Success in a niche market:

A grounded theory analysis of video-on-demand platforms for performing arts in Europe.

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Ceci n'est pas un spectacle

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ABSTRACT

Study purpose: This paper delves into the nuances of success in the niche market of video-on-demand (VoD) platforms for performing arts in Europe, focusing on managerial perspectives. It seeks to comprehend how top executives construct success and the associated meanings in their strategic decisions within this market, where success is often equated with profitability, survival, or expansion. The research emphasizes the pivotal role of strategic management decisions in constructing a knowledge framework for optimal outcomes, providing valuable insights for navigating success in this niche market.

Methodology: The study employed a constructivist grounded theory approach, extracting empirical data through intensive interviews, while existing literature on success in a niche market and strategic decision-making provided the foundation for the research problem.

Findings: The research explores the shift from professional to personal management roles and evolving perceptions of service success for VoD platforms for performing arts in Europe. It investigates the complexity of strategic decision-making, emphasizing the crucial role of top executives in shaping the vision, mission, and purpose of these platforms. The study also delves into managers' perspectives on defining service success, revealing the complex interplay of meanings in the niche market and underscoring the challenges and motivations in navigating this landscape. It highlights the significance of crafting uniqueness to achieve success, attract audiences, and secure public and private funding.

Research implications: The paper underscores the crucial impact of strategic managerial decisions on the success of specialized video-on-demand platforms for performing arts in Europe. It reveals that in the niche market, there is no dominant definition of success; instead, diverse meanings interact and complement each other, with traditional and digital expressions in performing arts evolving in parallel, fostering unique forms of artistic innovation and creative expression.

Keywords: service success, strategic decision-making, niche market, video-on-demand platforms, performing arts, constructivist grounded theory

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1. INTRODUCTION

The introductory chapter departs from the contextual backdrop of the study, with the primary intention of underscoring the significance of the research subject matter. It initiates by offering a thorough exposition of the subject, providing a comprehensive understanding of the topic. Subsequently, the chapter progressively refines the focus, akin to a roadmap, transitioning from a broader contextual background to the precise problem addressed in the paper and its associated aim and research question. Lastly, the introductory chapter delineates the structural framework of the thesis, serving as a guiding template for the subsequent chapters.

1.1. Research background

Video-on-demand (VoD) platforms for performing arts in Europe are a recently expanding market in a quest to succeed in the global field of online streaming marked by renowned companies such as Netflix, Disney+, and Amazon Prime Video. The number of VoD platforms for theatre, opera and dance increased significantly in Europe during the COVID-19 pandemic (International network for contemporary performing arts, 2020 [1]; Vlassis, 2021; European Dance Development Network, 2021; European Theatre Convention, 2023). These were dominantly launched by public funded organisations such as the Digital Stage platform (2023) produced by 'Radu Stanca' National Theatre in Romania, or Dramox platform (2023) that offers in majority performances of subsidized European theatres. The global lockdown with an uncertain end date forced performing arts organisations to find new ways of reaching audiences and some seized the opportunity to develop their own VoD platform or film and sell productions to specialized websites. The COVID-19 pandemic had a devastating impact on the performing arts sector in Europe, with activities and events coming to a halt and causing substantial financial losses (European Parliament – CULT Committee, 2021; International network for contemporary performing arts, 2020 [2]). Despite these challenges, the performing arts sector demonstrated resilience, creativity, and solidarity, with innovations such as 'digital theatre' (Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture – European Commission, 2022).

However, the phenomenon does not own full acknowledgements to the 2019 pandemic outbreak. For instance, medici.tv (2023) launched in 2008 and up until now it provides one of the largest video-on-demand catalogues in the classical music industry, with over 4 000 concerts,

operas, ballets, documentaries, master classes and jazz programmes, although chose to market itself with 'TV' name. The use of video and broadcasting technology within performing arts organisations is not without precedent either (Bay-Cheng, 2007), previously experimenting with cinema (e.g., the Royal National Theatre in UK live screens theatre performances in over 700 cinemas across the UK and around the globe [Bakhshi and Throsby, 2014; National Theatre Live, 2020]) and TV broadcasting (e.g., televised theatre [Wyver, 2014] or specialised TV channel for classical music, jazz, opera and dance [Mezzo TV,2023]). The relationship between video and performing arts also resulted in DVD distribution of art recordings (e.g., BelAir Classiques [2023], based in France, releases audiovisual productions of classical music programmes (operas, ballets, concerts and theatre) on DVD and Blu-ray since 2004) and specialised film festivals (e.g., Cinedans FEST, based in the Netherlands, has celebrated dance film as an art form since 2003 [IMZ International Music + Media Centre, 2022]). A recent novelty is the online streaming of performances either free of charge or based on subscription, with a niche market of VoD platforms in expansion in Europe. A nascent market, VoD platforms are revolutionizing the performing arts sector, a sector traditionally defined by the concreteness of the space, whether indoor or outdoor.

A phenomenon acknowledged as well by European performing arts networks, beyond the context of the pandemic-defined 'new normal' (International network for contemporary performing arts, 2020 [2]), professionals had different titles for digitally distributed performances such as 'digitally located theatre' (European Theatre Convention, 2023), 'virtualized dance' or 'screendance' (European Dance Development Network, 2021). The report 'European Media Industry Outlook' (European Commission, 2023) concluded that while the European VoD market is expanding and becoming more stable, it faces competition from US-based streaming platforms that offer lower subscription fees and a vast content library. As a result of these structural advantages enjoyed by American platforms and the overall relatively smaller size of the European VoD market, platforms dedicated to showcasing performing arts in Europe can be considered niche. To this adds the European cultural and creative industries (CCIs) particularity of relying in majority on public funding (Mathieu and Visanich, 2023). More importantly, VoDs for performing arts have managerial implications within the CCIs in Europe, especially knowing that approximately half of all new enterprises fail within the first five years of operation (Eurostat, 2020; Quansah and Hartz, 2021). Currently, the meanings of technology within the CCIs are gaining new strategic meanings and the managers of these platforms are shaping a competitive, yet

niche market. In this niche context, a key point of inquiry pertains to the strategies and meanings that contribute to the success of these VoD platforms. And who could be better suited to provide an answer than the managers themselves, who serve as the primary decision-makers, responsible for the VoD platform's viability.

1.2. Research problem

Video-on-demand platforms for theatre, opera, and dance represent a niche market - creating, securing, and providing a valuable product to a small segment of a market with distinct demands (Toften and Hammervoll, 2013). Whether public-funded elite institutions or private entrepreneurial organisations within the cultural and creative industries are increasingly investing at the moment in the online streaming of performances, with the largest specialized market in Europe. Instead of spotting or constructing gaps in existing theories, the process of problematisation in this paper will follow the principles for identifying and challenging assumptions as stated by Alvesson and Sandberg (2011). Namely, I seek to challenge my and respondent's assumptions to discover and explore interestingness in strategic decision-making for ensuring success as a niche market, departing from the empirical foundation of managerial ways of thinking. Therefore, problematisation will be used throughout the thesis not only to reach an intriguing research question, but also for analysing and questioning the status quo of strategic management decisions. In doing so, the process may facilitate the development of more interesting theoretical concepts and notions, simultaneously grounded in empirical data and distanced by it through a novel perspective.

Success in terms of management decisions is defined in specialised literature as synonym to either profitability (Barney, 1986; Igor Ansoff and Sullivan, 1993; de Kuijper 2009, Levinthal and Wu, 2010; Besanko et al., 2013; López-Cabarcos et al., 2015; Helfat, 2021; Simon, 2021), survival (Glauner, 2016; Dao, 2019; Eisenhardt, 2021; Furr and Eisenhardt, 2021; Quansah and Hartz, 2021), or expansion (Robinson & Lundstrom, 2003; Luo and Tung, 2007; Child et al. 2019&2021) in a market. For this, strategic managerial decisions are required. Strategy can literally become valuable when managers' main goal is to constantly increase revenues, relying on exact calculations in order to minimize risks of failure and potentialize secure sources of income (Besanko et al., 2013; López-Cabarcos et al., 2015; Choi et al., 2022). Managers create strategies for economic gain, which implies a growth in overall surplus, making an organisational *raison*

d'être out of yielding profits (Helfat, 2021; Simon, 2021). On the other hand (or end), top executives can be concerned with strategies for surviving in a market, especially when innovating products and trying to enter a market or stimulate a demand for them (Dao, 2019; Quansah and Hartz, 2021). In the ever-evolving world of service management, the essence of crafting and executing effective strategies can lie in ensuring survival, and in the case of niche markets, thriving becomes the true measure of the strategic acumen (Eisenhardt, 2021; Furr and Eisenhardt, 2021). Moreover, some managers indicate that expanding the market(s) their organisation is part of can guarantee success, with some enterprises expressing efforts to reach global customers (Luo and Tung, 2007), and some to adapt or shape in real-time their capabilities to performatively respond to the external environment (Robinson & Lundstrom, 2003; Helfat, 2022).

Strategic management decisions play a key role in this aspect, in a constant quest to construct a knowledge framework to achieve the best results. Yet, we know little about how managers in a niche market like the VoD platforms for performing arts create meanings of strategizing and what success means for them. Managerial decisions have a complex thought process behind, sometimes tangled, and this paper intends to clear the picture by identifying patterns of meaning for success, but not providing an ultimate recipe for it. By analysing how managers of VoD platforms for performing arts in Europe construct success, the present paper constitutes a tool for clarity over strategic thriving in a niche market. Therefore, I challenge both empirical and academic assumptions on the way strategy results from a managerial thought process and its impact on the organisation and its market.

1.3. Research aim and question

The aim of this paper is to investigate the fundamental meanings of success managers construct when activating in the niche market of VoD platforms of performing arts in Europe. In simpler terms, this paper seeks to comprehend the meanings behind thriving through strategic managerial decisions within this niche market, whether those meanings relate to market survival, expansion, profit, or of a different nature. The primary focus will be on the pioneering adopters of this trend who exhibit a strong commitment to developing VoD platforms for performing arts in Europe. The research centred on this niche market as it pertains to a particular kind of management decision for service development. However, during the data collection process, I encountered pertinent

information regarding VoD platforms for performing arts in Europe in the context of niche market success.

Given the limited existing knowledge or theoretical groundwork regarding the formulation of success in a niche market, the present study employed a grounded theory research approach. The primary objective was to formulate a theory, albeit in the absence of a well-defined theoretical foundation from which to construct a specific research question (Bowen, 2006; Charmaz, 2014; Zaidi, 2022). Grounded theory has undergone substantial evolution over the last five decades and encompasses various branches. To gather data for this thesis, I followed Charmaz's constructivist approach to grounded theory, as outlined in 2014. Consequently, grounded theory was employed to shed light on the more subtle and concealed meanings that may not be overtly articulated in the analysed results. The research aimed to address the following research question:

How do managers of video-on-demand platforms for performing arts in Europe construct success in a niche market?

1.4. Thesis structure

The upcoming chapters of the thesis are outlined as follows. The second chapter delves into previously published works, where relevant literature and theories in the field are assessed in alignment with the research aim. Given that the paper employs grounded theory methodology, it also investigates the role of literature. The third chapter details the methodology and justifies the selected methods. In the fourth chapter, empirical findings are analysed, based on the elaborate theoretical coding of interviews. The fifth chapter of the research entails a discussion, accompanied by the proposal of a theoretical framework aimed at addressing the identified research gap and addressing the research question outlined in the study's objective. The sixth and concluding chapter covers the practical implications of the paper, as well as the research's limitations and future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This paper's chapter delves into the existing literature within the realm of success in a niche market that aligns with the research aim. To begin, I provide a concise overview of the paper's utilization of grounded theory in the examination of literature. Additionally, an assessment is conducted to determine the appropriateness of theories previously employed in relevant research endeavours.

2.1. Approaching literature in grounded theory

All prevailing perspectives within grounded theory, including Glaserian and constructivist, have reached a consensus that a well-developed theory must have its roots in the data itself, not in pre-existing literature (Bowen, 2006; Charmaz, 2014; Zaidi, 2022). The literature, in this context, should serve as a supportive resource for the analytical research approach, rather than forming the primary theoretical framework. In the majority of research studies, a literature review is typically conducted before data collection and analysis to assess research against previously published works (Bowen, 2006; Thornberg, 2012). The timing for conducting a literature review in the context of grounded can vary, contingent upon differing arguments stemming from various epistemological perspectives.

