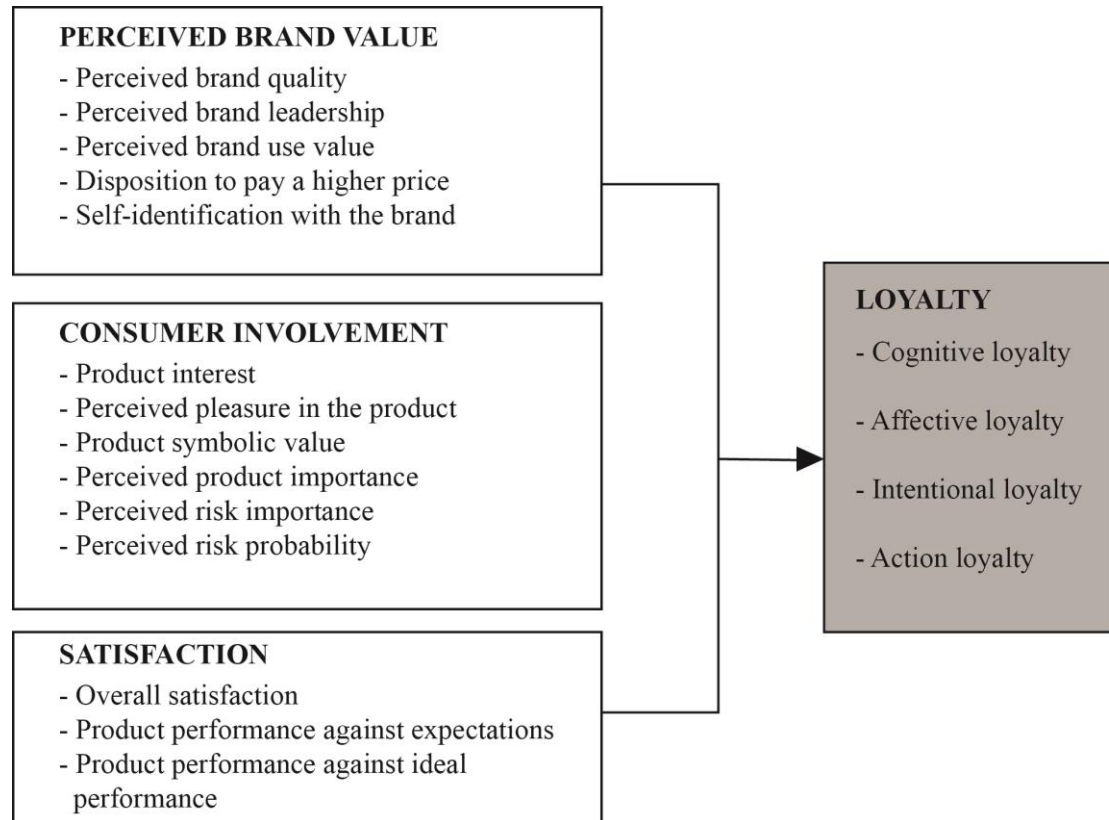


Figure 6 Measures defining brand loyalty (Vera & Trujillo 2017, 605)

Vera and Trujillo (2017, 605) concluded that brand loyalty consists of three components which are consumer involvement, perceived brand value, and satisfaction. The perceived brand value is formed by five measures: perceived quality, brand leadership, brand use value, disposition to pay a higher price, and self-identification with the brand. Perceived brand quality is often measured in comparison to alternative brands in terms of ranking in quality and the consistency of quality between different products while brand leadership is measured as brand innovativeness and popularity. Disposition to pay a higher price is measured as the willingness to pay for the brand in comparison with a competing brand offering similar benefits. (Aaker 1996, 109.) The perceived brand value also includes the assumption that a product of a certain brand provides a good value for money and there are reasons to choose this brand over competitors (Aaker 1996, 111).

Consumer involvement measure can be understood as the type of information the consumer processes when making a decision about which brand to buy. The consumer involvement measure involves the product's future value and the enjoyment associated with the risks identified. The measure includes product interest, perceived pleasure, the symbolic value of the product, perceived product importance, perceived risk importance and perceived risk probability. (Vera & Trujillo 2017, 614.)

Customer satisfaction measure is measured as cumulative satisfaction, which means all the brand experiences existing customers have had over time. The measure includes the overall assessment of satisfaction, product performance against expectations and the ideal performance. (Vera & Trujillo 2017, 603–604.) The measure can also be used as an indicator of future purchase behavior and the intention to recommend the product to others (Aaker 1996, 108–109). In their study, Vera and Trujillo (2017, 614–615) identified product performance against expected performance as the most commonly occurring customer satisfaction variable in measuring brand loyalty. These findings show that companies must offer a solid and differentiated product on the market, while providing a strong brand and attractive product design. Also, other studies (e.g. Chitturi et al. 2008, 60–61) show that utilitarian benefits such as product satisfaction lead to increased brand loyalty and purchase intention.

## 4 METHODOLOGY

### 4.1 Data collection

Semi-structured personal interviews were used as a primary data source for this study because interviews attempt to understand the world from the subject's point of view (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009, 3) and can provide a deeper understanding of peoples' personal, attitudinal, and value-laden material, such as feelings and meanings (Ghauri & Grønhaug 2002, 100–101; Silverman 2000, 122). In a semi-structured interview, answers are not constrained, leaving respondents free to answer to the questions posed by the researcher according to their own thinking and the topics and issues to be covered, questions to be asked, sample sizes and people to be interviewed are determined beforehand (Ghauri & Grønhaug 2002, 101–102). Qualitative data was gathered from Finnish and Swedish professional trotting drivers through personal telephone interviews.

The interviewee should be the most appropriate person to provide the researcher with relevant and valid information over the issue (Ghauri & Grønhaug 2002, 102) and therefore the sample selected for the personal interviews consisted of 9 trotting professionals and 2 sales personnel, total of 11 persons from Sweden and Finland. Professional trotting drivers were purposefully selected among the long-term customers of Company M, with regular repurchases from the company and comprehensive professional experiences on trotting sport and clothing customizing. Nationality, level of professional experience, frequency of competing in trotting competitions, gender, and a long-term customer relationship with Company M were used as selection criteria for the interviewees in this study. All the professional trotting drivers interviewed had ordered a new custom-made trotting clothing from Company M within the time period of September 2016–September 2017. Participants' ages varied between 21 and 64, and the professional experience of trotting sport varied between 2–41 years. One sales representative with a long history with the brand was selected from both countries because sales force is closest to the consumer in the supply chain, and therefore has unique market insights and knowledge of the consumer (Kuester et al. 2017, 462–463, 473–475; Parrish 2010, 556–557). At Company M, the sales force has a dual role by offering insight from the market for the product development process and following the product adoption process on the market. The sales force was asked the same questions as the trotting drivers with the aim of finding out their views on what their customers valued in their trotting sport clothing.

The interviews were conducted in two weeks in September 2017. The interview questions are listed in the Appendix 1. The interviewees were contacted through telephone and informed about the purpose of the research and the confidentiality of the in-

interview material. The subjects were informed that the data will be presented anonymously, and their identity will be kept hidden. The interviews were made in Finnish and English and the length of the interviews varied between 23–42 minutes with the mean of 32,5 minutes. The overview of the interviews is visualized in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Overview of the interviews

Interview duration (minutes)	Professional Athlete	Nationality	Trotting Experience (years)	Professional experience (years)	Competition days per year
32	Male, 34	SWE	16	2	70
28	Male, 64	SWE	45	34	70
34	Male, 36	SWE	26	10	100
33	Male, 59	FIN	40	40	200
25	Female, 24	FIN	14	8	200
32	Male, 21	FIN	7	3	270
42	Male, 64	SWE	50	41	300
23	Male, 26	FIN	7	5	330
29	Male, 22	FIN	6	3	330
Interview duration (minutes)	Sales Representative	Nationality	Experience in trotting business (years)	-	-
42	Male, 34	SWE	15		
37	Male, 49	FIN	8		

The interviews were recorded in order to be able to return to the data in the original form (Silverman 2000, 126). The interviews consisted of 13 questions shown in Appendix 1. The interviews included background questions about the personal involvement and experience in trotting sport, questions about clothing customization and the current competition clothing the subject owned, and questions about customer relationship and experiences with Company M. Some additional questions were needed to clarify the answers.



## 4.2 Data analysis

The interview data was taped and transcribed, coded based on meanings, and then categorized to find shared themes. In a qualitative analysis, the analysis focuses only on the aspects that are relevant from the viewpoint of the study (Alasuutari 2011, 40). The interview analysis involves five steps. First the whole transcribed text needs to be read through to get a sense of the whole. Then the meaning units of the text are determined by the researcher. The fourth step is to interrogate the meaning units in terms of the specific purpose of the study and the final step is to tie together the essential themes of the entire interview. (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009, 195–196.)

