JYU DISSERTATIONS 314

Kimmo Taiminen

Flourishing Digital Content Marketing Communication

Engaging Consumers with Attractiveness, Benevolence, and Cogency

JYVÄSKYLÄ UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF BUSINESS
AND ECONOMICS

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ABSTRACT

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Digital content marketing (DCM) arises from the need to connect with information-overloaded, advertising-reluctant customers and prospects. DCM is primarily about engagement and becoming meaningful by making a difference in a consumers' life. This dissertation scrutinizes DCM as an authenticity-based communication activity by focusing on three perspectives: 1) a pull marketing orientation, 2) helpfulness, and 3) transparency. To explore the roles of the first two DCM elements, empirical data are gathered using online surveys among DCM consumers, and the data are analyzed using structural equations modeling. The role of a brand's transparency is approached through practitioner interviews and utilizing thematic analysis.

The roles of these elements are supported by the dissertation findings as follows. High attraction is shown to encourage consumers' favorable brand-related meaning making through the frequent interaction mechanism. For less attracted consumers, the mechanism is exposure-based affect transfer from the content to the brand. This indicates that highly attracted consumers invest more in brand-related processing, which implies increased brand engagement. Brand engagement is shown to be a necessity for converting brand-related DCM perceptions into relationship value. To aid favorable brand engagement, authenticity, and trust, this dissertation reveals the potential of several helpful and transparent communicative brand actions in DCM and ends up redefining DCM from the communicative perspective.

Based on the results, attraction, benevolence, and cogency are suggested to form the basis for DCM engagement and authentic relationship building through DCM. Attractiveness arises from DCM that consistently resonates with the audience's needs and wants. Benevolence arises from DCM that signals a genuine intent to act for the benefit of the audience. Cogency arises from signals, which foster consumer topical understanding and the authentic authority-position of the brand. This dissertation concludes that, when brands act on these principles, different brand-originated digital content creation forms (including native advertising) can potentially represent the true DCM ideology.

Keywords: content marketing, relationship marketing, engagement, authenticity, transparency

TIIVISTELMÄ (ABSTRACT IN FINNISH)

Taiminen, Kimmo
Kukoistava digitaalinen sisältömarkkinointiviestintä: Kuluttajien sitouttaminen vetovoimaisuuden, hyväntahtoisuuden ja vakuuttavuuden avulla
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Digitaalinen sisältömarkkinointi (*lyh.* DSM) nousee tarpeesta saavuttaa ja kytkeytyä informaatiotulvassa elävien ja mainontaan vastahakoisesti suhtautuvien nykyisten ja potentiaalisten asiakkaiden kanssa. DSM on ennen kaikkea sitouttamista ja merkitykselliseksi tulemista edesauttamalla asiakkaita heidän omassa elämässään. Tämä väitöskirja tarkasteleekin DSM:ää autenttisuuteen perustuvana viestintä-aktiviteettina keskittyen kolmeen näkökulmaan: 1) vetovoima-perustaisuus, 2) auttavaisuus ja 3) läpinäkyvyys. Ensimmäisiä kahta DSM elementtiä lähestytään empiirisesti verkkokyselyillä DSM kuluttajien keskuudessa ja aineistot analysoidaan rakenneyhtälömallinnuksella. Läpinäkyvyyttä lähestytään sen sijaan haastattelemalla ammattilaisia ja hyödyntämällä teema-analyysiä.

Väitöskirjan tulokset tukevat näiden tekijöiden roolia seuraavasti. Runsaan vetovoimaisuuden näytetään rohkaisevan kuluttajien suotuisaa merkitystenantoa brändistä toistuvien vuorovaikutustilanteiden kautta. Vähemmän vetovoimaa kokevilla vaikutus perustuu altistukseen ja mielikuvan siirtoon sisällöstä brändiin. Vahvasti vetovoimaa kokevat kuluttajat näyttävät siis panostavan enemmän brändin prosessointiin nostaen brändisitoutumista. Kognitiivis-emotionaalisen brändisitoutumisen osoitetaan myös olevan vaatimus sille, että brändiin liittyvät havainnot siirtyvät suhteen arvostukseen. Autenttisuuden takaamiseksi ja suotuisan brändisitoutumisen ja luottamuksen aikaansaamiseksi tämä väitöskirja tarjoaa nipun potentiaalisia, avuliaisuutta ja läpinäkyvyyttä lisääviä viestinnällisiä bränditekoja ja päätyy uudelleenmäärittelemään DSM:n viestinnällisestä näkökulmasta.

Tulosten perusteella väitöskirjassa ehdotetaan vetovoimaisuuden, hyväntahtoisuuden ja vakuuttavuuden muodostavan pohjan autenttisuuteen perustuvalle sitouttamiselle ja suhteiden rakentamiselle DSM:n avulla. Vetovoimaisuus nousee johdonmukaisesta kuluttajien tarpeisiin ja haluihin pohjaavasta ja resonoivasta toiminnasta. Hyväntahtoisuus nousee teoista, jotka ilmaisevat vilpittömiä aikomuksia toimia yleisön edun mukaan. Vaikuttavuus taas nousee teoista, jotka edistävät kuluttajien ymmärrystä aiheesta ja viestittävät brändin autenttisuuteen perustuvaa aiheeseen liittyvää auktoriteettia. Väitöskirja päättää toteamukseen, että brändien toimiessa näiden periaatteiden mukaan erilaiset brändi-lähtöiset digitaaliset sisällöntuotannon muodot (sis. natiivimainonta) voivat potentiaalisesti edustaa todellista DSM ajattelua.

Avainsanat: sisältömarkkinointi, suhdemarkkinointi, sitouttaminen, autenttisuus, läpinäkyvyys

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This is it—after many moments of happiness, pride, sorrow, and despair and after many years of hard work. *Finally, this is it,* compressed into a compilation part and three dissertation articles. This dissertation was no solitary process. I wish to express my deepest gratitude to the many individuals who helped me in my dissertation journey.

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and research objectives

Today, online media platforms provide vast content for a variety of consumer needs. An average Finn devotes three to four hours daily to online media consumption, which represents more than half their total daily media consumption time (Dentsu Aegis Network 2018; Kantar TNS 2017). Even if consumers are now able to enjoy constant online access, their temporal resources limit the possibility to engage with all the content or even all of what they find the most interesting. Therefore, to optimize their media consumption, it is now common for consumers to use several media simultaneously, while skimming the content and concentrating only on what they find most relevant and interesting. These media consumption habits have also influenced digital marketing communication. Consumers now filter advertising content and bypass messages that they do not want to see or hear. Consequently, marketing communication has moved toward providing content that resonates with the needs and desires of consumers (e.g., Accenture 2016; Econsultancy and Adobe 2018; Pulizzi and Barrett 2009).

Given this shift, digital content marketing (DCM) has become an important marketing communication activity. DCM research pioneers Holliman and Rowley (2014, 287) defined DCM based on the American Marketing Association's (2013) definition of marketing as follows:

> Digital content marketing is the activity associated with creating, communicating, distributing, and exchanging digital content that has value for customers, clients, partners, and the firm and its brands.

Unlike most marketing messages, DCM applies a brand-extended (vs. a brand-centered) approach to marketing communication. Here, the intention is not to promote brands through DCM content (e.g., Holliman and Rowley 2014); the objective is to gain consumers' attention and connect them with brands through topical common ground that the brand and the DCM target group share. In consumer markets, DCM often centers on content, which nurtures the audience's lifestyle. For example, Mr. Porter, an online retailer of men's fashion, provides expert advice and style tips on how to look good externally and feel good internally. By contrast, business-to-business DCM commonly focuses on providing views on industry developments and trends. While the topical relevance of DCM content helps gain consumer attention and interest, its value for the consumer is argued to define the relationship marketing potential of the DCM activity and generate favorable brand attitudes and trusted brand relationships (e.g., Holliman and Rowley 2014; Vollero and Palazzo 2015; Hollebeek and Macky 2019). However, in the academic DCM literature, these arguments are based on explorative, conceptual, and qualitative studies. The purpose of this dissertation is therefore to test those explorative findings and provide support for the significance of DCM in relationship marketing.

To approach the research objective, consumer engagement is adopted as the foundation for the following three reasons:

1. An engaged consumer is characterized as being motivated to pay attention to and become emotionally responsive and behaviorally active toward the brand or brand-initiated activities (e.g., Brodie et al. 2011; Vivek et al. 2012; Hollebeek et al. 2014). Engagement thus corresponds well to the fundamental idea of DCM (i.e., to obtain the attention and interest of consumers and encourage them to consume content by the brand).

2. Most consumer engagement literature builds on the relationship marketing theory and acknowledges the central role of consumer engagement in "attracting, building, maintaining, and enhancing relationships with potential and existing customers" (Vivek et al. 2012, 128). Consumer engagement is thus braced to provide important relationship building potential for brands.

3. DCM literature has also acknowledged that consumer engagement does play a role in successful DCM activities. Notably, there are essentially two views to consumer engagement in the academic DCM literature. Some scholars focus on topical content as the main engagement object (e.g., Holliman and Rowley 2014; Järvinen and Taiminen 2016). As per this view, positive relationship outcomes occur because a brand provides engaging content to a consumer. However, other scholars emphasize the ability of DCM to trigger brand engagement and induce associated relational outcomes (e.g., Rahim and Clemens 2012; Rancati and Cordini 2014; Hollebeek and Macky 2019). This dissertation integrates the two views and highlights the topical content and the brand as the two engagement objects that collectively form consumer's DCM engagement. In particular, DCM content is presumed as the primary engagement trigger that drives consumers' DCM consumption. DCM consumption also allows consumer brand engagement through DCM.

To explore factors that act as DCM engagement triggers, the following research question will be examined:

RQ1: How does DCM trigger consumer engagement?

The DCM literature typically mirrors DCM to publishing activities (Barry and Gironda 2019; Pulizzi 2012; Holliman and Rowley 2014; Lieb 2012). Perhaps stemming from this analogy, the academic DCM literature has almost consistently focused on understanding the creation and distribution of topical DCM content. In this dissertation, the scope is broadened, and DCM is viewed as a communicative act. Holliman and Rowley (2014, 287) articulated the communication aspect in their general DCM definition, wherein they refer to DCM as "the activity associated with creating, *communicating*, distributing, and exchanging digital content" [italics added by the author]. The word "communication" originates from the Latin word *communicare*, which refers to an act of sharing and producing a shared meaning. Consistent with relationship marketing theory (e.g., Morgan and Hunt 2009), in this dissertation, communication is argued as a key to fostering consumer understanding about the relational character of a brand through DCM.

In this dissertation, the view of DCM communication builds on the theory of communicative action (TCA; Habermas 1984), which describes communicative actions as rational and deliberate interactive behaviors through which communicative parties consciously aim at understanding the communicative attempt. Language plays a key role in this process. Reflecting the rationality of communication, the communicator uses language not only as a function to transmit topical information. Communication is used also as a conscious effort to convey social meanings. Through these meanings, other communicative actors are then allowed to interpret the communicative attempt and interpret relational meanings based on these attempts (see also; Finne and Grönroos 2009; 2017). When referring to DCM as a communicative act, it thus involves much more than relevant and valuable information sharing. It is about the conscious and purposive use of verbal signals to signify the brand's relational role for DCM consumers. This relational meaning is argued to occur because of consumers' (cumulative) engagement with the DCM activity (Hollebeek and Macky 2019), justifying the centrality of consumer engagement in the DCM communication process. To understand the relational outcomes of DCM engagement, the following will be explored:

RQ2: How does DCM communication trigger relational sense-making?

1.2 Areas of focus

To answer the two research questions, this dissertation will approach DCM communication as 1. an attraction-based pull marketing activity 2. aimed at helping the consumer 3. while maintaining the authentic character of the brand through transparency. Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework and illustrates the three DCM communication facets as engagement triggers. The rationale for choosing each element is provided below.

As stated previously, pushing marketing messages in front of consumers has become an outdated strategy in the highly competitive online environment.

DCM relies on generating favorable attention through pull marketing (e.g., Lieb 2012; Rancati and Gordini 2014). The term "pull" describes consumers' attraction toward the engagement object (Higgins and Scholer 2009; Bogue 1969). Attractive DCM should therefore trigger voluntary DCM consumption and thus induce DCM engagement. Based on the DCM literature review (see chapter two), consumers' attraction toward DCM is argued to build especially on consumer perceptions of the DCM content's relevance and its anticipated value. This perspective is addressed in the first dissertation article from the perspective of creating favorable brand-related interactive experiences with prospective customers. The findings illustrate the importance of reaching a highly attracted audience (i.e., avid DCM content consumers) when aiming at creating favorable brand-related interactive experiences. Prospective customers on the other hand provide an important research setting, as these customers are an underdeveloped focus area in the DCM research (Hollebeek and Macky 2019).

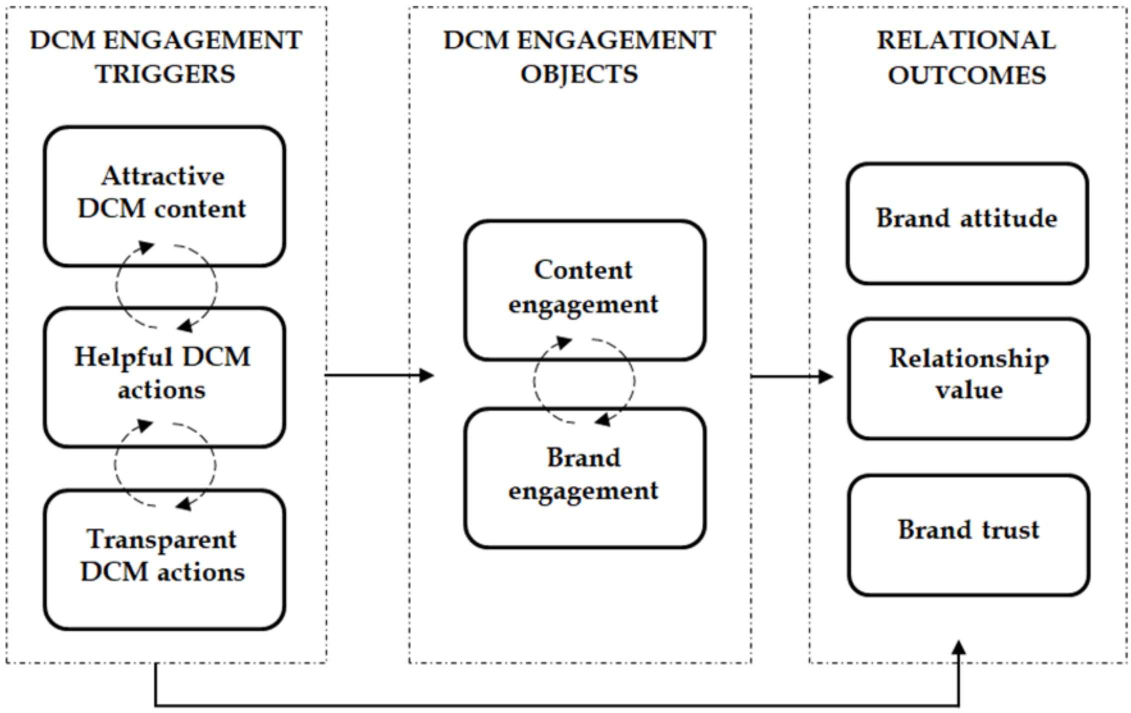

FIGURE 1 Conceptual framework

The second dissertation article continues to expand the communicative view to DCM. The article argues that DCM attractiveness solely based on relevant and valuable DCM content inadequately explains the communicative function of DCM. Instead, the article bridges the two literature streams, which consider DCM effectiveness based either on the content's benefit for the consumer or DCM as a brand-related activity and highlights the role of a brand's helpfulness in DCM. A brand's helpfulness—instead of brand promotion or direct selling—is argued to represent an authentic DCM orientation (Lieb 2012; Pulizzi 2012; Rahin and Clemens 2012; Holliman and Rowley 2014; Hollebeek and Macky 2019). However, the helping nature of DCM had been ill-defined. The literature only briefly acknowledged helpfulness as helping consumers make good decisions and solve problems through DCM (e.g., Holliman and Rowley 2014; Hollebeek and Macky 2019). In the second dissertation article, helpfulness is approached from the communicative perspective as "a bundle of the brand's functionally oriented DCM actions executed in a knowledgeable and benevolent manner" (Taiminen and Ranaweera 2019, 1761). The article identifies several potential helpful brand actions in DCM and shows their relevance in engaging consumers with the brand and facilitating customers' relational sense making, which influence valued and trusted brand relationships.

The third dissertation article scrutinizes a brand's transparency as the third DCM engagement trigger. Transparency is a crucial DCM trend along with brand authenticity and consumer value creation (Coredna 2019). The importance of transparency in marketing communication contexts such as DCM lies also in the fact that consumers are especially alert and susceptible to evaluating the persuasive intent of brands when they encounter marketing communication (Friestad and Wright 1994). Thus, unlike helpful brand actions that aim at consumer value creation, transparent brand actions must aim at decreasing consumers' risk of being manipulated by brands. From the communicative perspective, transparent actions by the communicator allow other communicative parties interpret the genuineness of the communication attempt (Habermas 1984). Consequently, transparent communicative actions help DCM content consumers "authenticate" the brand's DCM intentions. The relevance of transparency in DCM is salient. Interestingly however, to the best of the author's knowledge transparency has not been the focus of any academic DCM study to date. Therefore, the third dissertation article aims at bridging the gap. By building on knowledge from the literature on organizational transparency and transparency in journalism and combining it with marketing communication practitioners' viewpoints, the article describes the role of transparent communicative actions in DCM and implies several transparent brand actions that could potentially ensure authentic DCM communication and increase acceptance of the brand's DCM activity.

The third article also addresses another controversial issue in the DCM literature: Different paid commercial online content creation forms, such as sponsored content and native advertising, have often been seen to confuse readers and thus not represent the authentic DCM philosophy (Hollebeek and Macky 2019; Vollero and Palazzo 2015; Campbell and Marks 2015). Instead of making presumptions of the intentions behind these paid commercial hybrid content forms, the third article addresses potential factors that may justify the usage of commercial hybrid online content forms as a part of DCM activities.

1.3 Outline

This dissertation is divided into two parts: three original articles and a compilation. Each original article provides a particular view of the DCM phenomenon and makes an individual contribution to the subject field. Table 1 details the dissertation articles and explains the author's contribution to each article.

TABLE 1 Dissertation articles and author contributions

Article	Authors	Publication forum & prestige	Author's individual contribution
I	Taiminen, K. and Karjaluoto, H.	*Computers in Human Behavior*; ABS level 3*; JUFO level 2**; SJR Q1***	Corresponding author. Full responsibility for writing the theoretical background, developing the hypotheses, collecting and analyzing the data, and making conclusions. Main responsibility for writing the storyline.
II	Taiminen, K. and Ranaweera, C.	*European Journal of Marketing*; AJG level 3*; JUFO level 2**; SJR Q1***	Corresponding author. Full responsibility for collecting and analyzing the data. Main responsibility for writing the theoretical background, developing the hypotheses, and making conclusions. Major responsibility for writing the storyline.
III	Taiminen, K., Luoma-aho, V., and Tolvanen, K.	*Public Relations Review*; JUFO level 1; SJR Q1***	Corresponding author. Full responsibility for writing the theoretical background. Main responsibility for collecting and analyzing the data. Main responsibility for writing the storyline and making conclusions.

Notes: ABS/AJG = Academic Journal Guide/Academic Business School Ranking by the Chartered Association of Business Schools; JUFO = Finnish Publication Forum Journal Ranking; SJR = Scimago Journal ranking by Scopus; *Highly regarded journal in the field; **Leading journals in the field; ***Best Quartile in the subject field.

The compilation acts as an introduction to the DCM phenomenon and provides a rationale for the research topic as well to each of the articles. The outcome of the compilation is the synthesis of the three articles from the perspective of DCM as a communicative act. Based on the synthesized findings, DCM is reconceptualized in this dissertation as follows:

> DCM is an attraction-, benevolence-, and cogency-based digital engagement function that communicates the beneficial, helpful, and transparent character of a brand and builds authentic relationships with customers and prospects.

The compilation begins by scrutinizing the existing DCM conceptualizations and its relevant facets. The chapter ends by introducing the theory of communicative action (Habermas 1984) and arguing the relevance of this perspective in explaining the DCM communication. In chapter three, the described DCM communication activity is combined with the consumer engagement literature. Chapter four explains the methodological premises of this dissertation by presenting the data and discussing the reliability and validity of the empirical studies. In chapter five, there is a summary of each dissertation article. Chapter six provides a synthesis of the dissertation findings and provides a rationale for conceptualizing DCM from the communicative view as well as discusses managerial implications, addresses the limitations, and provides avenues for future research.

2 WHAT IS DIGITAL CONTENT MARKETING?

Digital content in general refers to "any bit-based objects distributed through electronic channels" (Koiso-Kanttila 2004). While digital objects are intangible, they are perceptible in the form of textual, pictorial, audio, or audio-visual material and their mixtures. From a marketing perspective, digital content represents an offering (Rowley 2008). Existing DCM literature has approached DCM from various perspectives, such as emphasizing both the practitioner's and the academic views of the phenomenon (see Table 2). DCM definitions vary, especially based on the lenses that are used to conceptualize the term. Even so, relevant dimensions are somewhat agreed upon in the literature, and this chapter provides an overview of those dimensions. DCM is portrayed as 1. an activity of creating and distributing DCM content 2. that customers and/or prospects find relevant, valuable, and/or compelling, 3. which fulfils the intended marketing aims by engaging consumers. First three sections in this chapter are devoted to providing introduction to each of these aspects. The last section of this chapter depicts the theoretical basis of understanding DCM as communicative act.

2.1 Creating and distributing DCM content

As in the publishing business to which DCM is often compared, DCM content creation and distribution that is based on target groups' needs and wants are atypical focus of the DCM literature. To create DCM content that builds on consumer preferences, the primary goal for content marketers is therefore to understand the audience to whom the brand is directing its DCM. This requires brands to be aware and constantly monitor the current discussions around their thematic content areas and listen to the topical feedback from the DCM consumers (Lieb 2012). To offer the most relevant and interesting information on a given topic, DCM content creators also utilize the knowledge within the organization as well as that of outside influencers (Holliman and Rowley 2014; Lieb 2012) and at the best customize the content based on consumer preferences and needs (Jär-vinen and Taiminen 2016). Before the content is distributed, the information is also packaged into the most relevant form. This may include limited and shorter forms of DCM, such as blog posts, infographics, videos, or newsletter articles. Longer forms of DCM may include podcasts, whitepapers, or webinars that are dedicated to approaching a single thematic area or topic. However, successful DCM is most often not about creating a single piece of content. Holliman and Rowley (2014, 287) explain that DCM optimally represents "an ongoing cultural stance, where the focus is on building an authentic relationship over the longer term, rather than conducting a series of short-term campaigns." Therefore, brands emphasize frequent DCM with the aim of maintaining consumers' attention.

Distributing DCM content to a receptive audience is essential for encouraging DCM content consumption. Fundamentally, distribution should take place through platforms on which the target group is present and receptive to certain types of content (e.g., Rowley 2008; Holliman and Rowley 2014; Lieb 2012). DCM is often distributed through brand-owned media platforms, such as brand website-based blogs. These platforms have often no role in the consumers' daily media consumption habits and by themselves they are inadequate for reaching the desired audience. For this reason, DCM content is promoted to foster visibility for the target group, and the content is typically optimized to promote search engine visibility (Pulizzi 2012). Social media or email newsletters are also often utilized to invite consumers to consume DCM content on the brand's website (Järvinen and Taiminen 2016). Additionally, while paid contexts are also acknowledged as a potential route to reach the attention of the DCM target group (Vollero and Palazzo 2015), the credibility of these activities have come into question (e.g., Hollebeek and Macky 2019). Moreover, consumers who are sharing content form an important promotional capacity for the DCM (e.g., Rancati and Gordini 2014; Kilgour et al. 2015).

TABLE 2 DCM conceptualizations

Author	Definition	Activity	Content	Aim
Pulizzi and Barrett 2009, 8	"the creation and distribution of educational and/or compelling content in multiple formats to attract and/or retain customers"	creating distributing	educational compelling	profitable customer relationships
Rose and Pulizzi 2011, 10	"a strategy focused on the creation of a valuable experience" "It is humans being helpful to each other, sharing valuable pieces of content that enrich the community and position the business as a leader in the field" "It is content that is engaging, imminently sharable, and most of all, focused on helping customers to discover (on their own) that your product or service is the one that will scratch their itch."	creating distributing sharing	valuable engaging	consumer value creation; thought leadership; brand preference
Pulizzi 2012	"the creation of valuable, relevant and compelling content by the brand itself on a consistent basis, used to generate a positive behavior from a customer or prospect of the brand"	creating	relevant valuable compelling	positive customer influence
Lieb 2012	"creating and distributing content - - both to attract new business and to retain existing customers" "It's being there when consumers need you and seek out with relevant, educational, helpful, compelling, engaging, and sometimes entertaining information."	creating distributing	relevant educational helpful compelling engaging entertaining	profitable customer relationships
Rahim and Clemens 2012	"creating and publishing unique and interesting content that focuses on prospects or customers. It educates them, helps them solve problems, and invites them to engage with a company's brand"	creating publishing	unique interesting educational problem solving	customer help; brand engagement
Rancati and Cordini 2014	"the creation, dissemination and sharing of free content, and being relevant, meaningful, valuable and able to inspire confidence in existing and potential customers"	creating distributing sharing	free	being relevant, meaningful, and valuable; trust
Holliman and Rowley 2014	"creating, distributing and sharing relevant, compelling and timely content to engage customers at the appropriate point in their buying consideration processes, such that it encourages them to convert to a business building outcome"	creating distributing sharing	relevant compelling timely	customer engagement profit
Vollero and Palazzo 2015	"Content marketing is a marketing technique of creating and sharing relevant and valuable content to position company as a "thought leader" in its sector with the aim of developing engagement and trusted relationships with customers" "strategy with the aim of driving profitable customer action"	creating sharing	relevant valuable	thought leadership; customer engagement; trusted relationships; profit
Hollebeek and Macky 2019	"the creation and dissemination of relevant, valuable brand-related content to current or prospective customers on digital platforms to develop their favorable brand engagement, trust, and relationships (vs. directly persuading consumers to purchase)"	creating distributing	relevant, valuable	customer engagement; brand preference; trusted relationships

2.2 DCM aims

DCM activities have dual aims: creating value for the consumer as well as creating value for the firm (Pulizzi and Barrett 2009). While value creation legitimizes DCM from the consumer perspective, it is actually the utility for the consumer that is argued to provide a basis also to the positive marketing communication and relationship marketing aims (Lieb 2012). In other words, customer value creation is a foundational DCM aim and acts as a mean to a marketing end in terms of providing engagement opportunities for a brand by providing relevant, valuable, and compelling content (Rose and Pulizzi 2010; Rahim and Clemens 2012; Holliman and Rowley 2014). The role of these DCM content facets are addressed more closely in section 2.3.

From the perspective of business value creation, the DCM literature review highlights three interrelated general-level marketing aims for DCM. From the business perspective, the role of DCM is to secure long-term profitability. In the DCM literature, this aim is visible quite consistently. For example, the practitioner literature states that DCM is an instrument that helps to attract and retain customers (Pulizzi and Barrett 2009; Lieb 2012). Likewise, the academic literature agrees that DCM has a role in supporting firms' sales processes (Holliman and Rowley 2014; Vollero and Palazzo 2015; Järvinen and Taiminen 2016; Wang et al. 2019). From the sales perspective, DCM activities are seen as a potential way to sort customer leads and nurture them into sales (Järvinen and Taiminen 2016; Wang et al. 2019).

Increasing profits through DCM however requires long-term orientation. Consequently, the main business emphases of DCM are building authentic and trusted relationships (Holliman and Rowley 2014; Vollero and Palazzo, 2015; Rahim and Clemens 2012) and strengthening the company brand as part of customer relationship management (Hollebeek and Macky 2019; Holliman and Rowley 2014). This concerns different stages of customer–brand relationships, including generating brand-aware audiences, fostering favorable brand perceptions, and increasing confidence in and loyalty to the brand. Awareness and positive attention are central to any brand at any stage of the customer relationship. DCM is seen to contribute to these aims through enabling frequent encounters with the brand (Holliman and Rowley 2014) and the positive consumer engagement that is induced by DCM content consumption (Hollebeek and Macky 2019; Rahim and Clemens 2012). In fact, many DCM sources (see Table 2) note consumer engagement central from the perspective of relationship marketing. DCM is also often noted for pursuing increased relationship quality by enabling confidence and trust in the brand (e.g., Rancati and Cordini 2014; Holliman and Rowley 2014). To do so, the literature emphasizes the need for the brand to become meaningful through DCM, especially via helpfulness (Hollebeek and Macky 2019), an expert (e.g., Järvinen and Taiminen 2016) or thought leader position (Barry and Gironda 2019).

