

EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION OF DIGITAL CONTENT MARKETING IN B2B ORGANIZATIONS

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ABSTRACT

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<p>Abstract</p> <p>As the marketing field has renewed enormously during past decades, it does not only pose great opportunities but also some challenges for businesses. In the digital era, content marketing has emerged as an important strategy to attract and engage customers, cost-effectively and in a modern way, not only in the B2C but also in the B2B sector. This thesis explores the effective implementation of digital content marketing (DCM) in B2B organizations, addressing a crucial research gap in the field. This research aims to deepen the understanding of the DCM concept, its implementation process, and the challenges and opportunities related to it.</p> <p>DCM has increased its popularity also in the B2B sector, as B2B marketing is shifting towards more like B2C kind of marketing. However, B2B content marketing lacks academic research, and therefore this study attempts to find out what digital content marketing means for B2B marketers, what challenges they face in the effective implementation, and what untapped opportunities the B2B DCM holds.</p> <p>Utilizing a qualitative research approach, data for the study was collected by interviewing B2B marketing experts from various organizations, and the data was analyzed using a thematic data analysis method. The findings reveal that B2B and B2C digital content marketing do not significantly differ and that B2B DCM can be described as a strategic approach where the company produces and shares its target group content in a digital form, to increase brand awareness, improve customer acquisition and nurturing existing customers, in addition to creating value for the customer. The research highlights several challenges related to the effective implementation of DCM, such as the lack of resources, and maintaining high-quality content consistency, but also identifies significant opportunities for B2B marketers like the development of AI, cooperation with subject matter experts, and utilization of more personal and entertaining content like in B2C marketing. The study concludes that DCM, when implemented effectively, can significantly contribute to brand awareness and customer engagement, and to achieving the business goals in B2B settings.</p>	
Keywords Digital Content Marketing, B2B Marketing, Customer Engagement, Content Creation, Marketing Automation, Implementation, Efficiency	
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TIIVISTELMÄ

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<p>Tiivistelmä</p> <p>Markkinointialan voimakas uudistuminen viime vuosikymmenten aikana tarjoaa yrityksille hienoja mahdollisuuksia, mutta myös joitakin haasteita. Tänä digitaalisena aikakautena sisältömarkkinointi on noussut esiin tärkeänä edullisena ja modernina strategisena mahdollisuutena, B2C yritysten lisäksi myös B2B yrityksille. Tämä Pro Gradu-tutkielma tutkii digitaalisen sisältömarkkinoinnin tehokasta implementointia B2B organisaatioissa, vastaten aiheen akateemiseen tutkimusaukkoon. Tutkimus pyrkii syventämään ymmärrystä digitaalisen sisältömarkkinoinnin konseptista, implementaatioprosessista sekä haasteista ja mahdollisuuksista siihen liittyen.</p> <p>Digitaalinen sisältömarkkinointi on kasvattanut suosiotaan B2B alalla, B2B markkinoinnin vähitellen siirtyessä kohti B2C markkinoinnin lainalaisuuksia. B2B sisältömarkkinoinnista ei silti ole riittävästi akateemista tutkimusta, ja siksi tämä tutkimus pyrkii vastaamaan siihen, mitä B2B sisältömarkkinointi tarkoittaa markkinoijille, mitä haasteita he kohtaavat siihen liittyen, ja mitä hyödyntämättömiä mahdollisuuksia se sisältää.</p> <p>Tutkielma toteutettiin kvalitatiivisin menetelmin, ja tutkimusaineisto kerättiin haastattelemalla B2B markkinoinnin asiantuntijoita useasta organisaatiosta. Aineisto analysointiin hyödyntäen teema-analyysia. Tulokset osoittavat, että digitaalinen sisältömarkkinointi ei merkittävästi eroa B2B ja B2C markkinoiden välillä ja, että B2B digitaalista sisältömarkkinointia voidaan kuvata strategisena markkinoinnin keinona, jossa yritys tuottaa ja jakaa kohdeyleisölleen digitaalista sisältöä, kasvattaakseen brändin tunnettuutta, ja parantaakseen asiakashankintaa sekä olemassa olevien asiakassuhteiden hoitoa, luoden samalla arvoa asiakkaalle. Tutkimus osoittaa myös muutamia haasteita digitaalisen sisältömarkkinoinnin implementoinnissa, kuten resurssien puutteen ja hankaluuden ylläpitää jatkuvaa laadukasta sisältövirtaa. Tutkimuksen myötä tunnistettiin myös merkittäviä mahdollisuuksia B2B markkinoijille, kuten tekoälyn kehitys, asiantuntijoiden hyödyntäminen sekä persoonallisemman ja viihdyttävämmän sisällön luominen. Johtopäätöksinä tämä tutkimus osoittaa, että tehokkaasti implementoituna digitaalinen sisältömarkkinointi voi vaikuttaa merkittävästi ja positiivisesti brändin tunnettuuteen ja asiakkaiden sitoutumiseen, ja täten B2B liiketoimintatavoitteiden saavuttamiseen.</p>	
Asiasanat Digitaalinen sisältömarkkinointi, B2B markkinointi, asiakkaiden sivistäminen, sisällön luominen, markkinointiautomaatio, implementaatio, tehokkuus	
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TABLES