In a qualitative research, the previous theoretical perspectives need to be taken into consideration (Rudestam & Newton 2007, 46). In the current study, the interview data of 11 persons was transcribed into 14 pages of text, and further categorized using the FEA Consumer needs model (Lamb & Kallal 1992, 42) as a basis of the categories for functional, expressive and aesthetic considerations. The category of the experience-based product value was adopted from Consumer Perceived Value Tool (CPVT) presented by Merle et al. (2010, 506–511). The categorization regarding brand-related values was based on the three measures in measuring brand loyalty: brand value, consumer involvement and satisfaction (Vera & Trujillo 2017). The framework is illustrated in Figure 6 in the chapter 3.4.2. The seven main concepts were divided into 23 subcategories in order to identify the sources of value of the mass customized product. The categorization and the meaning units are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Meaning units used in data analysis

Concept	Category	Translations
<b>Functional</b>	Fit	The size and silhouette of the garment How the garment fits on the body Allows body movements
	Comfort	Keeps the body at an ideal temperature Keeps the body dry Protects the wearer while competing
	Durability	Amount of times the garment can be worn before it physically deteriorates The quality of the product Preserves the design, colors, and functionality after washing
<b>Aesthetic</b>	Design	Personal aesthetic preferences Favorite colors and color combinations Subjective sense of beauty Pleasing to the eye
	Aesthetic comfort	How the product feels against skin
<b>Expressive</b>	Self-expressiveness	The product reflects personal values The product reflects personal taste and style The product reflects personality
	Uniqueness	The product is unique/rare/one-of-a-kind The product is valuable because no one else has it
	Roles	The product reflects social role (occupation) The product helps to conform to a social role By using the product it is possible to become accepted in a social role
	Status	The product reflects status The product reflects the achieved level of competence The product increases feelings of competence and credibility in a social role The product is a means to social admiration
	Distinctiveness	The product helps to identify the person The product increases personal distinctiveness
<b>Experience</b>	Hedonic value	The joy of the design experience increases the value of the product The time and effort put into the product design process increases the value of the product
	Creative achievement value	Owning a self-designed product increases the value of the product The feeling of accomplishment in the design task
<b>Brand value</b>	Brand quality	Products of this brand are of good quality
	Brand leadership	This brand is a forerunner

		This brand is the best
	Brand use value	Products of this brand are more useful than products of other brands
	Willingness to pay a higher price	I would pay more for a product of this brand
	Self-identification with the brand	The brand reflects my personality / values The brand reflects my personal taste / style
<b>Consumer involvement</b>	Product interest	I actively follow who wears products of this brand I actively follow the brands my competitors wear
	Perceived pleasure	I feel good wearing product of this brand compared to other products Products of this brand look better than products of other brands
	Product symbolism	Purchasing a product of this brand reflects my competence / status Purchasing a product of this brand increases my competence / status
	Risk probability	Buying a product of this brand involves strong risks It is likely that the product is defective It is likely that the product delivery fails
<b>Satisfaction</b>	Overall product satisfaction	Products were absolutely what I expected I like what I receive from this brand
	Overall brand satisfaction	The service I received from this brand is absolutely what I expected I like how the company treats me as a customer

In the FEA Consumer needs model Lamb and Kallal (1992, 42) have identified three user needs named functional, expressive and aesthetic. Functional considerations for an apparel product relate to its utility in the intended use. Lamb and Kallal (1992, 42) include the needs for fit, mobility, comfort, protection, donning and doffing into the clothing functionality. In the current study, fit and mobility are connected under the term "fit", and comfort and protection are connected under the term "comfort". In the current study, the category of durability was added under the concept of functionality.

Aesthetic considerations deal with the visual aesthetic and how the product feels on the body. In this category Lamb and Kallal (1992, 42) include the need for art elements, body/garment relationship, and design principles. In the current study, the aesthetic category is divided to design and comfort. Design means the consumers' subjective preferences on product design, color and beauty. Comfort means that the materials used in the product, the whole garment, and how it has been constructed feel comfortable against the skin while wearing it.

The expressive needs relate to the communicative and symbolic aspects of clothing product. In this category Lamb and Kallal (1992, 42) include needs for values, roles, status, and self-esteem. The need for expressive aspects is coded as self-expression, uniqueness, roles and status. In the current study, the category of distinctiveness is added to the expressive concept.

In the Consumer Perceived Value Tool, Merle et al. (2010, 509–511) include experimental values from the co-design process as a source of value for the consumer. The values are divided into two categories: hedonic value and creative achievement value. In the current study, these terms were used as the names of the two categories. The framework of Vera and Trujillo (2017) illustrated in Figure 6 in the chapter 3.4.2, was used as a basis of analyzing brand value. The framework was divided into three concepts affecting brand loyalty: brand value, consumer involvement, and satisfaction. These categories were adopted from the framework. The category of overall brand satisfaction was added in order to analyze service impact on the brand value.

The categorization entails a systematic conceptualization of a statement. The coding of meanings requires interpretation, since the researcher needs to work out structures and relations of meanings not immediately apparent in the transcribed text (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009, 201–208). The coding of a text's meaning into categories makes it possible to quantify how often specific themes are addressed in a text (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009, 208–212; Silverman 2001, 123). The quantification in this study was executed by calculating how many interviewees mentions a specific category. If the author of the current study had counted only the number of occurrences of certain themes in the transcribed text, the information could have been distorted because one interviewee could have mentioned a topic of importance to him many times. In the research results, the theme would have seemed very important even if it was only important for one interviewee. The main goal was to understand all the themes mentioned in the interviews and prioritize them based on how many interviewees mentioned them in their interview.

### **4.3 Reliability and limitations of the study**

According to Silverman (2000, 188), reliability refers to the degree of consistency with which meanings are interpreted in the same category by the same observer in different occasions. Therefore, it is important that the categories used in the study have been used consistently. In this study, the meaning units of coding are demonstrated in Table 2. From this table it is possible to examine the meaning units used as the basis on each category.

Semi-structured interviews were used as data collection method of this research. The study subjects were chosen to have the widest knowledge possible of the subject of cus-

tomized trotting clothing manufactured by Company M. The age of the professional trotting athletes interviewed (n=9) varied between 21–64 years with the average of 39 years. Five athletes from Finland and four athletes from Sweden were chosen for the interview. Although some of the study subjects had only a few years of professional experience, each had over six years of experience in trotting competitions at the amateur level and the current competition experience for over 200 competition days a year. Most of the professional athletes had non-professional experience in trotting sport almost throughout their lives. The professional experience varied between 2–41 years, with the mean of 15 years. The professional experience and the amount of competition days a year of the interviewees is illustrated in Figure 7.

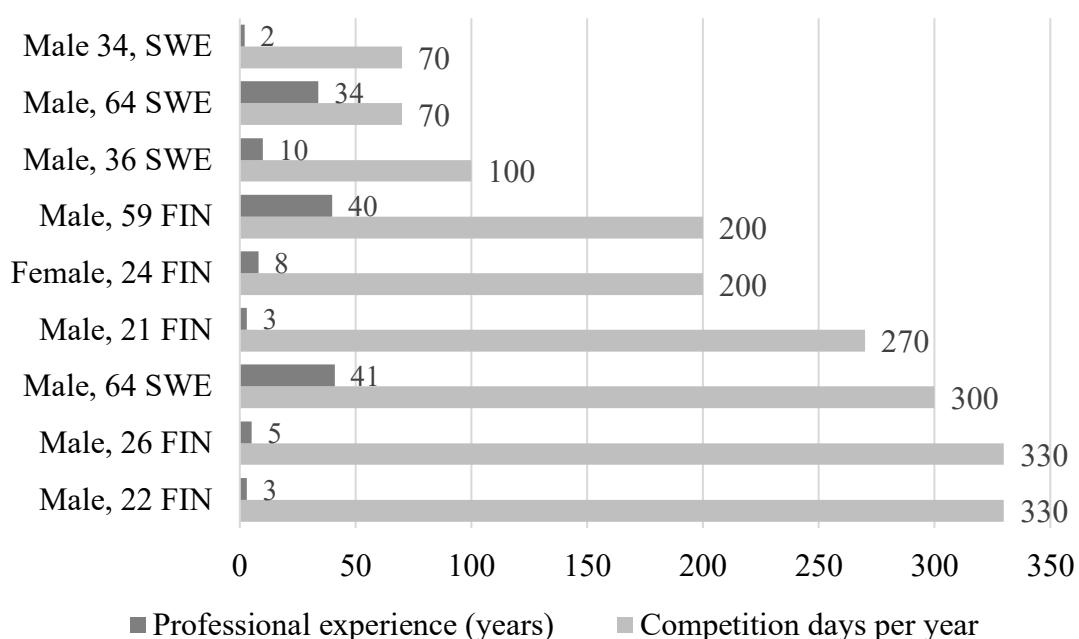


Figure 7 Professional experience and competition days per year

The estimated competition days varied between 70–330 days a year, with the mean of 208 days a year. The younger generation of professional drivers were those who reported the largest amounts of competition days a year. In a competition day, the professional driver usually takes part in many separate races, called starts, which can be up to 1,000 starts a year.