2.3 DCM content

Relevant, valuable, and compelling DCM content are the three widely agreed upon elements for DCM content (see Table 2). Content relevance reflects the consumer's interest in the content and the perceived significance of the information in relation to the consumer's information needs (Järvinen and Taiminen 2016). Consumer-perceived relevance is thus a result of marketers successfully providing the right content to the right audience (Rahim and Clemens 2012). Relevance parallels the marketing concept of consumer involvement. Involvement refers to a state of personal relevance and interest in the particular object, wherein a consumer is motivated to pay attention to and process information about the object of involvement (Zaichkowsky 1985, 1986). DCM content relevance or involvement is therefore a precondition in successful DCM activities. Consumers need to be involved with or at least be receptive to particular thematic information areas prior to their exposure to DCM content. Higher thematic involvement also motivates consumers to actively search and willingly receive relevant content (Pulizzi and Barrett 2009; Lieb 2012; Holliman and Rowley 2014). Thematic involvement therefore makes it possible for a consumer to feel attraction toward DCM acts

Valuable DCM content is that which is beneficial to a consumer's life (Hollebeek and Macky 2019). Relevant content with no value may catch a consumer's attention one or twice, but it is not likely to maintain consumer interest in the long run. As explained by the uses and gratifications theory (Katz 1963/1964), gratifications and expected benefits motivate consumers to continue to consume media. Information is among the most important gratifications sought from online media consumption (e.g., Ruggiero 2000; Mersey et al. 2010). Similarly, information is argued as the main consumer value that consumers take from DCM content (e.g., Holliman and Rowley 2014; Hollebeek and Macky 2019; Lieb 2012). The DCM literature relates information value to the ability of DCM content to educate consumers and enable them to learn new things (Hollebeek and Macky 2019) and to help them make good decisions (Rahim and Clemens 2012), solve problems (Järvinen and Taiminen 2016), and perform better (Holliman and Rowley 2014). Instead of sole information provision, the informational value is thus also instrumentally determined through the utilitarian value that DCM content can provide.

Compelling DCM content is the third commonly acknowledged DCM content facet (e.g., Pulizzi and Barrett 2009; Holliman and Rowley 2014). Interestingly, the meaning of compelling DCM content has remained unexplained in the academic DCM literature. According to Merriam-Webster's online dictionary, the term "compelling" refers to having a strong interest toward an object or something being able to hold an individual's attention or make an individual agree to something. These explanations indicate that a compelling experience occurs, when an actor interacts with an involving object, and engages into information processing. Consistent with the notion, the major informational processing models—the heuristic systematic model (Chaiken 1980) and the elaboration likelihood model (Petty and Cacioppo 1986)—argue that a compelling experience occurs in a process directed at understanding or judging the particular information. Compelling experience is therefore a result of comprehensive message processing and evaluation of the argument quality, which leads to either accepting or rejecting the message (Petty and Cacioppo 1986). Guided by these acknowledgements, compelling DCM content is touched upon, with the literature emphasizing the need for DCM content to deliver comprehensive (Koiso-Kanttila 2004; Rowley 2008), accurate, understandable, and credible information to consumers (Holliman and Rowley 2014; Hollebeek and Macky 2019).

2.4 Toward understanding DCM as a communicative act

The literature seems to view DCM especially as a relationship marketing activity that is based on the delivery of relevant, valuable, and compelling content to consumers. However, the DCM literature does not explain well how the DCM facilitates brand-related sense-making beyond the role of the brand as a source of relevant utilitarian DCM content. This section aims to expand the view of the brand as the sole DCM source. To do so, DCM is approached from the communicative perspective, relying on the TCA by Jurgen Habermas (1984). According to Habermas (1984, 86), communicative action refers to "the interaction of at least two subjects capable of speech and action who establish interpersonal relationships." The communicative action thus manifests in a communicator's use of language and related purposive utterances in helping the other communicative party understand the communication attempt. Sense-making follows, when the other party then utilizes the communicator's language-based signals as a resource in interpreting the communication attempt. This process reflects the communicative rationality involved in these types of sense-making processes (Habermas 1984, 16-17). The following paragraphs explain the fundamentals of the TCA and connect them to the idea of DCM as a communicative act.

Communicative actions can have two purposes: strategic and communicative. Actors are strategically oriented whenever they use communication to attain their personal goals. These goals can be either social or nonsocial. Habermas (1984) explains that when a communicative actor perceives the communicative situation as socially irrelevant, they take instrumental actions to achieve something through the communication. Instrumental actions can manifest in DCM, such as when a consumer is oriented toward the consumption of relevant, valuable, and compelling content. When a communicator experiences a socially relevant communication situation, which is oriented toward some kind of social influence, strategic action takes place. Social influence attempts can manifest either as a covert manipulation or as an open and authentic attempt to reach a consensus through cogent argumentation (Habermas 1984, 333). Only the open, consensus-driven approach is acceptable from the communicative view. Consequently, any commercial content creation form that is based on something other than an overt influencing attempt through explicit and overt argumentation has no place as a form of authentic communicative action. An open influence attempt that builds on comprehensibility and cogent arguments instead allows the receiver to judge independently the validity of the argument and the communicative act (Habermas 1984). In the same vein, open compelling DCM communication should build on cogency, thus emphasizing the importance of a compelling DCM consumption experience as an important element in DCM communication.

How are communicative actions able to facilitate consensus and relational sense-making? Habermas (1984) grounds the idea in Austin's (1962) speech act theory, which describes the three basic language utterances (i.e., speech acts). Speech acts that simply utter something verbally are called locutionary acts, while those based on some strategic intent are called perlocutionary acts. However, central to the communicative view are illocutionary acts, which are key to communicative success, as they act as verbal signals to what the communicator means "in saying something" (Habermas 1984, 289). Habermas (1984) further classifies illocutionary acts into three categories. Constative acts refer to language-based manifestations, which occur as utterances related to informing or asserting, among other things. These utterances focus on offering a claim about the state of something (e.g., a phenomenon or a topic). Expressive acts manifest as expressions that encompass any subjective, self-expressive utterances related to opinions and feelings. Finally, regulative acts manifest, for example, as utterances related to promising or proclaiming something. These regulatives are also the most effective in activating relational sense-making processes (Habermas 1984), as these acts are socially oriented by their nature. Table 3 illustrates the three speech act types.

TABLE 3 Illocutionary acts and related validity claims

Speech act type	Examples	Main validity claim
Constative acts	informing, asserting	Propositional truth
Expressive acts	suggesting, opining	Subjective truthfulness
Regulative acts	promising, proclaiming	Normative rightness

Illocutionary acts are not meaningful only from the communicator's perspective. They also offer a window to the other communicative parties to make sense of the communication based on what Habermas (1984, 10) calls the four "validity claims." According to Habermas, comprehensibility is a fundamental validity claim and a precondition for reasoned judgments related to the other three validity claims. This is because language acts that lack comprehensibility cannot lead to an understanding of the original meaning of the communication anyway.

Propositional truth as the second validity claim links most of all to the sense-making of the constative acts. Here, the interpretation is directed at validating the factuality of the claims, assertions, and other similar types of utterances. Subjective truthfulness as the third validity claim, on the other hand, helps to make sense of the sincerity and genuineness of the communicator's expressed opinions. This validity claim links principally to expressive acts. Finally, normative rightness as the third validity claim helps with reasoning whether the communicator has acted in a proper, socially acceptable manner in the communicative act. This validity claim links mainly to regulative acts.

Based on the TCA, the sole focus of topical DCM content is insufficient from the communicative view. Instead, the communicative role of a brand arises from the pivotal illocutionary acts that induce the relational sense-making of the audience. In this dissertation, considerations of illocutionary acts center on the roles of beneficial, helpful, and transparent brand-initiated (communicative) actions. These elements are discussed in chapter three together with the consumer engagement concept, which is argued in this dissertation to act as the key rationale for brand-related (relational) sense-making induced by DCM communication.

3 CONSUMER ENGAGEMENT IN DCM COMMUNICATION

Consumer engagement concept is widely acknowledged in the DCM literature (see Table 2). However, excluding the recent article by Hollebeek and Macky (2019), efforts to explain the central mechanisms for DCM engagement have been scarce. This chapter explains consumer engagement as a cross-sectional rationale for generating the conditions for a flourishing DCM communication. The chapter reveals the discrepancies in the current DCM engagement views and provides an integrative view to consumer engagement in DCM context. The chapter firstly introduces the consumer engagement concept and then reveals elements, which have the potential to trigger consumer engagement with DCM content and a brand.

3.1 Consumer engagement

While consumer engagement has become a widely studied phenomenon in the marketing field within the last ten years, there is no consensus on its exact definition or dimensions. The consumer engagement literature can be categorized into two literature streams: 1. viewing engagement from a purely behavioral perspective and emphasizing engagement as a customer's behavioral manifestation (e.g., van Doorn et al. 2010) and 2. considering engagement a multidimensional combination of behavioral and psychological factors (e.g., Brodie et al. 2011). This dissertation follows the latter and views consumer engagement as a consumer's voluntary cognitive, emotional, and behavioral investments in the interaction object (Hollebeek et al. 2019).

The behavioral engagement view highlights engagement as a "behavioral manifestation toward a brand or firm, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers" (van Doorn et al. 2010). What is central in this perspective is that engagement reflects voluntary customer actions toward the object of interest, such as a firm or a brand (Jaakkola and Alexander 2014; Keller 2009). Digital engagement activities include learning-based content consumption, contributing to discussions, providing feedback, and starting new discussions (Eigenraam et al. 2018). Here, the increased effort required for implementing the practice requires more intense engagement (Maslowska et al. 2016). The behavioral engagement dimension plays an important role in the literature, which approaches engagement from the psychological perspective stream. It is here that behavioral engagement reflects the consumer's intrinsic motivation to approach and interact with the engagement object (Algesheimer et al. 2005; Dessart et al. 2016; Solem and Pedersen 2016; So et al. 2016; Hollebeek et al. 2014). Hollebeek et al. (2014, 154) call this an activation, which manifests as increased "energy, effort, and time" related to brand-related interactions. In this dissertation, behavioral engagement is defined as the energy, effort, and/or time spent consuming DCM content (Hollebeek and Macky 2019), which subsequently increase in frequency (Holliman and Rowley 2014).

Consistent with the information processing literature (Petty and Cacioppo 1986; Chaiken 1980), cognitive engagement arises from a consumer's personal connection to and interest in (i.e., involvement) the available engagement objects (Brodie et al. 2011; Dessart et al. 2016). Cognitive engagement manifests as focused attention (Vivek et al. 2012; Hollebeek et al. 2014). It means that, when consumers are cognitively engaged, they are concentrating on and immersed with the engagement object during the consumption episode (So et al. 2016; Dessart et al. 2016). By contrast, emotional engagement refers to the affective and emotional responses that engagement object-related interactions induce. The consumer engagement literature states that emotional (affective) engagement consists primarily of feelings of enthusiasm and enjoyment that are related to the engagement object (So et al. 2016; Vivek et al. 2014; Hollebeek et al. 2014). Enthusiasm reflects the "intrinsic level of excitement and interest" toward the engagement object (Dessart et al. 2015, 35), and enjoyment reflects the "pleasure and happiness derived from interactions with the engagement partner" (Dessart et al. 2015, 35).

3.2 Engagement with the DCM content

Based on chapter 2, DCM content is the primary trigger for consumers' DCM engagement. Similar to how involvement motivates consumer engagement in general (Brodie et al. 2011), consumer's topical involvement (i.e., DCM content relevancy) motivates them to pay attention to and engage with DCM. High involvement conditions also generate focused and in-depth information processing (Zaichkowsky 1985; Chaiken 1980) and thus strengthen the cognitive engagement. Consistently, consumer-relevant thematic DCM content (i.e. locutionary acts) is also able to arouse compelling DCM consumption experiences, when the consumer makes sense of the arguments and value of DCM communication. When the experience is compelling, it can lead to appreciating the communication more due to the utility of the content consumption experience (Cesario, Grant, and Higgins 2004). This appraisal is then able to induce emotional engagement. The utilitarian value (i.e., understanding, learning, and increasing one's performance), but also emotional value (i.e., enjoying the content that corresponds to one's needs and interests) thus arise from cognitive and emotional engagement with DCM content. Customer-perceived relevance and value also strengthens behavioral engagement with DCM content (Hollebeek and Macky 2019; Katz 1963/1964). Cesario, et al. (2004) notes that if an individual expects an activity to facilitate positive outcomes, he or she becomes increasingly eager to engage. Put differently, activities that merge well with needs and goals of an individual are more engaging during the interactive episode (Higgins 2006) and causes more readiness to put increasing effort toward the activity by strengthening the attraction towards the activity (Higgins & Scholer 2009). Consequently, these arguments justify DCM's orientation towards an ongoing content creation to uphold the consumer engagement and maintain their attraction toward DCM.

Brands aim at activating the attraction by delivering DCM content through various different online platforms, such as social media, email newsletters or website-based blogs. Actually, often social media and newsletters are used as a route to introduce and promote new website-based DCM content to consumers (e.g., Järvinen and Taiminen 2016). Using social media and email however make the DCM activity and the content to compete with other content that is presented on that particular platform. Hence, consumers should perceive DCM content presented in these platforms as highly attractive for letting DCM activity to stand out. Relative high attractiveness is also needed to activate the consumer to abandon their current media consumption and shift to brand's website to consume the DCM content. This dissertation addresses both high attracted and less attracted consumers. Those highly attracted consumers, who convert to another online platform to consume DCM content are called as avid consumers. Those less attracted consumers, who only subscribe to and consume newsletters or a brand's DCM content on social media are called as skim consumers. The diverging effects of these two groups regarding the DCM engagement performance are the focus of dissertation article one.

3.3 Brand engagement in DCM

DCM literature argues that DCM is able to facilitate consumer-brand relationships through brand engagement (Rancati and Gordini 2014; Vollero and Palazzo 2015; Hollebeek and Macky 2019). This rationale seems to typically lean on the social exchange theory (Blau 1964), which argues that the more an actor perceives to gain (benefits and value) from other actor, the more favorable he or she perceives the relationship to be (in DCM context; see e.g., Hollebeek and Macky 2019). However, this rationale is inadequate from the perspective of the theory of communicative action (Habermas 1984). Without communicative orientation by the source, there is no guarantee that consumers interpret brand-related activities as a relational episode (see also Finne and Grönroos 2017). Consequently, this dissertation argues the importance of brand-initiated communicative DCM actions in triggering brand engagement and strengthening relational sense making in DCM. Similar to consumer engagement with other kinds of engagement objects, consumer brand engagement arises from consumers' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral investments (Hollebeek et al. 2019). Unlike consumers' DCM content-oriented engagement, these investments are focused on a brand. In particular, Hollebeek and Macky (2019) define brand engagement in DCM as follows: Cognitive brand engagement occurs when DCM activity induces brand-related attention, concentration, and learning. Conversely, emotional brand engagement emerges from the DCM activity as brand-related emotional responses of pleasure and enjoyment. Moreover, behavioral brand engagement manifests as brand-related energy, effort, and time spent on the DCM activity.

While relevant and valuable DCM content motivates consumers to engage with the DCM activity, the literature has anticipated brand's authenticity and helpfulness as two potential brand engagement triggers (e.g., Holliman and Rowley 2014; Hollebeek and Macky 2019). Brand's authenticity relates to the genuineness and credibility of the brand behaviors (Bruhn et al. 2012; Morhart et al. 2015; Napoli et al. 2014; Fritz et al. 2017). It means that authentic brands act in a manner that is consistent with its values and the real identity (Fritz et al. 2017, 327). Reflecting on DCM as a communicative act, brand's authenticity would thus manifest as the genuine orientation to help the consumer with the DCM content. but also as an open attempt for communication-based brand engagement. Only the open communication allows common understanding through allowing communicative parties to evaluate the communicative attempt (Habermas 1984), thus leading to communication-based brand engagement. Based on this discussion, authenticity, helpfulness and openness (as characterized by the transparency) are approached in this dissertation as the foundation for brand engagement and its relational outcomes. The following two sections 3.3.1 and 3.3.2 discuss the roles of a brand's helpfulness and transparency as the two key dimensions for ensuring the authentic DCM communication engagement.

3.3.1 The role of a brand's helpfulness

Helpfulness in general relates to supportive actions from one actor to another. In the DCM literature, this helpfulness is noted to occur when brands provide relevant and valuable content that helps the consumer learn, solve problems, and make good decisions (e.g., Holliman and Rowley 2014; Hollebeek and Macky 2019). However, helpfulness can include much more than simply being beneficial. Another marketing literature stream about product reviews acknowledges that helpfulness relates also to the perceived quality of the review content, as well as to the representations of a communicator's competence and credibility (Lee and Choeh 2017). This is consistent with the fact that source credibility is commonly acknowledged as one of the main communicator-related judgments that individuals process. McCroskey and Teven (1999) note that source credibility is often addressed through two facets: trustworthiness represents how sincere and honest the communicator is perceived to be, while competence, on the other hand, relates to the perceived expertise or skillfulness of the communicator. McCroskey and Teven (1999), however, provide empirically valid evidence for goodwill as the third dimension of source credibility. Unlike the two other dimensions, goodwill relates directly to consumer evaluations of the benevolent intentions of the communicator. This benevolence has an important role in trusted customer relationships (Mayer, Davis and Schoorman 1995).

Following the above rationale, this dissertation approaches helpfulness as "a bundle of the brand's functionally oriented DCM actions executed in a knowledgeable and benevolent manner" (Taiminen and Ranaweera 2019, 1761). Functional orientation reflects the brand's purpose to communicate DCM content that is instrumental in helping consumers achieve their needs and wants, while knowledgeable and benevolent execution reflects the communicative actions needed for brand engagement and subsequent relational sense-making. In this dissertation, brand engagement is argued to arise from consumers' motivations to evaluate the genuineness of a brand's intents in DCM, as well as to interpret brand-related attraction in DCM. Considering attraction is important, as the increased attraction toward another actor motivates relationally oriented interactions (Montoya and Horton 2014). Following the above discussion, helpful communicative brand actions should focus on applying a brand's knowledge capabilities to DCM. This view is consistent with the concept called task attractiveness, which occurs when an actor perceives another actor as having skills and competence that can help the individual attain their own goals and perform better (McCroskey and McCain 1974). This supports the view that DCM consumers are primarily instrumentally oriented in their DCM consumption.

However, instead of only beneficial knowledge contributions, showing a willingness to benefit the other actor can motivate relational sense-making (Montoya and Horton 2014, 60). This is because such actions symbolize benevolent intents (Semmer et al. 2008), emphasizing the role of benevolence in a brand's helpfulness. The role of helpful communicative brand actions in consumer-brand relationships is the focus of the second dissertation article.

3.3.2 The role of a brand's transparency

Even if DCM communication would fundamentally be about helping consumers, it is still a marketing activity, and implemented by a commercial source. In commercial contexts such as marketing communication, consumers are especially alert to processing the intent of the communicator (Friestad and Wright 1994: Tutaj and van Reijmersdal 2012). Hence, this dissertation argues that transparent communicative actions are also important brand engagement trigger in DCM.. Transparency helps consumers to rule out manipulative intent (Gilpin et al. 2010), thus lessening the persuasion-related risk (Leitch 2017). The purpose of transparent communicative actions are therefore at the same time to help consumers authenticate the brand's helpfulness in DCM. Therefore, unlike competence and benevolence based helpful brand actions, transparent actions are trustworthiness and benevolence ensuring. Consistent with other recent marketing literature (e.g., Leitch 2017), this dissertation defines transparency based on Rawlins (2009, 75) as follows:

> The deliberate attempt to make available all legally releasable information—whether positive or negative in nature—in a manner that is accurate, timely, balanced and unequivocal, for the purpose of enhancing the reasoning ability of publics and holding organisations accountable for their actions, policies, and practices.

As the definition of transparency reveals, transparency facilitates consumer understanding and helps them make reasoned judgments about the communication. In relation to DCM, being a transparent brand would mean that the brand would provide all the necessary disclosures and arguments that can help the consumer to interpret and judge the DCM communication. This includes supporting the consumer understanding of the topical DCM content, thus reducing the consumer risk to misunderstand and misinterpret the given DCM-related information. This supports the communicative action perspective as these actions increase the comprehensibility and cogency of information. From the perspective of benevolence, transparency strengthens the accountability of a brand and its actions. The use of transparent communicative actions to proclaim accountability therefore enables consumers to identify clearly the brand's helpful intentions in DCM, as well as ensure that brands aim not to mislead them. The role of transparent communicative actions is the focus of dissertation article three.

4 METHODOLOGY

This chapter explains the methodological choices that were made in this dissertation, beginning with introducing critical realism as the paradigmatic orientation and explaining its underlying assumptions. The chapter then explains the research orientation, introduces the data for each of the three articles, and explains how the data were collected. Finally, the chapter explains the methods of analysis and addresses the reliability and validity of the findings.

4.1 Critical realism as a research paradigm

Paradigmatic assumptions provide a justified background for implementing scientific research. Paradigmatic reasoning guides the selection of the most suitable and acceptable research method. However, paradigms also have an even more fundamental role in scientific activities in that they regulate the perspective to the generated research knowledge and provide a rationale for two types of paradigmatic assumptions: ontology and epistemology. While ontology reasons what is real in the world, epistemology argues how the research knowledge represents the reality (Guba and Lincoln 1994, 108). Scientific disciplines usually have a dominant paradigm. The marketing discipline has traditionally been developed via positivism (Easton 2002). Positivism builds on the ontological and epistemological assumptions that one true reality exists, and empirical observations from the events directly represent this reality (Järvensivu and Törnroos 2010). From the positivist stance, research creates objective knowledge, which is not distorted by the subjective interpretations and social influence of the researcher (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008). However, the marketing discipline has recently started to admit that the positivist view of knowledge is rather naïve; consequently, the discipline is moving toward a more realist paradigm (Hunt 1990; Easton 2002; Järvensivu and Törnroos 2010). In a similar manner, this dissertation applies the principles of critical realism, which has evolved as a prominent research paradigm.

Critical realism has become a more common and acceptable paradigm in marketing because it provides a more approachable view to researchers who have traditionally considered positivism and interpretism the extreme ends of the paradigmatic continuum. Both positivists and critical realists share the ontological assumption that our knowledge of reality is limited (Sayer 1992; Easton 2002) and recognize the need for deductive empirical testing to understand reality (Järvensivu and Törnroos 2010). However, critical realists abandon the naïve knowledge generation view of positivists, who see empirical observation as a direct reflection of reality. Epistemologically, critical realists instead consider knowledge a quest to finding the most valid and comprehensive representation of the real world (Easton 2002). The role of empirically testing the theories is to validate the most acceptable explanation of reality (Järvensivu and Törnroos 2010).

Critical realists also admit that knowledge of reality is socially bound (Sayer 1992). Hence, they embrace the relatively interpretist view to knowledge generation; they admit to the need for socially constructed knowledge generation; and they allow community consensus as an appropriate method for knowledge creation (Järvensivu and Törnroos 2010). Unlike interpretists, who argue the existence of parallel social realities (Lincoln and Guba 1985), critical realists see social meanings as the way toward the most consistent and frequently emerging explanation of reality. Järvensivu and Törnroos (2010, 102) call this "triangulating the truth." In line with this perspective, incongruities in theories, empirical evidence, and socially constructed meanings can make knowledge more volatile and less valid.

The rationale for critical realism assumptions originates from Roy Bhaskar's (1978) work. He explains that reality occurs on three stratified layers: empirical, actual, and real. The empirical layer represents the socially constructed knowledge that is bounded by human perception. However, actual reality reflects events that happen in the real world. Instead of emphasizing either of these two layers of reality, the aim of the critical realist is to go further and explain how real independent reality works (Bhaskar 1978) by explaining the mechanisms that make certain events real and make people relate certain meanings to those events (Sayer 1992).

4.2 Abductive research orientation

This dissertation aims at generating knowledge related to DCM engagement and its role in fostering consumer–brand relationships by following an abductive research orientation. This approach supports addressing knowledge as a cumulative process and allows synthesis of the findings through cyclical assessments of the theories and empirical data of the three articles. This process differs from the inductive research process in that it does not use empirical findings as the starting point for knowledge generation (Järvensivu and Törnroos 2010). The process also differs from the deductive research process because it moves beyond testing the hypotheses and existing theories. The following paragraphs address the use of the abductive research process in this dissertation.

Consistent with the critical realist view (see Bhaskar 1978; Fletcher et al. 2017), the research process started by identifying the existing theoretical knowledge from the DCM phenomenon (which is temporally updated). The process phase included reviewing the existing academic DCM articles and widely recognized practitioner books, obtaining a greater understanding of the DCM phenomenon, and exploring the most fundamental, commonly agreed upon aspects of DCM (see chapter 2). The literature review revealed that the research on DCM was previously purely conceptual and mostly based on qualitative interviews for describing the DCM phenomenon (e.g., Holliman and Rowley 2014) or surveys that quantified the most important elements of DCM activity (e.g., Rahim and Clemens 2012). To contribute to the DCM literature, this dissertation aimed to explore the interrelationships among the described DCM elements and scrutinize the role of engagement in the DCM.

The first study utilized an online survey and statistical testing as the research method (see chapters 4.3 and 4.4). Consistent with the critical realist view (Bhaskar 1978), the focus was on the mechanisms that act as the reason for one event to cause another. The particular focus was on revealing the mechanism that causes favorable brand-related responses for highly and less attracted DCM audiences. The aim was to understand the importance of pull strength in DCM, which motivates either avid consumption or skim consumption. The findings yielded the need to place a greater focus on the diverging roles of DCM content engagement and brand engagement to understand engaging DCM and its positive relationship outcomes. This necessitated a shift from the dominant DCM focus on the relevant and valuable content toward exploring the engaging roles of a brand in consumers' DCM consumption experiences.

The shift in perspective directed the attention into the brand-oriented communicative DCM signals as a form of relationship communication. The aim of study two was to understand the role of a brand's helpfulness in DCM activities, especially related to its role in triggering brand engagement and increasing relationship value and trusted brand relationships. Building on the relationship communication approach (Finne and Grönroos 2009; 2017) and the findings from study one, the role of a brand's helpfulness-related sense-making arising from DCM engagement was anticipated as the likely cognitive-oriented mechanism that causes brand trust. Similar to study one, study two utilized an online survey and statistical testing as the research method.

The relevance of a relational sense-making mechanism based on the communicative actions in DCM was made evident by the results of studies one and two. Sense-making induces evaluation and learning, which are outcomes of consumers' cumulative brand-related engagements in DCM (Hollebeek and Macky 2019). While study two focused on genuine helpfulness in DCM as a means of authentic relationship building, study three concentrated on the credibility aspect of authenticity and identified the need for transparency as an enabler of credible and authentic DCM activities. It is important to focus on the brand's transparency in DCM because it allows consumers to make sense of the brand's authenticity (Gilpin et al. 2010).

Discussions on transparency are lacking in DCM studies; therefore, study three approached the research aim via a qualitative orientation and used semi-structured interviews as the research method. When the research knowledge on a specific phenomenon is scarce, researchers often utilize the inductive research process (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008); however, a different approach was applied in study three. The process started with bridging the theoretical knowledge about authentic relationship building and transparency as well as the context-specific knowledge related to DCM. Notably, the aim was not to focus on providing rich perspectives related to the phenomenon, even though this is often the aim of interpretist research (Guba and Lincoln 1994). Instead, the qualitatively oriented research process followed critical realism and searched for the most consistent reflection of reality by combining theories and achieving a consensus among the researcher, other researchers, and practitioners who have gained recognition as experts in the field.

The findings of the three individual studies answered the two dissertation research questions and allowed for synthesis and revisualization of the findings. The results of this process are addressed in the discussion chapter.

4.3 Sampling and data collection

The empirical data for the first study consist of 2 groups and 189 responses. The skim reader group (n = 76) comprised consumers who were relatively low in their attraction toward the DCM content and who only consumed the brief introductory versions of it on Facebook. The other group comprised avid consumers (n = 113) who were highly attracted by the brand's DCM content and read comprehensive versions of it through the brand's DCM-related blog. The invitation to participate in a survey was provided through these two platforms. The demographic profile was 92% female. Most respondents (71%) were 26–45 years of age. The demographic profile was also consistent with the DCM target group. The paper utilized multiple indicator measures that were adopted from the existing literature and fitted to the context of this study. All the items were measured on a five-point Likert scale.

The data for study two were collected among the newsletter subscribers of a large B2B brand. The invitation to participate was sent via email to all the subscribers. The sample included 195 responses (equal to one-tenth of the monthly newsletter readers). The demographic profile of the respondents was as follows: 60% of the respondents were male and 40% were female; most respondents were 40–59 years old (68%); about half (47%) of the respondents were employed in a firm that used products and services of the B2B brand; and about 40% of the respondents had read either the majority or all of the newsletters, while the same amount had consumed only a minor share of the newsletter content, and 16% did not read the content at all. The latter group was kept in the sample because they still subscribed to the DCM content and thus had some knowledge of it. The paper utilized multiple indicator measures, which were measured on a seven-point Likert scale. Most measures were adopted from the existing literature and fitted to the study context. However, a helpful brand action measure was formed based on the conceptualization made in the paper.

The empirical data for the third article were collected using ten semi-structured theme interviews among the marketing and public relations associations' and agencies' representatives. The co-authors collectively chose the first interviewee based on the person's qualifications in relation to the phenomenon. Snowball sampling was utilized to reach other recognized persons in the field (identified by the other interviewees). Before the interviews were scheduled, interviewees were asked to evaluate whether they felt they had appropriate knowledge about the phenomenon. The thematic areas for the interviews were deduced from the theoretical discussion. The interview structure consisted of four areas: 1. the term that the practitioner wanted to use when referring to commercial/paid forms of brand online content creation; 2. the elements of the good/beneficial and the bad/harmful use of those activities; 3. credibility related to commercial hybrid online content creation; and 4. the transparency of those activities.