In accordance with the constructivist grounded theory, the theoretical background of the present master's thesis represents as well an exploration through problematising both empirical and academic assumptions. Sensitizing concepts were used to inform the overall research problem, as a source of guidance towards approaching the empirical world, without a rigorous prescriptive view and opened for novelty (Blumer, 1954; Bowen, 2006; Zaidi, 2022). Essential to mention that all the concepts used in this paper are intertwined in terms of managerial strategic decisions, namely through acquiring either profits, survival or market expansion (i.e., success). All these influence the process of effectively taking decisions for thriving in this case VoD platforms, becoming the medium for achieving contemporary business and market demands.

Sensitizing concepts serve as initial reference points for constructing an analysis aimed at generating a well-founded theoretical framework (Charmaz, 2014; Zaidi, 2022). Sensitizing

concepts offer researchers a sense of how observed instances of a phenomenon might align within conceptual categories, providing initial reference points for constructing an analysis aimed at generating a well-founded theory (Blumer, 1954; Bowen, 2006) Additionally, the concepts were used with a disciplined imagination approach (Weick, 1989; Chermack, 2007) between scenario and theory building. Important to mention that empirical methods are employed solely for the purpose of forecasting the efficacy of scenario planning, rather than for predicting the future itself (Chermack, 2007).

Informed grounded theory operates on the logical principle of abduction, which aligns most effectively with the constructivist variant, as highlighted by Charmaz (2014). Since this paper adheres to Charmaz's grounded theory methodology, the literature review also adopts the constructivist approach. The literature review commenced with an initial examination of published research papers to establish familiarity with the research landscape within the VoD platforms for performing arts and identify gaps in existing knowledge, specifically in relation to defining success in a niche market. Charmaz (2014) recognizes that in constructivist grounded theory, prior literature serves as a comparative tool throughout all stages of research, demonstrating how the developed theory extends and challenges prevailing ideas in the field. Furthermore, preceding theories and concepts are regarded as partial and provisional viewpoints, rather than absolute truths, as noted by Thornberg (2012). Consequently, this thesis has dynamically constructed the literature review in conjunction with the research process, shaping it in response to the available published material.

2.2. Success in a niche market

In the sphere of management decisions, success is often characterized in the specialized literature as synonymous with either profitability, survival, or expansion within a market. To achieve success in this context, strategic managerial decisions play a pivotal role. Strategy becomes valuable when the primary objective of managers is to consistently increase revenue. This entails leveraging precise calculations to minimize the risks of failure and maximize secure income streams, as discussed by Besanko et al. (2013), López-Cabarcos et al. (2015) and Choi et al. (2022). Managers formulate strategies with the ultimate aim of driving economic growth, which translates into an organisation's core purpose being the generation of profits, as emphasized by

Helfat (2021) and Simon (2021). Conversely, top executives may focus on strategies that ensure their organisation's survival in the market, particularly when introducing innovative products and attempting to create or stimulate demand for them, as outlined by Dao (2019) and Quansah and Hartz (2021). In the ever-evolving service landscape, developing and implementing effective strategies can lie in guaranteeing survival. In niche markets, thriving becomes the ultimate benchmark of managers' strategic prowess, as noted by Eisenhardt (2021) and Furr and Eisenhardt (2021). Furthermore, some managers advocate for market expansion as a means to secure success. Some enterprises put significant efforts into reaching global customers, while others adapt or shape their capabilities in real-time to proactively respond to the external environment, as suggested by Luo and Tung (2007) and Pedersen and Tallman (2022).

Profit, often seen as the residual amount following the fulfilment of financial obligations (Simon, 2021), plays a pivotal role in economic and strategic management theories. Economics-based theories in strategic management fall into two categories: those rooted in strategic management with economic logic, and those originating in economics but further developed in strategic management (Helfat, 2021). Achieving above-average returns from product market strategies hinges on the firm's ability to accurately anticipate the strategies' future value when acquiring resources (Barney, 1986; Choi et al. (2022). Igor Ansoff and Sullivan's (1993) observation underscores the necessity of aligning an organisation's strategy with its operating environment's turbulence to maintain financial performance. Profit power, as advocated by de Kuijper (2009), emphasizes the ability to retain profitability, leverage it in business relationships, and outmanoeuvre competitors and customers for extraordinary returns. The concept of opportunity cost is influential, suggesting that diversification hinges not only on resource availability but also market opportunities (Levinthal and Wu, 2010). When assessing decision costs, it is crucial to consider only those directly impacted (Besanko et al., 2013). The significant impact of possessing superior capabilities on profitability is well-documented (López-Cabarcos et al., 2015). In sum, profit is a multifaceted and critical element at the intersection of economics and strategic management, guiding decisions and outcomes in service management (Simon, 2021).

In the complex landscape of service management, the ability to succeed and survive in the market hinges on the underlying values that define an enterprise's purpose and shape its business

model (Glauner, 2016). This success is intrinsically tied to the impact of technological change on strategic decision-making, where the rationality of strategy building is juxtaposed with the dual principles of revenue generation and social responsibility (Glauner, 2016). Niche producers and technology followers striving to navigate turbulent market conditions must create effective strategies for product communication while remaining vigilant to the signals transmitted by competitors, as these signals can significantly influence their service success (Dao, 2019). Competitive advantage in nascent markets is marked by its unpredictability, with the essence of strategy formation determining which enterprises thrive and which falter in these contexts (Eisenhardt, 2021). In such high-uncertainty markets, the conventional resource-based view becomes less relevant, as valuable resources may be nascent or their value indeterminate or changing (Furr and Eisenhardt, 2021). Survival in the modern service management is an increasingly challenging endeavour, particularly for small and new businesses, amid hyper-competitive markets, technological disruptions, workforce preparedness concerns, and the complexities posed by global pandemics. Contrary to the conventional notions tied to a firm's age or size, effective management approaches depend on encompassing learning, strategic pivots, wise time management, relationship-building, and cultivating a resilient organisational culture as key factors distinguishing leaders who successfully adapt their organisations to market changes from those who do not (Quansah and Hartz, 2021).

Achieving success through market expansion necessitates a comprehensive approach. Understanding the learning curve inherent in new market exploration is vital, as venturing into unfamiliar territory without prior experience can be risky. Assessing the alignment of internal and external factors within the organisation plays a pivotal role in determining the appropriate level of control, resource allocation, and risk associated with each expansion mode, ultimately leading to a framework for informed market expansion decisions (Robinson and Lundstrom, 2003). Notably, a firm's global success is intrinsically tied to its design competitiveness, driven by its design capabilities. According to option theory, international expansion serves as a valuable option window for multinational enterprises to acquire tacit knowledge and explore emerging opportunities (Luo and Tung, 2007). Building a superior competitive position entails securing value drivers and cost minimization through various means, including economies of scale, scope, and learning. Competitive strategies are defined by firms to leverage their industry positions and

resources effectively, while cooperative strategies involve collaboration and partnerships with other firms, serving as avenues to achieve mutual objectives (Child et al., 2019&2021).

The existing body of academic literature concerning niche marketing has predominantly concentrated on market-specific elements, with a particular emphasis on exploring the defining characteristics of a niche and the factors that lead to its emergence. In the niche market of performing arts in Europe, success in terms of management decisions is crucial for the growth and sustainability of VoD platforms specializing in this domain. To achieve success, strategic managerial decisions are essential, and they can be characterized based on various objectives. One key aspect of success for VoD platforms in performing arts can be profitability. To maximize revenue and ensure financial success, these platforms can benefit from applying strategic management principles. As discussed by Besanko et al. (2013) and López-Cabarcos et al. (2015), leveraging precise calculations can help minimize the risks of failure and maximize secure income streams.

In the ever-evolving landscape of the VoD industry, ensuring the survival of a platform is a critical management objective. This is particularly relevant when introducing innovative products and trying to stimulate demand in a niche market. Strategies that focus on long-term survival in the market are emphasized by Dao (2019) and Quansah and Hartz (2021). To remain competitive and relevant, VoD platforms need to adapt and innovate. Expanding the market and customer base can also be a pathway to success for VoD platforms in the performing arts niche. Some platforms put significant efforts into reaching global customers, while others adapt their capabilities in real-time to proactively respond to the external environment, as suggested by Luo and Tung (2007) and Pedersen and Tallman (2022). Expanding into new regions or markets can open up new revenue streams and opportunities. In niche markets like the performing arts, thriving becomes the ultimate benchmark of strategic prowess, as noted by Eisenhardt (2021) and Furr and Eisenhardt (2021). To succeed in this context, VoD platforms should consider specialized strategies tailored to the unique demands of their niche audience.

In summary, success in the niche market of VoD platforms for performing arts in Europe can be characterized by profitability, survival, and expansion. To achieve these objectives, strategic

managerial decisions play a pivotal role, and it is essential to adapt and innovate in the ever-evolving service landscape while catering to the specific needs of the niche market.

2.3. Strategic decision-making

To begin with, it is important to distinguish between strategy content - i.e., what a strategy consists of, and strategy process - i.e, how an organisation formulates and implements its strategy (Andrews et al., 2009; Andersen, 2013; Helfat, 2021; Mishra and Mohanty, 2022). This thesis will focus mainly on formulating strategies as a process that has the strategic apex as its centre, respectively top executives of VoD platforms for performing arts in Europe responsible for constructing the vision, mission, and sense of purpose for the enterprise (Mintzberg, 1980 [1]). Mintzberg (2007) distinguishes further between strategy formulation – a deliberate, controlling, process centring on planning and visioning, and formation – an emergent one, comprising of decisions relating to its content and process, but centring on venturing and learning, concluding however that in practice formulation and formation are oftentimes mixed. Besides, I acknowledge the multitude of factors involved in and impacting strategy formulation, both internal (i.e., human, financial, and knowledge capital) and external (e.g., technological developments, political and economic changes), yet I choose to focus on the role of the strategic apex since I believe managers are the main influencers for making an enterprise thrive. Therefore, crucial in the present thesis is the study of strategic decision-making as management patterns in action (Mintzberg, 2007; Mintzberg et al., 2009) – i.e., patterns identified through analysing the interviews with top executives, which constitute commonalities of best practices and beliefs towards constructing success in a niche market.

Academics and practitioners often assume that strategy formulation requires and relies on strict rational planning and logical restrictions (e.g., Andrews et al., 2009; Varbanova, 2013), yet dealing with the novelty of entering or shaping a niche market like the VoD platforms can presume a more spontaneous and less linear decision-making process (Helfat and Raubitschek, 2018). It is also essential to distinguish between managerial decision-making (Drucker, 2006 [1]) and sense-making (Weick et al., 2005; Jalonen et al., 2018; Penttilä et al., 2020), and I intend to analyse how top executives in a niche market construct judgement (Bazerman and Moore, 2012), scenarios (Lindgren and Bandhold, 2009) or vision (Drucker, 2006 [2]) when strategizing. Although

dynamic managerial capabilities, such as innovation, integration, scanning and sensing in a market are pertinent for thriving in a niche market (Helfat and Raubitschek, 2018), the present paper will not delve further into the psychological aspects of strategizing.

Eisenhardt and Zbaracki (1992), Simon (1997) and Mintrom (2015) discuss the significance of strategic decision-making in defining success. Simon (1979, 1997) defines decision-making as the process of choosing among available options, influenced by several factors and often with incomplete information. His concept of purposiveness suggests a hierarchy of decisions, each step implementing goals from the one above. Bounded rationality is a central concept, indicating that managerial decisions are shaped by limits on knowledge and computational capabilities. Simon's (1997) administrative theory focuses on intended and bounded rationality, as individuals satisfice due to limitations in maximizing. Satisficing criteria like 'share of market', 'reasonable profit' and 'fair price' are common in business. Decisions are typically about finding actions that meet multiple constraints, not just a single goal. Simon (1997) explores the consequences of choice and the psychology of administrative decisions, emphasizing the limitations of individual rationality and the role of organisational structures in promoting more rational decision-making. Simon (1979, 1997) highlights that rationality demands complete knowledge, anticipation of consequences, and choice among all alternatives, but these demands are constrained by cognitive and informational limits.