For the credibility and generalizability of the research results, it was important that the widest possible group of research units were represented. The sample size of 11 persons was sufficient in this study, since the interview data was highly saturated, the answers were highly similar, and adding more respondents would have not brought new knowledge. Open-ended questions allowed interviewees to use their own thinking and answer questions using their personal experience. At the end of the interview, the inter-

viewees were given the possibility to bring up aspects that were not asked during the interview. Because the aim of this study was to find shared themes in the value-creating factors of customized trotting sport clothing, pauses and emotional aspects of the speech were not as important in the transcription as in a discourse analysis.

The research results are focused on the male perspective, since there are not many professional female trotting drivers in Finland or in Sweden. For example, one of the biggest trotting competitions in Finland, "Suur Suomalainen Derby" held in October 2017, had 52 professional trotting drivers enlisted in the competition, from which only one female. Compared to regular trotting competition during midweek, there were slightly more females competing. From 54 trotting drivers enlisted in the competition held in Teivo racetrack in Finland on Tuesday 29.8.2017, six were females. Compared to a trotting competition held in Axevalla racetrack in Sweden on the same date, from 60 trotting drivers six were females. This result is in line with the proportion of women interviewed in this study.

The questions asked in this study were based on theories of product value at product level, experience level, and brand level. Swedish professionals were interviewed in English, which was not the first language for them or the interviewer. There might have been some limitations in the expressions and the extent the subject was able to express themselves. However, trotting is a very international sport, and professionals have usually worked and competed in different countries at some point in their career. All of the Swedish respondents made themselves understood at the level required in this interview. The translation from Finnish into English leaves possibly a minor deviation to the details when comparing the original intention of the respondent and the written results. It is also important to acknowledge limitations of this research. The results of this study have several limitations which also indicate directions for further research. The primary limitation of this research is that it explores only one niche sports clothing category in individual sport context potentially limiting the generalization to customized clothing products used in other sports and in team sport context. The restrictions imposed by trotting federations limit the design of the clothing and therefore the findings of the study may not be replicable in the context of other sports offering more design freedom for the clothing appearance. Sponsorships restrict the possibility for self-expression through clothing style and product aesthetics because the athletes need to adapt to the clothing appearance defined by their sponsor.

Generalization of the findings is limited due to the relatively small sample size, but with open-ended questions it was possible to create an overall image of the aspects of customization valued by the professional trotting drivers in Finland and in Sweden. The reliability of the study results could be increased by increasing the sample size and including participants from other trotting countries.

Limitations of this research involve its specific focus on Finnish and Swedish trotting professionals who are predominantly male, since there are not many females driving horses on a professional level in these countries. Interviews were also conducted with over 50-year-old active professionals, which is not a common age competing at professional level in many other sports. This could also potentially limit the generalization of the findings to other sport contexts.

The professional athletes interviewed in this study were long-term customers of the case company. The results of this study can only be generalized to athletes who have formed a customer relationship to a certain brand offering the customization possibility. The case company offers additional services for its long-term customers, potentially limiting the generalization to different brands. Also, the fact that customers of competing brands were not interviewed, could affect the overall research results by showing case company in an overly positive light.

The time of the year could have influenced on the research results since the interviews were conducted between late August and early September. The interviewees may have reflected their answers on their clothing they were currently wearing during competitions. Summer clothing and rain clothing were the top two product groups mentioned in the interviews. Aspects of winter clothing were not discussed as much. The validity of the results could be improved by conducting the research also in winter and summer seasons.

The findings can be generalized to companies offering customization services on the similar points of customization. There is a probability that the value factors would be different in a context of company offering more design freedom for customization where the product development process requires a higher level of customer involvement.

## 5 VALUE FACTORS IN A CUSTOMIZED ATHLETIC APPAREL

### 5.1 Product-related value

#### 5.1.1 Expressive value

The most important product-related value of customized sports clothing in a trotting sport context relate to the expressive factors, product functionality, and product aesthetics. Product-related consumer value on customized sports clothing is visualized in Figure 8 and discussed in more detail in this chapter. Figure 8 shows the individual product-related sources of value of a customized clothing product in order of importance to the interviewees categorized under the main concepts of expressive, functional, aesthetic, and experience value.

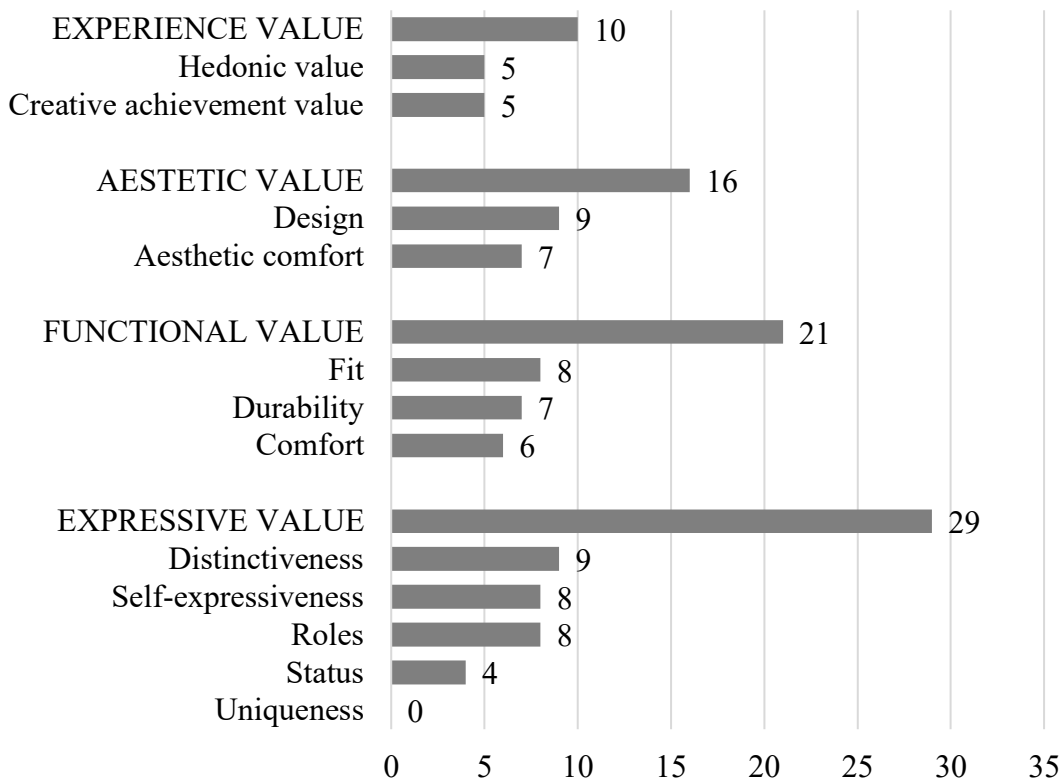


Figure 8 The importance of the expressive, functional, aesthetic, and experience value of a customized clothing product

In Figure 9 the ranking of each type of value is calculated by summing the number of times each subcategory was mentioned during the interviews. The result shows that expressive factors were reported to be the most important source of value in customized



athletic clothing. Since there were more subcategories in the concept of expressive value than in other categories, it is possible that the importance of expressive value seems somewhat greater than it actually is. However, the purpose of this study was to identify the factors that create value for athletes and not prioritize them. The results of this study show that all the product-related value factors of expressive, functional, aesthetic, and experience value affect the perceived value of a customized athletic clothing and are discussed in more detail in this chapter.

In this study, distinctiveness was found to be the most important factor in determining the expressive value of the customized sports clothing and most of the interviewees acknowledged that it would not be possible to acquire unique trotting clothing without the option for customization. During the interviews, the unique clothing look was referred to as the athlete's personal brand, which helps to identify the athlete during the race. It was mentioned to increase the personal distinctiveness the longer an athlete competes wearing the same design. The athletes reported to be often reluctant to change the personal clothing design and the colors of the apparel according to their sponsors' wishes because they feel they lose their distinctiveness when the personal style changes.

*"People remember the colors of the garment. Especially when watching the race on TV, the only thing spectators see is the competition garment and recognize it is me."* (Finnish Male, 21)

*"One driver had worn yellow for a long time, and when he changed his colors no one recognized him anymore and they thought that he was not competing."* (Finnish Female, 24)

Self-expression and roles were also identified important expressive factors in sports clothing. It became apparent that the interviewees had a dual role in being a professional athlete and a paid advertisement for the sponsoring company. The athletes seemed to be aware of their responsibilities to bring visibility to their sponsors. The role was experienced somewhat restricting, because the athletes needed to adapt to the clothing appearance defined by the sponsor. The monetary value of sponsorships was often mentioned as a compensatory factor for the negative effects.

The role of a sponsored athlete became a concern for the interviewees when wearing a clothing design of a stable owning the competing horse instead of their registered competition outfit during trotting competitions. In many trotting countries, athletes must compete wearing clothing designs of the stable owning the competing horse if the stable has a registered clothing design. The interviewees estimated to compete wearing their unique clothing 95% of the competitions and compete wearing stable's design between

1–60 times a year, with the mean of 20 times a year. There were no significant differences in the amounts reported between the Finnish and Swedish athletes.