4.4 Data analysis

The data analyses for the first two articles were implemented using structural equation modeling (SEM). The SEM technique is popular, especially in the social sciences, because it allows the researcher to address unobservable, latent concepts and their relationships (Jöreskog and Sörbom 1982). What makes this technique especially suitable to this dissertation is that the dissertation articles address various psychological concepts, such as engagement, value, attitude, and trust. Moreover, the aim of this dissertation is to move beyond exploring the key elements that define the DCM phenomenon and explain their interrelationships. The following paragraphs explain the data analysis techniques that were used for each article.

Article one utilized variance-based SEM using PLS 3.0 software. PLS SEM is based on a composite-based measurement practice, where unmeasured latent factors are formed as a composite construct of the items that were used to measure the theoretical construct (Hair et al. 2011). The method is especially appropriate in exploratory situations because it helps reveal patterns in the data (Hair et al. 2014, 3). Notably, article one was primarily based on exploratory DCM studies, and there was no particularly strong theory behind the research model. Thus, PLS was used to explore the particular mechanism at work in the specific condition. Moreover, using PLS was also chosen because it is a nonparametric method that does not require the data to be normally distributed (Hair et al. 2011). In addition, the two relatively small conditional data sets in the study promoted the use of PLS, which utilizes bootstrapping sampling. This sampling method randomly selects the subsamples from the original data and estimates the model based on those subsamples, which allows specification of the standard errors from the data and highlights significant path relationships (Hair et al. 2014, 163).

The SEM data analysis practices can be categorized into measurement model assessments and structural model assessments. Measurement model assessments relate to scrutinizing the validity and reliability of each construct. The validity and reliability of the studies are the focus of section 4.5. Structural model assessments relate to exploring the relationships between constructs. The relationships were assessed in article one and guided by Hair et al. (2014) by measuring the construct relationships (β) and their significance with a 95% confidence internal and measuring the overall predictive relevance of independent variables in determining the dependent variable (R^2) and the effect sizes of each construct's effect in explaining the predictive relevance (f^2). Study one consisted of two groups; therefore, the measurement invariance of composite models (MICOM) procedure was implemented to test the invariance and verify the homogeneity of the two groups (see Henseler et al. 2016).

Unlike paper one, the data analysis for paper two was implemented using a covariance-based method of SEM in AMOS 24.0. This method forms the latent constructs based on the shared variance of its indicators (Jöreskog and Sörbom 1982). With this method, the latent constructs reveal the common cause of their indicators. The common cause also differentiates the covariance-based SEM from the composite score-based PLS method that was used in the first article. Compared to the PLS-SEM, the strength of the covariance-based SEM is that it addresses statistical errors, which indicate variation that is not caused by the latent factor. Thus, it provides a more valid reflection of the theoretical concepts (Bagozzi 2011). It is also a more valid approach to testing structural models because confirmatory factor analysis in AMOS provides indices for the global goodness-of-fit of the entire model. The importance of these goodness-of-fit indices lies in their power to explain how well the comprehensive model supports the covariation in the data (Anderson and Gerbing 1988). The structural model assessments were similar to study one, excluding the measurement of the effect sizes (f^2). Moreover, during the data analysis of study two, a mediation analysis was also implemented to test the hypothesized indirect effects. The mediation model was implemented using Preacher and Hayes's (2008) process tool (Model 6) with 5,000 bootstrap samples.

The interview data for the third article were analyzed using the thematic analysis technique (Miles and Huberman 1994, 10). In this process, the audio-taped interviews where transcribed word for word; however, all identifiable information regarding the interviewees or their firms was omitted. The transcribed interview data were then grouped into thematic categories that were consistent with the four thematic areas. Next, the data were reduced until the thematic categories included only the relevant interview quotations. In this phase, the categorically representative codes that highlighted a specific thematic area were issued to each of the quotations. The categorical codes were then quantified in terms of frequency of their occurrence. Following the critical realist rationale, the objective of this action was to reveal the dominant perspectives to the phenomenon. The final phase of the data analysis included combining the thematically coded data to the researchers' theoretical underpinnings that were related to authentic relationship building, transparency, and the commercial online content creation context. Based on these combinations, the final conclusions were provided.

4.5 Reliability and validity of the studies

Generating reliable and valid knowledge is a fundamental aim of scientific research. Reliability refers to the consistency of the research procedures that generate the same results when the research process is replicated (Yin 2014; Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008; Guest, MacQueen, and Namey 2012; Kerlinger et al. 1980, 443). Conversely, validity reflects how accurately research is able to address the intended phenomenon (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008; Guest, MacQueen, and Namey 2012). Reliability and validity have different emphases in the qualitative and quantitative research traditions. Quantitative research underscores the role of statistical evaluations of reliability and validity and focuses on the measurement instruments. Qualitative research instead underlines the trustworthiness and quality of the research process (Lincoln and Guba 1985). The need for trustworthiness criteria in qualitative research arises from the fact that qualitative research builds on socially induced knowledge and its subjective interpretation. The validity and reliability of the two quantitative studies and the one qualitative study are therefore addressed separately in the following paragraphs.

The quantitative studies of this dissertation include the common criteria for assessing the quality of the quantitative studies: reliability, face validity, criterion validity, and construct validity (Ping 2004). Several efforts were made *a priori* to gather data to support the reliability of the two quantitative studies. To ensure that the respondents were able to understand the survey questions, the clarity of the survey and the measured items were addressed through dialogue between two other researchers and feedback that was collected through survey pretesting. To avoid data distortion that can be caused by the socially desirable answering style and to ensure reliable responses (MacKenzie and Podsakoff 2012), the anonymized responses were secured during data collection. The reliability of the data was also supported by using multi-item measures and mixing the individual construct measures in the survey. This procedure helps avoid any biased internal consistency of the measured items that can be caused by straightlining the survey answers (MacKenzie and Podsakoff 2012). Guided by Hair et al. (2014), internal consistency reliability was also established statistically during the data analysis. Indicator reliabilities were established by ensuring that the individual factor loadings exceeded 0.7 (Hair et al. 2010). During the process, the indicator reliability assessment identified two items that were not sufficiently explained by the latent construct. Given that the model consisted of reflective items, removing these two indicators was reasonable and enabled an increase in the internal reliability of the constructs. The composite reliability scores were then examined to assess how the items were related to one another and to the construct that they were expected to reflect[1]. After removing the two items, the lowest composite reliability score was 0.821, which indicated good internal reliability (Bagozzi and Yi 1988).

Face validity indicates the measurement items' correspondence to the theoretical construct (Ping 2004), while criterion validity refers to how well the construct measure corresponds to other measures of the same theoretical construct (Ping 2004, 130). These two validity types were ensured through the use of validated measures. The survey data were gathered in Finnish. Therefore, the face validity of the measures was verified by enlisting another researcher to compare the original questions and the translated questions. To support the face validity of the, "helpful brand actions" construct, the development was guided by the work of Ping (2004). In the process, a comprehensive theoretical rationale was provided and the content of the concept was described alongside with the explicit definition of the concept. While emphasizing the validated measures, a few other indicators were also included to explore the theoretical concept more comprehensively. The measures were found to have good internal consistency; therefore, this practice can be seen to increase the criterion validity of the measures. The measures were also fitted to the context. Therefore, the lack of direct contextual evidence that was offered by the existing measures might have limited the criterion validity of some measures (Ping 2004). Moreover, the formed measure that was related to helpful brand actions was limited in providing evidence for the criterion validity.

Construct validity indicates how well the measured construct represents the particular theoretical concept and how it compares to other constructs (Ping 2004, 130). In quantitative research, construct validity is commonly addressed by exploring convergent and discriminant validities of the measured constructs. Convergent validity is established when individual construct measures are highly correlated and share a common variance, whereas discriminant validity is established when the constructs are shown to be distinct. In this dissertation, the construct validity assessments follow Fornell and Larcker's (1981) procedure: the sufficient construct reliabilities were established (reliability; see above), and the convergent validities of the constructs were then addressed by calculating the average variance extracted (AVE) scores for each construct. Each AVE score in the two studies explained more than half the variance of the items that were used to measure the construct, which confirmed the convergent validities (Fornell and Larcker 1981). The final step included determining whether any of the construct correlations exceeded the 0.9 threshold (Hair et al. 2010) and whether any of the squared AVE values exceeded the level of correlation between other constructs (Fornell and Larcker 1981). They did not in either case, indicating that adequate discriminant validities were established.

[1] Note: One construct consisted of only two indicators; therefore, internal consistency was measured through the correlation coefficient.

TABLE 4 Statistical reliabilities and validities

Criterion	Acceptable Threshold	Dissertation values
Indicator reliability	> 0.7[c]	≥ 0.74 [A1]; ≥ 0.70 [A2]
Composite reliability	> 0.7[b]	≥ 0.82 [A1]; ≥ 0.89 [A2]
Convergent validity (AVE)	> 0.5[a]	≥ 0.60 [A1]; ≥ 0.57 [A2]
Discriminant validity	square root of AVE > construct correlations[a]; construct correlations < 0.9[c]	Passed [A1; A2]
Model validity		
Chi-square/Degrees of Freedom ratio	< 3[c]	1.9 [A2]
RMSEA	< 0.08[c]	0.068 [A2]
NFI	> 0.9[c]	0.882 [A2]
IFI,	> 0.9[c]	0.940 [A2]
TLI	> 0.9[c]	0.931 [A2]
CFI	> 0.9[c]	0.940 [A2]

Notes: [a] Fornell and Larcker 1981; [b] Bagozzi and Yi 1988; [c] Hair et al. 2010; [A1]Article 1; [A2]Article 2

Even if the constructs have construct validity per the abovementioned criteria, the survey method may also cause specious construct validities because participants may respond in a stylistic manner, such as tending to favor extremely positive/negative answering. Respondents may also suffer from low motivation to respond, which can cause less accurate responses and lead to apparent increases in variance among the construct items or covariation between the constructs (MacKenzie and Podsakoff 2012). The two quantitative studies assessed this problem by testing whether the latent method factor influences the results (see Podsakoff et al. 2003). In this approach, the method factor, which was composed of all the original measurement items in the measurement model, was allowed to correlate with all the original constructs to reveal whether the method factor significantly changed the original factor loading. In this case, it did not; thus, common method bias is unlikely to be a serious concern in these studies.

The hypothesized model was also found valid; the goodness-of-fit indices were satisfactory (Hair et al. 2010), and an alternative model that comprised the hypothesized relationships as well as all other complementary direct relationships to the dependent variable neither increased the model fit nor revealed any significant relationships among the complementary relationships.

Following the critical realist tradition, in the qualitative study, the interviews were conducted as a means to assess the social consensus on the phenomenon and reveal the most common representation of the reality. To validate the theory-based perspective of the role of transparent actions in commercial online content creation as a means to authentic relationship building, the study addressed the most common explanations based on the interview answers. Consequently, the procedure focused on the study's validity through closely related analytical induction and analytical generalization, which was suggested by Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008, 4–5). Analytic induction (Glaser and Straus 1967) refers to combining the existing theory and the empirical data and scrutinizing whether the theoretical phenomenon must be reformulated based on the empirical data. The findings converge with the theory and thus ensure the validity of the theoretical discussion. Analytic generalization explains in which contexts the results can be generalized (Yin 2014). While the two quantitative studies aimed at generalizing the findings to a study population through supporting the hypothesized theoretical relationships, the qualitative study aimed at generalizing the interview findings to the theoretically induced propositions that are made in the paper.

Notably, the abovementioned procedures lack some commonly utilized reliability procedures, such as including many quotations, which enable the reader to audit the trustworthiness of the researcher's interpretations, and in-depth descriptions of the data collection processes, which enable study replication (e.g., Yin 2014). Similar to typical descriptive studies (Guest, MacQueen, and Namey 2012), replicability was not the goal of this study. The study's reliability was instead seen to arise through validating the theory-based discussion. This is consistent with the fact that valid qualitative data is reliable by its very nature (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

5 SUMMARIES OF THE ARTICLES

This chapter summarizes the three dissertation articles and explains the view of each article as well as how each article is influenced by the findings of the other two.

5.1 Facilitating favorable brand connections through attractive DCM content

The first dissertation article explored the role of DCM as a pull marketing activity aimed at attracting consumers to consume DCM content. The article defined attraction-based DCM content as "thematically-bound, non-brand focused, and frequently-produced messages with a purpose of repeatedly driving consumers toward the brand's online sphere of influence" (p. 449). The attraction toward the DCM content was argued to differ in terms of motivational intensity, depending on the consumer's "interest in devoting energy, effort, and time" toward DCM consumption (Solem and Pedersen 2016, 448). This article scrutinized both low and high attraction. Consumers that were characterized by low attraction (i.e., skim reading) were solely motivated to read shorter versions of the DCM content on Facebook. High attraction (i.e., avid reading) drove the consumption of more comprehensive DCM content on the brand's website-based blog. Avid engagement thus represented an increased interest in seeking more compelling DCM experiences by understanding more about the topic compared to skim reading.

With the focus on non-customers instead of existing customers, this study highlighted the role of DCM at the early stages of customer relationships. The study identified brand familiarity (i.e., the collection of a consumer's brand-related experiences and knowledge) (Alba and Hutchinson 1987; Campbell and Keller 2003) and brand attitude (i.e., favorable evaluations about the brand) (Schmitt 2012) as the two important brand-related outcomes of DCM in this relationship stage. The findings indicated a statistically significant difference between the brand attitude formation of both the avid and skim-reader groups. The skim readers' brand attitude was primarily formed in the affect transfer from a positive (i.e., interesting, likable, and non-irritating) content attitude toward positive brand attitudes and was largely based on informational and emotional value experiences with the DCM content. While brand familiarity also played a role, the primary importance of affect transfer indicated that there is a peripheral, exposure-based role of a brand for skim readers (see Muehling and Lazniak 1992), who pay little attention to the brand and process the brand in a rather limited manner in relation to DCM (MacKenzie et al. 1986). Consequently, skim readers' brand engagement did not seem high during DCM consumption.

Divergent from the skim-reader group, avid readers' content attitude did not have a significant influence on brand attitude. Instead, the results indicated that frequent content consumption and brand familiarity affected the brand attitude of avid readers. Frequent content consumption strengthens the brand-related comprehension and evaluations of why the brand is personally relevant (Baker et al. 1986); thus, it is able to increase relational closeness between actors (e.g., Ledbetter et al. 2016; Hudson et al. 2016). Therefore, the findings related to the avid reader group imply that DCM triggers brand-related engagement, especially for those consumers who are highly attracted by the brand's DCM activities. Collectively, the findings suggest the importance of highly attractive DCM content when brands aim at supporting positive brand engagement and relational sense making through DCM.

5.2 Becoming a valued, trusted brand through helpfulness

Guided by the results of the first article, the second article shifted the focus from the DCM content toward how DCM communication triggers brand engagement and fosters brand's relational roles. The article emphasized understanding the role of a brand's helpfulness in triggering brand engagement and in facilitating valued and trusted brand relationships. Helpfulness was conceptualized in this article as "a bundle of the brand's functionally oriented DCM actions executed in a knowledgeable and benevolent manner" (p. 1761). The relevance of helpful DCM actions in fostering relationship outcomes was argued to arise from the potential of these actions to transfer communicative meanings and signal the brand's DCM motives (e.g., Finne and Grönroos 2009). The article explained functional orientation as the brand's intent to share knowledge and invest in knowledge-based efforts that make DCM content increasingly useful for customers' needs while helping them make reasoned decisions and solve problems. From the brand's perspective, this helps them signify their areas of expertise and show their willingness to act for the benefit of consumers through DCM.

Based on the literature review in the article, the provision of relevant topics and ideas, a problem solving orientation toward relevant content, and efforts to interpret, analyze, and explain topics were seen to address (although they were not argued as inclusive) the helpful actions of the brand (see Table 5 below). In the article, the helpful DCM brand actions concept was considered consistent with the attractive DCM content as the primary engagement object in the DCM. The concept builds on consumers' motives related to seeking and understanding relevant and valuable information from their thematic areas of interest, which correspond to behavioral engagement with DCM content. It was argued that attention, in-depth processing, and learning from the DCM content were parallel to the idea of cognitive engagement and DCM that correlates with these motives and that this can also increase the positive emotional responses and thus emotional engagement.

The findings of the empirical study revealed that helpful brand actions have the ability to engage consumers with brands. Helpful brand actions were found to induce cognitive–emotional brand engagement and to act as a source of attraction, which drives consumers' later engagement with DCM and the brand. The results imply that the brand-related reasons (i.e., the customer-valued actions by the brand) can cause long-term engagement with DCM.

TABLE 5 Helpful brand actions

Helpfulness manifestations based on helpful DCM acts	Prevailing example
DCM content delivery	
Introducing relevant topics	Providing knowledge related to current issues
Conveying relevant ideas	Providing thought-provoking and stimulating perspectives
Problem-solving orientation to topics	Providing problem-solving guidance
Information processing by the brand	
Efforts to explain topics	Providing comprehensive descriptions related to specific topical content
Efforts to analyze topics	Providing a rationale for topics under discussion
Efforts to interpret relevant topics	Bringing out various meanings from topics

Beyond brand engagement, the relationship influences of helpful brand actions were found to occur through the two sense-making mechanisms. Helpful actions made by the brand were found to directly increase trust toward the brand. Trust was conceptualized as "the confidence the customer has in the brand's beneficial relationship attributes in terms of its competence, benevolence, and integrity" (p. 1765). Hence, helpful brand actions contribute to a knowledgeable and benevolent image of the relationship partner. Relationship value perceptions (i.e., "a customer's subjective perceptions of the overall value of the brand relationship" [p. 1765]), were also found to affect trust toward the brand. Therefore, the more beneficial that consumers find their relationship with the brand, the more confidence they seem to have with the brand as a relationship partner. This important relationship is also related to the findings presented in the next paragraph.

The findings also indicate that consumers' cognitive–emotional engagement is required for allowing a brand's helpfulness to transform into increased relationship value perceptions. This finding supports the importance of DCM in triggering brand engagement to induce relational sense-making for DCM consumers. However, frequent brand-related consumption was not found to increase relationship value perceptions beyond the influence of cognitive–emotional brand engagement. The result adds to the findings of the first article by suggesting the importance of focusing not only on facilitating ongoing interactions between customers and brands by providing attractive DCM content but on highlighting brand-related engagement triggers in DCM. The findings of this study collectively show the relevance of helpful brand actions as a potential trigger. Given that the roles of customers and non-customers were controlled in this study, the role of helpful brand actions on DCM engagement should not be influenced by the diverging relationship stage roles of prospective and existing customers.

5.3 Ensuring brand authenticity in DCM through transparency

The third dissertation article addressed the roles of transparent communicative acts as a means of authentic relationship building through DCM and provided clarity for the use of commercial hybrid online content (i.e., native advertising and brand-sponsored content) as a DCM activity. The importance of transparent communicative actions was argued to arise from the need for brands to help consumers assess the authenticity of DCM activities on their own. The term "commercial hybrid content" was adopted to avoid focusing too strictly on advertising content or branded content, which are promotionally oriented in nature. Commercial hybrid content was instead seen to cover all paid brand-generated online content forms outside the brand-owned platforms. However, the DCM orientation of the study did include the general DCM discussion related to the role of paid DCM activities.

At the time of the article's writing, scant literature discussed transparency in the DCM domain. Consequently, the paper aimed at increasing understanding of the interrelationships between the studied concepts of authentic relationship building, transparency, and commercial hybrid content/paid DCM. The article used public relations and organizational communication literature as the theoretical basis because the discussion on transparency was most evolved in these literature streams from the relationship communication perspective. Furthermore, ten public relations and marketing communication associations' and agencies' representatives were interviewed to provide support for the anticipated role of transparent communicative acts in DCM and assess the role of commercial hybrid content forms as a paid DCM form.

Unlike some academic DCM literature (Hollebeek and Macky 2019), this study indicates that commercial hybrid content creation forms, such as native advertising or sponsored content, may be considered part of DCM activities. Interestingly, most of the interviewees preferred to use the term "content marketing," even in a paid media context. Commercial hybrid content was noted to optimally build on the informational needs and wants of the readers of that particular media channel. The practitioners also argued that it is important that the brand is involved and has a functional link to the topical areas of commercial hybrid content. These aspects are convergent with the central DCM principles (see also Chapter 2.). The interviewees also noted that commercial hybrid content can be used in an inappropriate way. For example, it may confuse readers into thinking that paid DCM content is part of the original editorial content that underlines and promotes the brand. This was acknowledged as a central reason for separating commercial hybrid content from authentic consumer value orientation in DCM activities. Hence, the article proposed that, when commercial hybrid content is used as a form of advertising (aiming to use the credibility of the editorial media or as a tool for brand or product promotion), the activity should not be mixed with authentic DCM activities.

The article identified three focus areas for transparent communication as part of authentic relationship building through DCM (see Table 6). The first focus area related to brand actions that ensure the genuineness of the brand in DCM. The article proposes that genuineness emerges when a brand (purposively) acts according to the DCM's fundamental value creation function and provides content that benefits the consumer. However, genuine identity-based DCM content provision emphasizes that brands should aim to add value for consumers through DCM content that builds on the brand's competence and skills. Consistent with the authentic customer-value orientation, genuineness of the brand and its DCM activities is threatened if the content underlines/promotes the brand or contains tentative or false information. Therefore, omitting these discrediting signals is also important.

The second focus area, dialogic engagement, relates closely to the brand's genuineness in relation to its DCM activity. Dialogic engagement requires brands to listen to the information needs and transparency requirements of their consumers. Listening supports authentic DCM value orientation by ensuring that consumers' needs are met. Participatory opportunities support authentic DCM activity by empowering consumers and allowing them to give feedback to the brand on topical content.

The third focus area relates to actions that ensure the credibility of the DCM activity and authority of the brand as its source. The knowledge-based content creation and customer value orientation should become visible in DCM content through the utilization of knowledge and providing justified knowledge-based argumentation to support consumers' content-based reasoning and understanding. To reduce the risk for consumers who believe in the message, direct disclosures relating to the brand's DCM intentions and reasons for involvement in the topic may provide more credible and authoritative reception. These disclosure statements directly relate to making the brand accountable because they enable the consumer to judge whether the brand is acting according to its DCM value proposition. Moreover, the reason for involvement may affect the DCM content perspective, and disclosing the perspective from which the brand addresses the topic enables the consumer to evaluate whether the brand has remained true to itself and to the DCM audience. Relatedly, the brand's transparent acts are credible and authoritative only if a brand's topical content, value orientation, and perspective correspond to the interests of the audience of the particular media. This points back to the importance of a brand's genuine DCM intent and dialogic engagement in DCM. Finally, in the paid DCM context, transparent DCM also relates to revealing the commerciality and the author of DCM content. This requires having appropriate disclaimers and a separate appearance from that of the original content.

TABLE 6 Transparent brand actions

Authenticity manifestation based on transparent DCM acts	**Prevailing example**
Genuine identity	
Customer-centric intent	Providing relevant and interesting content that benefits the consumer
Knowledge-based content	Focusing on content provision from the areas where the brand genuinely has something to offer
Truthful content	Maintaining content reliability and withholding uncertain or false information
Non-promotional content	Omitting the promotional orientation or brand underlining in the content
Credible authority	
Topical knowledge contributions	Utilizing brand expertise comprehensively for the benefit of the consumer
Contributions to quality content	Using evidence-based and understandable arguments for justifying the content
Disclosures on intent	Making the brand accountable for DCM activity by proclaiming their intent to provide content that is beneficial for the consumer
Brand involvement disclosures[a]	Disclosing a brand's perspective and the reason for involvement with a content topic
Commercial disclosures**	Disclosing the brand as the commercial source (payer) of content
Authorial disclosures**	Disclosing who has produced the content (e.g., produced by a brand or produced by a form of media for a brand)
Native content distinction**	Separating the original content sufficiently from commercial content (while maintaining the compatible consumption experience)
Audience-specific delivery[b]	Focusing on providing content that is consistent with the specific interests of consumers of a particular media
Dialogic engagement*	
Needs listening-based content	Ensuring that a brand's DCM corresponds with the information needs of its consumers
Participatory opportunities	Allowing consumers to give feedback on topical content

Note: **pre-eminent to a paid DCM; [a] mainly literature based; [b] mainly interview based

6 DISCUSSION

The purpose of this dissertation was to provide an understanding of DCM from the communication perspective. To approach this issue, the following two research questions were set:

RQ1: How does DCM trigger consumer engagement?
RQ2: How does DCM communication trigger relational sense-making?

The first research question was answered by considering both DCM content and the brand as the two DCM engagement objects. The synthesized findings support the explorative view of the existing DCM literature, and they underpin the role of relevant, valuable, and compelling content in generating consumer engagement with DCM content. This process involves two mechanisms. First, cognitive and emotional engagement arises from consumers' attraction to relevant and valuable DCM, which activates their DCM consumption, thus manifesting as behavioral DCM engagement. Second, when the relevant and valuable DCM content is perceived as highly attractive, it leads to increased cognitive engagement and behavioral engagement due to the motivation to assess the comprehensibility of the DCM content. Comprehensibility might also lead to emotional engagement due to the increasing understanding and utility of DCM content.

The two communication-oriented studies provide evidence also of the roles of a brand's helpfulness and transparency in fostering consumer brand engagement in DCM. By identifying and using a bundle of helpful brand actions, this dissertation showed their relevance, not only as triggers for cognitive–emotional brand engagement, but also as an attraction factor that activates the behavioral engagement of consumers. These findings give the needed structure of the role of DCM as an act of helping (Hollebeek and Macky 2019), and they further the DCM literature from the communicative perspective by providing proof of the role of helpful brand actions as communicative signals that generate brand engagement in DCM and strengthen brand-related task attractiveness.

Unlike helpful brand actions that maintain consumer DCM engagement, transparent brand actions were suggested to motivate cognitive and emotional brand engagement during DCM consumption. This is because transparent actions increase comprehensibility and open DCM from the perspective of brand-related communicative signals. This way, transparency motivates consumers to engage in the cognitive processing of brand-related cogency and benevolence in DCM communication. Emotional brand engagement may arise from this cognitive engagement process, when a consumer accepts the brand's communicative attempt. These acknowledgements contribute to the DCM literature by recognizing the need for transparency in DCM engagement.

Considering the second research question, this dissertation provides compelling evidence of the need for digital content marketers to broaden their publishing mindset and consider DCM beyond relevant and valuable content delivery. Based on this dissertation, the social and relational role of a brand emerges when consumers make sense of the DCM as a communicative act. While relevant and valuable content delivery veritably leads to considering DCM as favorable brand-related interactions, this dissertation verified that utilitarian DCM consumption converts into relationship value only through cognitive–emotional brand engagement. As the communicative orientation to DCM strengthens brand engagement, it consequently facilitates the role of DCM in customer–brand relationships. This view contributes to the DCM literature by highlighting the centrality of addressing DCM from the view of cognitive–emotional brand engagement instead of emphasizing solely the pull-marketing orientation and frequent DCM consumption. This dissertation also implies the importance of communicative brand actions as a trigger in motivating consumers' relational sense-making. In particular, this dissertation acknowledged that a brand's helpfulness and transparency are able to foster authenticity-based, trusting consumer–brand relationships, because communicative brand actions are able to signify the beneficial, helpful, and transparent consumer-oriented character of a brand in DCM. Because of the importance of communication to DCM, this dissertation redefines DCM from the communicative perspective as follows:

> DCM is an attraction-, benevolence-, and cogency-based digital engagement function that communicates the beneficial, helpful, and transparent character of a brand and builds authentic relationships with customers and prospects.

Figure 2 illustrates the main interrelationships between different DCM communication facets and argues that they collective form the basis of engaging DCM communication. Following the theoretical view of communicative actions (Habermas 1984), relational sense-making is grounded in different illocutionary acts. From the three different illocutionary acts introduced in the theory section, constative acts have the weakest capacity to induce relational sense-making (Habermas 1984). This is because they are primarily oriented toward informational content. Consequently, the top of the triangle forms the basis for consumers' DCM content engagement and for favoring the brand due to the DCM content. According to Habermas (1984), regulative acts, on the other hand, have the strongest capacity to transfer relational meanings, because these acts orient directly toward other communicative parties. These illocutionary acts manifest therefore at the bottom of the triangle and are most likely to induce higher levels of brand engagement and foster valued and trusted brand relationships. Expressive acts appear in the lower middle parts of the triangle. They indicate the communicator's subjective perspectives (Habermas 1984) and thus provide a stronger foundation for brand-related communicative acts compared to sole information-centred constative acts.

The in-depth research implications for DCM as a communicative act are provided in the upcoming sections, along with managerial implications. Furthermore, the limitations of the research findings are addressed, with relevant future research avenues at the conclusion of this chapter.