Besides, Henry Mintzberg, one of the leading researchers on business and management, explored how effective organisations can be designed, what is the nature of managerial work and what roles strategy and decision-making have in it (1980 [1], [2]; 2007; 2009; 2001/2010). Still, his studies focus more on ensuring efficiency and effectiveness, with little insight into what it means to be successful in a service or market, as well as how managers perceive success. The hereby study on managers' strategic decision-making in a niche market seeks to inquire about the executive's decisions with a curious Mintzberg style 'it is not what you think'. It is known that decision-making often defies the step-by-step logic, and can be intuitive or action-oriented (Mintzberg and Westley, 2001/2010; Kahneman, 2011), while managers act towards it as entrepreneurs, disturbance handlers, resource allocators, or negotiators (Mintzberg, 1980 [1]). Mintzberg (1980 [2], 2009) acknowledged that strategies have five constituent parts (five Ps) –

plan, ploy, pattern, position, and perspective, but with limited insights into how decision-making affects service management thriving.

Strategic decision-making is at the core of managers operating in a niche market such as European VoD platforms for performing arts. Mintzberg's view on the five Ps of strategy and Simon's concepts of bounded rationality and satisficing are crucial in understanding this process. Mintzberg (2007) emphasizes the distinction between deliberate strategy formulation, which involves planning and visioning, and emergent strategy formation, which involves venturing and learning. However, in practice, these two aspects often intertwine. While many assume that strategic formulation relies on strict rational planning, entering or shaping a niche market may require a more spontaneous and less linear decision-making process (Mintzberg, 2009; Helfat and Raubitschek, 2018). Managers in such markets need to construct judgment, scenarios, and vision when strategizing (e.g., Drucker, 2006 [1], [2]; Kahneman, 2011). Bounded rationality, as described by Simon (1979, 1997), recognizes that managerial decisions are shaped by limitations in knowledge and computational capabilities, and managers often 'satisfice' due to these constraints. This paper can delve into the decision-making frameworks of managers in niche markets, acknowledging the importance of understanding how they perceive success and make strategic choices in a complex and uncertain environment.

3. METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I present the systematic and scientifically grounded approach that shapes the trajectory of the entire thesis. In order to rectify the limited comprehension of the overarching phenomenon, this chapter delineates the procedures for assessing, validating, and establishing a suitable research design, along with the methodological strategies required to advance the study.

3.1. Research design and philosophy

In order to develop theoretical notions and concepts, the thesis adopted a grounded theory methodology using induction logic, with the overall objective of accurately depicting social reality (Glaser and Strauss, 1967/2006; Charmaz, 2014; Alvehus, 2020). Particularly, it followed the lines of a constructivist grounded approach as stated by Charmaz (2014), with an awareness of the manifold meanings and realities of subjectivism and authenticity. As the name implies, the method is grounded in empirical data, systematically, yet flexibly interpreting social (inter)actions and phenomena to comprehend the relative and complex reality (Charmaz, 2014; Flick, 2014; Alvehus, 2020). Grounded theory is concerned with coding data and acquiring knowledge of a subject matter, and the constructivist perspective centres as well how social actors achieve social phenomena and convey meanings to them (Charmaz, 2014). The empirical material was collected at the early stages of the thesis with the final aim to develop theoretical notions and concepts, in a continuous reflective system of analysis, through coding. Coding represents the process of structuring segments of data by depicting what each constituent part is about, therefore building blocks of abstract theoretical understanding (Charmaz, 2014; Flick, 2014).

The original statement by Glaser and Strauss (1967/2006) is adopted by the constructivist grounded method. This approach is inductive, comparative, emergent, and open-ended. I found this method most suitable for the topic of managing the niche market of video-on-demand platforms for performing arts in Europe since it is a recent and understudied phenomenon with the potential of challenging and extending existing theories on service success and strategic decision-making. Particularly, by interviewing the managers of these platforms, the present research sought to explore and understand answers in-depth and in close connection to the complex process of strategic decision-making. The empirical material took the lead, while guided by the researcher's active analysis, as well as oriented by what Blumer (1954) coined as 'sensitizing concepts',

namely using existing theories in evolutive accordance with empirical findings, not as a definitive framework for analysis. Thus, my knowledge and understanding represented tools for constructing research, by actively reflecting on my own actions and decisions by challenging my own assumptions and previous field knowledge.

Epistemological considerations, what constitutes (or should constitute) acceptable knowledge in a discipline, centred around interpretivism to grasp the subjective meaning of social action, in this case, management of VoD platforms (Fay, 1996; Flick, 2014; Bryman, 2016). Constructivism followed as the ontological perspective to highlight that managers, social actors, constantly achieve social phenomena and convey meanings of strategic use of VoD platforms (Fay, 1996; Flick, 2014; Bryman, 2016). These philosophical foundations not only provide a robust framework for understanding the complexities of strategic decision-making in a niche market but also emphasize the evolving nature of the field, necessitating ongoing research and adaptation.

3.2. Research methods

In the context of this study, it is essential to differentiate between methodology and method. Method refers to the specific techniques or instruments used for data collection, while methodology is concerned with the broader examination of the methods used in research (Bryman, 2016). Grounded in subjectivist epistemology, this research adopts an inductive approach with a focus on theory generation, making it inherently qualitative and distinct from quantitative and positivistic research strategies (Flick, 2014). I have chosen grounded theory methodology due to its suitability for theory development from the data itself, being characterized by systematic yet flexible rules for gathering and interpreting qualitative data (Charmaz, 2014). Despite the relevance of existing concepts and theories, the absence of a predefined theoretical framework in grounded theory research posed a methodological dilemma. As student researcher, I remained methodologically unbiased toward any theoretical framework before data collection, allowing for the exploration of unknown insights from interviews, even if some results may later align with existing theories.

3.2.1. Sensitizing concepts

Commencing a grounded theory research project with sensitizing concepts represents the initial phase. These sensitizing concepts serve as valuable starting points, offering the researchers initial insights into the subject matter and providing tentative tools to navigate the process of defining the data (Bowen, 2006; Charmaz, 2014). Consequently, prior to embarking on activities such as data collection, sampling, and coding, it was advantageous to establish a foundational understanding of success and strategic decision-making in a niche market, in the case of VoD platforms for performing arts in Europe, as sensitizing concepts. Some concepts were later omitted from consideration, as they fell outside the scope of the research. These selected concepts provided valuable guidance as the research progressed.

As researchers do fieldwork or begin coding (labelling and classifying) data, sensitizing concepts may offer potential areas of inquiry or alert them to certain significant elements of a specific study scenario (Blumer, 1954; Bowen, 2006; Zaidi, 2022). Throughout the analysis, such notions might increase sensitivity to subtleties in the data and spark appropriate queries. The analytical process can reveal how managers interpret a topic in a certain situation. Concepts such success in a niche market and strategic decision-making were used for both conducting interviews and the analysis process.

Considering the initial research problem pertaining to the meanings of success in the VoD niche market for performing arts in Europe, the concepts and theories mentioned previously held significant relevance. Nonetheless, the utilisation of these frameworks carried the potential to restrict the discovery of previously undisclosed insights during the interview process, as I aimed to embrace a more empirical methodology. Although subsequent chapters may reveal certain overlaps with the previously mentioned theories in some portions of the results, it is crucial to emphasize that the research remained entirely unbiased from any theoretical framework prior to the collection of data.

3.2.2. Sampling methods

In grounded theory research, data collection and analysis are intertwined processes, with various sampling techniques employed to develop conceptual categories (Charmaz, 2014; Flick, 2014; Carmichael and Cunningham, 2017). Purposive and homogenous sampling was chosen to

enhance the alignment of the sample with the research's question and aim, thereby elevating the study's rigor and bolstering the credibility of the data and findings (Glaser and Strauss, 1967/2006; Campbell et al., 2020). Homogenous meant that the sampling was done to saturate a concept, to thoroughly investigate it and its link to other ideas so that it could be conceptually meaningful (Glaser and Strauss, 1967/2006). In this phase, three interviews were conducted to test avenues of meanings managers of VoD platforms for performing arts in Europe confer to success in a niche market.

Theoretical sampling, the second phase, focused on emerging categories and was driven by the evolving theory, with six interviewees strategically selected to further develop and refine these categories (Charmaz, 2014; Flick, 2014). Despite a prevalent misconception regarding the attainment of statistical significance through sampling, in grounded theory, theoretical sampling focuses on the development of conceptual categories that are relevant to the research objectives and interests (Charmaz, 2014). This approach aligns with grounded theory's iterative process, emphasizing theory development from the data itself.

3.2.3. Data collection

Reaching insights into how managers in a niche market construct success required intensive interviews with the top executives of the VoD platforms, with six managers agreeing to participate. The respondents marked the same profile (i.e., part of the strategic apex of a VoD platform for performing arts in Europe). Intensive interviews were used as a tool to elicit respondents' views and understandings of success in a niche market, with the interviewer's primary responsibility to help interviewees in becoming storytellers (Gibbs, 2007; Charmaz, 2014). By this method, I learned considerably more about the subjects' true vision since the respondents were invited to share their experiences in an open and unrestricted manner. The overall purpose of obtaining and analysing the data from the interviews was to reveal the interesting obvious, with a novel perspective on the strategic apex's decision-making for market thriving. Accordingly, the research centred on a qualitative framework, emphasizing on detailed meanings of a relatively small number of participants, within the context of a specific topic, to comprehend people's social reality, which included grasping their attitudes, beliefs, and motivation (Flick, 2014; Bryman, 2016).

The interview questions were open-ended, allowing for organic exploration, and ensuring a coherent discussion on the subject of VoD platforms for performing arts in Europe. An interview guide was consistently used during the interview process (see appendix 1). The categories that had already emerged from the first three interviews helped shaping this interview guide. Moreover, the respondents did not receive details in advance regarding the questions to be posed in the interviews in order not to influence their answers. All interviews were conducted through Zoom, recorded, transcribed, and used only for this thesis, and lasted on average one hour.

Intensive open-ended interviews		
Name	**Function**	**Length**
Interviewee 1	Manager	01:03:42
Interviewee 2	Chief Operating Officer (COO)	00:56:38
Interviewee 3	Chief Operating Officer (COO)	00:47:02
Interviewee 4	Curator and Artistic Consultant	01:30:56
Interviewee 5	Producer	01:11:26
Interviewee 6	Executive Manager	00:55:37

Table 1. Interviewee details

3.2.4. Data analysis and coding

In this study, data analysis followed an iterative process in line with grounded theory methodology, involving continuous engagement with the interview transcripts and coding (Charmaz, 2014; Flick, 2014). The interview recordings were transcribed using Otter.ai, an AI transcription tool, and then manually corrected for accuracy. The corrected transcripts were imported into NVivo 12 Pro for initial coding using a line-by-line coding technique, without using any automatic coding functions. As the initial codes evolved into broader categories, Microsoft Excel was employed to organize the codes for further analysis. The coding process in this research adhered to Charmaz's (2014) two-phase approach, involving initial coding and focused coding, where coding was defined as the act of labelling segments of data to categorize, summarize, and interpret the data.

As part of the initial coding, the first three interviews were meticulously coded, adhering to Charmaz's (2014) line-by-line coding technique. Initial codes closely represented the content of the transcripts and were formulated using gerunds to emphasize action and context (Carmichael and Cunningham, 2017). In total, there were 364 initial codes, highlighting the extensive comparative and interactive nature of the grounded theory coding process. In the focused coding phase, additional categories emerged from the analysis of the first three interviews, necessitating the conceptualisation and in-depth analysis of these categories by examining, sorting, synthesizing, and organizing the initial codes into broader, more relevant categories to provide strong analytical guidance, while codes not directly relevant were labelled as spare codes and retained for potential future reference.

In the later phase, theoretical coding was employed to analyse the focused codes coherently and comprehensibly, helping to theorize the data, and visualize the interconnections of theoretical codes and emerging concepts through Charmaz's (2014) techniques. Finally, memo writing plays a crucial role in grounded theory research, emphasizing reflexivity and aiding in analytical and theoretical coding (Birks et al. 2008; Charmaz 2014), and in this particular research, memos were created using Nvivo 12 Pro software to facilitate the analysis. Memos serve as reflective, interpretive records documenting the evolution of ideas, events, and the thought processes in the research, offering insight into the researcher's thoughts, feelings, and intuitive contemplations (Birks et al., 2008), as can be seen in the appendix 3.