When asked if professional trotting drivers felt any different competing in other clothing design than their own, each interviewee reported to feel disrespectful towards their sponsors if they succeeded in a competition wearing other clothes than the ones their personal sponsors have paid for and not giving them the desired visibility. On the other hand, the interviewees reported that the few times they needed to wear other design than their personal registered competition design did not hurt the sponsors. Some of the athletes felt that future negotiations with their sponsors would be more difficult if they had to compete more often wearing stables' clothing instead of their own.

*"I only have doubts if I need to wear stable's clothing in big competitions and then I have often contacted my sponsors to ask their opinions. They are the ones paying for my clothing and they want the visibility during races. I feel it is conflicting to drive big races in other clothing than my own without making special contracts for that."*  
(Finnish male, 59)

Self-expression was also an important factor in determining the expressive value of a customized sports clothing. In the current study self-expression was closely linked to the personal aesthetic preferences by allowing athletes to show their personality, personal style, values, and preferences through the choice of clothing style. The case company allows athletes to use creativity in the design process and adjust the garment design, colors, ease, and silhouette according to their personal preferences. This possibility was highly appreciated among the interviewees. However, it became apparent from the interviews that the level of self-expression through customized trotting sport clothing was limited due to the sport clothing tradition, national horse associations, and personal sponsors. Also, the rules of the trotting sport requiring athletes to wear a competition clothing of the stable owning the competing horse instead of the personal competition design limited the extent of self-expression. However, a few athletes reported to feel enjoyment of the variation in competing in stable's design.

*"I don't feel any different when driving in other clothing besides my own. In my opinion it is a nice variation to normal to see myself in different colors sometimes. Only it bothers me if I succeed in the competition and my own sponsor doesn't get the visibility without my own sponsored clothing."* (Finnish male, 26)

Because the athletic clothing was often paid by sponsors, it became apparent that the interviewees felt the athletic clothing was owned by the sponsors. Many felt that keeping the clothing presentable by treating it properly with regular washing and repairing

was a way to respect their sponsors. Such behavior reflected the personality and personal values of the professional athlete.

*"I think I am respecting my partners to drive in clean and unbroken garment that fits well. For me it has always been a priority to respect my partners." (Finnish male, 64)*

The term "status" reflects on the customized clothing's ability to reflect and increase person's status, achieved level of competence, and credibility in a social role. Status was mentioned as an important factor affecting clothing value when competing in a new place against competitors one does not already know. The clothing creates comfort for the athlete in the professional role and increases the feelings of competence in the eyes of new competitors. It is also possible to show status with the clothing colors when the color scheme has been used in the family for generations. By wearing a clothing of a specific color, it is possible for the athlete to show belonging to a family that has already acquired status and competence in the sport.

*"I have designed my suit based on the colors of my father's suit. My brother also wears the same colors. This is our tradition to have same colors as our dad because we want to keep the color scheme in the family." (Swedish male, 34)*

Previous research found that product uniqueness played an important motivational role in choosing the customization option (e.g. Merle et al. 2010, 511). The uniqueness value, which was defined as owning products that are scarce or one-of-a-kind (Merle & al. 2010, 511) did not come apparent in this study. It was found that uniqueness itself did not add value to the customized athletic clothing product. The customization option was required in the trotting sport context in order to acquire an unique clothing design and specialized product features for each professional. The results of this study showed that uniqueness was a motivational reason to acquire a customized clothing product, but the athletes valued more the expressive factor of distinctiveness achieved by wearing an unique clothing than the product uniqueness itself.

### **5.1.2 Functional value**

Trotting sport differs from other athletic sports because the body posture during the sports performance is quite static. However, the physical strain on the body during competitions can be compared to any other sport. Therefore, the athletic clothing needs to have the benefits of a sport clothing by reducing air resistance, removing sweat from

the skin, and keeping the body at an ideal temperature under varying weather conditions. The clothing fit affects the sports performance and therefore it became the most important category in determining the functional value of the customized athletic clothing.

Clothing customization was seen as a good way to acquire well-fitting athletic clothing. The fit became more important for the athletes whose body differed from the standard size. The athletes who reported to have standard size bodies, did not find made-to-measure fit as the most important value in customized sports clothing. Each of the interviewees reported some adjustment problems in their current clothing, but these problems were allowed to a certain extent without hurting the athletic performance too much.

*"There are always some small adjustments that needs to be done to the clothing. I know I could order suit of two-parts where these problems do not exist, but the one-piece overall is more stylish and then I need to accept the fact that it has some problems." (Finnish male, 21)*

The rule of the trotting sport, which requires athletes to wear a competition clothing of the stable owning the competing horse instead of the personal competition design was seen to affect negatively on the sports performance if the clothing had a poor fit. Scandinavian horse stables use different athletes driving their horses and therefore stable's clothing is often manufactured in standard size to fit for different sized trotting drivers. If the size of the garment used was too big for the athlete, it was reported to affect the comfort during the sports performance.

Durability was the second most important factor in determining the functional value of the customized sports clothing product. The materials used in the clothing were regarded as the main source of durability. The clothing gets dirty during the race and it needs to be washed after every race. When a professional trotting athlete takes part in trotting competitions over 70 days a year, the clothing is used and washed a lot. Durability was seen as the garment's ability to keep its colors, quality, and functionality regardless the amount of wash and use cycles.

Fit and the feeling of comfort were related to each other. It was reported that it feels comfortable to work in well-fitting clothing that does not restrict body movements. Most of the interviewees referred to the rain clothing when describing the importance of clothing comfort. The clothing needs to keep the body dry and at an ideal temperature during the sports performance. Also, the protective factor of a garment was categorized as comfort in this study. During a sports performance, an athlete holds the reins with his/her hands, which means that the athlete cannot protect him/herself from injuries

caused by gravel and small rocks. For this reason, the protection provided by the clothing became especially important.

### 5.1.3 *Aesthetic value*

The clothing design that fills a subjective sense of beauty was reported to be the single most important factor affecting the aesthetic value of the customized garment. It was important for the interviewees to show their personal taste through the clothing outlook and to look stylish wearing their personal competition clothing.

*"For me the main thing is to be happy about how the clothing looks. It is the same when going to shopping, everyone buys different things, but everyone buys things that appeal to themselves." (Swedish male, 36)*

Favorite color was reported as the main factor affecting the unique product design and some of the professional athletes reported to have used the same colors in their athletic clothing for all their lives. Some athletes reported that they do not give their sponsors the authority to change the clothing colors according to the sponsoring brand, because the colors of the clothing represent also the personal brand of the athlete and affect the distinctiveness during a sports performance. Some athletes had even ordered their other sports equipment according to their personal clothing colors.

*"Sponsors have no saying in the clothing design. I only let them influence on the sizes of their advertisements. I won't let sponsors to dictate the colors, I will wear these colors for the rest of my life." (Finnish male, 21)*

*"I have had the same design in all my custom-made clothing for the last 20 years." (Swedish male, 64)*

Also, the shapes used in the customized clothing design were reported important in defining the aesthetic value of the personal clothing. The importance of these design features became more important the longer the shapes had been part of the personal design.

*"I have had the blue suit and three stars on the design since I was 10 years old. I have given my sponsors the authority to change everything else, but I have always*

*wanted to keep the stars and my favorite color. If the sponsor requires a change of the clothing color, I won't place their logo on my suit and the sponsor needs to go."*  
(Finnish female, 24)

The aesthetic comfort was also appreciated factor in determining the aesthetic value of the clothing. The athletes considered their personal competition clothes as an occupational clothing that are worn for 4–5 hours during a competition day. The clothes are worn on the racetrack and at the stable area next to the racetrack before and between race starts. It was reported that the clothing needs to feel comfortable and make the athletes feel confident about themselves wearing the clothing in different situations during the competition day. It was also important for the athletes that the clothing feels comfortable and allows body movements during the sports performance.

*"The stylish and comfortable clothing makes me feel good to walk around the stable area as well."* (Finnish male, 22)

#### **5.1.4 Experience value**

The appearance of trotting clothing is heavily influenced by sponsorships. Most often personal sponsors are the ones who pay for the clothing for professional athletes and therefore the sponsors want to have the authority to decide the colors, the number of logos, and the logo placing on the competition garment. Personal sponsors are respected because of their financial support and therefore the athletes often accept to design their clothing according to the sponsors' wishes. The number of sponsors often depends on an athlete's achieved level and competence on the sport.

The trotting athletes reported to balance between the self-expressive factors of the clothing and the demands of their sponsors. It was considered important for the study subjects to have the possibility to impact on the clothing design by negotiating with their sponsors to find a solution that satisfies both parties. Most of the athletes interviewed reported to have been involved in designing clothing for themselves in collaboration with the sponsors and the manufacturing company. One interviewee reported to have designed his clothing design together with his sponsors and a professional design agency. Three interviewees reported to have designed their competition clothing completely by themselves. These three athletes were the ones with the smallest number of competition days a year and each had only one sponsor.