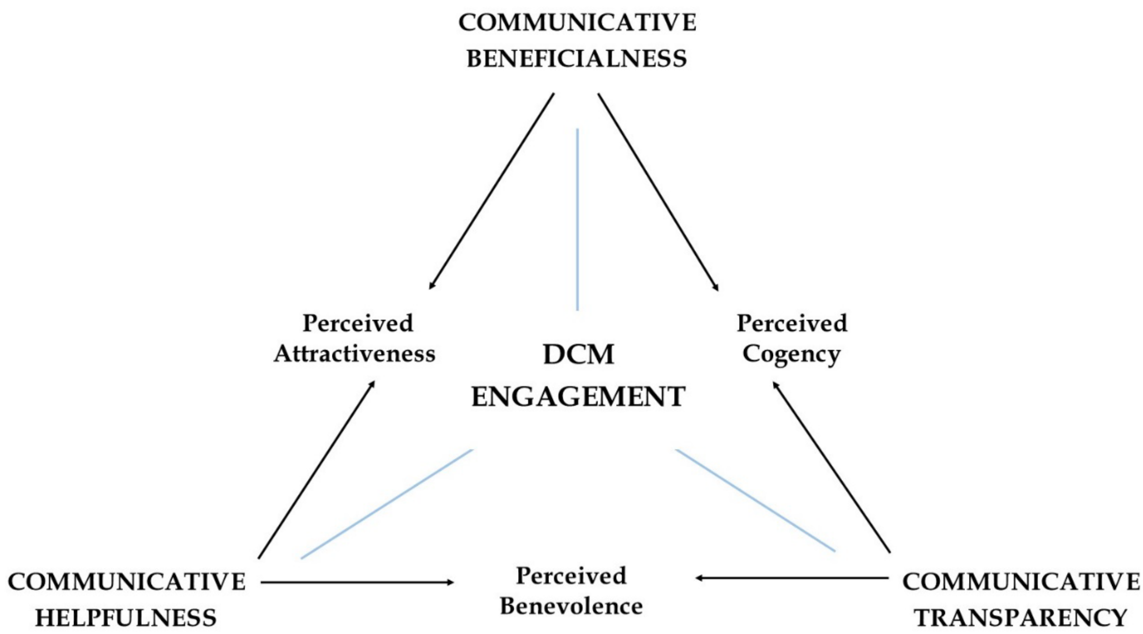

FIGURE 2 Elements of an engaging DCM marketing communication

6.1 Research implications

6.1.1 Communicating a beneficial character

From the communicative view, DCM consumption must be considered at least a favorable brand-related interaction episode. This dissertation acknowledges the importance of communicating DCM content that resonates highly with the interests and understanding of the specific audience. It is also important that DCM communication occur on a media platform in which the audience is receptive to the DCM communication. When the content stimulates increased attraction, it is more likely to induce positive cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement.

Relevant content that has no benefit would provide no addition to the knowledge resources of the audience, nor would this kind of DCM content provide anything to the relationship. Therefore, being beneficial is the most important aspect for DCM consumers. Without value, consumers would not long be willing to consume the DCM content, nor would they likely be interested in engaging with the brand behind the worthless content. Therefore, the beneficial character of a brand requires consumers to engage with the DCM content and evaluate its benefits. Hence, brand-related engagement builds on valuable content experiences (Hollebeek and Macky 2019). While not providing any all-encompassing lists, this dissertation revealed especially the acts of informing (about a topic), describing (a topic), and rationalizing (a phenomenon) as a few brand-initiated constative acts that fall into this category. Topical information and facts by themselves are however relatively weak communicative signals, and they should be combined with other communicative acts in DCM.

6.1.2 Communicating helpful and transparent relational character in DCM

Based on this dissertation, an increasingly relational brand character arises from a brand's helpfulness and transparency as the two types of communicative actions that offer consumers a brand-related understanding. DCM communication can foster brand-related attractiveness, brand-related cogency, or brand-related benevolence in DCM.

The key to helpful brand actions is brand knowledge contributions in relation to the topical information. A knowledgeable brand should not hide behind their expert status and solely claim particular information; rather, they should provide evidence of their knowledge. This is consistent with Barry and Gironda (2019), who acknowledge that DCM helps a brand become a topical authority when the brand is recognized for its topical knowledge in DCM. As the findings of this dissertation imply, the utilization of knowledge resources then converts into brand-related attractiveness in DCM. Knowledge resources are personal and thus manifest as a brand's knowledge capital in DCM. Based on the dissertation, some of these acts manifest as recommendations, (problem-solving) advice, and ideas or perspectives that emphasize a brand's own thoughts in relation to the topical content. At its best, these communicative actions are founded in a consumer-oriented perspective, thus fostering the beneficial view of the DCM.

Transparent brand actions play a role in optimizing brand-related cogency. Here, transparency manifests as different subjective expressions aimed at fostering consumer understanding. This type of communication includes openly providing brand (subjective) knowledge in the form of explanations, interpretations, analysis, and angles or perspectives of things about which the brand genuinely believes it has a say. As transparency here reflects exposing the knowledge and beliefs that the brand holds, disclosing from whom the content or a particular view originates may also strengthen brand-related cogency. These types of disclosure allow consumers to judge whose view the content represents. For example, in the case when a brand uses external consulting firms as the content creator, the views may not always be the brand's own anymore. From the same perspective, a transparent brand must disclose the origins of facts or opinions, for example, by providing links to the original content to help the consumer validate the information.

Communicative acts that directly signal something about the intentions of the communicator are the most effective for inducing brand engagement and sense-making of the relational role of the brand in DCM. To trigger consumer evaluations of the brand's benevolence, communicative DCM actions must signal a brand's willingness to put forth efforts that benefit others (see e.g., Montoya and Horton 2014). In relation to helpful brand actions, benevolent perceptions may rise, especially, from proclaiming what the content means from the perspective of a particular consumer or consumer group. This corresponds to the need to target DCM correctly and orient it toward the appropriate audience (Lieb 2012; Rowley 2008). Concerning benevolence, a brand's helpfulness should also become visible in the absence of brand promotion or an unnecessary brand underlining. These actions may endanger the credibility and trustworthiness of the brand and distance the DCM activity from the commitment to the authentic consumer value-orientation and relationship building.

From the view of transparent brand actions, this dissertation suggests that a brand may signal its benevolent intentions also directly to consumers. One way to do so is by using "value proposition" disclosures that hold the brand accountable for its DCM communication. These disclosures lead the consumer to assess directly the brand's intent, as well as how well it performs in relation to this value proposition. In the same vein, disclosing a brand's reason for topical involvement can be considered a transparent action. This helps consumers to consider the potentially unbalanced views of a brand's DCM. At the same time, these kinds of disclosures can provide compelling evidence of a brand remaining true to itself and having a stance in its DCM communication. Finally, direct and clear commercial disclosures are obviously important when a brand communicates through paid media.

6.1.3 A note on the role of paid commercial content in DCM communication

While there are debates on the role of commercial content forms, such as native advertising or sponsored content, and whether such forms can be seen as DCM (Hollebeek and Macky 2019; Vollero and Palazzo 2015), article three implies that practitioners often consider these paid forms as DCM. This dissertation argues that those commercial paid content forms can ideally be approached as DCM communication. In particular, if the paid communicative activity is founded on a brand's beneficialness, helpfulness and transparency, the paid setting itself would not prevent the authenticity in DCM communication. In fact, to some audiences, the particular paid context may even provide an attractive engagement platform. Content that has a thematic fit to other content on that platform can increase attention and interest. For example, Deloitte delivers their financial insights and analyses through the *Wall Street Journal*'s online media site. The platform and the topical content support consumers' thematic consumption journey and offer an attractive addition to the other content that originates from that media. Therefore, this study supports Vollero and Palazzo's (2015, 12) statement that "it's more important to get marketers to use the same term and come to understand what it signifies than to worry about which term it is."

6.2 Managerial implications

This dissertation provides several implications for managing DCM activities. It firstly implies that the sole focus on publishing relevant and valuable DCM content is inadequate when aiming to reach and engaged audience and facilitate consumer-brand relationships. Instead, digital content marketers should highlight the role of communication and brand engagement in fostering consumers' relational sense-making. In addition, assessing DCM effectiveness solely based on content attitudes and experience measures and focusing only on behavioral metrics, including unique visitors, revisits, or time spent consuming the DCM content, is insufficient to strategically steer brand engagement that is induced by DCM. The roles of content that benefits consumers and frequent DCM consumption are however fundamental to inducing positive DCM engagement in general because they allow engagement with the brand that is employing DCM. Yet, to further the potential for brand engagement and relationship development, digital content marketers should highlight DCM as a communicative act and aim at signaling the authentic relational meanings of the DCM activity for the consumer.

Based on this dissertation, beneficial DCM content delivery, a brand's helpfulness, and transparency act as three building blocks for an authentic DCM communication because they enable consumers' brand-related engagement and sense-making. Beneficial DCM content delivery, which is the primary requirement, allows consumers to become engaged with the brand's DCM activities It pulls consumers toward the content because consumers find the discussed topics valuable.

Based on the results of this dissertation, a brand's helpfulness in DCM can signify the relational meanings of the DCM to the consumer. Helpfulness is closely related to beneficial content delivery because it also has the ability to provide new information by educating consumers, helping them understand issues, giving advice, tips, and ideas, and providing problem-solving content that guide consumer performance. It highlights the moral principle to utilize one's resources for the benefit of others without harming them. To act on this principle, managers should thus apply their knowledge resources as the basis of DCM content. It relates to making knowledge-based contributions to the topical discussion and helping the particular consumer through utilizing knowledge. At the same time, signaling the authentic benevolent intent requires that DCM not include hidden agendas, such as brand promotion.

A brand's transparency in DCM is another communication element that supports relational sense-making. Transparent communicative DCM acts help consumers independently process, reason, and judge the persuasive risks of DCM activities. In this dissertation, these communicative acts are referred to as providing cogency, which highlight making justified argumentation to support DCM content claims and utilizing different DCM-related disclosures. Direct value proposition disclosures that are related to a brand's DCM activity facilitate consumer reasoning about the brand's intentions that are related to the DCM and provide a view of the thematic foci of the brand's DCM activity. For example, CMO by Adobe explains their DCM mission as follows: "CMO by Adobe offers interviews and advice from industry experts, help and how-to guidance, and data-driven research and insights to help senior business leaders navigate digital transformation." Using value proposition may also support the attraction toward DCM because such disclosures facilitate consumer expectations about what kind of content is provided in the future. Disclosures that are related to a brand's involvement and the perspective that the brand has taken in the discussion can foster consumer reasoning of the content and assess what viewpoint may be missing. In the paid DCM context, helping consumers realize the commercial background of the DCM is needed. This involves disclosing the paid role of the content and the author as well as making a clear distinction between the paid content and the original content, which can foster consumers' sense-making of the brand's authenticity and thus ensure authentic relationship building through DCM.

6.3 Limitations and avenues for future research

The findings of this dissertation are subject to different limitations. Many of these limitations also provide interesting future research avenues. For example, the three studies were cross-sectional in nature and consisted of relatively small samples. The dissertation was therefore unable to draw causal conclusions from the data. Future research could make an effort to test the results with larger samples or utilize experimental research to validate the causal influences. Social knowledge is also constantly updating, and there is no certainty about whether the interviewees' opinions in article three have changed during the years or whether today some other interviewees would have established a widely recognized role in relation to the studied phenomenon. Scholars may find it relevant to approach authenticity in DCM and related communicative actions from diverging angles, especially in relation to the newest DCM trends.

Another limitation relates to contextual factors. The survey data for the first article were collected among consumers of DCM content, and that audience was primarily female. Therefore, it is possible that gender influenced the results. In addition, the first survey was implemented in a B2C context, while the second survey was implemented in a B2B setting. While both studies focused on the individual consumers of a brand's DCM content, and existing literature supports the similar motivations for content consumption and engagement, it is possible that the tendency for relational sense-making differs between the two contexts. Future research could focus on understanding the gender- and consumer market-related vs. the business market-related differences in connecting and relating consumers with brands through DCM. Research should also emphasize (in addition to functionally-oriented helpfulness in DCM) the emotional meanings of helpfulness. A focus on the emotional social support aspects of empathy or acceptance could be a fruitful starting point, especially in the B2C context. Moreover, DCM research should attempt to further our understanding of the role of DCM engagement and its triggers in inducing brand identification (Hollebeek and Macky 2019).

Another limitation was that the empirical studies were only focused on written content on the brands' website-based blogs (with invitations through Facebook and e-mail newsletters). However, the audio and audiovisual formats have the ability to transfer other kinds of communicator-related cues and impact the communicative sense-making of the recipient (Chaiken and Eagly 1983). The rise of webinars, videos, and podcasts indicates the importance of focusing on these formats as a source of relationship communication.

The final limitation relates to perspective on the communicative action. Habermas (1984) explains communicative actions as they would ideally occur. In the same vein, the view to DCM as a communicative act should be considered as an ideal. Lastly, the communicative brand actions that were identified in this dissertation should by no means to be seen as a comprehensive list of communicative DCM actions. The focus on understanding different key communicative acts that are beneficial for consumers, trigger brand engagement, and generate related relationship outcomes would be especially high in managerial relevance and a fascinating future research area.

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ORIGINAL PAPERS

I

EXAMINING THE PERFORMANCE OF BRAND-EXTENDED THEMATIC-CONTENT: THE DIVERGENT IMPACT OF AVID- AND SKIM-READER GROUPS

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Examining the performance of brand-extended thematic-content: The divergent impact of avid- and skim-reader groups

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A B S T R A C T

Today, the reading online content is a daily habit for many users. In an online environment, users encounter brands, who hope to attract visitors to their online spheres of influence through brand-extended thematic-content. The purpose of this study is to investigate this phenomenon and assess its impact on both the readers of the content and the brands. To do this, we use structural equation modeling to analyze data from two groups, skim readers and avid readers, who vary in terms of the behaviors they invest in the reading of brand-extended thematic-content. The findings reveal that brand-extended thematic-content affects divergently on the brand attitude formation of these two groups. Specifically, this study reveals that, for skim readers on social networking sites, brand-extended thematic-content affects brand attitude primarily through an affect transfer effect, whereas, for avid readers, brand attitude is shaped primarily by brand familiarity following reading frequency.

1. Introduction

Online media use trends, such as short periods of engagement by users and simultaneous usage of multiple forms of media (Newman & Levy, 2014), have resulted in a lack of cognitive focus on ads and have affected the way marketers and advertisers pursue consumers (Malthouse, Haenlein, Skiera, Wege, & Zhang, 2013). To succeed in delivering their brand messages in this era, brands have adopted a new mindset in the creation of content (Malthouse et al., 2013; Pulizzi, 2012), making the attractive content a priority in digital marketing actions (Accenture, 2016). Digital content marketing can be defined generally as “creating, distributing and sharing relevant, compelling and timely content to engage customers at the appropriate point in their buying consideration processes, such that it encourages them to convert to a business building outcome” (Holliman & Rowley, 2014, p. 285). These practices are often characterized by regular content creation aimed at long-term relationship building (Holliman & Rowley, 2014).

As a result of this development, users of online media are now encountering increasing quantities of brand-created digital content covering broader themes and topics rather than focusing on content about the brands. Gao and Feng (2016) have defined content, which has a broader product category-level focus instead of a more limited brand focus as brand-extended content. With respect to the context of this study, we elaborate this definition and categorize brand-extended thematic-content produced by content marketers as thematically-bound, non-brand focused, and frequently-produced messages with a purpose of repeatedly driving consumers toward the brand's online sphere of influence. The rationale for differentiating brand-extended thematic-content from pure brand-extended content is that brand-extended thematic-content does not limit merely to product category-level, broadening the focus for example to lifestyles or societal issues. The thematic focus of brand-extended content makes it possible for users also to expect content from specific thematic areas, supporting their further intentions to engage with content that they find personally relevant.

Academic research related to content marketing is still scarce (Holliman & Rowley, 2014; Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016). The importance of considering brand-extended thematic-content in digital content marketing rises especially due to the fact that prior literature has mostly been interested in users who interact with brands online because of their personal relationship with brands. In these conditions, voluntary social media interaction between users and brands is argued to have important implications for branding (e.g., Gao & Feng, 2016; Kim & Drumwright, 2016) and in building customer-brand relationships (e.g., Habibi, Laroche, & Richard,

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2014; Hudson, Huang, Roth, & Madden, 2016; Malthouse et al., 2013). Similarly, the literature often assumes that users engage with online brand communities and their members because they are already involved with a brand and want to strengthen their relationship with that brand (e.g. Habibi et al., 2014). Hence, more research is needed to explore the impact of brand-extended thematic-content for readers.

To that end, we contribute to the evolving discussion of content marketing by empirically testing the proposed behavioral and psychological impact of brand-extended thematic-content on readers and their brand response. To do this, we take into account elements of media user profiling like frequency of usage, platform, and content preferences (see Brandtzæg, 2010), which we consider as being important for understanding engaged readers of brand-created thematic-content. In addition, as all readers cannot be assumed to be equally interested in the brand (Habibi et al., 2014), the impact of brand-extended thematic-content for readers may differ based on individual reader's brand connection. Without a strong existing brand relationship, brand-extended thematic-content can be a key driver for readers to develop an interest in the brand. Specifically, when readers' brand involvement remains low, but involvement and engagement to brand's content is higher, readers are more likely to pay attention also to the actual brand (Wirtz et al., 2013). Hence, we study readers who are not existing customers of the brand but who still have varying levels of engagement with brand-extended thematic-content.

This study highlights the role of more “avid readers” who read brand-extended thematic-content on brand website-based blogs, compared to “skim readers” who are satisfied to read a more concise version of this content on the popular social networking site Facebook. Specifically, we argue that the impact of brand-extended thematic-content on positive brand response will be stronger for avid readers. As content marketing is often characterized by continuously offering new content (Holliman & Rowley, 2014), we explore whether reading frequency of brand-extended thematic-content impacts readers' brand responses beyond the previously-explored effects, such as the affect transfer.

The article proceeds as follows. We first explain the logic behind brands deciding to focus on creating brand-extended thematic-content. Then, we discuss the formation of a positive brand attitude through attitude towards the brand-extended thematic-content, the reading frequency of this content, and brand familiarity. Third, to empirically test our research model, we use data from two brand-extended thematic-content reader groups (avid and skim) who are not existing customers of a brand. Finally, we discuss our results and generate relevant suggestions for future research.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

2.1. Logic of brand-extended thematic-content in attracting and engaging readers

Content marketing has become a widely-used digital marketing tactic due to its potential to create positive influence on business (Holliman & Rowley, 2014; Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016; Pulizzi, 2012). Content marketing objectives seem to be in line with general digital marketing objectives, such as creating awareness, changing brand attitudes, and building brand associations (Järvinen, Töllinen, Karjaluoto, & Jayawardhena, 2012; Yan, 2011). Along with those objectives, marketing practitioners have stated brand trust and more directly sales-focused objectives such as increased website traffic and lead generation important (Holliman & Rowley, 2014). Many content marketing critics state that there is nothing new in the idea of content marketing; for example, customer magazines implementing similar ideas have existed for a long time. The crucial difference, however, may not lie in the execution of the content itself. Instead, the rationale for differentiating content marketing from more traditional forms is that, today, this content delivery underlines the role of digital channels and emphasizes the aspect of pulling readers to brand's online channels with interesting content (Holliman & Rowley, 2014; Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016). “Pulling” refers to attracting readers who already are involved with a particular issue or a brand and who, therefore, seek content related to that issue or brand (Holliman & Rowley, 2014). Consequently, thematic involvement, in terms of personal relevance and interest in a topic (see Zaichkowsky, 1985) can be seen as a prerequisite for readers to seek, consume, and become engaged with online content.

Beyond the thematic involvement, the value of content marketing for readers is argued to arise from reading experiences, mostly relating to the provided information or entertainment (Holliman & Rowley, 2014). From a theoretical stance, uses and gratification (U&G) theory is a relevant approach for explaining media use behavior. Specifically, U&G theory suggests that gratification sought from media use defines readers' further usage of that media (e.g., Katz et al., 1973/1974). Indeed, if readers do not find themselves motivated to use a medium, they will stop using it (Joines, Scherer, & Scheufele, 2003). More evidence is found in information systems literature, where Bhattacherjee (2001) found satisfaction and perceived usefulness as the primary drivers for continuous use of an information system. However, whereas satisfaction encourages readers to return to read more content, in the long run it is the more specific experiences that define future content reading (Mersey, Malthouse, & Calder, 2012). To ensure continuous reading behavior, brands' content must support the creation of these experiences.

The U&G approach has successfully been adopted into marketing (e.g., Jahn & Kunz, 2012; Muntinga, Moorman, & Smit, 2011) as well as into information systems studies (e.g., Gao & Feng, 2016). In the field of marketing, Jahn and Kunz (2012) identified hedonic and functional content as the biggest reasons for users to engage to brand fan pages. Similarly, Shi, Chen, and Chow (2016) found that information value, followed by entertainment value, has the strongest effect on continued interaction intention with social media brand pages. In other online media studies, these motivations are usually called “perceived enjoyment” (Calder, Malthouse, & Schaedel, 2009; Heinonen, 2011) and “entertainment” (Heinonen, 2011; Mersey et al., 2012; Muntinga et al., 2011). In addition, utilitarian motivations are often listed as “information” or “learning” (Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013; Heinonen, 2011; Mersey et al., 2012; Muntinga et al., 2011). In the same vein, information systems literature, specifically the unified theory of acceptance and use of technology (UTAUT) and UTAUT2 models (see Venkatesh, Thong, & Xu, 2012), highlight the role of utilitarian and hedonic value in influencing behavioral intentions to use a technology. Similarly, Gao and Feng (2016) identified information-seeking and entertainment among the more socially-driven gratifications as major usage motivations for social media. While admitting that social gratifications may have a part in our study in defining media usage, here we only focus on information and enjoyment, which are especially relevant for readers to engage with content created by content marketers (Holliman & Rowley, 2014). Based on this rationalization and the substantial existing research on media gratifications driving continuous media usage in different media contexts, we hypothesize that:

H1. *Information gratification significantly drives frequent reading behavior.*

H2. *Enjoyment gratification significantly drives frequent reading behavior.*

However, as brands cannot ultimately be assumed to create content without at least a partial self-interest, brand-extended thematic-content should also have some impact on readers' brand responses. For those who are not existing customers of a brand, content marketing may particularly affect brand awareness and attitudes (Malthouse et al., 2013). While brand awareness basically relates to the ability to recognize and recall the brand, brand attitude refers to a favoring the brand and providing positive evaluations of the brand (Schmitt, 2012). Brand attitude is often used as a measure in understanding brand responses in other kinds of marketing communication tactics like advertising (MacKenzie, Lutz, & Belch, 1986; Muehling & Lazniak, 1992) or advergames (Van Reijmersdal, Jansz, Peters, & Van Noort, 2010). Related to online content strategies, brand-extended content like knowledge, news, and information from the product category was recently identified as affecting brand attitude better than a content strategy using only brand-related content (Gao & Feng, 2016).

To further explore the impact of reading of brand-extended thematic-content on brands, we next identify two important mechanisms that occupy the center of our conceptual research model.

2.2. The impact of reading frequency on brand attitude

So far, academic content marketing literature has focused more on understanding content marketing from the perspective of marketers. The literature has also overlooked the aspect of a brand's continuous content creation and discusses content marketing at specific points in time, especially related to the buying process (see Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016). However, limited support for the perspective of continuous content creation exists. Holliman and Rowley (2014) state that content marketing should be viewed "as an ongoing cultural stance where the focus is on building an authentic relationship over the longer term, rather than conducting a series of short-term campaigns" (p. 287). The importance of focusing on relationship is also supported by brand community literature. For example, Habibi et al. (2014) highlight the consumer's ongoing relationship with the brand community enabling to create more supportive brand responses through continuous exposure to the brand and enhanced communication possibilities with the brand. Continuous usage behavior has also been noted as a central concept in information systems literature (see Shaikh & Karjaluoto, 2015). Consequently, it seems that, similar to information systems and for many online-based businesses' success (Bhattacherjee, 2001), frequent reading behavior should have a central position in successful content marketing strategies.

Consumers' repetitive interaction with brand-related content has been studied particularly in social media context. Related to the evaluation of those interactions, frequency and the amount of interaction by the customer are seen central (Hudson et al., 2016; Shi et al., 2016). In addition, Jahn and Kunz (2012) found that the intensity, which they use as a concept similar to frequency, of a customers' brand page usage is more important in affecting their brand loyalty than their participatory interaction behaviors on the brand page.

Frequency of online interaction has also been found in a non-brand context affecting the preferences towards the other entity. Ledbetter and Mazer (2014) found that social media interactions can strengthen relationship outcomes like relationship tie strength, in terms of affecting other persons' cognitions, affection, and behaviors (i.e. interdependence). Similarly, continuing their work relating to social media user relationships, Ledbetter, Taylor, and Mazer (2016) found a significant relationship between the frequency of online media interaction and relational closeness towards another person. While the previous effects are discussed related to personal relationships, we argue that similar effect may exist related to brands, due to the connection enabled by the online platforms (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Thematic content has the ability to create common ground and reveal shared interests between a brand and content readers (Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Wirtz et al., 2013). Supporting this, Hudson et al. (2016) found that frequent interaction with a brand on social media fosters emotional attachment and intimacy. Attachment translates into self-centered connection with a brand (Schmitt, 2012), at least partially reflecting the same aspects as relational closeness (Ledbetter et al., 2016) and interdependence (Ledbetter & Mazer, 2014). Furthermore, albeit weaker than attachment, brand attitude is also a construct that represents consumers' connection to a brand (Schmitt, 2012). We argue that frequent interaction with brand-extended thematic-content should affect positively on the brand and, therefore, hypothesize the following:

H3. *Reading frequency of brand-extended thematic-content has a significant positive effect on brand attitude.*

2.3. The impact of affect transfer effect for brand attitude

To be a relevant concept in a content marketing context, reading frequency of brand-extended thematic-content should affect readers' brand responses in the presence of previously highlighted factors. An affect transfer effect impacts consumers' brand responses when their motivations to evaluate the brand are low (Muehling & Lazniak, 1992). Affect transfer indicates a direct positive effect from attitude toward a brand-associated object (e.g. an ad) to attitude toward the brand (MacKenzie et al., 1986; Machleit & Wilson, 1988; Muehling & Lazniak, 1992). This indicates that consumers' cognitive processing is often focused on related contextual factors instead of directly processing the brand (MacKenzie et al., 1986). Brand-extended thematic-content may produce brand responses the same way. This is because processing the content may produce a positive attitude towards this content (Mersey et al., 2012) as readers may consider this content relevant and likable. However, while the affect transfer effect has mainly been studied experimentally related to content, like a single advertisement (e.g., Muehling & Lazniak, 1992) or advergame (e.g., Van Reijmersdal et al., 2010), we argue that the affect transfer effect may remain over time, when brand relationship is primarily determined by the brand-extended thematic-content. In line with this, we hypothesize:

H4. *Information gratification has a significant positive effect on content attitude.*

H5. *Enjoyment gratification has a significant positive effect on content attitude.*

H6. *Attitude towards content has a significant positive effect on brand attitude.*

Affect transfer is noted to occur especially when the brand is relatively unfamiliar (Machleit & Wilson, 1988). Brand familiarity is thus an important concept to take into account when assessing brand attitude formation. Brand familiarity can be defined as all the experiences with a brand, which includes all the cognitions (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987) that affect a consumer's brand knowledge (Campbell & Keller, 2003). Previous research has made evident that consumers' positive attitudes to brand-created content, like ads, increase their cognitive brand evaluations (MacKenzie et al., 1986). This kind of attention makes it also harder to influence consumers directly through affect transfer (Campbell & Keller, 2003; Machleit & Wilson, 1988). However, positive brand-related experiences generated by brand-extended thematic-content should mediate the affect transfer effect in the absence of other equally important experiences with a brand. Hence, we hypothesize:

H7. *Brand familiarity mediates the effect of attitude towards content on brand attitude*.

2.4. Hypothesizing divergent brand impacts for skim readers and avid readers

Today, users are engaging in numerous online platforms, which offer them different content consumption possibilities. For brands, different platforms also require special planning (Gao & Feng, 2016). Brand blogs are particularly noted to be important for content marketing (Pulizzi, 2012). On the other hand, social networking sites are argued as platforms, which leverage the reach of content marketing (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016). It is common that this kind of content on social media is more concise, whereas blog posts are longer. In a similar vein, short version of the brand-extended thematic-content on a blog is often posted on other social media sites to introduce the blog content to the larger audience. Typically, a link and an invitation to read the entire content from the blog are attached to support website traffic. Following these presumptions, we next identify two potential differences in mechanisms that lead to the formation of a positive brand attitude.

Compared to social network sites, such as Facebook, the blog environment generally differs due to the presence of just one content creator at the time, which enables greater focused attention to specific content as well as to the content creator. Readers mostly already know to expect specific content theme from the particular blog. Social network sites, on the other hand, are full of frequently changing content from a variety of sources (Gao & Feng, 2016) including the users themselves, their friends and brands followed. Naturally, social networking sites also contain numerous distinct content topics to focus on. During social networking site browsing, consumers are not likely to have interest in or even the resources to focus equally on all content, which creates a platform characterized by a constant rivalry for users' attention. Therefore, in a general manner, social media browsing behavior can be seen as skim reading. Skim reading relates to a behavior in which a reader chooses the most relevant and important content or content parts to focus on, instead of reading all the content available (e.g. Duggan & Payne, 2009; Reader & Payne, 2007). Skimming makes it possible to assess the available content and make a decision about whether more focused reading is preferred.