3.2.5. Data saturation

In research, knowing when to cease data collection is crucial, and in grounded theory research, this decision is guided by achieving theoretical saturation, which signifies that the properties of theoretical categories have become fully explored, during the focused coding phase (Charmaz, 2014; Flick, 2014). Careful attention was paid to theoretical sensitivity to identify emerging patterns and distinctive properties, ultimately leading to the recognition that no new information was emerging from the interviews after the 9th case due to the thorough coverage of the niche market of VoD platforms of performing arts through theoretical sampling.

3.3. Ethical considerations

Researchers have the opportunity to explore the study participants' knowledge and experiences in great depth using qualitative research methods such as intensive interviews. Though, when it comes to making public this rich data, qualitative researchers face distinct and sometimes complex ethical problems (Gibbs, 2007; Kaiser, 2009; Bryman, 2016). One such issue is the struggle between presenting full, accurate representations of the data while still preserving the identity of the people who agreed on covering also sensitive topics like, in this case, strategic decision-making for service success.

The participants were informed twice (invitation email and interview) about the fact that the interviews are recorded, transcribed, and used only for this master's thesis, as well as the fact that this paper will become an official document after the thesis defence and will be published on Lund University's dedicated platform, Lund University Publications Student Papers (2023). The interviewees expressed their verbal consent at the start of the interview (appendix 2). However, it was difficult to anticipate the managers' answers, and the anonymity of the respondents was guaranteed in direct proportion with the number of interviews conducted. Participants were also informed that only some quotes of theirs might appear in the thesis and that the purpose of the interviews is for the researcher to develop theoretical concepts and notions from their answers. The research ensured participant anonymity and compliance with ethics and privacy regulations by obtaining consent, adhering to the European Union GDPR law, discussing publication boundaries during and after interviews, and presenting data transparently with proper references to prevent any exploitation or deception.

Important to mention that in the present study, the researcher's bias was used as a reflexive tool. Specifically, I used to work as Public Relations Officer for an international theatre festival and a theatre in Romania, as well as helped promote a video-on-demand platform for these organisations. The researchers' work experience and previous field knowledge facilitated the evolution and analysis of interviews. The privilege of entering the interviewees' worlds reached its potential by asking open questions and encouraging the respondents to take the lead on the subject matters they found important to be shared. The participants were also informed in the initial contact, the invitation email, about the researcher's previous work experience.

4. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This chapter explores in depth the relationship between the categories resulting from theoretical coding (see appendix 4). Theoretical coding was utilized to systematically examine the focused codes in a manner that facilitated a coherent and comprehensive analysis. This process aided in the development of concepts based on the data and allowed for the visualization of the relationships between theoretical codes and emerging concepts using Charmaz's (2014) methodology.

4.1. The shift from professional to personal management roles and perceptions of service success

Reasons and motivations behind having a service as VoD platform for performing arts in Europe: Establishing a video-on-demand (VoD) platform for performing arts in Europe is motivated by several compelling reasons. Firstly, it serves as a means to provide high-quality accessibility to audiences, enabling them to enjoy the rich tapestry of European performing arts from the comfort of their homes.

'We started during the pandemic period in 2020, when everything was shut down. And we thought that it's very important to continue to have a relationship with the audience.' (Interviewee 4)

'We aimed to offer fresh avenues for our existing audience to engage with their favourite performances while simultaneously reaching out to new viewers.' (Interviewee 6)

Furthermore, such platforms actively support and promote the performing arts community by creating a broader online space for artists and organisations to showcase their talent, thus fostering artistic growth and sustainability. In addition, VoD platforms contribute to the preservation and celebration of Europe's diverse cultural heritage, ensuring that these art forms are not lost to time.

'We tried to collect a large library of material which could be interesting to opera and ballet audiences.' (Interviewee 5)

'An important thing for us, particularly at the moment, is trying to put all these operas in context by offering contextual material, you know, behind the scenes videos, texts, insights, all that to give a richer understanding of these pieces.' (Interviewee 1)

Moreover, these VoD platforms cater to contemporary consumer preferences, offering the convenience to watch performances at any time and from anywhere, adapting to the fast-paced lifestyles of today's audiences. Lastly, these platforms also harness VoD technology for profit, offering a sustainable business model that benefits both the arts community and the platform owners, creating a win-win situation for all stakeholders involved.

'We always say it's like Netflix, but with opera, concerts, ballet and documentaries.' (Interviewee 2)

'We have a particular focus at the moment […] for the next generation of talent, for young artists.' (Interviewee 1)

'[…] like Netflix lobbying theatrical performances, to simplify it as much as possible. Yeah. Online theatre, basically.' (Interviewee 3)

Business meaning: professional versus personal turns as manager. In the business sphere, managers often combine professional and personal meanings. On the professional front, managers may have a deep-seated passion for the arts, which drives their commitment to the success of their organisation. This passion can fuel their efforts to positively impact stakeholders, whether it is investors, artists, or audiences, by consistently delivering high-quality performances and fostering a thriving arts ecosystem. Moreover, top executives aspire to contribute to the innovation of performing arts, pushing the boundaries of creativity and engaging with the evolving needs of their industry.

'To me, it's like a bit of a, like a treasure chest, I think. To me, it's like I mean, my personal opinion is of course, you know, tainted by the fact it's what occupies all my working hours. I think fundamentally, what most motivates me is just the opportunity to just get close to all this content, all this material, which is just very, personally very enriching.' (Interviewee 1)

'I have been always very interested about the possibilities of what digitality can bring to performing arts and how that can maybe improve the accessibility of the art form, which can be a little bit the sort of the entrance that can be quite high for new audiences.' (Interviewee 5)

On a personal level, managers understand the significance of team and community building. They recognize that the performing arts are not just about individual brilliance but also about the collective harmony that brings a vision to life. This personal connection inspires top executives to engage with challenges, whether professional or personal, as opportunities for growth. By embracing challenges, they develop valuable skills and attributes, ultimately enhancing their abilities as both professionals and individuals.

'The performing arts aren't just about individual brilliance. It's about building a community to bring a vision to life. That personal connection we share with our team and the broader community inspires us to tackle challenges head-on.' (Interviewee 6)

In the end, the dichotomy between professional and personal turns for a manager in the performing arts VoD industry underscores the multifaceted nature of their role, where passion, pride, innovation, and community-building all play a significant part in their journey.

Own view of managed service success: In the managers' perspective, a successfully managed service in the field of performing arts should adopt a multifaceted approach. They believe that paramount importance lies in the continuous growth of audience engagement, accomplished by offering a diverse range of high-quality content that captivates and inspires. Simultaneously, the service should ensure that revenue is generated not only for itself but also for the benefit of artists and performing arts organisations.

'I think, first of all, we have to establish what means success, in which are the terms to define what is success: we are talking about numbers, or we are talking about necessity, or we are talking about different experience, like in the normal experience, in-person experience. And we were never focused on numbers for [VoD platform]. We were focused especially for people not having the possibility to attend in-person performances from our institution. And as I was telling it's important regarding a different kind of experience, which is completing the in-person performance.' (Interviewee 4)

'[…] we want to support the theatres with the money as much as possible. And this is the reason why [more than half] of our revenue is going back to the theatres. So, basically, we are, for some of the theatres, we are supporting 30% of their budget. […] We are using something which is called customer-centric model: it means that we are not deciding where the money is flowing, but people are deciding where the money flow.' (Interviewee 3)

Moreover, they emphasize the significance of building a sense of community among viewers, artists, and arts enthusiasts, creating a shared space for appreciation and discourse. To achieve this, they advocate for the development of partnerships and collaborations with artists, cultural institutions, and both public and private funders, establishing a robust network that nurtures and sustains the arts.

'Yeah, look, you won't be surprised that I think it is a success. But indeed, what's interesting is the 'how' question. I think probably the first thing is really the sense of ownership by the contributing partners.' (Interviewee 1)

'But it's just a question of commitment by our owners to, you know, get the money to successfully work these other markets. And as a result, have, you know, a lot of subscribers and a positive result at the end.' (Interviewee 2)

'It's not just about our platform; it's about being a part of a larger ecosystem that values and contributes to the arts.' (Interviewee 6)

In this digital age, top executives underscore the importance of enhancing accessibility and user experience and see innovation as essential, along with the adaptation of technology to meet evolving audience preferences. The measurement of cultural impact is another vital aspect, as it reflects the platform's role in enhancing the visibility and accessibility of performing arts within society.

'[…] And I'm proud of our numbers […]. So that means there are a lot of people out there watching every day, what we do. But I think that person's sense of ownership by the partners is perhaps as important as the number of views.' (Interviewee 1)

'Well, one of the biggest breakthroughs since [launch] probably happened during the pandemic, when people didn't have access to live performances. We had suddenly, we had a huge spike in [VoD platform] viewing.' (Interviewee 5)

Ultimately, they believe that a successfully managed service should be capable of sustaining a business model that supports the arts and allows for continuous audience growth. Public acknowledgment and praise from viewers, artists, and partners serve as a proof to the platform's effectiveness in achieving these objectives, making it a valuable contributor to the sphere of performing arts, as seen from their perspective.

4.2. Navigating strategic decision-making: from the past to the future

Strategic decision making: past tense. To propel a VoD platform for performing arts to new heights, it is imperative to pursue an array of strategic initiatives. Expanding the content focus is a pivotal step, diversifying offerings to cater to a broader range of artistic tastes and preferences. A shift in the pricing model can also bolster a VoD platform, making it more accessible and appealing to a wider audience. Securing exclusive content rights is another key strategy, ensuring that the platform becomes a go-to destination for unique and sought-after performances.

'[...] but of course, that [national broadcasting company] could have been something that we could have relied solely on and not produce our own in-house channel for those performances. [...] That could have been an option, and it would have required a lot less resources from us, of course, but I think it's important to have those audiences visit our website and sort of make us more known.' (Interviewee 5)

'We thought of live streaming of performances in real-time, to create a here and now experience for our audience, to merge better with the beauty of a live act. But the costs were not so friendly at the time. Yeah, I think experimenting more with technology could have helped us.' (Interviewee 6)

Moreover, venturing into live streaming of performances in real-time can create a dynamic and immersive experience for the audience, while enhancing the educational component can engage and educate viewers about the intricacies of the performing arts. Geographical expansion opens up new markets and audiences, broadening the platform's reach. The introduction of interactive

features can enhance user engagement and create a sense of participation, while prioritizing mobile app development and offline viewing ensures convenience and accessibility.

'[…] we tried to do have a strategy for worldwide, to open the platform worldwide, that was basically the strategy. They [funders] didn't want it. Yeah. Now, the next, the alternative is having a free-view platform […].' (Interviewee 2)

'[…] everything must be connected: relationship with the theatre, marketing, you know, quality theatre performance recordings. Every aspect of applications, TV applications, mobile applications, technological solutions, speed of the servers, everything needs to be aligned with the high quality.' (Interviewee 3)

Furthermore, the creation of a strong online community of performing arts enthusiasts fosters a sense of belonging and encourages discussions and sharing. Enlarging partnerships with performance venues for joint promotions and cross-promotional events not only extends the platform's influence but also bolsters the overall performing arts ecosystem, solidifying its position as a hub for the appreciation and promotion of the arts.

'There were choices to make in terms of the finances, and we could have started changing for [platform]. But given that most of the partners were motivated, not to make money, because that's a very hard thing, but to extend the reach of their activities throughout the world, thanks to a digital platform. […] But we could have looked at and we did look at pay view models. We looked at subscriptions and it's something we're going to have to keep thinking about. We've experimented with, especially during the pandemic, call for donations.' (Interviewee 1)

Strategic decision making: future tense. To stay ahead in the ever-evolving landscape of VoD platforms for the performing arts, it is essential to continually explore technological avenues. This includes investing in cutting-edge tools and solutions that not only enhance content delivery but also drive innovation. Developing interactive storytelling is another key strategy to make content more engaging, immersing viewers in a more dynamic and participatory experience. By personalizing recommendations, the platform can ensure that each viewer discovers content that aligns with their tastes and preferences, thereby enhancing user satisfaction and retention.