*"My sponsor defined the colors of the clothing. I had some say on the design process, because, of course, I wanted to bring a little bit of my style in the design. Eventually I could do that only to a small extent. The sponsor had a clear vision on how they wanted to bring visibility to their business and when they paid for the clothing, I needed to respect their opinion." (Finnish male, 26)*

In the context of trotting clothing, the clothing design cannot be changed without re-registration. Because the appearance of the garment is restricted by the sport rules and personal sponsors, athletes put a lot of time and effort into adjusting the clothing fit and functionality when ordering a new custom-made clothing. According to the interviewees, hedonic value, which refers to the joy and entertainment derived from the product design experience, derived mainly from the ability to influence on the clothing fit. If the athletes experience problems with clothing fit, they send the product back to the manufacturer with instructions on how to make alterations. The product is then altered to the extent where the athletes feel satisfied with the finished garment.

*"I feel I have always been able to make my racing clothing individual and as I want it to be. Now changes have been made for these new trousers to have slimmer legs and even more form-fitting silhouette. These are not big things, but small changes according to my wishes." (Finnish female, 24)*

*"I want to feel comfortable in my suits. Every time I put my trousers on, I look at the legs of the trousers and think 'oh they are too wide I want to have them a little tighter'. I think I want to change them as I want to have them." (Swedish male, 64)*

The feeling of creative achievement was categorized as the feeling of accomplishment in the design task and being proud of owning a self-designed product. Most of the interviewed athletes felt that they were not the designer of their clothing, but they had the authority to influence on the clothing design to a certain extent. The athletes who had the possibility to influence on the design without too much of a control from their sponsors felt increased creative achievement value.

Experience value was not a defining factor on the overall value of the athletic clothing. The professional athletes interviewed had a relatively little influence over their own competition clothing, but they felt that it was important to be part in the designing process and to have the option to have help from a professional designer. It was also mentioned that computerized design program would be needed in order to be able to test different design options. It was mentioned beneficial for the athlete to see what is possible to customize before placing an order.

## 5.2 Brand-related value

### 5.2.1 Satisfaction

The professional athletes and sales representatives interviewed were asked how the brand and service of a supplier affects the value of customized sports clothing. The brand-related factors affecting sports clothing value are illustrated in Figure 9 which shows the individual brand-related sources of value of a customized clothing product in order of importance to the interviewees arranged under the main concepts of satisfaction, consumer involvement, and brand value.

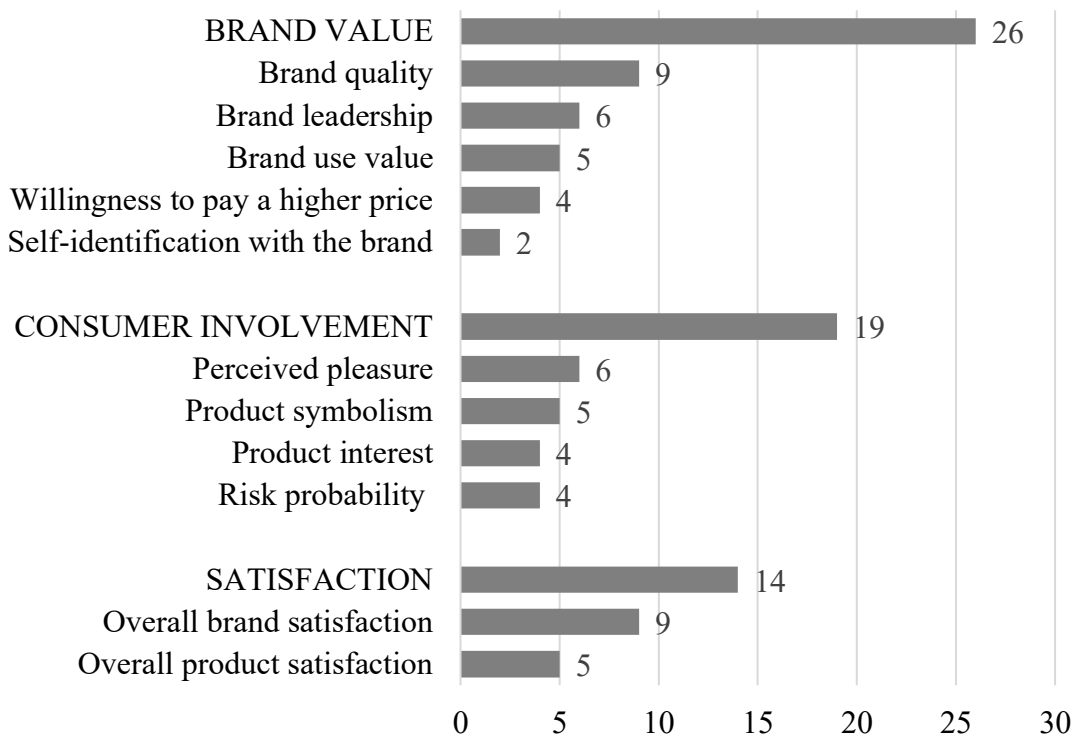


Figure 9 The importance of satisfaction, consumer involvement, and brand value in a customized clothing product

The result shows that overall brand satisfaction and brand quality were the most often occurring themes mentioned during the interviews. The category of satisfaction includes the assumption that the supplier meets customers' expectations in terms of products, customer service, service recovery, and customer relationship. Customer service was seen as an essential factor in determining the level of satisfaction by allowing the athletes to create more personalized designs beyond the standard offering. Interviewees mentioned to value the "we make what you want" -mentality of Company M, which was



said to lack from its competitors offering the customizing option. When the customers' expectations on the finished product were not met, they valued the possibility to send the product back to the manufacturing company for an alteration. All the professional athletes interviewed had experienced problems with clothing fit at some point, but ultimately reached a satisfactory level with clothing alteration services provided by Company M.

*"When I am not satisfied, I can send the clothing back to Company M to change it as I want it. This is what I mean as "good service". (Swedish male, 64)*

*"The service is an important thing. The clothing is not cheap and if there is no possibility to change something later, then I will find another producer. When the clothing costs more than 200€, I want to have an alteration service." (Swedish male, 36)*

The alteration service itself was considered to be a prerequisite for ordering premium priced customized clothing products, but relatively long delivery times for the alteration work were experienced negatively. The athletes needed to consider the effort of sending the product back to the company and waiting for the repair to finish or accept the clothing with the faults. Also placing the order for custom-made clothing was considered slightly difficult, especially for people who did not speak Finnish. They wished to have more impersonal ordering channel, which would require less personal contact with the company. An online-based service was requested.

*"I know that fitting problems with my overall can be fixed, but I would need to take it back to Company M tens of times for alterations and it takes half a year before it is fixed. I don't see the point of doing that." (Finnish male, 21)*

*"I would want Company M to make an internet site where one can design one's own dress and put one's own measurements in the computer system. People are telling me that they should buy new clothing, but it is so difficult. If they could go to internet and see that this system exists, they would start to play with it and ultimately place an order." (Swedish male, 36)*

In addition to customer service, customer relationship played an important role in defining the brand satisfaction. The trust built over the long customer relationships with the company was seen as important motivational factor to choose Company M as a supplier for custom-made garments over competing brands. The athletes valued their personal relationships with the company, which were considered to affect the level of customer service, the special features of the clothing, and the ability to negotiate lower

prices of the products. The athletes interviewed were confident in placing orders with Company M, since they knew the products and quality well, which minimized the fear of risks when making a repurchase.

*"When my new sponsors wanted me to explain why I want Company M as a supplier of custom-made clothing even though their products are more expensive, I managed to justify my choice with the long customer relationship to the company and the trust built over the years." (Finnish male, 59)*

The assumption that the products of a certain brand meet exactly consumers' expectations is included in the category of product satisfaction. The brand loyal athletes interviewed felt that the Company M brand name was an indicator of product functionality in terms of durability and quality, product fit, and appearance with a distinctive design. It was mentioned that the products of Company M last long, are stylish and make the athletic performance more enjoyable by allowing body movements and keeping the body warm and dry. The brand name was also regarded as an important indicator of lowered purchase risk when customers could rely on the quality of materials used in their custom-made clothing and the clothing fit to be exactly as expected. The consistency of product quality was also mentioned as one factor affecting product satisfaction. The athletes reported to have the need to rely on the quality and fit of their clothes to be constantly the same as they had received before.

*"Customers know Company M is the best and they know what they get when buying products from Company M." (Swedish male, 34)*

*"I can trust that the clothing from Company M is like it should be and I can start wearing it as soon as I receive it." (Finnish male, 22)*

### **5.2.2 Brand value**

Brand quality was mentioned as the most important factor affecting the value of customized sports clothing. Brand quality refers to quality image and experiences with a product quality of a certain brand. The interviewees were unanimous about the brand quality of Company M's products. The quality, design, and fit were mentioned as the main aspects affecting the quality image. The garment quality was emphasized in functional clothing especially made for the rain and cold weather conditions.