Presuming that a blog posts about brand-extended thematic-content offers more encompassing content than the concise version on a social networking site, the level of engagement between the group reading solely social networking site content and the group also reading content on a blog should differ. To rationalize this, skim reading literature (e.g. Duggan & Payne, 2009; Reader & Payne, 2007) argues that readers who find content more relevant to focus on are likely to invest their time and effort to read that content. Similarly, in the context of this study, the behavioral difference could be explained by the different level of intentional engagement, defined as the “interest in devoting energy, effort, and time to a brand activity” (Solem & Pedersen, 2016, p. 448) which is then actualized as a behavioral manifestation (van Doorn et al., 2010). This way, skim readers who solely read the concise brand-extended thematic-content on a social networking site are not equally engaged compared to those travelling from a social networking site to the brand blog or who otherwise visit the blog because of the brand-extended thematic-content. Based on this, we call these more engaged readers as “avid readers”. Highlighting differences between these two groups, we next propose the different impact of skim readers and avid readers for brand response.

First, as revealed from the brand relationship context, consumers who invest time and other resources may be more focused on long-term relationship maintenance (e.g. Sung & Choi, 2010). Similarly, for more engaged readers, reading frequency of brand-extended thematic-content may strengthen their positive brand-related responses. This may particularly occur because of the shared thematic interest between the brand and readers, which may make the brand stand as something more important for the reader (Wirtz et al., 2013), strengthening the connection with a brand (Hudson et al., 2016; Ledbetter et al., 2016). Based on this, we argue that more frequent reading of brand-created thematic-content may also impact brand attitude, especially in the case of the avid-reader group. Hence, we hypothesize that:

H8. *Reading frequency has a stronger effect on brand attitude for avid readers than skim readers*.

Second, drawing from the discussion related to the hypothesis H8, in the case of skim readers the brand may remain more distant. This may be because for less engaged readers, content may not be as valuable as for more engaged readers. In this case, the brand may be seen less important (Wirtz et al., 2013) and brand attitude is more likely being shaped by perceptions related to positive attitude to brand-extended thematic-content. In the same vein, affect transfer should determine the emergence of skim readers' brand attitude formation more than within the avid-reader group. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H9. *Attitude towards the content has a stronger effect on brand attitude for skim readers compared to avid readers*.

Hudson et al. (2016) noted the importance of also taking into account the amount of consumer-brand interaction. Similarly, we argue that the results may vary with respect to whether brand-extended thematic-content is totally read only a few times or numerous times. Particularly, the number of positive exposures to content may have an effect on more positive brand attitudes (Machleit & Wilson, 1988). Hence, in this study, we control the effect of total number of reads on brand attitude measured by whether the content has been read between one and ten times or more than ten times. Finally, we also control for the effect of age on brand attitude. Fig. 1 illustrates the proposed research model.

3. Method

3.1. Data collection and sample

To test the hypotheses, data was collected in cooperation with a brand that was relying heavily on content marketing and social media marketing to reach especially female readers. The brand updated weekly its blog purely consisting of brand-extended thematic-content and also delivered most of its content via its Facebook page. In detail, the content was not brand-related, but focused on providing inspiration, stories, and ideas related to house construction, design, and decoration. Compared to blog content, Facebook content was often presented in shorter versions or as “introductions,” from which the consumer could then continue to read the content through the blog. Many times this conversion from Facebook to blog content was pursued through adding a suggestion, like “Read more from our blog!” on Facebook posts, with a link included to the full blog post. During the time the data was gathered, the brand had been operating in the home construction business about a year and a half, and it was not that familiar in its product category. Nonetheless, the brand had been “liked” by over

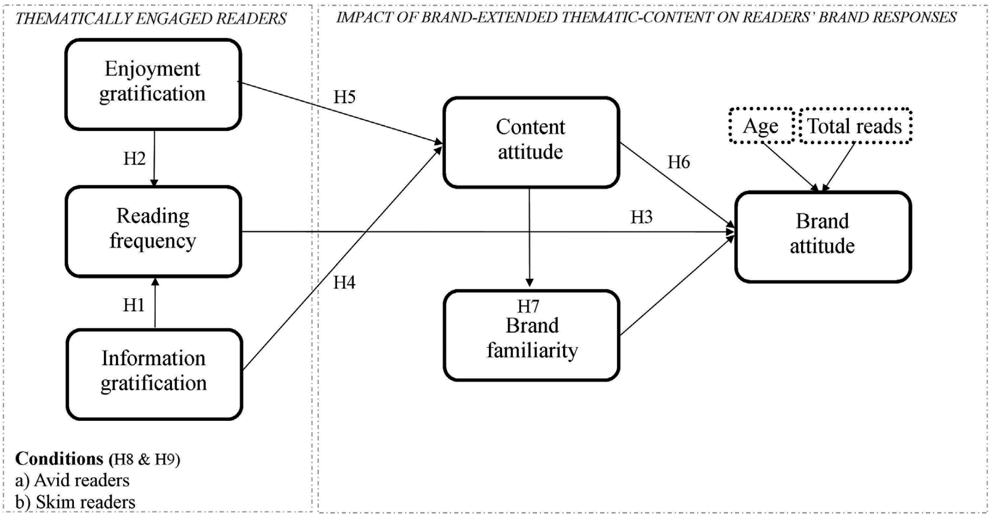

Fig. 1. Research model.

7000 people on Facebook.

To reach thematically-engaged Facebook followers, as well as brand-website-based blog readers, the survey was administered through both the company blog and the company Facebook page. To verify that respondents were consuming brand-extended thematic-content, the question “How do you follow brand-created content related to decoration and design?” was included as a background question. The question was implemented using yes/no options related to reading brand-created content on Facebook and yes/no options related to reading brand-created content in website-based brand blog.

A total of 213 acceptable responses were received, resulting in an effective response rate of 45.5%. After removing the respondents who were not reading brand-extended thematic-content on either the website-based blog or on Facebook, as well as a small proportion who only read the blog (N = 16), the final data set consisted of 189 respondents. Most of the respondents were female (92%), which supports the goal of the creation of brand-extended thematic-content, reaching the demographic segment that the brand was targeting. As web technology use and motives are noted to vary between genders (Shi et al., 2016), this data only reveals effects related to females. Most of the respondents were between 26 and 35 (39%) and 36–45 (32%) years of age. While 19% of the respondents had just drifted to the brand website, and 4% noticed the brand because of some other reasons, the great majority (90%) reported that they had noticed the brand because of its brand-extended thematic-content, although 15% of those who just drifted to the brand website also chose this answer, giving support to our contextual starting point. Furthermore, 74% of the respondents reported they had read brand-extended thematic-content more than 10 times. Platform-specific descriptions are found in Table 1.

To ensure that common method bias did not seriously affect the results (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003), we enforced a procedural remedy at the data collection stage to ensure that respondents' identities remained confidential. Furthermore, item ambiguity was reduced, and the items were mixed in the questionnaire. We also ran a model with a common method factor to examine the role of common method variance in the model (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Whereas the average variance explained 0.74 of the indicator variance, the average method-based variance explained just 0.01. The results support the insignificant effect of the method variance, and so common method bias is unlikely to be of serious concern for this study.

Table 1
Respondent profiles.

	Avid readers		Skim readers		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Gender						
Male	15	13.3	3	3.9	18	9.5
Female	98	86.7	73	96.1	171	90.5
Total	113	100.0	76	100.0	189	100.0
Age						
<25	20	17.7	4	5.3	24	12.7
26–35	39	34.5	34	44.7	73	38.6
36–45	36	31.9	25	32.9	61	32.3
>45	18	16.0	13	17.1	31	16.4
Total	113	100.0	76	100.0	189	100.0
Noticed the brand because of..						
thematic content	79	69.9	66	86.8	145	76.7
drifted to website	8	7.0	2	2.6	10	5.3
both	20	17.7	6	7.9	26	13.8
other reasons	6	5.3	2	2.6	8	4.2
Total	113	10.0	76	100.0	189	100.0
Total content reads						
≤10	25	22.1	24	31.6	49	25.9
>10	88	77.9	52	68.4	140	74.1
Total	113	100.0	76	100.0	189	100.0

3.2. Measurement

For measuring media gratifications, we adapted an information gratification measure (e.g. “I get good tips from the content”) from Mersey et al. (2012) and an enjoyment gratification measure (“I find following content enjoyable”) from Calder et al. (2009). Both gratifications were measured with five indicators and were modified for the study context. Related to the enjoyment measure, we replaced one item with the indicator “I find content entertaining,” as entertainment is one of the dimensions closely related to enjoyment. To measure thematic content consumption frequency, we modified the usage intensity measure used by Jahn and Kunz (2012), making it more content-oriented. Two modified items were: “I frequently follow the content” and “I regularly read the content.” The former items were measured on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from “totally disagree” to “totally agree”.

In addition, the measure for brand attitude (i.e. negative/positive, unpleasant/pleasant, do not like/like, bad/good) was taken from MacKenzie et al. (1986). The measure for attitude towards content (i.e. bad/good, do not like/like, irritating/not irritating, uninteresting/interesting) was adapted from Mitchell and Olson (1981). The measure for brand familiarity (i.e. familiar/unfamiliar, recognized/unrecognized, had heard/had not heard) was taken from Simonin and Ruth (1998). These items were all measured on a five-point scale.

4. Results

4.1. Measurement model assessments

The hypotheses were tested with SmartPLS 3 (Ringle, Wende, & Becker, 2015). We found partial least-squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) especially suitable for our testing, as it is practical when the data sample size is small and the tested model is explorative (Henseler, Ringle, & Sinkovics, 2009). Both these conditions stand in this study. To reveal the differences between the avid-reader group who read brand-extended thematic-content both on Facebook and on brand website-based blog and the skim-reader group who solely read brand-extended thematic-content on Facebook, the two groups were analyzed separately. However, to make group comparison possible, the data sets had to meet the partial measurement invariance (Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2016). To verify the homogeneity of the data groups, the MICOM procedure (Henseler et al., 2016) with 3000 permutations was implemented. As the MICOM procedure detected no significant differences between the groups, the group comparison could be made. However, to sustain high factor loadings (>0.7) in both conditions, two indicators from the information gratification measure and two indicators from the enjoyment gratification measure were eliminated. The measurement model results are shown in Table 2.

Moreover, internal reliability was established with high composite reliabilities ranging between 0.82 and 0.96. To assess the discriminant validity of our model, we used Fornell and Larcker's (1981) criterion. The results showed that the square root of AVEs were greater than cross-correlations between factors, indicating that the model had acceptable discriminant validity (see Table 3).

4.2. Structural model assessments and hypothesis testing

To evaluate the differing effects of skim readers versus avid readers in the research model, the moderation analysis was performed using partial least-squares multi-group analysis (PLS-MGA) (Henseler et al., 2009) with a bootstrapping of 2000 subsamples. In addition, the mediation effect of brand familiarity on the relationship between attitude towards content and brand attitude (H7) were assessed using bootstrapping sampling, as it is suggested to be more robust compared to Baron and Kenny's (1986) four-step approach (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Complete results of the hypotheses testing are collected in Table 4. Next, these results are discussed in detail.

To start, our results showed that information gratification was significantly related to reading frequency for skim readers ($\beta = 0.358$, $p < 0.01$) but not for avid readers ($\beta = 0.168$, *ns*). Thus, H1 is only confirmed within the skim-reader group. Similar results occurred related to the effect of information gratification on attitude toward content, providing only partial support for H4. Relatedly, information gratification was the primary influencer of attitude toward content ($\beta = 0.433$, $p < 0.001$) for skim readers, but the effect was not significant for avid readers ($\beta = 0.193$, *ns*). Enjoyment was found to have an effect on reading frequency within the skim-reader group ($\beta = 0.272$, $p < 0.05$), as well as avid-reader groups ($\beta = 0.304$, $p < 0.01$). Enjoyment also had a significant role in positive content attitude formation in both cases ($\beta_{skim} = 0.305$, $p < 0.001$; $\beta_{avid} = 0.411$, $p < 0.001$). Hence, both H2 and H5 are supported. While the PLS-MGA did not find significant differences between the groups related to these hypotheses, it is interesting to note that for skim readers, a search for information seems to be a more important motivation for reading, whereas for avid readers, information-seeking does not support more frequent reading behavior. Therefore, it seems that only hedonic gratification is able to sustain the avid readers' continuous brand-extended thematic-

Table 2
Measurement model results.

Factor	Indicator	Factor Loadings (avid/skim)
Information gratification (INF) *	I get good tips from the content	0.81/0.79
	The content helps me to learn from new products or solutions	0.77/0.85
	The content helps me learn what to do or how to do it	0.75/0.75
Enjoyment gratification (ENJ) *	I find following content enjoyable	0.84/0.85
	The content entertains me	0.86/0.84
	I like to relax with the content	0.82/0.77
Reading frequency (RF)	I regularly read the content	0.97/0.95
	I frequently follow the content	0.96/0.95
Attitude towards the content (CATT)	bad - good	0.86/0.94
	I don't like - I like	0.91/0.90
	irritating - not irritating	0.74/0.83
	uninteresting - interesting	0.82/0.85
Brand attitude (BATT)	negative - positive	0.83/0.84
	unpleasant - pleasant	0.89/0.94
	I don't like - I like	0.89/0.96
	bad - good	0.82/0.93
Brand familiarity (FAM)	unfamiliar - familiar	0.89/0.83
	have not heard anything - have heard much	0.83/0.89
	do not know - know	0.83/0.87

Note. * Two indicators removed to improve latent factor.

Table 3
Composite reliability, AVE, correlations and square root of AVE.

avid/skim	Means	CR	AVE	BATT	CATT	FAM	ENJ	INF	RF	AGE	READS
BATT	4.46	0.92	0.74	**0.86**							
	4.18	0.96	0.84	**0.92**							
CATT	4.66	0.90	0.70	0.30	**0.84**						
	4.46	0.93	0.77	0.69	**0.88**						
FAM	3.81	0.89	0.72	0.42	0.20	**0.85**					
	3.37	0.90	0.75	0.58	0.46	**0.86**					
ENJ	4.21	0.88	0.71	0.35	0.52	0.14	**0.84**				
	3.83	0.86	0.68	0.50	0.55	0.28	**0.82**				
INF	4.24	0.82	0.60	0.27	0.43	0.16	0.59	**0.78**			
	3.88	0.84	0.64	0.56	0.60	0.38	0.56	**0.80**			
RF	3.79	0.85[a]	0.92	0.33	0.31	0.10	0.40	0.35	**0.96**		
	3.52	0.81[a]	0.90	0.46	0.48	0.35	0.47	0.51	**0.95**		
AGE	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	−0.20	−0.08	0.11	−0.02	−0.10	0.10	n.a.	
	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	0.04	0.05	0.08	0.16	0.07	0.18	n.a.	
READS	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	0.17	0.29	0.18	0.30	0.21	0.32	0.17	n.a.
	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	0.43	0.34	0.33	0.34	0.39	0.49	0.00	n.a.

Note. n.a. = not applicable.
Square root of AVEs of constructs bolded on the diagonal.
[a] Correlation coefficient (Due to measuring CF with two items, CR was not calculated).

Table 4
Structural estimates and group comparison (PLS-MGA).

Direct effects model: $N_{\text{avid}} = 113$; $N_{\text{skim}} = 76$	β_{avid} / β_{skim}	f^2_{avid} / f^2_{skim}	$\|\Delta\beta\|$	Hypothesis test results
Information → Reading frequency	0.168	0.023	0.190	H1: partially supported
	0.358^{**}	0.127		
Enjoyment → Reading frequency	0.304^{**}	0.074	0.033	H2: supported
	0.272^{*}	0.074		
Reading frequency → Brand attitude	0.318^{***}	0.132	0.253^{*}	H3: partially supported (avid)
	0.064	0.006		H8: supported
Information → Content attitude	0.193	0.035	0.239	H4: partially supported
	0.433^{***}	0.226		
Enjoyment → Content attitude	0.411^{***}	0.158	0.106	H5: supported
	0.305^{***}	0.111		
Content attitude → Brand attitude	0.141	0.025	0.340^{**}	H6: partially supported (skim)
	0.483^{***}	0.381		H9: supported
Content attitude → Brand familiarity	0.200^{*}	0.042	0.256^{*}	
	0.456^{**}	0.263		
Brand familiarity → Brand attitude	0.407^{***}	0.241	0.118	
	0.289^{***}	0.153		
Age → Brand attitude	-0.232^{**}	0.079	0.208^{*}	
	−0.024	0.001		
Total reads → Brand attitude	−0.147	0.028	0.288^{**}	
	0.141	0.035		
Mediation:	***Indirect effect***	***Total effect***	***VAF***	
Content attitude → Brand familiarity → Brand attitude	0.081	0.222^{**}	0.365	H7: supported (partial mediation)
	0.132^{***}	0.615^{***}	0.215	
	$\boldsymbol{R^2_{avid}/R^2_{skim}}$			
Reading frequency	0.166			
	0.291			
Brand familiarity	0.031			
	0.198			
Content attitude	0.287			
	0.412			
Brand attitude	0.327			
	0.561			

Notes. N_{skim} skim reader group, N_{avid} avid reader group, β standardized coefficient, f^2 the relative impact a construct has in producing the R^2 value of the endogenous construct, $|\Delta\beta|$ the absolute value of the difference in coefficients between groups, $^{*}p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{***}p < 0.001$ (two-tailed test).

content reading in this context.

Our data also strongly supports differing mechanisms for brand attitude formation between the skim-reader and avid-reader groups. PLS-MGA revealed significant differences between the two groups within both hypothesized effects H8 ($\Delta\beta = 0.253$, $p < 0.05$) and H9 ($\Delta\beta = 0.340$, $p < 0.01$), strongly supporting both these hypotheses. The differences were even found to be so strong that H3, related to the frequency effect, was rejected within the skim-reader group ($\beta = 0.064$ ns), and H6, related to affect transfer, was rejected within the avid-reader group ($\beta = 0.141$ ns). To illustrate the differences between models, significant group-specific results are found in Figs. 2 and 3. Next, these differences are examined more closely.

Within the avid-reader group, we found reading frequency to be a significant predictor of positive brand attitude ($\beta = 0.318$, $p < 0.01$). This result indicates that, in the case of avid readers,

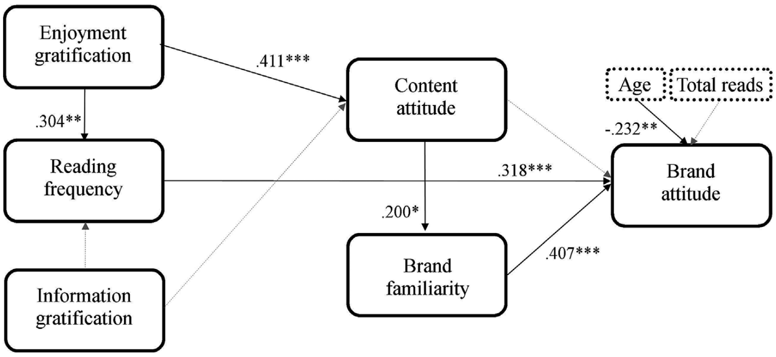

Fig. 2. Significant structural model results for avid readers.

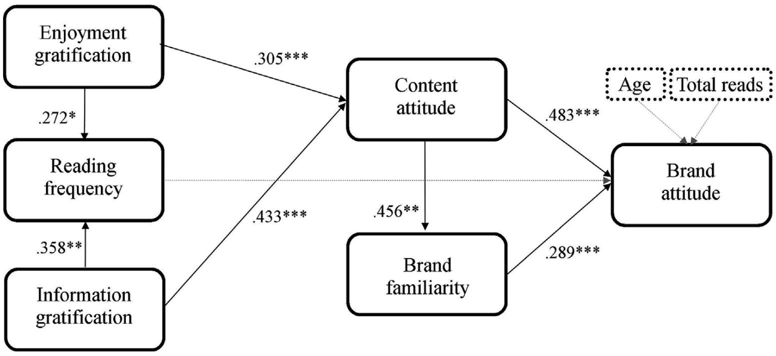

Fig. 3. Significant structural model results for skim readers.

reading frequency of brand-extended thematic content means that the brand represents something positive to the readers. Furthermore, our results reveal brand familiarity as the primary predictor of positive brand attitude ($\beta = 0.407$, $p < 0.001$), which also partially mediates (VAF = 37%) the effect from attitude towards content to brand attitude for avid readers. This supports the increased attention given to the brand as well as the manner by which the positive attention based on brand-extended thematic-content affects brand attitude through some kind of brand-relevant experiences. Together with these results, and the insignificant result of the affect transfer effect, it seems that, within the avid-reader group, affect transfer is not any more important in defining the formation of brand attitude; the connection to a brand behind the brand-extended thematic-content matters more. Finally, the results reveal that younger avid readers have better brand attitudes compared to older avid readers. This result also significantly differed from the skim-reader group, in which age did not have any effect on brand attitude.

Following similar logic, in the case of skim readers, who are more less engaged to brand-extended thematic content, reading frequency had no effect on brand attitude ($\beta = 0.064$ ns). Instead, we found that attitude towards the content was a primary reason for positive brand attitude within skim-reader group ($\beta = 0.483$, $p < 0.001$). These results support the existence of strong affect transfer from content to brand. Within the skim-reader group, brand familiarity was not found to be the most important aspect ($\beta = 0.289$, $p < 0.001$), as skim readers more likely give only limited attention and importance to the brand. This is also supported by the considerably high effect ($\beta = 0.456$, $p < 0.01$) from attitude towards content on brand familiarity. Similarly, as the results revealed barely a partial mediation effect of brand familiarity between attitude towards the content and brand attitude (VAF = 22%), it can be said that in the case of skim readers, brand-extended thematic-content builds on the affect transfer effect in influencing brand attitude.

To reveal the predictive accuracy of the structural model, we explored the coefficient of determination (R^2) (Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2014). The analysis revealed that enjoyment and information gratifications explain 17% of the variance of reading frequency and 29% of the variance of attitude towards content within the avid-reader group. Similarly, our model explained 29% of the variance of reading frequency and 41% of the variance of attitude towards the content in the case of skim readers. The predictive accuracy of brand familiarity was explained 20% by the content attitude within the skim-reader group, but only 3% within the avid-reader group. Finally, we were able to explain 33% of the brand attitude variance in the avid-reader group and 56% of the variance in the skim-reader group.

To make the results more interpretable, we added an f^2 value that explained the relative power of the constructs in the model, which could be divided into small (>0.02), medium (>0.15), and large (>0.35) (Hair et al., 2014, pp.176–178). We found that, within the skim-reader group, content attitude ($f^2 = 0.381$, high) and brand familiarity ($f^2 = 0.153$, medium) had a considerable effect size, affecting brand attitude. In the avid-reader group, brand familiarity was found to be the only concept having a medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.241$, medium), whereas reading frequency was established close to the limit of medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.132$, small) and therefore can be considered an important concept. As a conclusion, the effect sizes verify that the two different mechanisms are contextually relevant.

5. Discussion

In this study we examined the role of brand-extended thematic-content in content marketing both for the reader and the brand. We defined brand-extended thematic-content from content marketers' perspective as thematically-bound, non-brand focused, and frequently-produced messages with a purpose of repeatedly driving readers to brand's online sphere of influence. Reflecting the reviewed literature, we argued that reading of this content differs based on consumers' level of "interest in devoting energy, effort, and time" (Solem & Pedersen, 2016, p. 448), which is actualized in this study as differing behaviors of skim readers or avid readers towards the brand-extended thematic-content. Specifically, we suggested that in this study, blog reading was characterized by a deeper level of interest and effort compared to social networking site readers.

In the light of this study, brand-extended thematic-content can be seen as mutually beneficial for both the reader and the brand. By creating thematically-relevant and interesting content, brands can offer enjoyment and information for readers on a continuous basis. For brands, brand-extended thematic-content creation offers possibilities for positive brand visibility and enables the building of relationships with consumers. From a theoretical perspective, our results indicate differing mechanisms for positive brand attitude formation between the two thematically-engaged content reader groups.

The findings of this study support earlier literature (Barreda, Bilgihan, Nusair, & Okumus, 2015; Gao & Feng, 2016) regarding the ways that social media can be used to make users more brand-aware and also to affect positive perceptions of a brand. However, when readers are only engaging with more concise version of the brand-extended thematic-content on a social networking site, their brand attitude is largely defined by the affect transfer from content attitude. In the same vein, for skim readers more frequent interaction with the brand-extended thematic-content was not found to affect brand attitude. This indicates that for skim readers, frequent interaction does not make them feel more connected to the brand, and the brand may remain distant to the consumer.

Our study indicates that the brand attitude of avid readers is formed because of their frequent reading of brand-extended thematic content and their familiarity with the brand. In addition, the findings indicate that only enjoyment gratification is strong enough to influence this reading frequency. Based on these findings, reading frequency supports readers connecting with a brand. Specifically, the brand may be appreciated more as a content creator, and, in this way, make the brand more important to avid readers. This supports the arguments by Wirtz et al. (2013). This finding also supports previous literature related to the effects of interaction frequency on the perceived connection with the object of interaction (Hudson et al., 2016; Ledbetter et al., 2016), revealing these effects in the context of brand-extended thematic-content. Similarly, avid readers' increased connection to the brand behind the content offers an explanation for the insignificant effect of content attitude on brand attitude. The results related to reading frequency offer evidence for the importance of ongoing brand-extended thematic-content creation by the brand. This supports Holliman and Rowley's (2014) view of seeing content marketing as building a long-term relationship with consumers.

6. Limitations and recommendations for future research

The main limitation of this study is its small sample size ($N_{skim} = 76$; $N_{avid} = 113$) and the use of data from just one brand. It is typical in the implementation of content marketing that a short version of blog content is "introduced" in social media to attract readers to view the entire blog; this study provides evidence in the case of a skim-reader group and an avid-reader group only. Another data-related limitation concerns gender. Gender specification is notably important as females and males typically differ in their motives for using media (see Shi et al., 2016). Given that the sample consisted of almost only female respondents, our results should be interpreted with caution regarding gender-based generalization. We thus encourage future studies to test the research model with larger sample sizes representing both genders.

Although we explained the relationships between brand-extended thematic-content gratifications (i.e. information and enjoyment), attitude toward content, brand familiarity, and brand attitude, future studies should also further test and validate the exploratory research model in other contexts and related to other brand responses. The role of different platforms for the formation of various brand responses in the case of brand-extended thematic-content might be especially interesting. Similarly, it is particularly important that future studies also examine the different forms and dimensions of engagement with brand-extended thematic-content and their impact on brands. Future research should also evaluate the role of content marketing for existing customers.

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II

FOSTERING BRAND ENGAGEMENT AND VALUE-LADEN TRUSTED B2B RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH DIGITAL CONTENT MARKETING: THE ROLE OF BRAND'S HELPFULNESS

by

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Fostering Brand Engagement and Value-laden Trusted B2B Relationships through Digital Content Marketing: The Role of Brand's Helpfulness

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STRUCTURED ABSTRACT:

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to explore how digital content marketing (DCM) users can be engaged with B2B brands and determine how such engagement leads to value-laden trusted brand relationships.

Methodology: Through an online survey**,** data were collected from the email marketing list of a large B2B brand, and the hypothesised research model was analysed using covariance based structural equation modelling.

Findings: This research identifies a bundle of helpful brand actions – providing relevant topics and ideas; approaching content with a problem solving orientation; as well as investing in efforts to interpret, analyse and explain topics through DCM – to foster relationship value perceptions and brand trust. Critically however, cognitive-emotional brand engagement is shown to be a necessary requirement for converting these actions into relationship value perceptions.

Theoretical implications: This paper furthers the understanding of the dual role of helpful brand actions in functionally-oriented DCM. Additionally, this paper offers evidence of the central role of cognitive-emotional brand engagement in influencing value-laden customer–brand relationships.

Practical implications: This paper introduces a bundle of helpful brand actions that forms the basis for the dual roles of a brand in enhancing customer value and in fostering brand engagement and building relationships. This approach helps practitioners to steer brand-related perceptions arising from DCM interactions towards building trusted brand relationships.

Originality/value: This paper contributes to the marketing literature by revealing a potential approach to DCM in managing customer relationships. Instead of focusing solely on the content benefit-usage link to support engagement, this paper reveals the potential of helpfulness as a brand-initiated DCM engagement trigger in engaging customers with the brand, vis-à-vis the content.

Key words: Content marketing, customer engagement, relationship marketing, relationship value, brand trust, business-to-business

Paper type: Research paper

1 INTRODUCTION

Digital content marketing (DCM) has become an important part of digital marketing, as firms adjust their marketing communications to reach customers and prospects with content that they are willing to engage with. Digital trends survey by Econsultancy and Adobe (2018) indicates that compelling content that fosters customers' digital experience will be among the top digital marketing priorities in 2019. Additionally, nearly nine out of ten B2B marketers in North America agree that content marketing is an important marketing tactic for their firms (Content Marketing Institute and MarketingProfs, 2017).