'[…] basically our goal is when the person steps out of the theatre, we are trying to cross their path as many times as possible' (Interviewee 3)

'We have not really carefully considered this yet, but they [global streaming platform] are a future option which we could add to the viewing experience. Just to name some they have like group chats, they have even group viewing, if I understood correctly, you could admit that data to the video play. So, you can actually see, maybe find the site synopsis or the information about the cast who's performing in that live stream. So those are all options how to make it even more interesting to people to whom just watching the live stream could not be enough.' (Interviewee 5)

'[...] we need to think about the place of other types of musical theatre. So I think we've had limited opportunities to stream [...]' (Interviewee 1)

Moreover, introducing live chat and audience interaction can create a sense of community and real-time engagement, fostering connections between viewers and performers. To extend the platform's reach and impact, global expansion is essential, reaching new audiences and artists from around the world. Data analytics play a crucial role in content curation and should be improved to refine content recommendations and enhance user experience. Accessibility features, including subtitles, audio descriptions, and translations, should be continually enhanced to ensure that the platform is inclusive and caters to diverse audiences.

'And our technical crew has been even awarded for VR tools [...]. It was awarded a prize in the performing arts sector. And that's, of course, something that maybe in the future, we could find a way of collaborating.' (Interviewee 5)

'[...] we truly believe culture is for all and want to make our platform as easy to access as possible, beside the anytime and anywhere part. The IT colleagues are helping massively to implement our ideas, from data analytics, to automatic translations' (Interviewee 6)

Additionally, increasing educational partnerships to offer tailored content can elevate the platform's value, attracting both learners and educators. Integration of social media features will allow users to share their favourite performances, reviews, and recommendations, expanding the platform's reach through user-generated content. Lastly, promoting sustainable practices within the platform and collaborating with environmentally conscious performers and venues demonstrates a commitment to both the arts and the planet, aligning with growing societal and environmental concerns.

'I think what is important to continue and we don't have this possibility in the in-person experiences is the educational part. So it's more about have another perspective in which way performance is done, to have interviews regarding the actors experiences. […] I think the digital part, it's important to complete this experience in order to have this educational part, this transmission of an experience based, you know, on the necessity and passion of the artists who are doing a project. […] Culture is not forcing somebody, it's a proposal of something and it is open for you to accept or not, but must be there. We are working also with high schools and we are offering for example, subscriptions for teenagers, and for high schools and also for universities.'
(Interviewee 4)

'We want to keep up with trends and really encourage the sustainability of the performing arts sector. We want to develop more viewing categories on the platform, expanding from classics and technological advancements, to how you as an online viewer, or you as an artist, can contribute to preserving the environment.' (Interviewee 6)

4.3.Managers' perspectives on their role in and meanings of service success

Managers' view of their role in service success: The role of a platform manager in the VoD industry for performing arts is multifaceted, encompassing numerous critical responsibilities. Setting the overall strategic direction of the platform is paramount, as it lays the foundation for success. This involves not only defining the platform's mission and vision but also determining the key areas of focus and growth. Overseeing the selection and acquisition of performing arts content is equally vital, ensuring a diverse and engaging library that resonates with a wide audience.

'I mean, there's a very small team. But I have one other full-time colleague, and then we have a couple of people who work part time on [platform], a very small team. And I think one of the things that we get feedback about from the opera houses that contribute is the whole process of arranging a production to be streamlined on [platform] happens pretty quickly and easily. So it is light and easy. I'm not taking personal credit for that. It's just the fact of the structure of [VoD platform] means it's, it's pretty light, put in non-hierarchical, and we'd don't have the weight of being a big institution, we're just a few people. I suppose that gives it a certain fragility, but it's nonetheless so far, so good.' (Interviewee 1)

'I am from the beginning, and we are always thinking in which way we can go further, in which way we can help. […] we are thinking about different audiences in order to reach them and to offer them the cultural experience, even if it is not possible to have an in-person experience.' (Interviewee 4)

Improving technology and user experience is a continuous endeavour, as it directly impacts user satisfaction and retention. Likewise, enhancing marketing and promotion strategies is crucial to attract and retain a loyal user base. Effective monetization strategies are essential for financial sustainability, and it is the top executives' role to ensure the platform's profitability. Simultaneously, building an engaged online community of arts enthusiasts fosters a sense of belonging and creates a vibrant ecosystem around the platform.

'I'm not like planning the strategy of the [performing arts] house. But of course, anything we do here is closely related to the strategy of the house. […] I sort of tried to collect all the specialists we use in house and also outside consultants to keep the [platform] developing. And then we have, of course, our live stream producer who tries his best to manage all the contracts that we can have the streaming rights for different productions, which are currently in repertoire.' (Interviewee 5)

Moreover, data analytics play a central role in understanding user behaviour, content performance, and market trends. Assessing and managing risks associated with content licensing, technology infrastructure, and market competition is necessary to safeguard the platform's operations and its long-term viability. Staying informed about emerging trends in the VoD and performing arts industries and exploring innovative features ensures that the platform remains relevant and competitive.

'I think the whole seven years, my main focus was on the content, so that was my job to be the curator of the platform. And we try to maximize the experience for the classical music customer. […] And we always say that we are like the perfect marketing tool for you. So, this is our message to an opera house, for example. […] And yeah, my role now, as the COO is also the marketing stuff.' (Interviewee 2)

In addition, providing leadership and guidance to the platform's team members is crucial for maintaining a motivated and cohesive workforce. Lastly, overseeing the platform's budget,

financial forecasting, and revenue optimization are fundamental to ensuring financial stability and growth. In essence, the platform's management team serves as the visionary and steward, shaping the platform's trajectory and success.

'My role, I'm a COO, so I'm making strategic decisions. It's in every cookbook of every, like, it's in the dictionary, basically. My role is to define what is the strategy of [platform], I'm holding key partnerships, I'm doing all the hiring, making the team happy. Collecting, holding the finance, holding the budget.' (Interviewee 3)

Meaning of success – professional and/or personal: Managers play a pivotal role in shaping the meaning of success, both professionally and personally. Professionally, they often find significance in their roles by pursuing activities and endeavours that align with their values and passions. By adhering to their personal principles, managers are better equipped to lead their teams and organisations with authenticity and purpose. They seek self-improvement and learning as a continuous journey, not just for personal growth but to contribute more effectively to their teams and the broader society. Success, in their view, is not only about achieving financial or operational targets but also about making a positive impact on the world, contributing to the betterment of society through their leadership and decision-making.

'I'm all about spreading the love for the arts, making them a part of everyday life. And, of course, boosting our fanbase is the cherry on top! [...] it is also a believe system between me, my team, partners, and audience' (Interviewee 6)

'We judge success in numbers of views, how many people are watching, we judge success in the extent to which a production shared on [platform] is viewed outside the borders of that country. [...] Whereas I think, also for us, [platform] is not meant to just be for the upper levels of the world. And so anything that we can do to reach audiences, who are just curious about performing arts, I think that's important to us as well.' (Interviewee 1)

'I think in classical music, I think most of the people see it like this, that you have these two worlds. On the one hand, we have to make money to exist, it's just the fact. And the other world I wanted to tell you is that we have this national heritage of classical music, and we want to preserve it. So there's our responsibility.' (Interviewee 2)

'If it's helping to reach more people, it's valuable. If the price compared to the number of spectators to getting values, again, it's valuable. If from longer or shorter periods of time, it gives us some advantage, valuable.' (Interviewee 3)

Balancing work and life is another key aspect of how managers derive meaning in their professional lives. They recognize that maintaining a healthy equilibrium between their careers and personal well-being is essential for long-term success and fulfilment. Moreover, practicing resilience and adaptability allows them to tackle challenges with determination and openness to change, fostering a culture of growth within their organisations. On a personal level, managers find meaning in success by being authentic, staying true to themselves, and feeling valued for their contributions, not only within their professional sphere but in their personal relationships as well. They aspire to create a lasting legacy, one that leaves an indelible mark on their industry, community, or chosen field, and in doing so, they experience contentment and a profound sense of purpose in both their professional and personal lives

'And it's of course, success means that whatever is your goal that you're trying to achieve that, you achieve it as fully as possible. So let's say we want to get new audiences for [platform], then we get in the determined timeframe, we get as many as we can. It's about achieving goals, basically success. I mean, that's, I guess what it is, quite simply and frankly.' (Interviewee 5)

'[…] this is for me, success when you offer an experience to the others and when you have these possibilities to pass the passion, we have for something and all this it's opening several doors, possible doors for the others, and it's upon them, it's open to everybody to see which door we are not only open but we pass through but yeah, that's for me success. In which way we can, which is the best way we can pass what we experienced before, personally and in what we've studied before.' (Interviewee 4)

'I am reaching a professional age where I am starting to be a bit divided on how much free efforts is put into working in arts especially. Don't get me wrong, I truly love performing arts, and been a performer myself, but I also see the other side, with my team been dedicating much of their personal lives, sometimes, yeah, it's a roller-coaster.' (Interviewee 6)

4.4. Navigating service challenges and managerial motivations in niche market activation

Dealing with issues in service management: Dealing with the multifaceted challenges that services often encounter requires a strategic and adaptable approach. Licensing and acquiring (exclusive) content form the cornerstone of success for a VoD platform, and it is crucial to navigate this complex landscape effectively. Simultaneously, identifying monetization strategies that strike a balance between profitability and user satisfaction is pivotal. A competitive edge is gained by differentiating from competitors, creating a unique value proposition that attracts and retains a loyal audience.

'I think the current issues we have is that the audience is no more interested like it was during the pandemic because a lot of the online proposals, they are just competing with in person experience. So, there are so many other online platforms and I think our possible solution is to go this direction of educational side, have an online experience. […] I think this must be more and more present in the online part in order to complete an experience because if not the attention will be less and less for the digital, for the online productions.' (Interviewee 4)

'For the future, we do not want to touch the strategy right now, which was from a start and still is, that we don't want to start collect the money from like a state budget, minister of culture etc. Because there is limited amount of money which is flowing into culture, and we would get the money or theatres would get the money, someone would get the money and someone will get not.' (Interviewee 3)

Maintaining a robust and scalable technical infrastructure is the backbone of uninterrupted service, while ensuring a user-friendly interface is essential for enhancing the user experience. Expanding the content offer broadens the platform's appeal and relevance, but it is equally important to help users discover relevant content amidst the abundance of options. Protecting content from piracy and addressing copyright violations safeguards the platform's integrity and legal standing.

'Well, there are still a couple of user experience details that we want to work on the website. And getting the full use out of the [distribution platform] is something that we need to work on to really get those additional, added value elements. And like I mentioned, it will be great to create

audio, more and more audio-visual material out of all productions that we have in the repertoire. But that requires a lot of time and resources.' (Interviewee 5)

Expanding to international audiences offers growth opportunities, but this requires an understanding of regional regulations and compliance. Remaining agile and keeping up with technological advancements is vital for staying competitive and preparing for unforeseen crises, which require a swift and effective response. In essence, dealing with the intricacies of service management in the VoD and performing arts industry is a multifaceted task that demands a combination of strategic foresight, adaptability, and a strong commitment to quality and user satisfaction.

'Our priority at the moment is on extending the reach of [VoD platform]. I think there's always a danger in that because it's been going for a while. So far, the partnership is important. So, we rely on the partners also to make to help promote what we're doing. […] But then it's time that needs somebody to make those relationships. I think extending the reach through public relations and partnerships, either media or institutional is a challenge that we really must tackle. Now.' (Interviewee 1)

'We try our best to maintain a balance between what artists and organisations get and our profit margin, but it is becoming more expensive as we plan to expand globally. Sure, this is a long-term, quite ambitious plan, but we try to learn as we go and showcase the value of [VoD platform].' (Interviewee 6)

Managerial reasons to activate in a niche market: Managers often find compelling reasons to activate in a niche market, driven by a deep-seated passion for the industry and a commitment to its growth. Reduced competition within the niche presents an opportunity for a platform to establish itself as a leader, fostering a dedicated and passionate audience base in the process. Content differentiation becomes a powerful draw, attracting users who seek specialized, high-quality content that caters to their specific interests and needs.

'Which outcome is more important? It's a combination of these things. Honestly, without audience we cannot exist. Without the marketing, partners, so it is impossible to have a platform no one knows of. Without the technological department, recording or distributors, we have nothing to present. So it's a combination – everything is important. But theatres are the first ones; if we

don't have a relationship with them, we didn't succeed in our goal to stream theatre.' (Interviewee 3)

'What is for us important is that these two go together in this direction. So, not only for a niche audience but also for new audiences more opened possibilities […] to go in this direction to open for a lot of different types of spectators or possible spectators' (Interviewee 4)

Furthermore, managers operating in a niche market can develop specialized expertise, becoming well-versed in the nuances of the content, industry trends, and the unique preferences of their audience. This expertise allows for the inclusion of premium pricing for specialized content or targeted advertising, offering a sustainable revenue model. In some cases, niche markets also offer an avenue for preserving and celebrating a particular cultural or artistic tradition, making a valuable contribution to the broader cultural landscape. Collaborating with key players within the industry becomes more accessible within a niche, fostering partnerships and alliances that can drive growth and innovation. Ultimately, catering to a passionate and dedicated audience within a niche market can offer long-term service viability and a fulfilling managerial journey.