*"The biggest difference is the durability of the garment and the quality. Rain clothing is the most important segment where the clothing quality becomes visible. I had competed in less than 10 starts in a clothing manufactured by a competing brand when a clothing seam first leaked, while I have used the previous rain set from Company M for two years and it took around 300 starts before seams started to leak."* (Finnish female, 24)

Brand leadership was the third most important factor affecting the customized product value. The category of brand leadership includes the assumption that the brand is perceived as the best one in the market and a forefront compared to other brands in the same category. The customized trotting clothing manufactured by Company M was mentioned as the best in the market. The product design, premium quality and fitting were regarded as the most important factors affecting the brand evaluation.

*"I have used competitive brands, but always heard that Company M is the best and wanted to try the best."* (Swedish male, 34)

*"If one wants to have the best clothing, it has always been Company M for me."* (Finnish male, 26)

Brand use value was also mentioned to have impact on the value of customized sports clothing. Brand use value involves the assumption that products of the brand are more useful than products of other brands. Even though some problems with clothing fit was mentioned, the fit of Company M products were generally considered to be better than in competitors' products. Use value is linked to the service and customization options provided by the company. If athletes encounter problems with the clothing fit, the garment will be modified to meet the expectations, increasing their confidence in the company. It is also possible to give more customization options for athletes to make the end product even more individual and better match to personal requirements.

*"Compared to the fitting of an overall from a competing brand, the overall made by Company M is of premium fit."* (Finnish male, 21)

*"Company M gives flexible options and although the clothes are customized from standard options, Company M takes customer preferences into account and make what the customer wants."* (Finnish female, 24)

It is common in the trotting business that personal competition clothing is paid by sponsors. Professional drivers usually have one main sponsor or many smaller sponsors

who divide the costs for racing outfits. (Company M 2017.) In some cases, this means that the professional driver who is the user of the clothing product, is not the person making the ultimate purchasing decision and has no control over the brand choice.

The athletes interviewed were aware of the price levels in the market, and it was understood that Company M is the most expensive brand. Even though the athletes were usually not the ones paying the whole outfit themselves, product quality and customer service were seen as factors that justify the higher price. The prior experiences with the product quality and the level of customer service were regarded as factors that will justify the brand choice for new sponsors. Company M brand was mentioned to be highly desired and therefore professional trotting drivers were searching for enough personal sponsors to cover the costs on Company M clothing. It was also mentioned by one athlete that Company M would be his brand choice even without sponsors. Then he would pay for the product himself by ordering less clothing and try to manage with various underwear options.

*"I don't mind the price of the product. I just want the best." (Finnish female, 24)*

*"Especially with new customers, premium pricing of Company M could lead them to place their orders somewhere else, because they can't convince the sponsors with previously acquired experience on Company M." (Finnish male, 59)*

When asked why professional trotting drivers have chosen Company M to produce their custom-made sports clothing, the brand quality, closeness of the brand, and personal relationships were mentioned as motivational factors behind the brand choice. One long-term customer interviewed mentioned that by choosing a local brand he reflects his personal values. Also, long-term customer relationships with the company and established friendships with the company personnel were mentioned as motivational factors behind the brand choice.

### **5.2.3 Consumer involvement**

The concept of consumer involvement includes four categories: product interest, perceived pleasure, product symbolism, and risk probability. The category of perceived pleasure was based on the feeling that it felt better to wear a particular brand compared to other brands available. It was mentioned that the fit and durability of Company M custom-made products increased the sense of comfort compared to competing brands. Horse racing was said to be more comfortable with clothing that protects the user in

various weather conditions and fits well. The well-fitting clothing was even mentioned to make the wearer look better.

The category of product interest meant the active research of the product category in question. In the context of this study, active research meant that the professional trotting drivers actively pay attention to the clothing brands their competitors are wearing. What top drivers wear and who is the manufacturer of their custom-made clothing is communicated during competitions, on advertisements, and magazines. The manufacturer of the outfit becomes apparent because logos of the manufacturing brands are often placed on the jacket collar, where they appear prominently in the images. During the interviews, it was said that especially younger generation looks up to their idols and want to imitate their brand choices. It was also mentioned that professional trotting drivers ask for suggestions on clothing choices from their colleagues.

*"Of course, one pays attention to the brands competitors and the best ones wear. Compared to the time when I didn't drive as much as now, I followed those who drove more, and they always wore clothing manufactured by Company M." (Finnish male, 26)*

Product symbolism, the product's ability to reflect status, was mentioned as an important factor affecting the value of customized sports clothing. Product symbolism included the assumption that purchasing a product of a brand in question reflects or increases consumer's competence or status. During the interviews, it was mentioned that the trotting sport is undergoing a transition phase where many of the old professionals will soon retire and the younger generation will step in. It was said that younger generation idolizes older professionals and want to adopt the brand choice according to their idol. Because the trotting clothing design needs to be individual requiring each trotting driver to have their own clothing look and colors, the manufacturer's logo on the clothing becomes one of the only visible signs of the brand choice. Because the premium pricing of Company M custom-made clothing, the logo becomes a desirable symbol which indicates achieved competence or status. It was said that all the best professional trotting drivers wear Company M clothing, and therefore the clothing has become highly desirable among young professionals.

*"Young want to dress as their idols, and the idols drive in Company M clothing." (Swedish male, 34)*

Risk probability includes the assumption that products of the brand in question are defective or the customer service will fail. The potential risks mentioned during the interviews were product dissatisfaction and monetary risk if the athlete was not satisfied

with the expensive garment. Because trotting competitions are held throughout the year in varying weather conditions, athletes need several pieces of clothing. Custom-made garments are expensive, and especially when more than one garment is needed, the monetary investment as well as the monetary risk increase.

Delivery times and measurement-taking were mentioned as potential service risks. The standard delivery time of six weeks for Company M custom-made clothing was mentioned to be too long. Some interviewees had experienced that the season to wear the clothing ended before the athlete received the finished product. Measurement-taking was also seen as a potential service fail which could result in problems with the clothing fit. Potential fitting problems would require athletes to send the product back to the manufacturing company and wait for the product alteration to finish, which also would increase the potential service fail of delivery time. Despite of these potential risks, the athletes interviewed mentioned not to feel any actual risks when buying custom-made athletic clothing from Company M because of the history of brand experiences and long-term customer relationships. Athletes reported to know what they get when they buy products from Company M and if the products are not perfect at the first time, athletes have learned to trust the repair service Company M offers. Also, the fact that the athletes do not pay for the clothing themselves, is an affecting factor for a lack of risks involved in the purchase decision.

*"I don't feel any risks. I trust the clothing is good and fitting. When buying clothing from Company M, I can trust that the clothing is like it should be." (Finnish male, 22)*

*"I don't feel risks. I have always eventually got the clothing as I want them changed. If I have had these feelings that the clothing does not fit as it should, Company M has always resolved it." (Finnish female, 24)*

### **5.3 Customized athletic clothing product value model**

Based on the findings of this study, the factors affecting the perceived value of customized sports apparel were not limited only to a product level as presented in the FEA consumer needs model (Lamb & Kallal 1992, 42) or to an experience level presented in the Consumer Perceived Value Tool (Merle et al. 2010, 511). The results of this study showed that the sources of value in an athletic clothing product derive from a product-related and supplier-related elements and a customized athletic clothing product value model was proposed (Figure 10).

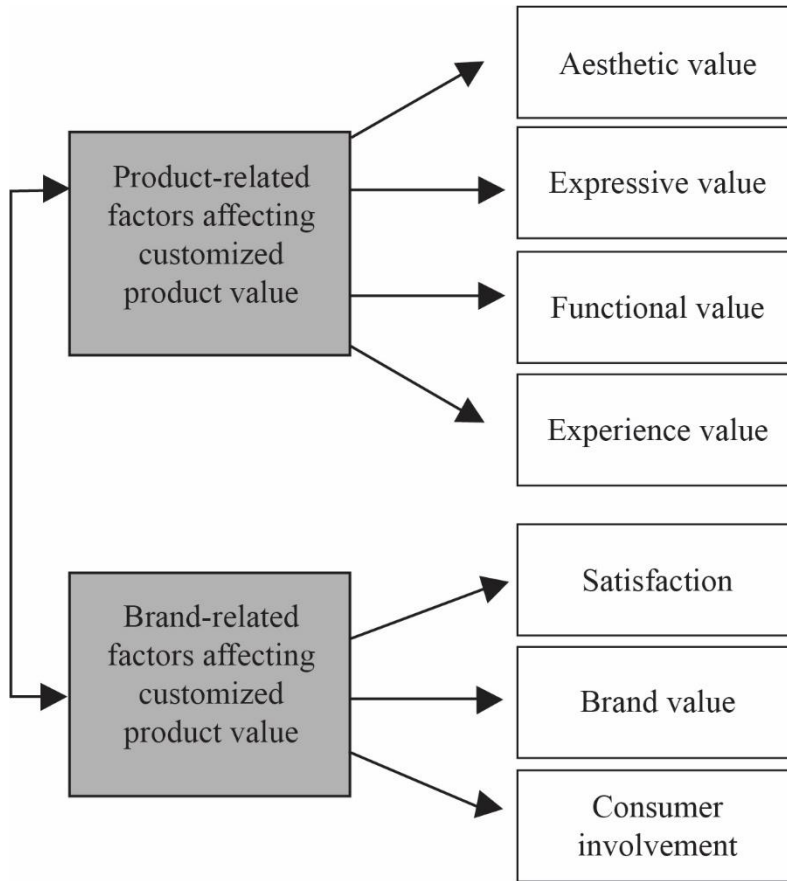


Figure 10 Customized athletic clothing product value model

Based on the findings of this study, the sources of value of a customized athletic clothing product were identified and categorized to two main levels: to a product level and to a brand level. On the product level, customized product creates four types of value to the consumer: aesthetic, expressive, functional, and experience value. On the brand level, satisfaction, brand value, and consumer involvement impact on the perceived value of customized clothing product.