Academic interest in DCM is also increasing rapidly. The focus of DCM has evolved from addressing relevant characteristics (Koiso-Kanttila, 2004) and value of digital (information) products (Rowley, 2008) to exploring DCM's potential in marketing communication (Malthouse *et al.,* 2013). This has led to conceptualizing DCM as "creating, distributing and sharing relevant, compelling and timely content to engage customers at the appropriate point in their buying consideration processes, such that it encourages them to convert to a business building outcome" (Holliman and Rowley, 2014). DCM has also often been linked to the concept of customer engagement. This discussion has centred around few main themes: Generating quality leads for sales (Järvinen and Taiminen, 2016; Wang et al, 2017); leveraging brand's social media influence through brand-focused messages (Ashley and Tuten, 2015), brand's thought leadership (Barry and Gironda, 2017), inspirational behaviours (Barry and Gironda, 2018), as well as brand content diffusion among C2C interactions (Kilgour *et al.*, 2015). Discussion has also focused on exploring positive brand attitude formation among prospective customers (Taiminen and Karjaluoto, 2017), and most recently, the role of DCM in trusted brand relationships (Hollebeek and Macky, 2018).

Most of the recent marketing research on DCM has been done in a B2B context (Holliman and Rowley, 2014; Järvinen and Taiminen, 2016; Wang *et al.*, 2017; Barry and Gironda, 2017, 2018). B2B transactions are often substantial, complex in nature (Webster and Wind, 1972) and made by a small number of buyer firms (Webster and Keller, 2004). Due to this, B2B suppliers often aim to establish long-term relationships with buyers (Ganesan, 1994). Here, much emphasis is on increasing buyers' trust and confidence to the supplier before (Bengtsson and Servais, 2005) and also after the purchase (Leek and Christodoulides, 2012). While the role of DCM in B2B relationships is noted (e.g. Holliman and Rowley, 2014), few studies empirically investigate the role of DCM from a relationship marketing perspective – in fostering value-laden trusting B2B brand relationships.

To address this gap, this paper considers DCM as a relationship marketing activity relating to ”the creation and dissemination of relevant, valuable brand-related content to current or prospective customers on digital platforms to develop their favourable brand engagement, trust, and relationships” (Hollebeek and Macky, 2018, p. 9). In this study the term *brand* relates to the corporate brand, which is often the primary brand in B2B. We study *DCM content users*, specifically consisting of e-mail newsletter subscribers—both customers and non-customers—of the B2B brand, hereinafter referred to as content *consumers.* Generally, DCM content can be distributed through various online platforms including the brand website, blogs and other social media. Email is however an established B2B channel (Järvinen *et al.*, 2012) and it offers a “convenient, acceptable, and appropriate” platform for B2B consumer engagement (Danaher and Rossiter, 2011, p.18).

B2B consumer engagement with digital content often builds on information related to industry issues, phenomena and trends (Holliman and Rowley, 2014; Järvinen and Taiminen, 2016). For example, pharmaceutical company Cardinal Health provides insights into the changing healthcare industry landscape on their website and through email newsletters. Enterprise software solutions corporation SAP has established a separate website dealing with several themes under an umbrella of digital business transformation. This content is also distributed to subscribers via email. This content, while non-brand centred, is a source of customer value (Pulizzi, 2012; Holliman and Rowley, 2014; Taiminen and Karjaluoto, 2017).

However, from a relationship marketing perspective, a pertinent question is how this consumer engagement with the content (as opposed to with the brand) evolves into brand engagement, and how this brand engagement can be properly fostered through the same DCM interactions. Without engagement with the brand (i.e., with sole engagement with the content), these interactions are less likely to influence consumer-brand relationships (Wirtz *et al.*, 2013; Finne and Grönroos, 2009). Research indicates that a wider thematic focus on the brands' digital content and their frequent consumption can influence positive brand attitude (Gao and Feng, 2016; Taiminen and Karjaluoto, 2017). However, brand attitude itself cannot fully explain consumers' relational orientation towards the brand, as the concept lacks interactional focus (Schmitt, 2012). Therefore, more attention is needed on the way in which DCM content could influence consumer engagement with the brand, and eventually value-laden, trusted brand relationships.

Thus, this paper aims to: 1) address potential ways to foster B2B brand engagement in DCM interactions and 2) identify how this brand engagement transforms DCM interactions into relationship value and increased B2B brand trust. Relationship value and B2B brand trust are justifiable as the key outcome variables based on their importance in both relationship marketing (e.g. Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Ulaga and Eggert, 2006) and DCM (Holliman and Rowley, 2014; Hollebeek and Macky, 2018).

To achieve these aims, this paper follows the rationale that brand-initiated actions are important in engaging customers (e.g. Kunz *et al.*, 2017; Beckers *et al.*, 2018). Consumer engagement occurs online always through some digital content (Brodie *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, to address consumer brand engagement in DCM, we focus on helpful brand-actions as perceived by consumers during their DCM interactions. Helpfulness is noted as an important element of DCM (Holliman and Rowley, 2014; Barry and Gironda, 2017; Hollebeek and Macky, 2018), but this concept has received inadequate attention in the DCM literature. Helpfulness in this study is defined as a bundle of the brand's functionally-oriented DCM actions executed in a knowledgeable and benevolent manner.

This study contributes to existing DCM literature in two ways. First, it offers key insights on the roles of B2B DCM content and its executional elements in driving brand engagement, and in fostering the relationship marketing aims of DCM. In doing so, it directly addresses areas highlighted by Holliman and Rowley (2014) and Hollebeek and Macky (2018) as requiring further research. This research focus differs from that found in prior studies addressing DCM influence on brands purely based on DCM content benefits and usage frequency (e.g. Taiminen and Karjaluoto, 2017) by shifting the focus to brand as an engagement object. Second, this paper furthers the research on helpfulness in functionally-oriented DCM (Holliman and Rowley, 2014; Barry and Gironda, 2017). In the process, this paper also heeds recent calls for further research in this area by Hollebeek and Macky (2018), through the provision of empirical evidence on how two brand-related DCM motives interact to trigger brand engagement in DCM. This paper also offers some contributions to brand engagement literature. This study continues the emerging discussion on brand-initiated consumer engagement efforts (e.g. Verhoef *et al.* 2010; Beckers *et al.*, 2018) and shows cognitive-emotional brand engagement to be a crucial mediator in transforming brand actions into relationship value perceptions in a DCM context.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. First, the theoretical background is discussed to rationalize the relevance of brand helpfulness in DCM. Second, a bundle of helpful brand actions in relationship marketing based DCM is suggested. Third, the relationships of the identified helpful brand actions to value-laden trusted brand relationships are hypothesised and a conceptual model is developed. Next, the method and data collection are explained and the results are provided. Finally, the paper concludes with theoretical and managerial implications, study limitations and suggestions for future research.

2 THEORY

2.1 Theoretical background

2.1.1 Helpfulness as the foundation for DCM engagement

Perceived thematic relevance of the content and the benefits arising from content consumption are often discussed as the primary reasons consumers voluntarily engage with digital content marketing (DCM) (e.g. Holliman and Rowley, 2014). To be suitable as a relationship marketing tactic, DCM must also contribute to "establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges" (Morgan and Hunt 1994, p. 22). To do so, these communicative episodes must also be treated as an interaction with the brand (Finne and Grönroos, 2009; 2017; Vivek *et al.*, 2012; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2016). The central attention of this paper is therefore on consumers' brand engagement induced by DCM interactions.

Brand engagement plays an important role in customer–brand relationships (e.g. Brodie *et al.*, 2011; Vivek *et al.*, 2012; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014). This is because it builds on self-relevant psychological connections with the object, such as a brand (Vivek *et al.*, 2012; Sprott *et al.*, 2009; Mollen and Wilson, 2010; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014), which occurs as an interaction-oriented motivational state triggered by the object of engagement (e.g. Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005; Demangeot and Broderick, 2016; Patterson *et al.*, 2006; Solem and Pedersen, 2016; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2016). Brand engagement is characterised by the various brand-related cognitive, emotional and behavioural responses induced by the specific brand interactions (e.g. Brodie *et al.*, 2011; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014). The engagement concept is also often addressed as engagement behaviours (e.g. van Doorn *et al.*, 2010; Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014), such as content consumption or online content creation by a customer (Maslowska *et al.*, 2016). However, the engagement concept tells little about the specific antecedents that can trigger consumer brand engagement during DCM interactions. Therefore, a better understanding of potential antecedents of this DCM induced brand engagement is needed.

To address this issue, this study highlights the relevance of the brand-initiated engagement triggers in engaging customers to brands (e.g. Beckers *et al.*, 2018; Vivek *et al.*, 2012). The specific focus is on brand actions that are observable to consumers during their DCM interactions. We further note that while brand communication may include invisible communicative elements (Finne and Strandvik, 2012), observable actions by the brand enables customers to directly assess the meaning of those actions (Semmer *et al.*, 2008) and make sense of the role of the communicator in relation to these actions (Finne and Grönroos, 2009). In this study, these observable actions are looked at as manifestations of the brand's engagement triggers, contrary to much of the prior literature which has mostly focused on manifestations of customer's own engagement behaviours (e.g. van Doorn, *et al.*, 2010; Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014). Therefore, differing from the original perspective (van Doorn, *et al.*, 2010), we see brand-initiated engagement actions in DCM as the brand's engagement triggers that have a DCM consumer focus.

The particular focus in this study is on brand's helpfulness manifestations, which are acknowledged to be the fundamental aim of DCM (Holliman and Rowley, 2014). Helpfulness in general relates to a social behaviour of providing assistance to the other actor(s). In DCM, helpfulness however has a dual role: DCM is aimed at providing relevant, consumer benefitting content on one hand (e.g. Holliman and Rowley, 2014), and fostering brand engagement, relational value and trust on the other (Hollebeek and Macky, 2018). This dual role of brand's helpfulness is consistent with the dual perspective on brand-initiated engagement (Kunz et al, 2017) and makes brand helpfulness consistent with the literature on customer engagement behaviours. In particular, while helpfulness aims to benefit the consumer beyond brand's primary role as a product/service vendor, it is not solely driven by altruistic motives (Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014) – helpfulness is aimed also at fostering brand's own marketing aims (e.g. fostering brand engagement). Consequently, the dual role also encompasses brand-initiated engagement triggers in terms of fostering customer engagement to build long-term relationships (Beckers *et al.*, 2018). This dual role should therefore be the basis for addressing brand's helpfulness for engaging consumers to brand in DCM.

Existing B2B DCM literature links DCM mainly to functional consumer-focused aims of enhancing consumer problem solving and learning (Holliman and Rowley, 2014; Järvinen and Taiminen, 2016), especially through utilising brand's topical knowledge (Barry and Gironda, 2017). When a brand contributes knowledge resources to provide this kind of functional DCM content, these contributions also act as an indication of the brand's competence (Barry and Gironda, 2017) and its willingness to utilise this knowledge to help (Barry and Gironda, 2018). It may also help the brand to indicate its authentic engagement to DCM (Barry and Gironda, 2017; 2018; Taiminen, *et al.*, 2015). It is these knowledge contributions that can potentially foster brand-focused DCM aims such as brand engagement and trust. Further evidence can also be found in the relationship marketing literature. Sirdeshmukh *et al.*, (2002, p.17) acknowledge visible operational behaviors "that indicate a motivation to safeguard customer interest" to be relevant in fostering trust with the firm. These behaviours consist of dimensions that reflect "underlying motivations to place the consumer's interest ahead of self-interest" (*operational benevolence),* "competent execution" of the specific activity (*operational competence)* and behaviours that indicate "motivations to anticipate and satisfactorily resolve problems" *(problem-solving orientation)* (Sirdeshmukh *et al.*, 2002, p.17-18). These studies indicate that manifestations of brand competence and benevolence in DCM may trigger what Hollebeek and Macky (2018) refer to as consumer's functional and authenticity-based motives to engage with brands in DCM. Consequently, we argue that a brand's helpfulness – a bundle of the brand's functionally-oriented DCM actions executed in a knowledgeable and benevolent manner – is an important element in fostering the dual role of the brand in DCM. This helpfulness is next discussed in a more concrete level related to B2B DCM.

2.1.2 Helpful brand actions in B2B DCM

In functional terms, knowledge sharing and using knowledge to solve problems constitute the basis for helpfulness. Relevant functional content seem to be the prerequisite for many helpful B2B DCM activity (Holliman and Rowley, 2014; Järvinen and Taiminen, 2016). Additionally, to build an engaged consumer base, this content should consist of topics that trigger consumers' on-going information consumption. The B2B literature has revealed that consumers continuously search for information beyond products and services, for example, to keep up with industry trends and market developments, develop their task-related skills, prepare for possible problem-solving situations and gather new ideas for their businesses (Aarikka-Stenroos and Makkonen, 2014; Borghini *et al.*, 2006). From the brand's perspective, provision of relevant topics, innovative ideas and approaching content with a problem-solving orientation are noted as an indication of the B2B brand's knowledge sharing, and act as the potential facilitator in B2B customer relationships (Walter *et al.*, 2003; deLeon and Chatterjee, 2017; Leek *et al.*, 2017; Barry and Gironda, 2017). Therefore, brand's helpfulness that manifests itself through these brand actions (relevant information, ideas and problem solving) are at the core of functionally oriented DCM delivery in B2B, as shown in Figure 1.

Besides knowledge delivery, this paper proposes brand investments in interpreting, analysing and explaining content as another important part of helpfulness. We argue that in DCM this could relate to the brand's knowledge investments made to enable the processing of content. For example, B2B literature has emphasized interpretation as an action, which strengthens the functionality of information for the information service customer (Wuyts *et al.*, 2009). Similar type of helpful actions can be found in the journalism literature. While journalism is contextually unrelated to marketing, its processes play a potential role in DCM (e.g. Pulizzi, 2012; Holliman and Rowley, 2014). Indeed, journalism appears to be built on utilising journalists' knowledge and abilities to process and present relevant and valuable information (Shapiro, 2010; Willnat *et al.*, 2013; Gil de Zúñiga and Hinsley, 2013). Here information processing relates to various efforts the journalist makes to analyse, examine and interpret the information in a way that best suits the information needs of the readers (Shapiro, 2010; Willnat *et al.*, 2013; Gil de Zúñiga and Hinsley, 2013). Similarly, the investments made to process information in terms of interpreting, analysing and examining the topics should increase the perceived helpfulness of DCM content by contributing to the functionality of the content. For example, rather than only focusing on providing a piece of information, deeper analyses of the information from the consumer's perspective may help consumers make better decisions based on the DCM content.

These types of complementary investments in acts of helpfulness may mirror the intentions of the sender in their content delivery (Sweeney *et al.*, 2012) and reflect that the consumer is respected and appreciated by the source (Semmer *et al.*, 2008). Hence, these types of investments are also likely to reflect the benevolent aspect of B2B DCM. This has also been identified by the recent DCM literature, noting the brand's "generous sharing of their knowledge" as an act reflecting their benevolence (Barry and Gironda 2017, p.18). These kinds of helpful brand actions occupy the outer layer in Figure 1.

Together the two layers illustrate the brand's helpfulness in DCM through the bundling of helpful brand actions. The inner layer in Figure 1 indicates that disseminating content relevant to the consumer is critical. Investing in activities that help the consumer interpret and analyse the content (outer layer) will be superfluous if the content is irrelevant. However, both layers will help foster brand engagement, trust and relationship value through the brand's knowledge contributions, highlighting the dual roles of DCM. The specific dimensions of Figure 1 reveal the brand's helpful actions used in the empirical study.

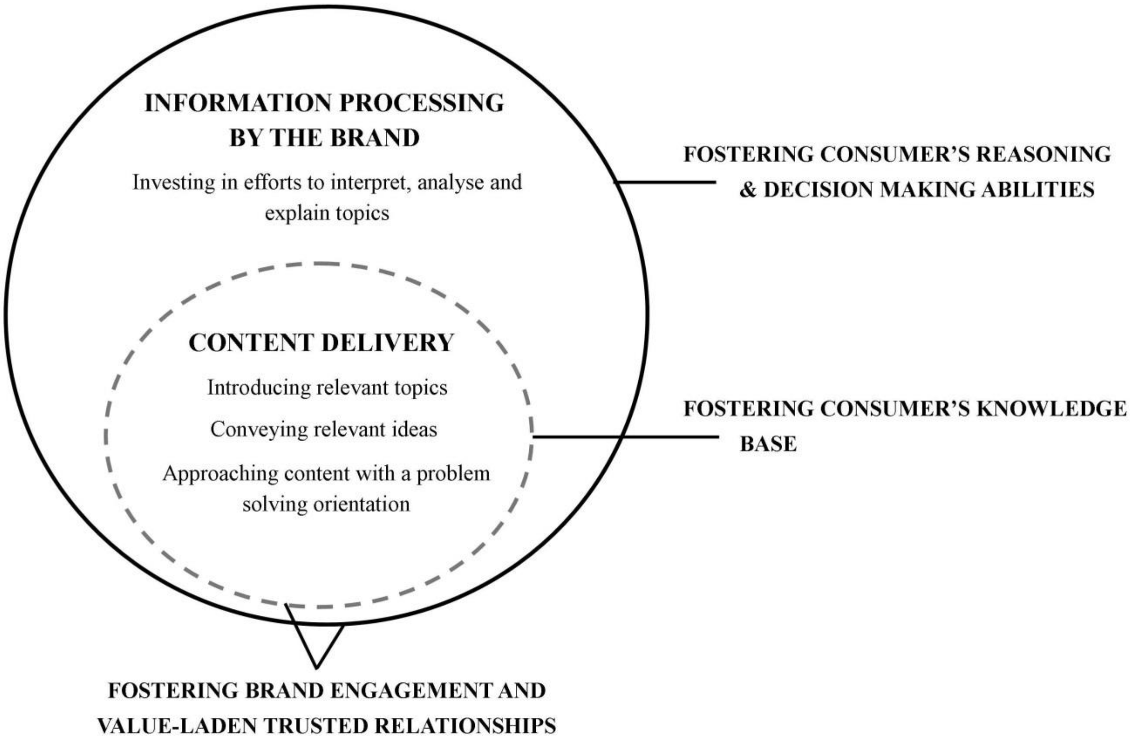

Figure 1. Dual roles of a brand in DCM helpfulness.

2.2 Hypotheses development and conceptual model

2.2.1 Influence of helpful B2B brand actions on trust and relationship value

Given that a main aim of this research is to investigate how B2B brand's helpful actions (specified in Figure 1) can enhance value-laden trusted brand relationships, we treat relationship value perceptions (RV) and brand trust (BT) as the main dependent variables. Brand trust is a key aim of DCM (Holliman and Rowley, 2014; Hollebeek and Macky, 2018).

In this paper, it is defined as the confidence the customer has in the brand's beneficial relationship attributes in terms of its competence, benevolence and integrity (in line with McKnight *et al.*, 2002; Walter *et al.*, 2003). The positive influence of brands' knowledge-based communication (Zhang, Wu and Henke, 2015; Sindeshmukh et al, 2002; Walter *et al.*, 2003) as well as resource investments (Ganesan, 1994; Palmatier *et al.*, 2006) on brand trust are well established in the relationship marketing literature. For example, Walter *et al.* (2003) argued that the use of a B2B firm's knowledge capabilities in communicating with consumers increases the consumers' trust in the firm. Ganesan (1994) on the other hand revealed a strong relationship between firm's specific investments into customer relationship and firm trust. Conceptually, B2B brand's helpful actions also count as such investments. They reveal the brand's investments in helping consumers beyond the primary business function between the seller and the buyer (c.f. deLeon and Chatterjee, 2017; Ritter and Walter, 2012; Sindeshmukh *et al.*, 2002). Hence:

H1: Perceived helpful brand actions will have a positive relationship with brand trust.

The value of the relationship is addressed in different ways in the literature. Often, it is related to what is received and given (Zeithaml, 1988), as a ratio of relationship benefits and sacrifices (Ravald and Grönroos, 1996) or as a value received from one vendor compared to its competitors (Ulaga and Eggert, 2006). In this paper, relationship value perceptions are viewed as a customer's subjective perceptions of the overall value of the brand relationship (c.f. Vivek *et al.* 2014), either for themselves or to their firm. In B2B, use of a firm's knowledge in communicating with consumers is linked to increased relationship value potential for the customer. Specifically, Ritter and Walter (2012) found that firms generating ideas and sharing information about the market leads to increased relationship value. Conversely, Wuyts *et al.* (2009) argued that interpretation as part of information provision adds to the value potential of the relationship. A similar effect may also occur through brand's helpful action in DCM, as it can contribute to the functionality of the DCM content, thus enhancing the perceived value of the consumers' brand relationship. Therefore:

H2: Perceived helpful brand actions will have a positive relationship with relationship value perceptions.

2.2.2 Role of brand engagement

Following earlier literature (e.g. Brodie *et al.*, 2011; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014), brand engagement is seen to include cognitive, affective and behavioural factors. In this study, cognitive and emotional engagement reflect Hollebeek *et al.*'s (2014) cognitive (brand-related thought processing and elaboration) and emotional elements (positive brand-related affect) (p. 154). Behavioural engagement in DCM is argued to arise from cognitive and/or emotional engagement, the latter stimulating behavioral engagement's subsequent development (Hollebeek and Macky, 2018). Consistent with this conceptualization, this research considers behavioural brand engagement as conative (Demangeot and Broderick, 2016; Solem and Pedersen, 2016), reflecting customer's intrinsic brand-related motivation to frequently interact (c.f. Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005). Interactional focus is also confirmed to be an important part of engagement by prior research (e.g. So *et al.*, 2014; Patterson *et al.*, 2006). The frequency element on the other hand is highlighted due to the relevance of frequent (behavioural) engagement of consumers with DCM (e.g. Holliman and Rowley, 2014; Taiminen and Karjaluoto, 2017).

When consumers perceive that the brand is investing in helping them, they may perceive this specific interaction as more engaging (e.g. Zainol *et al.*, 2016). Similarly, when brands make voluntary resource investments for the sake of DCM consumers, brand engagement is likely to enhance (Hollebeek and Macky, 2018; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2016). Additionally, if consumers identify B2B brand's helpfulness behaviour valuable, this may act as a direct trigger to frequently consume DCM content, similar to the content benefits–usage link often described in the marketing literature (e.g. Taiminen and Karjaluoto, 2017; Jahn and Kunz, 2012; Gummerus *et al.*, 2012; Calder *et al.*, 2016). Therefore:

H3a: Perceived helpful brand actions will have a positive relationship with cognitive-emotional brand engagement.

H3b: Perceived helpful brand actions will have a positive relationship with behavioural brand engagement.

It is also likely that cognitively and emotionally engaging brand interactions through DCM (Hollebeek and Macky, 2018) will be a strong motivational trigger for frequent behavioural brand engagement. This relationship is also consistent with the well-established principle that cognitions and emotions are the direct antecedent of behaviours. Consequently, it is expected that behavioural brand engagement will be significantly affected by the cognitive-emotional form of brand engagement. Thus:

H4: Cognitive-emotional brand engagement will have a positive relationship with behavioural brand engagement.

Customer-perceived value has often been argued to be a consequence of engagement (e.g. Vivek *et al.*, 2012, 2014; Brodie *et al.*, 2011; van Doorn, *et al.*, 2010; Hollebeek, 2013; Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014). Moreover, Hollebeek (2018) recently identified the functional relationship outcomes important in B2B engagement. However, empirical, quantitative studies addressing the relationship between brand engagement and relationship-oriented value remain scarce. Some evidence for this relationship is offered by Vivek *et al.* (2014), who revealed a high correlation between customer’s value perceptions and their brand-related engagement dimensions (i.e. conscious attention, enthusiastic participation, social connection). In the same vein, Zhang *et al.* (2017) found that customer engagement with enterprise microblogs strongly influenced consumers' specific enterprise-related value perceptions in terms of functional, hedonic and social value. Gummerus *et al.* (2012) showed that frequent behavioural engagement with the brand community influenced consumers' perceived relationship benefits in terms of social, entertainment and economic benefits. Supporting the relational orientation of the engagement concept (e.g. Brodie *et al.*, 2011; Vivek *et al.*, 2012; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2016), this study expects brand engagement to act as antecedents to relationship value perceptions. Hence:

H5a: Cognitive-emotional brand engagement will have a positive relationship with relationship value perceptions.

H5b: Behavioural brand engagement will have a positive relationship with relationship value perceptions.

Furthermore, this paper expects brand engagement factors to act as a mediator between brand's helpfulness behaviour and relationship value perceptions. This is because relational influence requires interactions (Finne and Grönroos, 2009) that induce self-relevant connections with the brand (Mollen and Wilson, 2010; Vivek *et al.*, 2012) or brand-related value (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2016; Finne and Grönroos, 2017). Hence, without cognitive-emotional state of brand engagement, consumers are unable to perceive relationship value, despite their perceptions of the brand's role in DCM (Hollebeek and Macky, 2018). In other words, cognitive-emotional brand engagement is an important requirement for brand's helpfulness behaviour to be translated into relationship value. Further, frequent engagement is argued as a strong relational concept (Keller, 2009). Similar to cognitive-emotional brand engagement, behavioural brand engagement can make relationship value more salient for the consumer. Hence, although B2B brand's helpful actions may act as a trigger for the ultimate development of relationship value (as hypothesized in H2), such effects will only take place in the presence of cognitive-emotional brand engagement and behavioural brand engagement. Therefore:

H6a: Cognitive-emotional brand engagement will mediate the relationship between perceived helpful brand actions and relationship value perceptions.

H6b: Behavioural brand engagement will mediate the relationship between perceived helpful brand actions and relationship value perceptions.

2.2.3 Relationship value perceptions and brand trust

While the relationship between trust and customer value is well established (Singh and Sirdeshmukh, 2000; Baumann, Le Meunier-FitzHugh, 2014), there exists some debate on the direction of the value–trust relationship. At the same time, the direction is assumed to depend on whether trust is seen to exist/occur pre- or post-consumption (Singh and Sirdeshmukh, 2000). Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that perceptions of relationship value leading to customer’s trusting brand attributes of competence and benevolence (Gil-Saura *et al.*,2009; Sirdeshmukh *et al.*, 2002). Hence, as the brand trust in this study relates to confidence in the brand’s beneficial relationship attributes, it is likely that the trust in the benefits arising from the relationship is formed based on the existing value perceptions of the relationship. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H7: Relationship value perceptions will have a positive relationship with brand trust.

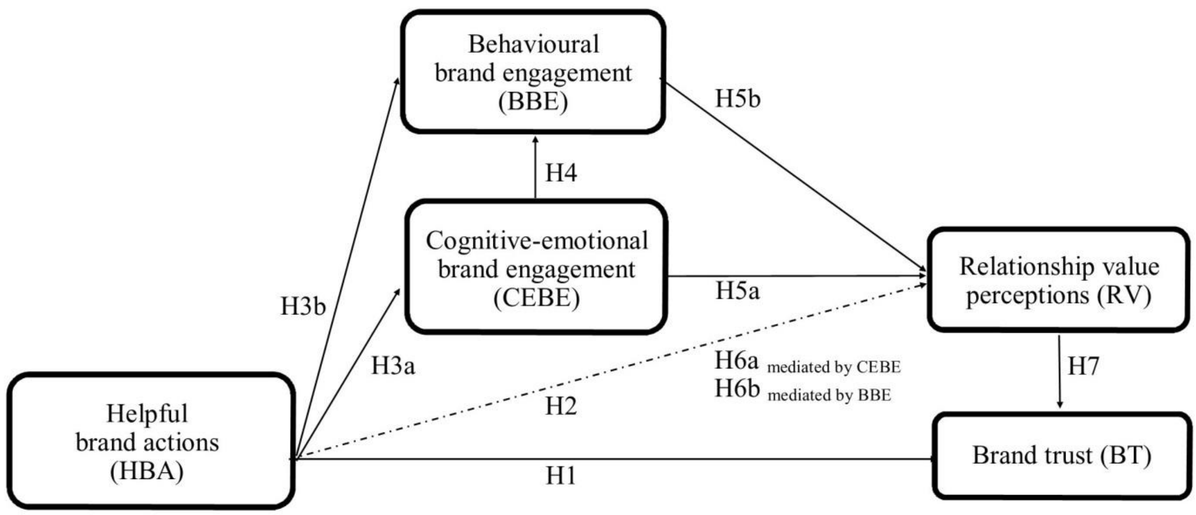

Figure 2. Hypothesised research model.

3 METHOD

3.1 Data collection and sample

To address the hypotheses and reveal the role of customer-perceived B2B brand actions in value-laden trusted brand relationships, a survey was conducted related to a thematic newsletter from a large B2B software firm offering enterprise business solutions. Unlike their other brand-centric newsletter, this periodical consists of industry-related topics and introductions to the firm's thematic blog posts, webinars, customer stories and how-to guides from the firm's website. Email newsletters are a well-accepted in B2B communication (Järvinen *et al.*, 2012; Danaher and Rossiter, 2011), and critical activity for successful B2B content marketing. Hence, the newsletter used as the focus of this survey incorporates an important B2B DCM platform.

The survey was distributed through email with a motivational letter and a request to participate in a survey related to one's brand-related perceptions and the above-mentioned newsletter. Specifically, the request was distributed to the brand's newsletter subscriber list. There were

2,000 email invitations that were confirmed as received by the recipients. Of those, the survey itself was opened by 398 respondents, and a total of 199 respondents completed the survey. Hence, of those who opened the survey, approximately 50% responded. Of the confirmed recipients of the invitation, approximately 10% submitted responses.