'Well, in a sense, niche, yes. But in terms of our functions, serving opera and ballet audiences, it seemed like an organic thing to do. […] It was not really thinking, okay, we're going to serve niche markets, but we're going to serve the audiences who both come on site and those who don't have the access.' (Interviewee 5)

'That's the thought behind [platform] that they [broadcasting company] have this large archive and they want to give access to the people and also preserve the concerts and classical music in general.' (Interviewee 2)

'You know what's cool about diving into a niche market? It's easier to team up with the big shots in the industry. You can cosy up to the key players and cook up some amazing partnerships and alliances. And guess what? It's these connections that really supercharge growth and innovation. So, going niche isn't just about serving your passionate audience; it's also about creating these essential collaborations that push your platform to new heights. It's like having a backstage pass to the coolest show in town!' (Interviewee 6)

4.5. Crafting uniqueness in a niche market: building success for audiences and attracting public and private funders

Shaping uniqueness in a niche market: Shaping uniqueness in a niche market requires a combination of strategic elements. Offering a carefully curated selection of high-quality performances is the foundation, ensuring that the platform becomes synonymous with excellence. Exclusive content deals provide a competitive edge, making it the go-to destination for specialized and sought-after material. By creating specialized categories or collections, such as experimental theatre, the platform can cater to specific interests within the niche, further solidifying its appeal.

'I mean, certainly I think we're the only platform that is really only dedicated to music theatre in different forms. I mean, there are, of course, other competitors. They're different in that they also have a commercial activity. But I think we're the only platform that is only celebrating musical theatre.' (Interviewee 1)

'Content really, isn't it? A streaming service is as good as the content. And hopefully, what we can create by having shorter videos, longer videos, articles, audios that we can really also have this educational side. That is also educational material for people who want to know about performing arts.' (Interviewee 5)

'Basically, there's nothing like that in our area, because I know those markets.' (Interviewee 3)

Educational content, like behind-the-scenes documentaries, artist interviews, enriches the user experience and adds value. Implementing interactive elements, such as live chats during performance streaming, fosters engagement and a sense of community. Building a strong online community of performing arts enthusiasts nurtures a loyal user base. Advanced recommendation algorithms offer personalized content, while content from different cultures and languages broadens the platform's global reach. Prioritizing accessibility features like subtitles ensures inclusivity. Hosting live streaming events or premiere performances generates excitement and anticipation. A strong partnership model between public and private funders provides the necessary resources for growth and innovation. Exploring emerging technologies, such as interactive storytelling, keeps the platform at the forefront of innovation. Creative and engaging marketing campaigns draw attention and boost brand recognition. Actively seeking user feedback

and using it to make improvements ensures that the platform evolves in response to its audience's needs, creating a unique and continuously improving niche experience.

'I think it can be unique when it's giving another type of experience and it's not competing with other niche markets and styles like a lot of platforms offering movies and series and so on. But more by completing a normal in person experience and at the same time offering this part of, the educational part of a in person experience […]' (Interviewee 4)

'You've got to make sure everyone's included, and that's where stuff like subtitles comes in – it's all about being accessible to everyone, no matter who they are. And let's not forget those creative marketing campaigns – they're like the spotlight that makes your brand shine, catching everyone's attention' (Interviewee 6)

Constructing success for audiences: Creating success for audiences of online performing arts involves a blend of enticing elements. First and foremost, it is about offering access to exclusive performances that might not be accessible to a live audience, making online viewers feel like they are part of something unique. Highlighting the convenience of enjoying these performances from the comfort of one's home taps into the modern lifestyle, where flexibility and comfort matter. It is all about providing a more intimate and detailed view of the performance, letting viewers immerse themselves in the art.

'I would not. They are totally different things. If you want, the live performance, I have not yet seen something that would replace that experience. It's different, there are so many other factors when you come for live show. Usually you come with other people, you have the intermission servings, and you get dressed up and it's like an event. At home it's rarely as much. […] But it's a great way when it's done well, when the live stream has been like directed well and you can see especially for ballet if you get to see some dances and dancers from close ups.' (Interviewee 5)

'I wouldn't. We have to understand that there's nothing which tops the live experience. It's just nothing. I think we can try a lot of things in technology. And sometimes you can see better than on, you know, can see better things, you can maybe see the expressions in the face better or something. […] It's not like we are better than you, because we need them. Without the theatre, we don't have this content at all, you know. So that's why I don't think that it's better online.' (Interviewee 2)

'When the people decide that they want to use [VoD platform]. When theatres would like to cooperate with us. When people like [VoD platform]. That's the value. When they will want to spend time with us and with the theatres, because if they will spend more time with [VoD platform], there is a very high chance to come with high numbers to spend time with the theatres physically.' (Interviewee 3)

Describing interactive features, such as live chats, allows online viewers to engage with the performance and feel connected. Emphasizing the presence of subtitles and translations makes content accessible to a global audience. Mentioning the ability to pause, rewind, or replay specific scenes enables viewers to savour their favourite moments, providing a level of control that is unique to online viewing. Highlighting the cost savings associated with online viewing is another compelling factor, as it is budget-friendly. Plus, it is an avenue for enjoying content from different cultures and regions, broadening one's horizons. Stressing the safety and health benefits of online viewing, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, underscores the platform's adaptability and consideration for its audience's well-being. By offering exclusive behind-the-scenes content or artist interviews, the platform creates a sense of connection and insider access. It is essential to remind viewers that by watching online, they are actively supporting the arts and the performing artists, contributing to the sustainability of the industry. Lastly, sharing positive testimonials and reviews from other loyal audience members creates a sense of community and trust, assuring potential viewers that they are in for a rewarding experience.

'[…] it's easy on the wallet, like, budget-friendly vibes all the way. You're saving some hard-earned cash, which is always a win. But it's not just about the moolah. You get to dive into content from different cultures and regions, which is like traveling the world without leaving your couch! It broadens your horizons and gives you a taste of the global stage. And especially during the pandemic times, it was all about safety and well-being. We receive tons of great comments to this digital experience from viewers' (Interviewee 6)

'It has to convince the people to have the in-person experience. Because I think the role of a digital platform it's to bring people together in a venue and not vice versa, to not leave your house and to watch yourself. And then I think this is the meaning of the performing arts digital platform, to bring knowledge and to give this wish to have an in-person experience.' (Interviewee 4)

'It is not a question of convincing a performing arts lover to watch [VoD platform] instead of going to a live performance. A live performance is always the preferred option. [VoD platform], however, offers the next best thing; the opportunity to see (thanks to streaming) performances which would not otherwise be accessible – be it for economic, geographic or some other practical reason.' (Interviewee 1)

Constructing success for public and/or private funders: Constructing success for both public and private funders hinges on a robust and well-documented strategy. To win their confidence, top executives define specific, measurable success metrics, such as user engagement, subscriber growth, and revenue generation. Presenting comprehensive market research and analysis demonstrates the platform's responsiveness to market demand, assuring funders of its relevance and potential.

'So [VoD platform]'s success is certainly linked to the size of its audience worldwide. I think [VoD platform]'s reach across a range of channels is also important – the fact that we have learned how to engage with the performing arts lovers of the world through a diverse programme of new weekly streams of well-known and rare titles, while at the same time reaching out to those who knew nothing about opera via channels like TikTok […]' (Interviewee 1)

Furthermore, providing data on the current audience base, including demographics, geographic distribution, and viewing behaviour, paints a vivid picture of the platform's reach. Showcasing the quality and diversity of the content portfolio underscores the platform's commitment to excellence. Highlighting user engagement statistics, such as average viewing time, user ratings, and reviews, offers concrete evidence of its appeal. Providing revenue projections and growth trends, like potential partnerships and advertising opportunities, underscores the platform's potential for financial sustainability. Conducting a competitive analysis underscores its distinctiveness and competitiveness.

'We're not just serving up any old stuff; it's a treasure trove of quality and diversity. We're all about excellence. And when you've got the goods, people notice – you can bet they're digging in, spending time with us, leaving ratings, and giving us the thumbs up in reviews. The numbers don't lie, friends. […] And when we talk about competition, we're in a league of our own. We've got the analysis to prove it. So, we're not just talking the talk; we've got the receipts to back it all up!' (Interviewee 6)

Sharing success stories of specific content or partnerships exemplifies the platform's capability to deliver on its promises, while gathering user testimonials or feedback highlights the positive experiences of the audience. Highlighting strategic partnerships or collaborations that contribute to the platform's success further underscores its significance in the arts community. Explaining how the platform leverages technology to enhance the user experience demonstrates a commitment to staying at the forefront of innovation. Presenting a clear and compelling long-term vision, including plans for growth, expansion, and continued innovation, assures funders of the platform's future sustainability.

'But of course, always nowadays, it's about numbers. And always, you know, nowadays, you are good if you have high numbers of spectators, viewers and so on. […] And what we are offering, for us it's easier because it's not something, as I told you, created you know, on itself, it's a part of [performing arts organisation]. […] So, for us, it's a little bit easier, because we are mixing these two parts, and also for sponsors and so on'. (Interviewee 4)

Addressing potential risks and challenges and outlining strategies for mitigating these risks demonstrates preparedness and a commitment to success. Highlighting the platform's positive impact on the arts community aligns with broader social values. Providing detailed financial projections, including revenue forecasts, assures funders of sound financial planning and the potential for returns on their investments. Committing to stakeholder engagement by seeking ongoing feedback and involvement from funders and partners fosters a sense of shared responsibility and collaboration. In essence, constructing success for funders involves a meticulous presentation of data, strategy, vision, and commitment that instils confidence in the platform's future.

'Like we also try to have everything correct in terms of content. We have very detailed oriented users, so if there is like a failure, a mistake, like writing mistake or something, they recognize it. […] We pride ourselves that we have the same detailed-oriented science approach to music, and I think our users and stakeholders they like this a lot. We also try to have a product with a lot of grace and beauty. […] We try to have the same spirit like an opera house and I think it works, I think we've achieved it.' (Interviewee 2)

'Well, I think the most important way to get resources for [platform] is that it's somehow part of the strategy of the house. And that way, because we're publicly funded so that way, the funding

that we receive, some of it will be directed to this, I think that's the most important thing that its value is recognised inside the house.' (Interviewee 5)

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of a grounded theory analysis are conveyed as a collection of interconnected concepts that culminate in the development of a theoretical framework, which offers a theoretical interpretation or explanation for the phenomenon under study. In essence, the distinctive feature of grounded theory lies in the creation of theory derived directly from data generated and gathered by the researcher (Charmaz, 2014; Flick, 2014).
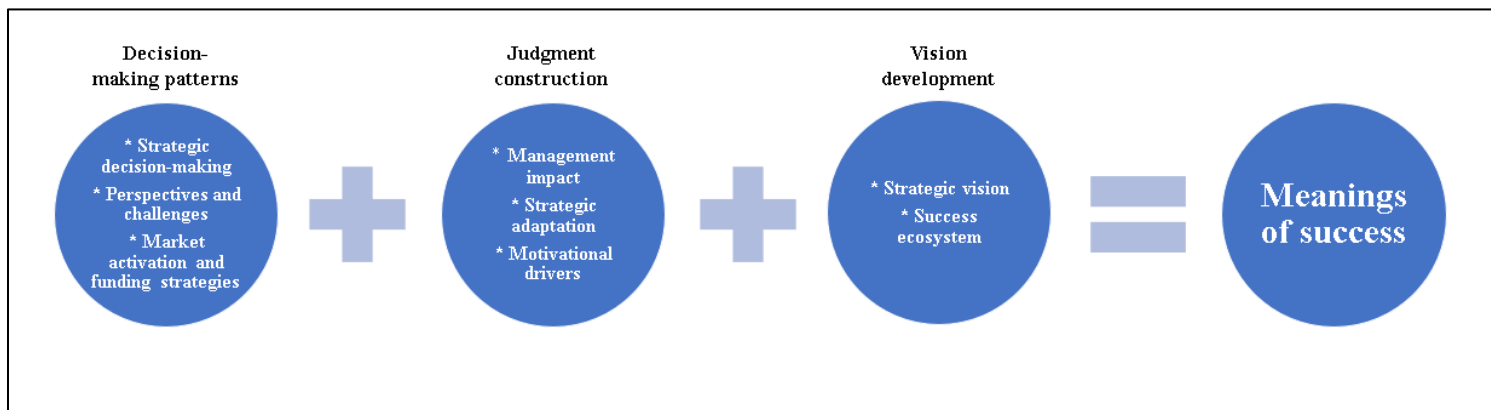

Figure 1. Theoretical framework proposal

In the discussion section, a comprehensive exploration of the analysis results is undertaken, highlighting their significance in the context of the overarching research question. This segment goes beyond mere interpretation, delving into a proposed theoretical framework (figure 1) on the meanings of success top executives construct in a niche market. By scrutinizing the findings, the discussion aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the research results, the analysis categories, and consider their implications. The discussion section not only deepens the comprehension of the study's outcomes but also contributes to the broader academic discourse by fostering a theoretical framework of the empirical results, enhancing the scholarly rigor of the research.