Although professional trotting athletes had a limited capability to influence the design of their individual competition clothing due to the sport tradition and sponsoring, favorite colors and subjective sense of beauty was found to be the most important aesthetic factor. It was also found important that an athlete feels comfortable wearing the clothing before, during, and after the sports performance. The most important functional value was identified as the clothing fit. Aesthetics, fit, and the feeling of comfort were related to each other. It was mentioned that it looks and feels good when clothes fit.

In the trotting sport context, the strong sense of tradition in trotting clothing, the rules placed by trotting federations, and the involvement of sponsors in the product design process limits the freedom of self-expression through clothing. Distinctiveness was found the most important expressive factor in customized clothing. It was found important that spectators recognize the athlete during a competition by only looking at the clothing.

The results show that experience value was not vital in this context, because professional athletes did not have the opportunity to design the customized athletic clothing completely based on their individual preferences. However, the data indicated that athletes felt it was important to have the possibility to influence on the clothing design and take part in the design process.

The research data indicated that satisfaction was the most important brand-value factor in customized sports clothing. Overall product satisfaction and the company's ability to offer customer service were mentioned as essential factors in determining the level of value for the customer. Especially, the service recovery was considered important in the context of customized clothing. If the delivered product was not what athletes expected, the company's ability to correct the situation became essential.

In the context of this study, the concept of brand value can be understood as the perceived quality of the product, product experiences, and the willingness to pay. The research data indicated that product quality was the most important factor affecting the value of the customized athletic clothing product and the willingness to pay. Athletes and sponsors paying for the premium-priced customized product wanted to invest in a product that lasts years without losing its functionality. Also, the brand leadership, the assumption that the brand is perceived as the best one in the market was another important factor affecting the perceived brand value.

Consumer involvement can be understood as the information the consumer processes when making a brand decision related to other brands available in the market. Risks related to the purchase decision were one of the defining factors affecting the value of customized clothing product. Prior experiences with the supplier reduced the risks and increased trust in the company. It was found that a brand name has a high impact on a supplier choice of customized clothing. The trust built with the brand on previous customer encounters lowered the perceived risk associated with the purchase decision. In the context of customized clothing products, trust will lead to repurchases and to increased brand loyalty.



## 6 CONCLUSIONS AND SUMMARY

### 6.1 Perceived value in a customized athletic apparel

#### 6.1.1 *Product-related value*

The Consumer Perceived Value Tool (Merle et al. 2010, 511), FEA Consumer needs model (Lamb & Kallal 1992, 42) and the variable measures determining brand loyalty (Vera & Trujillo 2017, 605) served as a basis for the model illustrating the research findings. The study offered a framework for understanding the value factors of customized apparel products specifically targeted at niche markets. Using a limited group of interviewees whose experiences in product customizing and product use were almost identical, it was possible to find common themes behind the value creating factors. Also, by studying loyal customers of a particular brand, it was possible to understand the reasons behind long-term customer relationships and identify the brand-related factors creating customer value.

The research results confirmed the prior academic understanding that the sources of value are subjective in nature, multidimensional, and result from a comparison between other potential products. According to the FEA consumer needs model presented by Lamb and Kallal (1992, 42), consumers' needs regarding clothing products combine elements from functional, expressive, and aesthetic considerations. In the context of clothing customization, this model lacked the experience-based values derived from the customization process.

The Consumer Perceived Value Tool presented by Merle and al. (2010, 511) was created to explain the value factors in a customized product, including the functional, expressive, and aesthetic factors in the FEA consumer needs model added with the experience-based values derived from the customization process. Hedonic value referred to the entertainment gained from the product design experience, while the creative achievement value referred to the accomplishment in the self-design task.

This study revealed that consumers demand more from customized products than from conventional products, and it was therefore considered important to be personally involved in the product design process. The sources of value of the customized athletic clothing product were related to the usability and appearance of the product as well as the expressive factors. Because the customized athletic clothing products were used at trotting competitions in front of an international audience, the end product had to meet different requirements.

Expressive value factors were reported to be the most important source of value in customized athletic clothing. In the current study, self-expression, distinctiveness, uniqueness, roles, and status were found to be the key factors in determining the expressive value. Self-expression was closely linked to the personal aesthetic preferences by allowing the athlete to show his personality, personal style, values, and preferences through the self-designed clothing style. It became apparent that trotting athletes valued the possibility to take part in the design process and choose from various customization options offered by the supplier. However, the strong sense of tradition in trotting clothing, the rules placed by trotting federations, and the involvement of sponsors in the product design process limited the freedom of self-expression through clothing.

Distinctiveness was found to be a key component of expressive value in the trotting sport context. Unique clothing look was considered to be the athlete's personal brand, which helped to identify the athlete during the race and increase his/her personal distinctiveness. It was found important that spectators recognize the athlete during a competition by only looking at the clothing. It was also found that the clothing uniqueness was a motivational reason to acquire a customized clothing product, but the athletes valued more the expressive factor of distinctiveness achieved by wearing an unique clothing than the product uniqueness itself.

In the context of the current study the athletes reported to have a dual role in being a professional athlete and a paid advertisement for the sponsoring company. The athletes felt that the competition clothing was owned by the sponsors because they had paid for the product. This reflected in the product design, use and the level of care. The athletes felt they needed to respect their personal sponsors by giving them the desired visibility during competitions and ensuring that the clothing product was clean and presentable in each competition.

Displaying status with clothing became relevant for the professional trotting athletes when competing in a new place against new competitors. However, status was not the defining factor of a customized clothing product value. It might be due to the fact that the sport-specific clothing look is mandatory for each professional and there are relatively few professional drivers in Scandinavia. These professional trotting athletes know each other at some level, and therefore the status of an athlete is transmitted more by the frequency of competition and by athletic achievements than by clothing look. However, it was mentioned in the interviews that a brand choice of a clothing can be a means to increase the athlete's credibility in the role at the beginning of the career without yet many achievements in the sport.

### *Functional and aesthetic value*

Traditionally the functional value has been associated with the extent of product utility in the intended use (e.g. Durá-Gil et al. 2016, 724; Harzer 2013, 24; Lai 1995, 383; Merle et al. 2010, 509–511). It was found important that an athlete feels confident wearing the clothing before, during, and after the sports performance. Based on the research findings, the clothing fit was found to be the most important functional factor of a customized apparel product because clothing fit and specialized features could improve the sports performance. Fit was related to the feeling of comfort and the interviewees reported that it feels comfortable to work in well-fitting clothing that keeps the body dry, adds protection, and does not restrict body movements during the athletic performance. The athletes who reported to have a body that differed from the standard size, valued the clothing fit achieved by customization more than standard-sized athletes.

Previous research found that the aesthetic value increased in self-designed products when consumers were able to design the product based on their individual aesthetic preferences (e.g. Franke & Schreier 2008, 99–102). It was important for the interviewees to have the ability to influence on the colors and the design. Although professional trotting athletes had a limited capability to influence the design of their individual competition clothing due to the sport tradition and sponsoring, subjective sense of beauty was found to be the most important aesthetic factor. The clothing design and favorite colors were reported to be the most important factors affecting the aesthetic value of the customized garment. These results were similar to the previous research, which showed that the sources of product-related values combine elements from the functional and aesthetic values.

### *Experience value*

It became apparent that personal sponsors have a high influence on the clothing design and therefore an athlete has no total control over the competition clothing appearance. Hedonic value and creative achievement value as they were presented in the Consumer Perceived Value Tool (Merle et al. 2010) were not defining factors on the overall value of the customized athletic clothing product because professional athletes did not have the opportunity to design the customized sports clothing completely based on their individual preferences. However, the data indicated that athletes felt it was important to have the possibility to take part in the design process.

Hedonic value, which referred to the entertainment in the product design experience, derived mainly from the ability to influence on the clothing fit and functionality. Because athletes had no total control over the design of their athletic clothing, personal creativity was mainly aimed at adjusting the clothing fit and improving the functionality

of the clothing by requesting additional customization possibilities from the manufacturing company.