A total of 195 complete and valid responses were used for further analysis. The four excluded responses indicated clear signs of straight-lining, where respondents give identical or nearly identical answers to items in a battery of questions using the same response scale (in this case, extreme negative responses), which reduces data quality and validity (Kim et al 2018).

In terms of demographics (see Table 1), most of the 195 respondents were 40–59-year-old (68%), male (61%), and working in a large firm (41%). Nearly half of the respondents were also employed by a firm that purchased products or services from the newsletter provider. There was also a considerable number (53%) of individuals whose firms had not purchased or who did not know whether their firms used products or services from the newsletter provider. Additionally, forty per cent of the respondents tended to read the majority of newsletters, while a similar amount tended to read a minor portion of the newsletters. Considering the sample size, the number of readers in this study represents approximately eleven percent of the average number of monthly readers of the studied newsletter.

Table 1. Respondent profiles.

	Value	Frequency (%)
Sex	Female	77 (39.5)
	Male	118 (60.5)
Age	18-29	6 (3.1)
	30-39	29 (14.9)
	40-49	54 (27.7)
	50-59	78 (40.0)
	60 and over	28 (14.4)
Firm size (no. of employees)	Micro (below 10)	11 (5.6)
	Small (10-50)	39 (20.0)
	Medium-sized (50-250)	62 (31.8)
	Large (over 250)	79 (40.5)
	Missing	4 (2.1)
Subscriber role	Customer	92 (47.2)
	Non customer	103 (52.8)
Newsletter reading habit	Does not read	32 (16.4)
	Reads minority	85 (43.6)
	Reads majority	70 (35.9)
	Reads all	8 (4.1)
Total		195 (100)

3.2 Measures

The measures used in this study were mostly scales tested and validated in prior research. However, some adaptations were necessary to fit the context. (Please see Appendix 1 for item descriptions and measurement properties).

The brand's helpfulness behaviour was developed based on the helpful B2B brand actions identified in the theory section. Items related to functionally-oriented knowledge delivery through DCM are consistent with the measures by Dholakia *et al.* (2004) and Bruhn *et al.* (2014). The items indicating brand's investment to process content were developed for this study. These are consistent with previous research, which used similar actions to represent the content delivery construct (Sweeney *et al.* 2012), i.e., the helpful manner in which content is delivered. The cognitive-emotional brand engagement measure was adapted from Hollebeek *et al.* (2014), but it was reframed and rephrased to support the measurement of brand-related cognitive and emotional activity during DCM interactions. The behavioural brand engagement measure was based on Algesheimer *et al.* (2005) and the competitor comparison in the item BBE2 was adapted from Hollebeek *et al.*, (2014). The items were formulated to highlight the brand-related trigger for frequent DCM consumption. In addition, the three items for measuring relationship value perceptions were formed based on Vivek *et al.* (2014). Acknowledging the various overlapping roles of respondents, the relationship value perceptions capture the overall value, benefits and positive performance contributions of the brand relationship to themselves or the firm. Finally, the items for brand trust were adapted from McKnight *et al.* (2002), Verhoef *et al.* (2002) and Abdul-Muhmin (2005). All the items were measured using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”.

3.3 Non-response bias

To identify the potential characteristics of non-respondents, the first 20 percent of the respondents were compared to the last 20 percent as suggested by Armstrong and Overton (1977). Chi-square tests and independent sample t-tests revealed a significant difference concerning customer/non-customer share in the groups (p=.000) and related to the item BBE2 (p=0.043). Concerning the customer share, the early respondent group included 20 percent more of customers compared to the late respondent group, which included an equal number of customers and non-customers/ individuals who did not know whether the brand was used by their firms. Hence, there was a possibility for non-customers to be representative of non-respondents. Consequently, all items were tested with a weighted early group, consisting of first 20 per cent of customers and 20 percent of non-customers. This weighted group was also compared to late respondent group. This time, no significant differences emerged. The original difference related to BBE2-responses may be explained by the non-customers as a group of non-respondents. Based on these findings, customer/non-customer variable (CUST) is used as a control variable in the model, to account for any differences between the two groups.

3.4 Common method bias

Common method bias is a possible concern in measurement, where data is self-reported and collected within a single survey (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). To minimise the occurrence of common method bias in this study, anonymity of responses in the data collection phase was ensured and the order of the survey items were mixed in the questionnaire. Additionally, following recent research (e.g. Panagopoulos et al, 2017; Steinhoff and Palmatier, 2016), common method bias was approached statistically using the unmeasured latent method factor proposed in Podsakoff *et al.* (2003). Basically, original factor items were allowed to load into a single latent common method variance factor, in addition to their original factors. All the original factor loadings remained significant in the presence of latent common methods variance factor. Furthermore, method-based variance explained only 7.6% of the indicator variance, which is well below the 20% threshold. Therefore, common method bias is unlikely to be an issue in this study.

4 RESULTS

4.1 Measurement model

Before addressing the structural model, the validity and reliability of the measurement model was addressed with confirmatory factor analysis using AMOS 24.0. During the validity testing, cognitive-emotional brand engagement item HBA6 (*I feel good about the brand when I read this content*) showed considerable overlap with HBA4 and was therefore omitted from further analysis. The final measurement model contained five latent constructs and 24 individual items (see Appendix 1).

The composite reliabilities (CRs) presented in Table 2 ranged from 0.89 to 0.94, demonstrating excellent internal consistency. The AVE values were well above the threshold of 0.5 indicating acceptable convergent validity. In addition, the results in Table 3 reveal that all factor correlations were below the square root of the AVEs, confirming the discriminant validity of the model (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

Table 2. Composite reliabilities (CRs), Average variance extracted (AVE), factor correlations, and square root of AVEs (on the diagonal).

	CR	AVE	BBE	CEBE	HBA	RV	BT	CUST
BBE	.894	.739	**.859**					
CEBE	.900	.645	.578	**.803**				
HBA	.887	.570	.517	.694	**.755**			
RV	.930	.817	.478	.619	.513	**.904**		
BT	.942	.700	.532	.633	.686	.732	**.837**	
CUST	n.a.	n.a.	.242	.207	.224	.470	.378	**n.a.**

BBE=Behavioural brand engagement; CEBE= Cognitive-emotional brand engagement; HBA= Helpful brand actions; RV= Relationship value perceptions; TB= Brand trust; CUST=Customer/noncustomer

4.2 Structural model

The indices for the structural model reveal an acceptable model fit (Browne and Cudeck, 1992). Table 3 shows that the chi-square/degrees of freedom ratio is below 2.5, the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) is below 0.08 and other model fit indices (NFI, IFI, TLI, CFI) were above or close to 0.9. The structural model test results for the hypothesised relationships also reveal that the constructed model has high explanatory power for the constructed model, as the model accounts for 49% of the variance in cognitive-emotional brand engagement, 38% in behavioural brand engagement, 52% in relationship value perceptions and 68% in brand trust.

The hypothesis test results show that, as expected, the helpful B2B brand actions had a strong positive impact on cognitive-emotional brand engagement ($\beta=0.68$, $p<0.001$). This supports hypothesis H3a. Helpful brand actions ($\beta=0.22$, $p<0.05$) and cognitive-emotional brand engagement ($\beta=0.40$, $p<0.001$) were also found to significantly influence behavioural brand engagement, supporting hypotheses H3b and H4. However, cognitive-emotional engagement seemed to have a considerably larger impact. Together, these results reveal the relevance of the studied helpful brand actions in engaging consumers to brands with digital content marketing.

Table 3. Structural model and hypotheses test results.

Direct effects:	**β**	**Hypothesis test results**
Helpful brand actions → Brand trust	.427***	H1: support
Helpful brand actions → Relationship value	.075	H2: no support (see mediation)
Helpful brand actions → Cognitive-emotional brand engagement	.684***	H3a: support
Helpful brand actions → Behavioural brand engagement	.221*	H3b: support
Cognitive-emotional brand engagement → Behavioural brand engagement	.402***	H4: support
Cognitive-emotional brand engagement → Relationship value	.435***	H5a: support
Behavioural brand engagement→ Relationship value	.112	H5b: no support
Relationship value → Brand trust	.492***	H7: support
Subscriber role → Helpful brand actions	.225**	
Subscriber role → Cognitive-emotional brand engagement	.053	
Subscriber role → Behavioural brand engagement	.110	
Subscriber role → Relationship value	.336**	
Subscriber role → Brand trust	.051	

	R^2	
Helpful actions	.050	
Cognitive-emotional brand engagement	.488	
Behavioural brand engagement	.378	
Relationship value perceptions	.521	
Brand trust	.676	

Model fit: $\chi^2(261)=495.12$; p=0.00; CMIN/DF=1.90; NFI=.882; IFI=.940; TLI=.931; CFI=.940; RMSEA=.068

Note: *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05.

In regards to B2B customer relationships, the direct effect results showed that relationship value perceptions were only influenced by cognitive-emotional brand engagement (*β=0.44, p<0.001*), while no influence of behavioural brand engagement was found (*β=0.11, p>0.05*). Consequently, hypothesis H5a was supported, but there was no support for H5b.

In addition, no support for H2 regarding the direct relationship between helpful B2B brand actions and relationship value perceptions (*β=0.08, p>0.05*) was found. However, based on the hypotheses H6a and H6b, the non-significant relationship is potentially caused by the mediating role of the brand engagement. To address the hypotheses relating to the mediation effect, a bootstrapping approach was applied following Preacher and Hayes (2008). With a 5000 bootstrap samples, the results show that cognitive-emotional engagement acts as a significant mediator between perceived helpful brand actions and relationship value perceptions ($\beta = 0.63$; SE = 0.12); 95 percent confidence interval (CI= from 0.397 to 0.878). This gives support to hypothesis H6a. However, the bootstrapping did not reveal behavioural engagement to play a mediating role as the CI-values were not significantly different from zero. Specifically, the results indicated its low influence as a direct mediator between helpful brand actions and relationship value perceptions ($\beta = 0.03$; SE = 0.03; CI= from -0.012 to 0.113). Similarly, no double mediator influence was found when taking into account the mediating role of behavioural brand engagement through the cognitive-emotional brand engagement ($\beta = 0.05$; SE = 0.04; CI= from -0.018 to 0.130). Hence, these results led to the rejection of the hypothesis H6b. Furthermore, relationship value perceptions were also found to be the primary influence on brand trust ($\beta=0.49$, $p<0.001$), supporting H7. However, as hypothesised, the helpful B2B brand actions also had a considerable effect on brand trust ($\beta=0.43$, $p<0.001$), supporting H1. This suggests that brand-related perceptions arising in DCM interactions are capable of influencing consumers' confidence on brands.

4.3 Alternative model

The hypothesized research model was also compared with an alternative model. To do this, a "complete" model consisting of the hypothesised relationships presented above, as well as the direct effects of cognitive-emotional and behavioural brand engagement on brand trust was tested. Rival model fit ($\chi^2(259)=492.42$; p=0.000; NFI=0.882; IFI=0.941; TLI=0.930; CFI=0.940) showed no changes in the chi-square/degrees of freedom ratio (1.90) or in RMSEA (0.068). Similarly, non-significant paths from cognitive-emotional brand engagement ($\beta=0.03$ $p>0.05$) and behavioural brand engagement ($\beta=0.02$, $p>0.05$) to brand trust support the original hypothesised structural model.

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Theoretical implications

This paper investigated the role of DCM using relationship marketing principles as a theoretical lens. Building especially on recent conceptual work addressing consumer brand engagement processes in DCM and its relational outcomes (Hollebeek and Macky, 2018), this paper addressed how brands could foster consumer engagement with the brand and build value-laden trusted brand relationships with DCM. Specifically, we focussed on helpful brand actions and demonstrated how those helpful actions play a dual role in B2B DCM. The dual role was rationalised based on the utility of helpful brand actions for both customer-focused (i.e. customer learning, reasoning and improved decision-making) and brand-focused (i.e. brand engagement, relationship value and brand trust) DCM aims. This helpfulness was empirically established to help brands to steer consumers' B2B brand engagement in DCM interactions and foster value-laden trusted brand relationships, contributing to the DCM literature.

To elaborate, the findings indicated that helpful brand action in DCM is a major driver of consumers' brand engagement. Specifically, helpful brand actions were found to act as a strong trigger for consumers' cognitive-emotional brand engagement. While helpful actions also had a limited role in triggering frequent behavioural brand engagement, this behavioural engagement was primarily caused by the consumer's cognitive-emotional brand engagement. These findings collectively demonstrate the importance of a brand's helpful actions in driving consumers' brand engagement in DCM. Additionally, these results provide evidence supporting the sequential occurrence of cognitive/emotional brand engagement and behavioral brand engagement in DCM (Hollebeek and Macky, 2018). The results offer the important insight that the focus of DCM should not only be on content benefit and usage, but also on ensuring that the content is delivered in a helpful manner which engages consumers to brands.

This paper also revealed the salience of cognitive-emotional brand engagement in transforming helpful brand actions into consumer perceived relationship value. This result gives empirical support to the central mediating role of brand engagement in customer relationships (e.g. Brodie *et al.*, 2011; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2016; Vivek *et al.*, 2012). This finding also points to the particular importance of concentrating on actions that enable the brand to convey relational meaning in DCM interactions, instead of solely focusing on providing relevant content to consumers.

Unexpectedly, this study did not find consumers' behavioural brand engagement to significantly influence their relationship value perceptions above and beyond cognitive-emotional brand engagement. Nor did this study find behavioural brand engagement to act as a significant mediator between helpfulness behaviour and relationship value perceptions. While unexpected, prior literature also indicates that these results are plausible. For instance, these findings on the direct effect of behavioural brand engagement are consistent with the acknowledged relatively weak influence of interaction frequency on relationship quality (Palmatier *et al.*, 2006). This highlights that mere B2B brand interaction does not necessarily lead to greater relationship value perceptions. The reason for the lack of a mediation effect may be that behavioural brand engagement is directed towards the DCM activity. On the other hand, cognitive-emotional engagement relates to the self-relevant connection to the brand induced by the consumers' DCM interaction. These results suggest the insufficiency of behavioural brand-related motivation such as frequent brand encounters in contributing to consumers' relationship value. Instead this value arises through cognitive/emotional brand engagement in DCM interactions, supporting the work of Hollebeek and Macky (2018).

Finally, this study confirmed helpful brand actions directly fostering B2B brand trust. Specifically, this influence was argued to occur through the ability of helpful brand actions to reveal B2B brand knowledge and signal brand's benevolence in terms of willingness to share their knowledge for the benefit of the consumer. This result supports Hollebeek and Macky's (2018) argument that brand trust develops as a consequence of consumers' sense-making through multiple brand-related DCM interactions. This was further supported by the insignificant relationship between brand engagement factors and brand trust addressed in the rival model.

These findings contribute to DCM and customer brand engagement literature in two intertwined ways. This study is among the first to empirically approach the role of DCM in value-laden, trusted B2B brand relationships and the suitability of helpfulness as the basis of DCM activities (Holliman and Rowley, 2014; see also Barry and Gironda, 2017). With this research, we answer to the call for more research on DCM execution, and for further evidence on practises that foster consumer value, brand engagement and trusted brand relationships (Hollebeek and Macky, 2018; Holliman and Rowley, 2014). Furthermore, this study explained brand's helpfulness in reflecting both brand knowledge sharing and related benevolence by the B2B brand. Hence, this paper addressed an important DCM research area by focusing on a concept that occurs in the intersection of consumers' brand-related functional and authenticity-based motives (Hollebeek and Macky, 2018). Brand's helpfulness in DCM also continues the emerging discussion in customer engagement literature on the active role of the brand in engaging customers (Verhoef *et al.*, 2010; Vivek *et al.*, 2012; Beckers *et al.*, 2018).

5.2 Managerial implications

To succeed in relational DCM aims, marketers' attention should not be only in disseminating topical content and related benefits for consumers. Instead, DCM practitioners should also focus on generating brand-related signals through DCM. It is these brand-related signals that trigger consumers' cognitive/affective brand engagement in DCM. This paper revealed that a specific bundle of helpful actions that manifest themselves as providing relevant information and ideas; emphasising problem solving; as well as in investing in efforts to interpret, analyse and explain topics–can drive this brand engagement. This helpfulness reveals brand's knowledge capabilities and signals brand's benevolence in terms of willingness to share this knowledge for the benefit of the consumer. These in turn act as a source of valued, trusted B2B brand relationships.

At the same time, these helpful actions are a source of functional benefit for the consumer. A brand's industry knowledge can support the consumer in terms of up-to-date information on the industry or related phenomena or support the consumer in problem solving. Similarly, using the brand's competence to explain, analyse and interpret topics may help the consumer to develop a deeper understanding of different topics and to make more reasoned decisions based on this information. Consumers presumably search for information from different sources until they are satisfied with this need (Hollebeek and Macky, 2018). Potentially, brands could also invest their time and effort to curate information on the relevant topics from outside sources and combine this information for example through interpretation and analysis. This may further reduce consumers' need to engage in information gathering and increase their motivation to engage with brand's DCM content. For a brand, helpful action is also easily executable relative to another known trust promoting DCM aim, namely thought leadership. This is because sharing brand knowledge in a functional and benevolent manner does not require thought leadership capabilities necessary when disseminating for instance, novel, industry-advancing content (c.f.: Barry and Gironda, 2017).

The concept of helpfulness applied in this research also offers a contrast to native advertising which is often considered as DCM in a paid context. There is a concern that marketing practitioners opportunistically utilise paid DCM primarily to leverage the credibility of the medium to their brand messages, thus endangering the credibility of the medium and the brand (Taiminen *et al.*, 2015). Applying brand helpfulness as the primary approach enables a more authentic route to paid DCM. This approach corresponds to the journalistic context, where brand representatives are in fact often attending as topical experts who are used to interpret and explain the happenings.

5.3 Limitations and future research suggestions

The results of this study revealed several interesting findings, but the cross sectional nature of the study limits ability to draw causal inferences. Furthermore, the study was based in a B2B context, often characterized by a high relational orientation between the supplier and a limited number of consumers and a relatively strong emphasis on corporate branding. As such, inferences about a B2C context will have to be made with some caution. In addition, the research focused specifically on DCM activity related to B2B brand's newsletters delivered through email. Email is a more accepted marketing communication platform in B2B than in B2C (Danaher and Rossiter, 2011). The B2B suppliers also disseminate content through other activities such as webinars, white papers or social media posts. However, this study does not focus on the roles of those other activities. Furthermore, the current engagement literature (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2016; Hollebeek, 2018) and marketing communication literature (e.g. Finne and Grönroos, 2017) have emphasised the role of ecosystems and multiple actors within. This study focuses on the dyadic brand relationship perspective in DCM treating the dyad as the lower analytical level within the higher level context of ecosystems. It has also been suggested that buying centre members may engage differently with B2B brands (Hollebeek, 2018). This study does not address such role differences. These topics highlight the numerous research future opportunities in this area.

Furthermore, DCM has become crucial in digital marketing activities in both the B2B and B2C sectors. Several academic marketing papers mention DCM, but research focusing specifically on DCM remains scarce. Thus, future research should put emphasis on addressing content marketing from various perspectives in both B2C and in B2B. This study offers an interesting path for future research to continue discussing the dual role of a brand's helpfulness in DCM in both these contexts. However, as similar type of functional benefits are important for B2C consumers as well (e.g. Calder *et al.*, 2016), and as information contributions are based on journalism whose content is regularly consumed by households, we believe that a brand's helpful actions should also be applicable to the B2C context.

Finally, this paper identified a bundle of helpful B2B brand actions that serve the consumer through B2B DCM. Most recent B2B DCM research has also similarly indicated useful tips and problem solving advice as representing brand's helpfulness (see Barry and Gironda, 2017). However, several other important helpful brand actions likely exist, especially related to information processing by the brands. Future studies could focus on identifying a broader bundle of helpful brand actions and their relationship to the dual role of the brand in DCM. Future research could also consider DCM from a systems perspective. For instance, what drives consumers to search topical information from one actor over another? What are the consumers' perceived additive benefits from engaging with several topic-related information sources in parallel? In addition to ecosystem perspective to customer engagement (e.g. Hollebeek *et al.*, 2016; Maslowska *et al.*, 2016), the recently introduced customer-integrated marketing communication model (Finne and Grönroos, 2017) may offer a fruitful starting point in addressing these issues. Effort could also be directed towards identifying distinctive strategies for brands to foster consumer brand engagement in DCM interactions.

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Appendix 1. Construct items and factor loadings.

Factor	Indicator	Factor Loadings
Behavioural brand engagement (BBE)	I read this content because of the actions made by this brand (BBE1)	.855
	Compared to similar vendors, this brand has a substantial influence to why I frequently read this content (BBE2)	.951
	I read this content repeatedly because of this brand (BBE3)	.762
Cognitive-emotional brand engagement (CEBE)	Reading this content gets me to think about the brand (CEBE1)	.740
	I think about the brand a lot when I read this content (CEBE2)	.824
	Reading this content stimulates my interest related to the brand (CEBE3)	.874
	The brand makes me feel positive when I read this content (CEBE4)	.862
	The brand makes me happy when I read this content (CEBE5)	.702
Helpful brand actions (PBA)	The brand introduces relevant topics (HBA1)	.829
	The brand conveys relevant ideas related to industry or phenomenon (HBA2)	.834
	The brand approaches relevant topics with a problem-solving mentality (HBA3)	.808
	The brand invests in explaining relevant topics (HBA4)	.716
	The brand invests in analysing relevant topics (HBA5)	.608
	The brand invests in interpreting relevant industry information or phenomenon (HBA6)	.707
Relationship value (RV)	This brand positively contributes to my/my company's performance (RV1)	.888
	Altogether my relationship with this brand is valuable for me/my company (RV2)	.893
	Altogether my relationship with this brand benefits me/my company (RV3)	.930
Brand trust (BT)	This is a competent brand (BT1)	.883
	This brand is exactly the right brand to provide industry products/services (BT2)	.878
	This brand performs well (BT3)	.844
	This brand is a good partner to do business with (BT41)	.884
	This brand is a fair actor (BT5)	.734
	This is a trustworthy brand (BT6)	.890
	This is a sincere brand (BT7)	.724

III

THE TRANSPARENT COMMUNICATIVE ORGANIZATION AND NEW HYBRID FORMS OF CONTENT

by

Kimmo Taiminen, Vilma Luoma-aho & Kristiina Tolvanen 2015

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The transparent communicative organization and new hybrid forms of content

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ABSTRACT

Building on the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management's Melbourne Mandate's understanding of a communicative organization consisting of organizational character, responsibility and listening and engagement, this paper explores these principles in the context of new hybrid forms of online content. This study asks about the role of transparency in the context of commercial hybrid content. Through theoretical consideration as well as interviews of representatives of public relations and marketing communication associations and agencies in Finland, the article presents the practitioners' perceptions and experiences using the literature on transparency. To better understand the communicative organization of today in the context of hybrid content creation, we propose the concept of the "transparent communicative organization." We suggest four new propositions for the practice of hybrid forms of engaging publics to support the transparent communicative organization: (1) source identification to enable trust, (2) two-way transparency inviting user feedback, (3) stakeholder-centric arenas to enable engagement, and (4) content on organizational expertise to build long-term engagement. We invite further public relations research to improve and test these preliminary propositions as the use of hybrid content increases.

1. The era of new hybrid forms of content

As traditional brand-centered communication and marketing efforts have become ineffective in the online environment (DuMars, Sitkiewicz, & Fogel, 2010; Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010), brands and organizations are moving their messages to issue-centered discussions in arenas chosen by the social consumers (Kliatchko, 2008). This implies a move from the push environment of traditional influence toward the searchable, customizable, (Seabra, Abrantes, & Lages, 2007), and relevance-driven pull environment, where the value comes from informative, entertaining and less irritating content (Tutaj & van Reijmersdal, 2012).

The central idea in this pull environment is "engagement:" Brands and organizations are increasingly engaging stakeholders online by providing relevant content outside their main product or service. When content produced by brands or organizations is interesting enough to engage stakeholders, it builds direct interaction between the brand or organization and the individual consuming the content (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). In aiming to engage stakeholders, the lines between

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editorial content, advertising and edited content are blurred (Reijmersdal, Neijens, & Smit, 2005) and online content takes a hybrid form (Balasubramanian, 1994). Examples of such hybrid content include sponsored content (Sonderman & Tran, 2013), native advertising (Interactive Advertising Bureau, 2013), content marketing (Pulizzi, 2012) and brand journalism (Brito, 2013; Cole & Greer, 2013). What they all have in common is their attempt to create value by offering relevant and useful content for stakeholders (Cole & Greer, 2013; Interactive Advertising Bureau, 2013; Pulizzi, 2012) and building credibility through brand and organizational identification.

The move toward engagement has sparked the interest of several disciplines such as public relations (PR), marketing, journalism and advertising. The new focus on engagement has narrowed the previously apparent differences between the aforementioned disciplines (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Michaelson & Stacks, 2007; Pulizzi, 2012), imposing an "identity crisis" with new ethical challenges for PR professionals. Previous studies have suggested combining, not separating, PR and marketing to get the best out of the engagement enabled by the online environment and social media (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Hensel & Deis, 2010; Pulizzi, 2012). Some believe that the hybrid forms of online content may indicate a change for the entire PR industry toward more marketing-oriented methods. Concern has arisen over replacing traditional PR with pure advertising and branding objectives (Hallahan, 2014). As the industry practice of providing online content spreads, there is emerging concern that brand and organization-generated content may deceive publics, may be one-sided or misleading and may be in need of regulation. For hybrid content, the transparency of the source, aim and origin is often lacking. In fact, hybrid content is often disguised. According to Balasubramanian (1994, p. 30), there is a need to address

> ". . . all paid attempts to influence audiences for commercial benefit using communications that project a non-commercial character . . . [because] under these circumstances, audiences are likely to be unaware of the commercial influence attempt and/or to process the content of such communications differently than they process commercial messages."

Despite the timeliness and importance of commercial hybrid content, little research has focused on what could be done to maintain credibility and legitimacy related to the phenomena. The authors argue that new forms of hybrid content without transparency may jeopardize "the communicative organization" (The Melbourne Mandate, 2012) and hinder the legitimacy of the communication profession as well as the media outlets they depend on.

We propose that transparency take center stage in the discussion on the engagement and future of PR. This study asks what the role of transparency is in commercial hybrid forms of online content. We use The Melbourne Mandate's (2012) principles of a communicative organization (organizational character, responsibility, and listening and engagement) to propose different aspects of transparency that need to be addressed in the context of hybrid content. To better understand the contextual nature of today's brands and organizations, the authors propose the concept of "transparent communicative organization" in the context of commercial hybrid content. Through theoretical consideration as well as interviews of representatives of PR and marketing communication associations and media agencies in Finland in the spring of 2014, we suggest four propositions for the ethical practice of hybrid forms of engaging publics to support the transparent communicative organization.

2. Transparency in the context of the communicative organization

To develop an understanding of the processes of transparency related to commercial hybrid online content, the aims of transparent actions should first be clearly understood. Grunig, Grunig, & Ehling, (1992) stated that for organizations, PR increases mutual understanding and satisfaction and builds on the openness, credibility, trust and legitimacy of an organization. Moreover, The Melbourne Mandate (2012) acknowledges that to secure legitimacy, an organization must transparently and responsibly communicate the value that it can create for stakeholders.

Whenever media, brands and organizations cooperate, trust is brokered and ethical aspects require consideration. Hybrid content, if used carelessly, may jeopardize the communicative organization's credibility and reputation, and further hinder the legitimacy of the PR profession and the media outlets uon which the profession depends. As credibility is directly related to the executed communication effort (Verčič, Verčič, & Laco, 2008), the trustworthiness of the organization is the key to effective communication (Miller & Sinclair, 2009). Whereas the traditional focus of businesses is to pursue their own interests (Kaler, 2000), transparent communication balances the organizational objectives with common societal interests and may thus help publics and stakeholders accept the organization (Jahansoozi, 2006; Milne, Rohm, & Bahl, 2009). From this perspective, transparency relates to stakeholder perceptions of mutual respect between an organization and its stakeholders as well as to the openness of communication (Rawlins, 2009).

The definitions of transparency in the communication literature vary and are often oversimplified (Albu & Wehmeier, 2014; Sisco & McCorkindale, 2013). While there is no universal definition of transparency (Sisco & McCorkindale, 2013), scholars agree that it is related to openness, truthfulness, public information needs (Baker, 2008; Rawlins, 2009), credibility (Miller & Sinclair, 2009; Plaisance, 2007; Sisco & McCorkindale, 2013) and trust (Miller & Sinclair, 2009; Plaisance, 2007; Rawlins, 2009). Some disagreement is also apparent as to whether transparency is an umbrella concept or merely a vital part of another concept such as authenticity or ethics (Gilpin, Palazzolo, & Brody, 2010).

Although The Melbourne Mandate (2012) equates transparency with openness, honesty and accessibility, these concepts differ from transparency. Thus, the construct should not be understood in such a simple manner. Rawlins (2009, p. 75) defined transparency in organizations as

> "the deliberate attempt to make available all legally releasable information—whether positive or negative in nature—in a manner that is accurate, timely, balanced, and unequivocal, for the purpose of enhancing the reasoning ability of publics and holding organizations accountable for their actions, policies, and practices."