5.1. Decision-making patterns

Investigating the strategic decision-making involved in the shift from professional to personal management roles (4.1) within the context of VoD platforms for performing arts reveals a nuanced approach by managers. On the professional front, managers display a deep passion for the arts, driving commitment to organisational success, innovation, and stakeholder impact. The blending of personal values, such as community-building and recognizing the collective nature of performing arts, shapes strategic decision-making processes (4.2). As managers navigate these decisions, they influence the subsequent crafting of uniqueness in niche markets (4.5). For a VoD platform specialising in performing arts, strategic decision-making in the past involves content expansion, pricing model shifts, and exclusive rights acquisition. Looking ahead, future strategic decisions include technological investments, interactive storytelling development, and personalized content recommendations. Shaping uniqueness in a niche market entails a multifaceted strategy involving curated content, exclusive deals, educational materials, community engagement, and global reach. The interconnectedness of these dimensions underscores the intricate balance between professional dedication and personal values in propelling the VoD platform to new heights, emphasizing innovation, excellence, and a vibrant community experience.

Examining how managers' perspectives (4.3) influence their approach to dealing with service challenges (4.4) reveals the intricate connection between management mindset and operational resilience in a VoD platform for performing arts. Managers, viewing their role as visionary stewards, guide the strategic direction of the platform, encompassing content curation, technological enhancements, marketing strategies, and financial sustainability. When facing challenges, such as content licensing complexities or technical infrastructure scalability, these perspectives shape decision-making processes. The experiences gained from overcoming challenges then inform future strategic decisions (4.2) as managers, drawing on their multifaceted roles, contribute to crafting uniqueness in niche markets (4.5). For instance, understanding the intricacies of licensing informs decisions on content acquisition strategy, and overcoming technical hurdles contributes to shaping a seamless user experience. The interplay between managerial perspectives, service challenges, and strategic decisions underscores the pivotal role of leadership in not only addressing immediate challenges but also in steering the platform toward long-term success by crafting a unique and resilient service ecosystem.

Analysing the process of niche market activation (4.4) unveils a strategic approach driven by managerial perspectives (4.3), where passion and commitment guide the activation rationale. Managers recognize the reduced competition within a niche as an opportunity to establish the platform as a leader, fostering a dedicated audience base. Content differentiation becomes a powerful draw, attracting users seeking specialized, high-quality content that caters to specific interests. Managerial expertise within the niche enables premium pricing and targeted advertising, contributing to a sustainable revenue model. This activation strategy also aligns with the platform's role in preserving cultural traditions, making it a valuable contribution to the broader cultural landscape. Managerial perspectives play a crucial role in shaping both niche market activation and funding strategies (4.5). Success in attracting funders hinges on defining specific metrics, conducting comprehensive market research, and showcasing the platform's unique qualities. The intertwining of managerial passion, strategic activation in a niche market, and effective funding strategies underscores the holistic approach required for sustained success in the performing arts industry, where professional commitment and personal values converge.

In conclusion, the intricate dance between professional dedication and personal values shapes the strategic decision-making processes of managers in the unique context of VoD platforms for performing arts. This study draws upon the foundational works of Mintzberg (2007) and Simon (1979, 1997) to highlight the essential role of managerial perspectives in navigating challenges, crafting uniqueness in niche markets, and driving successful activations. The strategic decisions made by managers, informed by a deep passion for the arts and a commitment to innovation and stakeholder impact, not only address immediate challenges but also contribute to the long-term success and resilience of VoD platforms. As these leaders embrace their roles as visionary stewards, their decisions encompass content curation, technological enhancements, marketing strategies, and financial sustainability, reflecting Mintzberg's (2007) insights into the multifaceted nature of strategic management. Moreover, the holistic approach to niche market activation, involving a careful balance of curated content, exclusive deals, educational materials, community engagement, and global reach, aligns with Mintzberg's (2007) framework of the five Ps of strategy – plan, ploy, pattern, position, and perspective. This interplay of managerial passion and strategic acumen underscores the complex yet essential connection between professional commitment and personal values, propelling VoD platforms for performing arts to new heights of innovation,

excellence, and vibrant community experiences in the ever-evolving landscape of the cultural industry.

5.2. Judgment construction

Exploring how the shift in management roles (4.1) impacts strategic decision-making (4.2), reveals a nuanced interplay between professional and personal dimensions in the performing arts VoD industry. The multifaceted nature of managers' roles, blending professional commitment with personal values, influences their management approach. On the professional front, managers driven by a deep-seated passion for the arts aspire to positively impact stakeholders through high-quality performances and innovation. This professional commitment shapes strategic decision-making in the past, emphasizing initiatives like content expansion and securing exclusive rights (4.2). Looking forward, the future tense of strategic decision-making underscores the need for continuous exploration of technological advancements and interactive storytelling to enhance user engagement. Moreover, investigating how managers' perspectives (4.3) shape service management approaches and decision-making emphasizes that success, whether professional or personal, is not solely about financial or operational targets but about contributing positively to society through authentic and purpose-driven management. The juxtaposition of past and future strategic decisions and the intertwining of professional and personal meanings showcase the evolving nature of management decisions in the performing arts VoD industry.

Analysing how navigating service challenges (4.4) demands strategic adaptation and decision-making, considering both past experiences and future goals, unveils the multifaceted nature of service management in the VoD and performing arts industry. The challenges, ranging from licensing complexities to technical infrastructure scalability, necessitate a strategic and adaptable approach. Crafting uniqueness in a niche market (4.5) is intricately connected to this strategic adaptation process. Shaping a distinctive identity involves offering a curated selection of high-quality performances, securing exclusive content deals, and creating specialized categories within the niche. The strategic elements, including educational content, interactive features, and community building, contribute to the platform's uniqueness. Moreover, advanced recommendation algorithms and global content diversity align with the strategic foresight required for both service management and niche market success. The interplay between these two aspects

underscores the dynamic and interconnected nature of strategic decision-making in the evolving landscape of the performing arts VoD industry.

Examining how managerial motivations in niche market activation (4.4) serve as a driving force behind decision-making reveals a strategic blend of passion, commitment, and the pursuit of growth. Managers, propelled by a deep-seated love for the arts, recognize the niche as an opportunity to establish leadership, foster a dedicated audience, and contribute to the cultural landscape. These motivations align seamlessly with the crafting of uniqueness (4.5), where offering exclusive performances, emphasizing convenience, and incorporating interactive features create a compelling online experience. The managerial dedication to specialized content and understanding audience nuances resonates with constructing success for audiences. Additionally, the collaborative nature of niche markets facilitates partnerships, contributing to growth and innovation. This alignment of managerial motivations with crafting uniqueness not only shapes the platform's identity but also contributes to its overall success. Constructing success for funders further underscores this alignment, as the well-documented strategy reflects the platform's commitment to excellence, user engagement, and financial sustainability. In essence, managerial motivations not only drive niche market activation but intricately contribute to the holistic success of the organisation by fostering audience satisfaction and securing support from funders.

In essence, the exploration of how the shift in management roles impacts strategic decision-making in the performing arts VoD industry in Europe reveals a nuanced interplay between professional and personal dimensions. Drawing on foundational works by Besanko et al. (2013), López-Cabarcos et al. (2015), Choi et al. (2022), Helfat (2021), and Simon (2021), this study underscores that success in management decisions is often equated with profitability, survival, or market expansion. The multifaceted nature of managers' roles, blending professional commitment with personal values, shapes strategic decision-making, emphasizing initiatives such as content expansion and securing exclusive rights. Future strategic decisions underscore the need for continuous exploration of technological advancements and interactive storytelling. Managerial perspectives and motivations, inspired by a deep-seated love for the arts, not only drive niche market activation but contribute to the holistic success of VoD platforms, fostering audience satisfaction and securing support from funders. This dynamic and interconnected nature of strategic decision-making in the evolving landscape of the performing arts VoD industry reflects

the ongoing tension between economic goals and the broader societal contribution of authentic and purpose-driven management, as highlighted by the literature on strategic management.

5.3. Vision development

Exploring how strategic decision-making (4.2) connects past decisions to future organisational vision, reveals the pivotal role of decision-making in shaping the trajectory of a VoD platform for performing arts in Europe. In the past, decisions to expand content focus, shift pricing models, and secure exclusive content rights laid the foundation for the platform's growth. The introduction of live streaming, educational components, and geographical expansion bolstered its influence. Looking ahead, future strategic decisions emphasize technological innovation, interactive storytelling, and global expansion, ensuring the platform's adaptability and relevance. Analysing how managerial motivations in niche market activation (4.4) contribute to the strategic vision unveils a commitment to industry growth, leadership establishment, and audience dedication. Managers, driven by passion, leverage specialized expertise and collaboration, aligning with the platform's vision. The combination of strategic decisions and managerial motivations creates a complex vision for the organisation—where innovation, inclusivity, and cultural preservation converge to position the platform as a global hub for performing arts, enriching the cultural landscape and fostering a sense of community among enthusiasts worldwide.

The interconnected elements of crafting uniqueness in a niche market (4.5) play a pivotal role in building success for a VoD platform in the performing arts industry. The strategic components, such as offering high-quality performances, exclusive content deals, specialized categories, and educational content, establish the platform as a hub of excellence. These elements are influenced by managerial perspectives (4.3) that define the overall strategic direction, mission, and vision of the platform. Managers' multifaceted roles, including overseeing content acquisition and setting the foundation for success, shape the approach to crafting uniqueness. Moreover, decisions made in navigating service challenges (4.4), such as licensing content, addressing copyright issues, and expanding internationally, impact the strategic elements of uniqueness. The adaptation and strategic foresight required to overcome service challenges contribute to the continuous improvement and innovation in crafting a niche experience. In essence, the success of building

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uniqueness in a niche market is an interplay between strategic decisions, managerial perspectives, and the ability to navigate complex service challenges effectively.

The extensive exploration of management decisions and success within the specialized literature underscores the multifaceted nature of achieving success, often defined as synonymous with profitability, survival, or market expansion. Strategic managerial decisions, as discussed by Besanko et al. (2013), López-Cabarcos et al. (2015), and Choi et al. (2022), play a pivotal role in this context, aiming to consistently increase revenue through precise calculations to minimize risks and maximize secure income streams. The core purpose of organisations, highlighted by Helfat (2021) and Simon (2021), revolves around the generation of profits, emphasizing the economic growth aspect of strategic formulations. Survival strategies in the ever-evolving service landscape, outlined by Dao (2019) and Quansah and Hartz (2021), become essential, particularly in niche markets where thriving is the benchmark of strategic prowess, as noted by Eisenhardt (2021) and Furr and Eisenhardt (2021). Market expansion strategies, advocated by some scholars such as Luo and Tung (2007) and Pedersen and Tallman (2022), are crucial for reaching global customers and adapting capabilities to proactively respond to the external environment. The study acknowledges the importance of distinguishing between strategy content and process, focusing on the role of the strategic apex in formulating strategies for VoD platforms in the performing arts industry. The thesis's focal point on studying strategic decision-making for success in a niche market, drawing from Mintzberg's (2007, 2009) insights, underscores the significance of identifying commonalities of best practices and beliefs through managerial interviews. This approach aims to construct success in the specific context of VoD platforms for performing arts in Europe, enriching the understanding of the nuanced interplay between managerial decisions and success within the cultural and creative industries.