The creative achievement value, which referred to the feelings of accomplishment in the self-design task (Franke et al. 2010, 133–139; Merle et al. 2010, 511) mainly derived from the feeling of being proud of owning a partially self-designed product. These results were similar to the previous research, which showed that the sources of product-related values combine elements from the functional and experience factors.

### **6.1.2 Brand-related value**

In the current study the brand-related factors in value creation were identified by using the dimensions of brand loyalty presented by Vera and Trujillo (2017, 605). In this model, consumer involvement, perceived brand value, and satisfaction were the key components leading to brand loyalty. By studying loyal long-term customers of the case company, it was possible to identify the value factors leading to brand loyalty. In the previous academic studies, the sources of value of customized clothing product were categorized only to the extent of product value and design process value. The results of the current study show, that product value and design process value were not enough to explain all the sources of value for professional athletes. The phrase "I want the best" in the context of customized athletic clothing for trotting sport also contains the brand-related attributes.

As previous studies have shown, the brand-related attributes play a critical role in determining the sources of value for consumers (e.g. Vera & Trujillo 2017, 605). The brand-related value factors were found to be reflected in consumer behavior, supplier choice, product satisfaction, repurchases, and purchase intentions. The athletes felt that by choosing a particular brand to supply with the custom-made clothing, the quality and the clothing fit were consistent, and they could start to wear the product as soon as it was delivered.

As the previous research has indicated, athletes look for particular brand names to identify them with their sport and to reflect a prestigious image (e.g. Leadbeater & Miller 2004, 45; Dickson & Pollack 2000, 70–71). The results of this study confirmed the view that the sport itself influences brand choice, and a certain brand increases the value of an athletic product to a consumer. The brand choice is made among a few leading brands that meet the requirements in terms of sports-specific clothing design, sufficient amount of protection in the sport, and offer additional value to the athlete. In the context of trotting sport with often international audience, the brand value is derived from the brand name which attach the athletes to their sport and creates social prestige among competitors.

### *Brand value*

Brand-related value was divided into three main categories: brand value, consumer involvement, and satisfaction. The research data indicated that product quality was the most important factor affecting the brand value of the customized athletic clothing product and the willingness to pay. Brand quality was measured in terms of quality, fit, and durability. The results showed that athletes and sponsors want to invest in a product that looks stylish and lasts for years without losing its functionality, regardless of the higher price compared to competing brands.

The brand leadership, the assumption that the brand is perceived as the best one in the market was another important factor affecting the perceived brand value. Company M products were mentioned to be the best ones available and the quality of the products, as well as the service provided by the company were identified as reasons behind the brand choice.

### *Consumer involvement*

The concept of consumer involvement can be understood as an active observation on what brands of clothing competitors are wearing, product symbolism, and the risks involved with the buying decision. Product interest manifested as an active research of the apparel items and clothing brands top athletes wear and who is the manufacturer of their custom-made clothing. The results showed that trotting athletes actively observe the clothing choices of other athletes and ask for suggestions on clothing choices from their colleagues.

One of the defining factors influencing the perceived value of customized clothing product, brand choice, and loyalty was related to risks associated with the purchase decision. At the moment of purchase the customized clothing product is not in a tangible form. Only an image of an ideal product is purchased which will materialize later in a production process. In the context of customized clothing products, the trust built with a specific brand on prior customer encounters lowered the perceived monetary risk associated with the purchase decision. The brand name was also regarded as an important indicator of lowered purchase risk when the athletes could rely on the quality of materials used on their custom-made clothing and the fit to be exactly as expected.

### *Satisfaction*

Overall product satisfaction and the company's ability to offer customer service were mentioned as essential factors in determining the level of value for the consumer. Satis-

faction was measured as prior brand experiences. The measure included the overall assessment of satisfaction and product performance against expectations and the ideal performance. Customer service was seen as an essential factor in determining the level of brand satisfaction by allowing consumers to create more personalized designs beyond the standard offering. The interviewees mentioned to value the "we make what you want" -mentality of Company M, which was mentioned to lack from its competitors offering the customizing option.

The results showed that the trotting athletes require consistency from their customized clothing products. The consistency of product quality was mentioned as one aspect affecting product satisfaction, because the athletes needed to rely on the quality and fit of their clothes to be constantly the same as they had received before in terms of fabric, design, and fit. Service recovery was considered particularly important in the context of customized clothing. If the delivered product was not what athletes expected, the company's ability to correct the situation became essential in creating trust. The prior experiences acquired from the service level of the brand in question lowered the perceived monetary risk associated with the purchase decision and increased the likelihood that the athlete will re-select the brand in the future.

In addition to customer service, customer relationship played an important role in defining the level of brand satisfaction. The trust built with the company was seen as important motivational factor to choose a particular brand as a supplier for custom-made garments over competing brands. Athletes also valued their personal relationships with the company, which were considered to affect the level of customer service, features of the clothing, and the ability to negotiate on lower prices of the products.

Unlike previous studies (e.g. Satam et al. 2011, 359), the findings of this study show that in the context of athletic clothing, customization itself does not increase customer satisfaction or loyalty. It was found that overall satisfaction with the customized product and service provided by the supplier were factors that increase satisfaction and trust ultimately leading to repurchases and brand loyalty. Based on the findings of this research, it was evident that in order to survive in the competition, athletic consumers need to trust the company to manufacture their customized clothing products according to their specifications and offer repair services to compensate if the product is not as expected. The experiences with the product quality and company service level increased trust and lowered perceived risk which affected on the future brand choice resulting in repurchases and lasting consumer relationships.

## 6.2 Summary

The purpose of this study was to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence the perceived value of custom-made athletic clothing product at a product, experience, and brand level. This study dealt with the psychological dimension of value, which was related to the subjective preferences on product purchase and brand choice. The perceived value was examined in the context of a case company offering customized clothing products specially for trotting sport. Trotting offered a great context to research the perceived values of customized clothing product because the rules of the sport dictate that a unique clothing design for each professional trotting driver is required. Semi-structured, personal theme interviews were used as a primary data source for this study. The sample consisted of trotting professionals and sales personnel, total of 11 persons from Sweden and from Finland. Previous theoretical perspectives were used as a basis for categorization for the interview data to identify the sources of value of the customized athletic clothing product.

Three theoretical models of FEA consumer needs model by Lamb and Kallal (1992), Consumer Perceived Value Tool by Merle and al. (2010), and Measures defining brand loyalty presented by Vera and Trujillo (2017) formed the scientific framework for this study. According to these theoretical models, the value factors of a customized clothing product are explained by functional, expressive, and aesthetic considerations added with the hedonic and creative achievement value derived from the design process. The value factors related to the supplier's brand were identified by using the dimensions of consumer involvement, perceived brand value, and satisfaction.

The findings of the current study show that the sources of value are based on product-related and supplier-related factors and are generated both before and after the purchase. The quality of the customized product, satisfaction, or the level of service provided by the supplier can't be comprehensively assessed before the purchase and use. As a result, a customized athletic clothing product value model was proposed.

On the product level, the value of a customized product is based on aesthetic, expressive, functional, and experience factors. On the supplier level, satisfaction, brand value, and consumer involvement impact on the perceived value of customized clothing product. The results of this study show that athletes did not have the opportunity to design the customized sports clothing completely based on their individual preferences. In the professional sport context, the sports tradition, the rules placed by sports federations, and the involvement of sponsors limit the freedom of self-expression in the product design process. However, the data indicated that athletes felt it was important to have the possibility to influence on the clothing design and take part in the design process.

The research data indicated that an overall product satisfaction and the supplier's ability to create trust were essential factors in determining the continuity of the custom-

er relationship. The trust built with the brand on previous customer encounters lowered the perceived risk associated with the purchase decision leading to repurchases and to increased brand loyalty. Especially, the service recovery was considered important in creating trust in the context of customized clothing. If the delivered product was not what athletes expected, the supplier's ability to correct the situation became essential.



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## APPENDIX

### APPENDIX 1 INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Thank you for participating in my study. This is my master's thesis in marketing in Turku School of Economics. In this study, I examine the value factors that professional trotting drivers experience when they buy a customized sports clothing. Company M is used as a context company in this study and I am conducting interviews for its customers. The interview is made anonymously and therefore your name is not revealed in the study.

#### Background questions

1. What is your age and nationality?
2. How many years of experience you have in trotting sport and how long have you been racing as a professional?

#### Questions regarding customized clothing

3. Have you designed your current driving suit yourself?
4. What factors have influenced on your current garment design?
5. What is the amount of races per year you drive in other design than your own?
6. Do you feel any different driving in other design than your own?
7. Why do you think it is important as an athlete that you have an unique clothing design?
8. What are the main benefits of sports apparel customization?
9. How close your personal suit is to your ideal in terms of design and fitting on a scale 1–10? Why not 10?

#### Questions regarding the clothing brand

10. Have you used customized clothing of other brand than Company M?
11. Why do you keep ordering your custom-made clothes from Company M?
12. Do you think Company M offers enough customization options for clothing?
13. What are the risks involved in buying customized clothing from Company M?