Table 1 Table of the definitions of marketing automation by different providers	26
Table 2 Content marketing tactics	30
Table 3 List of the research interviewees and interview details	38
Table 4 Summary of the themes and codes/The concept of DCM	41
Table 5 Summary of the themes and codes/Implementation of DCM	45
Table 6 Summary of the themes and codes/Objectives	48
Table 7 Summary of the themes and codes/Increasing effectiveness	50
Table 8 Summary of the themes and codes/Challenges	53
Table 9 Summary of the themes and codes/Opportunities	55

FIGURES

Figure 1 Sales funnel framework	12
Figure 2 Digital content marketing framework according to Terho et al., 2022	15
Figure 3 Digital content marketing framework according to Jami & Karimi, 2023	16
Figure 4 Digital content marketing objectives influence one another	19
Figure 5 Example of a buyer persona of an imaginary pharmaceutical company	29
Figure 6 Preliminary conceptual framework	34
Figure 7 Data analysis process according to Ruusuvuori et al., 2010	39
Figure 8 Revised conceptual framework	64

CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

TIIVISTELMÄ (ABSTRACT IN FINNISH)

LIST OF TABLES & FIGURES

1 Introduction	7
1.1 Research gap	8
1.2 Research purpose	9
1.3 Structure of the study	9
2 B2B Digital Content Marketing	10
2.1 B2B sales and marketing	10
2.2 Digital Content Marketing	14
2.2.1 B2B Digital Content Marketing vs B2C	20
2.2.2 Content	21
3 Implementation of DCM	25
3.1 Marketing automation	25
3.2 Buyer personas	29
3.3 DCM tactics	30
3.3 Personalization	32
4 Challenges	34
5 Research approach & methods	37
5.1 Qualitative research	37
5.2 Data collection	38
5.3 Data analysis	40
6 Findings	42
6.1 Concept of digital content marketing	42
6.2 Implementation of DCM	46
6.3 Objectives	48
6.4 Increasing effectiveness	51
6.5 Challenges	54
6.6 Opportunities	56
7 Discussion & Conclusion	60
7.1 Theoretical implications	60
7.2 Managerial implications	65
7.3 Evaluation of the research	66
7.4 Future Research	67
REFERENCES	68
APPENDICES	71

1 INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the Internet and digitalization have significantly altered our world. We now live in a digital era where technology and constant connectivity play integral roles in our daily lives and businesses. Today, using the Internet to advertise is one of the most common ways for organizations to tell people about themselves. Additionally, consumers as well as organizations are also more skeptical of traditional marketing methods, and thus new methods need to be sought out and researched (Calder & Uzunoglu, 2019, p. 1).

As time goes by, online marketing transforms and evolves in various forms. One newer form of online marketing is digital content marketing. (Pažeraitė & Repovienė, 2016, p. 105) Content marketing is “an umbrella term” for all of the marketing formats that include creating or sharing content to attract and retain existing and prospective consumer audiences (Pulizzi & Barrett, 2008). Recently digital content marketing (DCM) has been on the lips of many CMOs and attracted bigger financial investments (Jami & Karimi, 2023, p. 17). Citing Luoma-aho (2018), content marketing, like other popular topics, is talked about more than it's really understood. Thus this research aims to deepen the understanding of digital content marketing in the B2B sector.

As industries navigate an increasingly interconnected and tech-centric world, the capability of digital content marketing emerges as a transformative force, reshaping how B2B organizations engage, attract, and ultimately, drive sales. Regarding former studies, customers today make decisions heavily relying on online information and thus they complete 60% of the typical purchasing process before they even contact a vendor (Adamson et al., 2012). Thus, building strong customer relationships is essential to successfully gaining new customers and keeping the old ones in the complex B2B processes (R. Rodríguez et al., 2020, p. 2). Now it needs to be done online as all the customers are there. However the importance and popularity of DCM have increased, and there is a lack of knowledge on the implementation and its various components (Jami & Karimi, 2023, p. 1). Thus it is crucial to lighten up, how companies could best benefit from this new and topical area of marketing.

The concept of digital content marketing has been rather well studied, but mainly in the B2C sector. The B2B sector deserves more research, especially in Finland, where B2B companies are generally bigger and more successful than B2C targeted companies. Also, research precisely on effective implementation in B2B companies has not come to the researcher's attention. Former academic research on DCM has mainly focused on the conceptualization and definition of digital content marketing (Calder & Uzunoglu, 2019, p. 2). Thus this thesis seeks to provide a comprehensive examination of the effective utilization of digital content marketing, exploring both its opportunities and challenges in depth. ChatGPT, Grammarly, and DeepL programs have been utilized in this thesis for paraphrasing and correcting grammar errors.