6. CONCLUSION

6.1. Practical implications

The study recognizes the centrality of strategic managerial decisions in defining success for video-on-demand platforms specializing in performing arts in Europe. The role of top executives in constructing vision, mission, and purpose is emphasized, focusing on decision-making patterns, judgment construction, and vision development. Among the various meanings managers confer to success in a niche market, there is no dominant relationship or single definition that holds superior significance. These definitions interact in complex ways, with some potential for substitution, but, more importantly, they complement each other. Not all analysis categories evolve into patterns, and not all patterns are initially planned. Each definition contributes crucial facets to the comprehension of strategic decision making for thriving in a niche market, prompting to explore fundamental inquiries about organisations in a broader context.

In the intricate interplay between performing arts and digital platforms, managers navigating niche markets, particularly in the realm of online performing arts, are confronted with a nuanced dynamic. The relationship between traditional and digital expressions in the performing arts domain is not one of substitution or competition; rather, it forms a parallel evolution, capturing unique forms of artistic innovation and creative expression. Success in this context transcends traditional benchmarks and embraces a new 'localism' of performing arts fostered by online platforms. Managers adept in balancing ambidexterity and navigating the delicate dance of exploration and exploitation find success not merely in financial metrics but in the cultivation of a vibrant and innovative space where the performing arts flourish in novel, digitally infused expressions.

6.2. Limitations and future research

While the study provides valuable insights into the top executives' strategic decision-making for success, it is crucial to acknowledge its limitations. The exclusive focus on managers' perspectives offers only a singular lens through which the strategizing phenomenon is examined, potentially neglecting other crucial stakeholders' viewpoints. Additionally, the reliance on a limited number of interviews may restrict the generalizability of the findings and hinder the

development of a comprehensive theoretical framework. Furthermore, the research design lacks the holistic and longitudinal approach necessary for a deeper understanding of the dynamic nature of strategic decision-making.

Moving forward, there is a need for research that transcends the confines of singular managerial perspectives to provide a more nuanced understanding of the strategic-decision making for service success. Future studies should aim to incorporate diverse viewpoints, including those of other organisational actors, to paint a more complete picture. Furthermore, researchers should consider adopting a more extensive and longitudinal approach, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of the evolving dynamics within the strategizing process over time. To enhance the robustness of theoretical frameworks, researchers should explore innovative methodologies that balance depth and breadth, enabling a more elaborated comprehension of the intricacies involved. Finally, future investigations should seek to bridge the gap between present realities and speculative futures, ensuring that narratives remain grounded by realistically portraying current organisational landscapes while incorporating challenges and uncertainties on the path to future scenarios.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1. Interview guide

General scope

1. How would you briefly describe *[X video-on-demand platform]*?
2. How did *[X video-on-demand platform]* come to life and why?
3. What does the *[X video-on-demand platform]* mean to you?

Success and strategic decision-making

4. Do you believe that *[X video-on-demand platform]* is a successful one? If so, could you please elaborate how?
5. Were there any past options to construct a different success for *[X video-on-demand platform]*?
6. Are there any future options to further construct the *[X video-on-demand platform]* success?
7. Do you have a role for constructing the *[X video-on-demand platform]* success? How? Could you give me an example?
8. What does success mean to you?
9. What are the current issues you are facing with *[X video-on-demand platform]*?
10. How do you tackle them?

Niche market and strategic decision-making

11. Why did you choose to activate in a niche market?
12. How can *[X video-on-demand platform]* be unique in a niche market?
13. How would you convince a loyal audience member it is worth watching a performance online rather than live on stage?
14. How do you convince stakeholders (public or private funders) that *[X video-on-demand platform]* can be or is a success?

Closing

15. Would you like to add something on the topic?

APPENDIX 2. Verbal consent for interview

Before we start, I would like to record your agreement regarding the use of this interview. As mentioned in my invitation email, the interview is recorded and used only for my master's thesis. Participation is voluntary and you have the freedom to speak as much as you want as well as refuse questions. Your responses are confidential, and some quotes might appear in the thesis which will be published on Lund University's dedicated website, LU Student Papers. The interviews will be anonymized. I will send you the transcript of the interview for you to check before I start my analysis. Also, clarifications/additional information may be needed after the interview, but I will try to let you know in due time if they can be resolved with an email or if a Zoom is still needed. You will also receive the final work after my thesis defence.

Do you have any questions before we start?

APPENDIX 3. Example of Nvivo 12 Pro Software's Memo

Concept: Feeling valued for one's contribution

In my exploration of how managers of Video-on-Demand (VoD) platforms for performing arts construct meanings of success, I've been particularly struck by the coding category of 'Feeling valued for one's contribution.' This aspect, in my opinion, lies at the heart of what success means in the realm of the performing arts. It underscores the importance of recognizing and appreciating the artists, creators, and contributors who bring their talents to these platforms. Success is not solely defined by viewership numbers or revenue generated; rather, it encompasses the deep sense of fulfilment that artists derive from knowing that their work is valued and acknowledged. The way managers navigate this delicate balance of fostering an environment where contributors feel valued can greatly influence the platform's overall success. It's a poignant reminder that success in the performing arts goes beyond financial gains; it's about nurturing a community where artists feel respected and appreciated for their unique contributions, which, in turn, can lead to more enriching and vibrant content for audiences.

APPENDIX 4. Theoretical coding

I. The shift from professional to personal management roles and perceptions of service success			II. Navigating strategic decision-making: from the past to the future		III. Managers' perspectives on their role in and meanings of service success	
1. Reasons and motivations behind having a service as VoD platform for performing arts in Europe	2. Business meaning: professional vs. personal turns as manager	3. Own view of managed service success	4. Strategic decision making; past tense	5. Strategic decision making; future tense	6. Managers' view of their role in service success	7. Meaning of success: professional and/or personal
• Providing audience accessibility • Supporting and promoting the performing arts community • Preserving and celebrating the rich cultural heritage of Europe • Ensuring audience convenience to watch performance anytime and anywhere • Exploiting VoD technology for profit	• Passion for the arts • Pride on positively impacting stakeholders • Contributing to performing arts innovation • Team and community building • Engaging with challenges for professional and/or personal growth	• Growing audience engagement • Providing quality and varied content • Generating revenue for artists, performing arts organisations, and the platform itself • Building a sense of community among viewers, artists, and arts enthusiasts • Developing partnerships and collaborations with artists, cultural institutions, public and private funders • Improving accessibility and user experience • Innovating and adapting to changing technology and audience preferences • Measuring cultural impact, such as its influence on the visibility and accessibility of performing arts • Sustaining a business model to support the arts and growing its audience • Public acknowledgement from viewers, artists, and partners	• Expanding content focus • Opting for a different pricing model • Securing exclusive content • Opting for live streaming of performances • Enhancing an educational component • Expanding geographically • Introducing interactive features • Prioritizing mobile app development and offline viewing • Building a strong online community of performing arts enthusiasts • Enlarging partnerships with performance venues to offer joint promotions, cross-promotional events	• Exploring technological avenues • Developing interactive storytelling to make content more engaging • Personalizing recommendations • Introducing live chat and audience interaction • Expanding globally • Improving data analytics for content curation • Enhancing accessibility including subtitles, audio descriptions, and translations • Increasing educational partnerships to offer accredited courses • Integrating social media features to allow users to share their favorite performances, reviews, and recommendations • Promoting sustainable practices within the platform and collaborating with environmentally conscious performers and venues	• Setting the overall strategic direction of the platform • Overseeing the selection and acquisition of performing arts content • Improving technology and user experience • Enhancing marketing and promotion to attract and retain a loyal user base • Implementing monetization strategies • Developing of an engaged online community of arts enthusiasts • Improving data analytics to gain insights into user behavior, content performance, and market trends • Assessing and managing risks associated with content licensing, technology infrastructure, and market competition • Staying informed about emerging trends in the VoD and performing arts industries and explore innovative features • Providing leadership and guidance to the platform's team members • Overseeing the platform's budget, financial forecasting, and revenue optimisation	• Pursuing activities and endeavors that align with personal passions, values, and interests • Self-improving and learning • Contributing to the betterment of society • Balancing work and life • Practicing resilience • Being authentic • Feeling valued for one's contributions • Creating a legacy to impact on an industry, community, or field of interest • Experiencing contentment and a sense of purpose • Being adaptable and open to change

IV. Navigating service challenges and managerial motivations in niche market activation		V. Crafting uniqueness in a niche market: building success for audiences and attracting public and private funders		
8. Dealing with issues in service management	9. Managerial reasons to activate in a niche market	10. Shaping uniqueness in a niche market	11. Constructing success for audiences	12. Constructing success for public and/or private funders
• Licensing and acquiring (exclusive) content • Identifying effective monetization strategies • Differentiating from competitors • Maintaining a robust and scalable technical infrastructure • Ensuring a user-friendly interface • Expanding content offer • Helping users discover relevant content • Protecting content from piracy and addressing copyright violations • Attracting and retaining a loyal audience • Ensuring a consistently high level of content quality • Expanding the platform's reach to international audiences • Staying compliant with regional and international regulations • Addressing environmental sustainability concerns • Keeping up with technological advancements • Meeting evolving viewer expectations • Preparing for and responding to unexpected crises	• Translating passion into a strong commitment to the industry and its growth • Reduced competition can provide an opportunity for a platform to establish itself as a leader • Having a dedicated and passionate audience base • Content differentiation can attract users looking for specialized content • Developing specialized expertise, such as understanding the nuances of the content, industry trends, and the unique needs of the audience • Including premium pricing for specialized content or targeted advertising • Preserving and celebrating a specific cultural or artistic tradition • Facilitating collaboration with key players within the industry • Catering to a passionate and dedicated audience offers long-term business viability	• Offering a carefully curated selection of high-quality performances • Having exclusive content deals • Create specialized categories or collections (e.g., experimental theatre) • Offering educational content, such as behind-the-scenes documentaries, interviews with artists, and masterclasses • Implementing interactive elements that engage viewers (e.g., live chats during performances streaming) • Build a strong online community of performing arts enthusiasts • Using advanced recommendation algorithms to provide personalized content • Offering content from different cultures and languages • Prioritizing accessibility features such as subtitles • Hosting live streaming events or premiere performances • Strong partnership model between public and private funders • Exploring emerging technologies like interactive storytelling • Developing creative and engaging marketing campaigns • Actively seeking feedback from users and using it to make improvements	• Offering access to exclusive performances that may not be available to a live audience • Highlighting the convenience of watching from the comfort of one's home • Providing a more intimate and detailed view of the performance • Describing any interactive features that allow online viewers to engage with the performance, such as live chats • Emphasizing that online performances often include subtitles and translations • Mention that viewers can pause, rewind, or replay specific scenes, allowing them to savor their favorite moments • Highlighting the cost savings associated with online viewing • Allowing viewers to enjoy content from different cultures and regions • Stressing the safety and health benefits of online viewing (during COVID-19 pandemic) • Offering exclusive behind-the-scenes content or interviews with the artists • Mentioning that by watching online, viewers are still supporting the arts and the performing artists • Share positive testimonials and reviews from other loyal audience members	• Defining specific, measurable success metrics (e.g., user engagement, subscriber growth, revenue generation) • Present thorough market research and analysis to demonstrate the market demand • Providing data on current audience base, including demographics, geographic distribution, and viewing behavior • Showcasing the quality and diversity of content portfolio • Highlighting user engagement statistics, such as average viewing time, user ratings, and reviews • Providing revenue projections and growth trends (e.g., partnerships, advertising) • Conducting a competitive analysis • Sharing success stories of specific content or partnerships • Gathering user testimonials or feedback that highlights the positive experiences • Highlighting any strategic partnerships or collaborations that contribute to the platform's success • Explaining how the platform leverages technology to enhance the user experience • Presenting a clear and compelling long-term vision, including plans for growth, expansion, and continued innovation. • Addressing potential risks and challenges the platform may face and outlining strategies for mitigating these risks • Highlighting the platform's sustainability efforts and its positive impact on the arts community • Providing detailed financial projections, including revenue forecasts • Committing to stakeholder engagement by seeking ongoing feedback and involvement from funders and partners