Hence, for communication to be transparent, relevant information must be made available for stakeholder reasoning, and organizations need to be accountable for their actions.

Accountability is therefore one important dimension of transparency (Rawlins, 2009). It is related to organizations' actions of offering their information for public scrutiny (Gilpin et al., 2010) as well as to organizational responsibility to provide the necessary information to make informed decisions (Rawlins, 2009). Thus, accountability relates to organizational responsibility for actions, initiated by social norms or regulations (Miller & Sinclair, 2009). However, in the absence of regulations, practitioners' morality and ethics determine the course of action. While accountability and a responsible "mindset" form the basis of transparent communication, transparency should become visible within the process of communication.

Gilpin et al. (2010) related transparency to enabling publics to know what is happening and making it possible to confirm the provided information. Thus, transparent processes require the disclosure of information (Baker, 2008; Rawlins, 2009). However, openness and disclosure of information are not enough to build transparency (Albu & Wehmeier, 2014; Baker, 2008; Rawlins, 2008). Organizations should seek to deliver relevant information (Rawlins, 2009), as transparency is more related to the "quality of openness" than to openness per se (Baker, 2008, p. 243). The quality of information is more important than all-inclusive information delivery.

To guarantee the delivery and transparency of relevant, quality information, a critical element to consider is how the available information resonates with stakeholder understanding (Albu & Wehmeier, 2014; Rawlins, 2008). Thus, transparency also forces organizations to "build a culture of listening and engagement" (The Melbourne Mandate, 2012). For example, Christensen and Langer (2009, as cited in Albu & Wehmeier, 2014, p. 118) noted, "The requirements of transparency tend to produce information without reception, and openness without trust, because they are not bound to the interpretive and sense-making capabilities of the publics." It is not the organization's perception of transparency that matters but the level of transparency perceived by stakeholders (Albu & Wehmeier, 2014). Therefore, the central point to consider is how stakeholders perceive the organization's transparency in specific touch points.

Allowing stakeholder participation and committing to dialogue about stakeholder information needs are critical aspects of transparent communication. Dialogue aims for relationships based on "mutual trust, compromise, cooperation, and whenever possible, win–win situations" (Hutton, 1999, p. 208). Using dialogic communication (Bruning, Dials, & Shirka, 2008), PR can manage stakeholder relationships by enabling mutual understanding and clarity of communication (Albu & Wehmeier, 2014; Moody, 2012; Shen & Kim, 2012). On the other hand, lack of organizational engagement and listening may lead to underestimating stakeholders' expectations and depreciating their needs and wants, therefore endangering the organization's reputation, credibilityand trust. Transparency ideally makes it possible for stakeholders to participate in the discussion of their information needs (Rawlins, 2009), which should correlate with the relevant information given to the publics (Albu & Wehmeier, 2014; Baker, 2008; Rawlins, 2009; Shen & Kim, 2012).

3. Transparency and authenticity

The authentic character of an organization supports the effectiveness of PR in terms of public responses and behavior (The Melbourne Mandate, 2012; Molleda, 2010). Stakeholders demand more transparency, openness and responsibility from organizations (Molleda, 2010). As organizations are accountable to stakeholders, stakeholder demands should be met. Authentic organizations are true to themselves; hence, authentic actions are genuine, truthful and consistent (Shen & Kim, 2012). Transparency relates closely to authenticity, as authentic character involves transparent actions of making authenticity visible (Baker, 2008; Gilpin et al., 2010; Rawlins, 2009; Shen & Kim, 2012). Stakeholder perception of authenticity enabled by transparent communication could determine the quality of organization-public relationships (Molleda, 2010; Shen & Kim, 2012).

Transparency must be understood in its context and therefore, the relationship between an organization's authenticity and transparency needs examination. Gilpin et al. (2010) proposed four dimensions of socially mediated authenticity in public relations: authority, identity, transparency and engagement. While in their model transparency is considered as one dimension of authenticity, transparency also creates authenticity as transparent activities support other dimensions of authenticity (Gilpin et al., 2010). The following sections examine how the transparent communication may link with other dimensions of socially mediated authenticity to supports an authentic organizational character in the context of commercial hybrid content creation.

3.1. *Mirroring an organization's identity through transparent communication*

Authentic presentation of an organization's identity is vital to a company's credibility and here transparency is necessary to guarantee the legitimacy of an action (Gurău, 2008). Identity is one of the dimensions of socially mediated authenticity, relating to sincerity or how genuine the organization's actions are perceived (Gilpin et al., 2010). While various viewpoints exist regarding an organization's identity, these are often related either to identity as a self-presentation and projection to stakeholders or to the self-perception of the organization by its members (Hatch & Schultz, 2000, p. 15). However, building identity through organizational self-interest, performativity, authenticity and genuineness cannot be achieved in the long run (Theunissen, 2014) because authenticity reflects stakeholder perceptions of the organization's reliability (Gilpin et al., 2010).

Genuine identity may be sustained through transparent communication (Gilpin et al., 2010). With regard to commercial hybrid content creation, genuine identity may become apparent in the organization's knowledge related to the topic, but involvement in the topic might legitimize participation in the discussion about it (Hallahan, 2001). Therefore, the way the company is integrated into the thematic content should be taken into account (Buijzen, van Reijmersdal, & Owen, 2010). While revealing source identity is important (Miller & Sinclair, 2009), Theunissen (2014) noted that the public perception of the organization's identity is still influenced by the communicated and "packaged" identity. As the company sends a variety of messages presenting different viewpoints of marketing, advertising or PR, these messages may be a threat to a consistent corporate image (Gurău, 2008). The organization needs to be presented in a consistent way (Shen & Kim, 2012), and genuine identity should be pursued trough consistent messages (Gilpin et al., 2010).

The commercial hybrid forms of online content are often implemented by or for marketers and advertisers and are thus driven by marketing objectives. To guarantee integrated communication to all stakeholders, a common understanding must exist inside the company about the messages sent outside the organization (Gurău, 2008). While genuine actions also create an authentic view from the organization, communication actions should still be coordinated through awareness of the organization's real identity.

Therefore, PR should highlight the genuineness of the organization's identity as a basis for all communication. However, one's identity must also correlate with authentic knowledge and involvement on the specific subject (Gilpin et al., 2010), as well as reveal one's identity to enhance stakeholder reasoning abilities (Rawlins, 2009). Hence, systematically coordinating media content is an important objective for PR to sustain corporate legitimacy (Jo, 2004) by creating understanding, building trust (Moody, 2012) and credibility (Jo, 2004), maintaining transparency (Molleda, 2010) and establishing a good reputation (Hutton, 1999; Jo, 2004).

3.2. Building authority through transparency of commercial hybrid content

Authority is the second dimension of an organization's socially mediated authenticity (Gilpin et al., 2010). While managing expectations, PR must acknowledge the media behavior of publics (Olkkonen & Luoma-aho, 2014). Organizations should acknowledge that communication is no longer organization-centric, but rather covers issues and topics on broader phenomena (Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010). PR practitioners must consider whether they should focus to a great extent on "issues" and "stakes," which are seen as a reason for involvement in the organization's sphere of authority. An organization's participation in a certain issue or discussion may be considered in terms of the knowledge related to the topic (Hallahan, 2001). Knowledge refers to beliefs, attitudes and expertise on the topic. Providing knowledge is an important element of positive organization-public relationships (Hutton, 1999; Jo, 2004). Thus, PR should determine the issues and topics on which the organization has knowledge.

Authority relates to contextual expertise (Gilpin et al., 2010). Organizations should evaluate the content carefully because the source's expertise influences the perceived credibility of the message (Cole & Greer, 2013), which in turn affects the credibility of an organization's actions (Gilpin et al., 2010). For PR practitioners to legitimize hybrid forms of online content in the media, they must ensure authority on the themes presented in the content. Authority guarantees increased attention, appreciation and acceptance (van Reijmersdal et al., 2005) toward the organization's activities. According to persuasion knowledge theory, the persuasiveness of the message is related to the public's perceived knowledge of the topic, it's understanding of the objectives and purposes of the message provider and the perceptions of the respondents' own goals and opportunities to manage the persuasion attempt (Miller & Sinclair, 2009).

Cole and Greer (2013) noted that the perceived trustworthiness of the content affects the public perception of the message credibility. Therefore, the quality of the argument in the message should be evaluated comprehensively (Jo, 2004). As stakeholder engagement through commercial hybrid content focuses on relevant, quality content delivery to publics, transparency in the context of journalism also should be considered. Karlsson (2010) noted that transparency in editorial processes relates to the disclosure of statements about how information is selected and produced and how the news content is verified. This notion should be taken into account to guarantee legitimate media cooperation and credible content creation forms in social media.

Marketers, advertisers and PR specialists also should keep in mind that purposely disguising promotional messages (Tomažic, Boras, Jurišic, & Lesjak, 2014) does not support the present consumer-value orientation in the new hybrid forms of content. Cole and Greer (2013), Hallahan (1999), Jo (2004) and Reijmersdal, Neijens, and Smit (2010) identified promotional messages and the content's persuasive intent as among the most important aspects affecting public perception of message credibility by lessening the authority of the source. Miller and Sinclair (2009) also noted that the transparency of planned action mediates the effect of message intent on trust toward the advertiser.

While mimicking the news article style and form may be useful in generating more credibility for the publisher compared to advertising (Cole & Greer 2013; van Reijmersdal et al., 2005), the intent behind the content should be revealed to increase understanding (Rawlins, 2009) and enable publics to know what is happening (Gilpin et al., 2010). Transparency increases the credibility of the content by offering opportunities to verify it (Karlsson, 2010), and well-written expert content increases credibility through knowledge sharing. Authority cannot be attained through promotion and persuasion; thus, hybrid forms of online content should be considered different from advertorials, as advertorials are often product-related and sales-focused (van Reijmersdal et al., 2005).

3.3. Ensuring transparency by enabling stakeholder participation

Symmetrical relationships (Shen & Kim, 2012) and engagement (Gilpin et al., 2010) are essential to building authentic organizations. Participation also is considered a dimension of transparency (Karlsson, 2010; Rawlins, 2009). Moreover, control mutuality is an important aspect of organization-public relationships (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998), and creating an environment of listening and engagement by ensuring common understanding and dialogue with stakeholders are at the center of the communicative organization (The Melbourne Mandate, 2012). Genuine identity should form the basis of this dialogue (Theunissen, 2014), where transparency involves making a certain level of interaction possible (Gilpin et al., 2010; Karlsson, 2010; Rawlins, 2009). This engagement or interaction with stakeholders can be seen as a willingness to risk dialogue-enabling interaction between the organization and the stakeholders (Gilpin et al., 2010). Without willingness, the organization may not be genuinely engaged in real dialogue (Theunissen & Wan Noordin, 2012). An organization may also build authority and legitimacy through engagement, as enabling interaction may create more acceptance and more open relationships with stakeholders (Gilpin et al., 2010). As meanings are co-created (Theunissen, 2014), organizations should not presume to know stakeholders' needs and wants. Instead, organizations should create shared meanings through dialogic communication with stakeholders.

More generally, the dialogic aspect of transparency is related to the need for engagement in authentic online communication, where participants expect to be involved (Gilpin et al., 2010). Dialogical transparency also may support the authentic organizational character because it makes interaction possible for participants (Gilpin et al., 2010) and might help publics express their opinions and give feedback (Shen & Kim, 2012). Participatory transparency in the journalistic context refers to involving publics in news processes by allowing them to influence, scrutinize and monitor the content (Deuze, 2005; Karlsson, 2010). In this way, the organization can enhance opportunities to influence and evaluate content, such as through commenting and contributing to the discussions.

4. Methodology

While numerous forms of hybrid content exist online, this study focuses on the commercial or paid hybrid content activities (e.g., native advertising, sponsored journalism), which are presented in the media context outside the organization-owned platforms and have become a popular form of stakeholder engagement. This study explores the role of commercial hybrid content and its transparency through theoretical consideration as well as interviews of 10 representatives of PR and marketing communication associations and media agencies in Finland in the spring of 2014.

In the interview process, a snowball sampling technique was used, since the topic is novel and professional listings do not yet specify which agencies and practitioners are specializing in this area. The first association and agency were chosen based on the research group's perception of their relevance to the study. Interviewees were also asked whether they perceived themselves as involved in the phenomenon and qualified to participate. All the other representatives were chosen based on the previous interviewees' suggestions about who could contribute to the discussion. In all cases, the person involved in executive management was approached and asked to suggest the most capable person in the organization to interview.

Semi-structured interviews were used to ensure that all the interviews covered the relevant aspects of the studied phenomenon without being too rigid. The first part of the interview focused on general perceptions about the phenomenon of commercial hybrid content activities, its credibility, benefits, disadvantages and appropriate/inappropriate use. The second part focused on the transparency elements of commercial hybrid forms of content. Questions in this part were developed based on themes found from existing theory, namely disclosure of information, responsibilities and participatory elements (e.g., Rawlins, 2009) of hybrid content processes.

The collected data were inductively analyzed by question. Different subthemes and aspects related to the questions (e.g., benefits of hybrid content activities) were identified and grouped into categories. To enhance understanding of the most common perceptions of transparency and the issues on which practitioners lack knowledge, the categories also were examined in terms of frequency of occurrence.

5. Practitioner perceptions of the transparency of commercial hybrid content

The results reflect the practitioners' perceptions, experiences and understanding of commercial hybrid forms of online content and their transparency. The results first show the practitioner perceptions about actors that benefit from the phenomenon of engagement and their perceptions of who the new hybrid forms of online content might harm and how. Then, the results focus more closely on the transparency of these commercial hybrid forms in terms of the responsibilities of the different actors involved, the needs of the actors involved and participatory ways enabling the transparent actions.

5.1. Practitioner perceptions related to authenticity of the hybrid online content

As this is a developing field, most of the interviewees preferred to use the term "content marketing" when discussing commercial hybrid forms of online content. Others focused on paid media content, suggesting terms such as "rented media space" and "sponsored content." Two interviewees felt that broader terms such as "online communication" or "content creation" were more suitable. However, from this point on, we primarily use the term "commercial hybrid forms of online content," which includes all the different forms mentioned by the interviewees.

5.1.1. The benefits and disadvantages of commercial hybrid online content

All the interviewees agreed that hybrid forms of online content mainly benefit the brand and the advertiser. The reasons given included promoting the brand, enhancing goodwill toward the organization, having a relatively "secure" and guaranteed way to get the message to the media and increasing the brand's media visibility in a credible way. Brands were also seen to benefit from sharable content, which broadens the content reach. Media houses were also seen to benefit from the phenomenon; the interviewees frequently mentioned that the media could benefit by earning revenue from advertisers. Relaying more relevant content to the media and establishing more long-term relationships with advertisers also were seen as benefits.

Most of the interviewees stated that commercial hybrid content should ideally benefit the reader, viewer or user. Several emphasized that readers/viewers should find the content functional, informative and/or entertaining in order for them to get value from it. Two interviewees also noted that content providers can benefit from offering sharable content while providing added social value for consumers.

The new developments of hybrid forms of online content were seen as an opportunity for agencies and new actors in the communication field who have special knowledge in online communication and social media, as well as for small actors who could serve brands relatively quickly in their content creation efforts.

Most of the interviewees stated that commercial hybrid content creation might harm the users of original online content. In general, all the interviewees highlighted the possibility of commercial hybrid content being seen as editorial even though it was paid content, which might confuse the reader. They stated that this confusion could produce credibility and reputation problems for both the organization and the media. In addition, the hype of commercial hybrid content creation was considered a threat to traditional advertising agencies because copywriters were seen as incapable of responding to the need for quality editorial content like PR agencies can.

5.1.2. Commercial hybrid content affecting the credibility of different actors

When asked how the hybrid forms affect the credibility of the different parties involved, the interviewees said that the content could both strengthen and reduce the credibility of the medium and the brand. First, if implemented with the proper level of transparency and with quality content, the credibility of both parties may increase. The number of recommendations and sharing of the content by consumers can also raise the credibility of the content and enhance the brand's status as a credible thought leader in a specific theme or issue, encouraging readers and users to revert to the brand and its content in the future. In addition, the relevant and effective commercial hybrid content may attract other advertisers to join the same media space, thus benefiting the medium in terms of revenue.

The biggest risk for brand credibility was considered to be hiding the brand or promoting it too much without relevant content for the public. The interviewees suggested that the media should not hide behind the claim of objectivity but sincerely disclose their relationships with brands.

5.1.3. Appropriate/inappropriate use of commercial hybrid content

When asked about the inappropriate use of commercial hybrid online content that might harm the actors involved, the interviewees mostly considered it from the brand point of view. The interviewees mentioned the following aspects that could affect stakeholders' evaluation of the brand or media: inauthenticity, irritation, content unsuitable to the medium on which it is published, underlining the brand, talking only about the brand or themes and/or issues not related to the brand and not taking into account the target group. The interviewees also stated that freelancers or journalists who are hired to create hybrid content in paid contexts should not work directly for the brand while working with the media house, or should at least disclose this conflict of interest. Online content executed as an advertorial is not enough; the content sponsor and the purpose of the content should also be revealed.

When asked about the appropriate use of commercial hybrid forms of content, all the interviewees suggested that the most important factor in creating commercial hybrid content is to consider the target groups' interests and make the content as relevant and useful for them as possible. The content should create value for the consumer by offering interesting stories and information. The content also should be found in the right media context and separated somehow from the original content. The interviewees suggested many times that the content should be well produced in pursuit of journalistic quality content and truthfulness. Moreover, hybrid content should not irritate the reader by producing the perception of commerciality, promotion and excessively underlining the brand.

5.1.4. Issues in the context of commercial hybrid content

When asked about the issues and standpoints that are not sufficiently understood in the context of commercial hybrid content, the interviewees focused on the viewpoints of the media and the brand. As media cooperation with brands increases, from the media point of view this development might be seen as a threat to objective newswriting. The interviewees voiced concern over media adhering to journalistic principles. Despite believing in journalists' professionalism, the interviewees considered economic pressures a threat to media principles. In addition, making content labeling identifiable enough was seen as an important aspect to consider.

On the other hand, for the brands and the companies, the interviewees stated that interest in content marketing has decreased the focus of other forms of communication but that those should not be forgotten. At the same time, there is concern that the effectiveness of hybrid content creation will decline without increased efforts to make commercial hybrid forms more credible and relevant for target groups. The use of resources to produce hybrid forms of content also was seen as a threat. As one interviewee explained, "A large amount of money is put into the content, and this money is taken from product and service development."

5.2. Practitioner perceptions of transparency of commercial hybrid content

When asked to define the transparency of hybrid forms of online content, some of the interviewees defined transparency broadly, whereas others named more specific aspects related to the concept. For example, in one interview, transparency was defined as "offering the possibility to know everything that can be known." The same interviewee suggested that there is no need to make everything visible, but that it is more important to provide opportunities to find all information relevant to content production and the content producer's intentions in order to guarantee the truthfulness of content. Hence, truthfulness is one aspect that defines transparency, as suggested by most of the interviewees.

Another interviewee suggested that "there should be a possibility for all the parties involved to know what is happening and why." Most of the interviewees suggested that the reader should know the content provider, who paid for placing the content and the original author of the content. This ensures that the reader can evaluate the motives behind the content. The content provider and payer should be visible via disclaimers and notifications, and there should be a writer byline. In addition, one interviewee stressed that references to other possible sources should always be added.

5.2.1. Perceptions of the transparent process of commercial hybrid content

When discussing the responsibilities of different actors in the process of commercial hybrid content, the interviewees suggested that media have the main responsibility for the content, as it is published in their media space. The interviewees stated that the media must serve the public and allow them to see which content is promotional and paid. The cooperation between the brand and the media should be visible through notifications and disclaimers. The disclaimers should clearly explain what the content is all about. Media should also indicate whether the content is produced by the media house or by the brand. Moreover, the ethical principles and standards of the media house should be made available for public scrutiny.

According to the interviewees, brand responsibilities include being honest and visible as the content provider. The brand also should clarify that commercial content may not be objective in all cases. The brand, in cooperation with the media, also is responsible for providing the right content in the right channel and for the right public. This notion relates to the relevance of content.

Regarding the role of online content users, all the interviewees noted it was the users' responsibility to maintain the basic ability to critically read the media. Users of online content should be critical of the source when sharing the content to their peers as truth. One interviewee suggested that "in the transparent, open world, where the consumer has become the king who can really affect things, the possibilities to influence should also include responsibilities." Relative to this notion, another interviewee said that consumers should make their claims visible. Furthermore, it was noted that consumers should act ethically and use appropriate language when commenting on the content and giving feedback.

The interviewees stated that consumers should be allowed to participate in the process of creating/providing transparency by providing feedback, commenting and taking a stand. Participation in the transparency process also enables engagement in the theme by continuing the discussion. Consumers of content, regardless of its scope or source, should be able to give feedback. However, consumer participation without listening is useless. Hence, it was suggested that both the media and the brand have the responsibility to listen and follow the active public and even ask for their comments and feedback. Nevertheless, it was noted that the moderation of comments is a risky act. Test groups and enlightened consumers may be used to gather the voice of the public in ensuring the ethical process of commercial hybrid content creation.

6. Conclusions

Transparency is an important concept in communicating with publics. In the context of commercial hybrid content, we propose that PR should take the lead in highlighting the importance of transparency. The act of transparent communication in the context of commercial hybrid content can be divided into two different viewpoints: First, transparency is directly related to the content and its presentation. Second, transparency concerns the processes of creating commercial hybrid content.

In the literature, transparency is understood in terms of relevant information disclosure to support public understanding (Gilpin et al., 2010; Rawlins, 2009), taking responsibility for one's actions and being accountable to stakeholders (Rawlins, 2009), as well as involving and engaging stakeholders in building control mutuality and ensuring the understanding of stakeholder points of view (Gilpin et al., 2010; Rawlins, 2009; Shen & Kim, 2012). In the interviews, however, transparency was mostly defined in terms of the truthfulness and visibility of the information. Transparency was largely seen as disclosure of information and having some degree of responsibility for one's actions. Without understanding transparency relating to control mutuality and dialogic aspects, the organization's actions may be transparent only in terms of its own perception but not that of the public. It is important to highlight this point for practitioners.

However, as Gilpin et al. (2010) noted, transparency by itself is not enough to guarantee authentic organizational character. Transparency must be understood in relation to its purpose. The Melbourne Mandate (2012, p. 1) states that "an organization must understand its character and responsibility to have meaningful engagement with its stakeholders." Identity may affect authenticity negatively (Gilpin et al., 2010) if the presentation is covert and the organization's identity is hidden (Balasubramanian, 1994; Miller & Sinclair, 2009), if the organization's messaging is inconsistent (Shen & Kim, 2012) or if the organization is not genuinely involved in the thematic content areas (Hallahan, 2001). The interviewees suggested that brands are responsible for honest messages and revealing themselves. They claimed that the most important aspect in maintaining transparency was the identification of the content provider. It was frequently mentioned that hybrid content creation should be built on truthfulness and that the content provider should be revealed at least through some kind of disclaimer to enhance stakeholder reasoning.

Authority is another aspect related to authentic organizational character (Gilpin et al., 2010). It helps create acceptance of the executed actions (van Reijmersdal et al., 2005), which affects the perceived trustworthiness and credibility of the organization. All the interviewees agreed that the commercial hybrid content might mislead the reader when placed in a paid context, which could also create credibility and reputation problems for the brand and the media. To support organizational authority in commercial hybrid content, several aspects should be highlighted through transparent communication.

Transparent communication should be pursued in terms of revealing the content provider and the intent behind the content; otherwise, the public may feel persuaded by the content provider (Balasubramanian, 1994; Cole & Greer, 2013; Hallahan, 1999; Jo, 2004; van Reijmersdal et al., 2010). Building authority also is related to content providers' expertise on the information given, as well as to participants' accountability for sustaining more credible hybrid content creation activities by enhancing the publics' reasoning abilities (Gilpin et al., 2010). The organization's expertise on a specific theme should be made visible. Several interviewees brought up the importance of expertise on relevant themes as well as thought leadership, but much room remains for fully integrating the idea of authority into the practice of commercial hybrid content. In particular, the question of how to recognize and take control of the relevant themes has not been fully answered. This is where PR practitioners with wide knowledge on stakeholder needs and expectations can play a vital role. Transparency here relates to openly revealing why the organization is involved in the topic and how its expertise can benefit the publics.

In addition, to guarantee the authority of the content, more editorial-like and less commercial-like content should be used (van Reijmersdal et al., 2005). Interviewees also suggested that by creating quality content, organizations or brands might even strengthen their credibility. On the other hand, the biggest credibility risk was perceived to be when the brand tries to hide or promote itself too much. Credibility related to the content includes aspects such as promotional and commercial content delivery. Hence, the authority to provide hybrid content related to certain issues or topics arises from the value delivery to the public and the cooperation between the media and the organization to support quality content creation.

The interviewees stated that the media have more responsibility compared with other parties, as the hybrid content is in the media space. While there may be different perceptions of the created content, whether it is of sponsor origin or editorial origin (Cole & Greer, 2013; van Reijmersdal et al., 2005), PR should support the editorial responsibility and the right to claim journalistic quality for the content shown in the context of the media. Journalists have a responsibility to serve the public (Deuze, 2005; Plaisance, 2007) and act as autonomous and objective watchdogs of the society (Deuze, 2005). It also is crucial for media editors to consider whether the content affects the credibility of the media itself (van Reijmersdal et al., 2005). Hence, emphasis should be placed on the openness of information, the information-gathering process and content verification (Karlsson, 2010). Similarly, for some hybrid forms in media outlets, the editing and fact checking of the content remain crucial to maintaining the credibility of the content and ensuring the transparent content creation process.

This is how hybrid forms of online content can be used in cooperation with the media while ensuring the legitimate action and real value creation for the public. Erjavec (2005) stated that PR information in press releases is passed on to the public in the media through hybrid forms of PR and journalism practice, in which parts of the persuasion attempts still penetrate the journalistic filter and are presented to the public. However, this new cooperation between the media and brands in the creation of commercial hybrid forms also could be a route to more transparent and authentic content, compared to traditional press releases as a PR tactic.

An organization must guarantee relevant information delivery to the public by involving them in the discussion about their needs (Rawlins, 2009). The interviewees stated that the public has a responsibility to give feedback when necessary, with both the media and the brand responsible for listening to the public feedback on the hybrid content. Supporting dialogue and engagement can help publics express their opinions and give feedback (Shen & Kim, 2012) about the communication activities. Thus, control mutuality (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998) relates closely to the idea of transparency where publics are seen as actively involved parties. Since participation enables transparency (Karlsson, 2010; Rawlins, 2009) in the context of commercial hybrid content, an organization may also build transparency and authentic character by enabling public commenting.

Based on the authors' analysis of both the literature and the interviews, they propose the following four propositions for transparent hybrid content creation to support the authentic organizational character in the online environment:

1. *The source and processes should be identifiable and understandable to enable trust*

The transparency of all commercial hybrid content requires clear disclaimers or author bylines identifying the source. These should describe all relevant information on the content provider and its relation to the media outlet to enhance credibility and stakeholder trust. The new hybrid content should be understood and distinguished from advertorials. The role of PR professionals is to make sure hybrid content is identified at least in terms of content labeling and that publics have sufficient understanding of the phenomenon, as a lack of understanding could lead to reputational damage in the long term. PR practitioners also should involve the media in content creation and share mutual accountability in hybrid content delivery.

2. *Transparency should be two-way, inviting user feedback and participation*

All stakeholders should have the opportunity to give feedback on commercial hybrid content and an organization's production methods and disclaimers to ensure stakeholder understanding. The role of PR professionals is to leverage control of the content, initiate and monitor these discussions and evaluate and apply stakeholder expectations to corporate practices related to hybrid content production.

3. *Arenas for content should be stakeholder-centric, not organization-centric*

When providing content to engage stakeholders online, organizations must follow their stakeholders' needs and preferences and ensure that this hybrid content creates stakeholder value. The role of the PR professional is to monitor the environment to identify and understand the dynamics among different stakeholder groups. Thus, understanding stakeholders involves supporting relevant content delivery for public needs as well as listening to their experiences and expectations regarding the phenomenon.

4. *Content creation should focus on areas of organizational expertise*

Content created by organizations is most often beneficial when it results from the organization's area of expertise. PR practitioners should openly suggest and share relevant knowledge and information for stakeholders to gain authority for the organization through quality content. This means not only delivering content that benefits the organization, but also possessing knowledge and being involved in a specific theme. If the content is related to the organization's area of expertise, the organization does not need to use promotional content. This relates to organizations' transparency in showing genuine organizational identity by understanding who they are and how they can create value. Understanding one's identity also enables consistency in delivering value.

These propositions are merely preliminary and limited to the literature examined as well as the small sample of practitioners interviewed. Since this is a preliminary study, several overlapping concepts were used to describe the phenomena; further studies should choose the most representative and accurate concepts. PR will certainly play a role in the process of commercial hybrid content creation; as one of the interviewees noted, PR practitioners, not advertisers and copywriters, have the special skills to understand and produce this kind of content. Therefore, as the trend becomes more popular, the role of PR practitioners in commercial hybrid content creation, as well as the interplay between the different disciplines involved, should be studied further. We hope these propositions can serve as a starting point for further larger-scale studies in different cultural settings.

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