1.1 Research gap

The business-to-business (B2B) industry is undergoing a significant transformation because of the growing impact of digital communication channels (McShane et al., 2019; Holliman & Rowley, 2014). Digital content marketing and marketing automation approaches are still relatively new disciplines and therefore there is quite little to no research made on these entities and sub-concepts (Pažėraitė & Repovienė, 2016, p. 98). For instance, Jami & Karimi (2023, p. 1) have stated that the understanding of the implementation of digital content marketing is not on a deep and clear level. Moreover, although B2B is an enormous factor in the economy, the B2B marketplace and B2B marketing are not yet getting as much attention as they require and deserve. The majority of academic papers, reports, and conferences are also conducted in the context of B2C (Wiersema, 2013, p. 471) This doesn't make sense because according to several different sources, there are approximately 1,6 B2B companies for every B2C company in the United States. For instance, Pandey et al. (2020, p. 1201) state in their comprehensive literature review on B2B digital marketing that while some B2B organizations are utilizing digital marketing, many are not fully and comprehensively leveraging the potential because of a lack of comprehensive research on the subject. Additionally, Pandey et al. (2020, p. 1201) implicate that digital marketing is not used on the strategic level in B2B organizations, but as a tactical tool. In addition, as consumers and organizations are getting more and more frustrated and distrustful of traditional advertising like cold calls and marketing flyers, businesses need to increasingly seek out more effective, and alternatives to these traditional marketing methods (Calder & Uzunoglu, 2019, p. 1). Thus it needs to be studied how B2B companies can make the most of content marketing and give digital content marketing the title and its place in the digital marketing world as a strategic method that it deserves.

Considering the changes in the B2B marketplace and the increasing pressures from customers and competitors, it is obvious that also B2B marketing has been and will be in transformation (Wiersema, 2013, p. 472; Wertenbroch, 2021, p. 19). Wiersema has listed in his previous study (2013, p. 473) the challenges that B2B companies face, and one of them is the challenge of building stronger relationships and links between marketing and other functions. Another challenge that the study displayed is to collect and exploit more customer and market knowledge. Both of these challenges can be at least partly overcome with the help of adopting marketing automation and a data-based marketing approach, in addition to content marketing tactics (Wertenbroch, 2021, p. 19). Therefore this study also dives into the problematic aspects of B2B content marketing and how to overcome them.

1.2 Research purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore the effective implementation of digital content marketing in B2B organizations. To address this purpose, the following sub-questions are posed:

1. What is B2B digital content marketing and what can it be used for?
2. How is digital content marketing implemented in B2B organizations?
3. What are the key challenges in effective implementation or potential untapped opportunities?

The research is limited to concern B2B digital content marketing, but industry or other factors have not been specified. As in this research, the effectiveness of digital content marketing is explored, it is necessary to define the concept of effectivity. According to Calder & Uzunoglu (2019, p. 3), content marketing can be seen as effective when it elicit high levels of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral customer engagement in the appropriate key stages of the certain customer journey. Such outcomes lead to favorable and successful responses towards the organization and its communication, thereby helping the company to reach its strategic business goals. Thus in other words, this research defines effective digital content marketing as successful, efficient, producing the desired results, and widely recognized as beneficial. Effectivity in this context can be measured by whether the organization achieves the set goals.

1.3 Structure of the study

This study is structured in seven chapters, including theoretical and empirical parts. The first chapter, introduction, gives an overview of the topic and sets the research goals as well as introduces the research questions. The second, third, and fourth chapters introduce the theoretical framework, which includes an overview of the previous literature on the topic. The goal of the theory chapters is to give the reader a deeper understanding of the theoretical entities covered in the research and explore the topic from many perspectives, like recognizing challenges and opportunities. The literature review concludes with a visual illustration of the theoretical framework.

The empirical part of this study focuses on the research itself. First, in the fifth chapter, the methodological choices are presented and justified. Research approach, data collection method and data analysis method are introduced. After that, the sixth chapter introduces the coding of the analysis and the findings that have been recognized from the data analysis. The last chapter describes the theoretical and managerial implications, and concludes the study with research evaluation, and future research recommendations.

2 B2B DIGITAL CONTENT MARKETING

This chapter reviews the existing literature on the many aspects of the B2B world and digital content marketing. First, the definitions of B2B sales and marketing are provided, after which the concept of digital content marketing and its implementation processes are explored in detail. Markets can be divided into two categories: business-to-business and business-to-consumer -markets. B2B companies offer products and services for the use of other companies and the purchase decisions are usually made by many people in the organization, while in the B2C market individuals make buying decisions for use of their own. (Isohookana, 2007, p. 71) Studies regarding digital marketing within a B2B environment are limited, yet they are progressively growing (Pandey et al., 2020, p. 1201; Karjaluoto et al., 2015, p. 704). For this study the B2B organizations have been chosen as the perspective because of the author's own interest and because there has not yet been much research on this issue in the B2B sector.

2.1 B2B sales and marketing

According to Järvinen & Taiminen (2016), B2B sales and marketing include transactions between businesses, unlike in the B2C interactions. Additionally, the sales and marketing of B2B organizations are different because of more complex decision-making processes including multiple stakeholders, and usually B2B organizations also have higher-value transactions as in the B2C market. In B2B marketing, organizations need to focus on the needs of businesses rather than individuals. B2B marketing usually focuses on more detailed and technical marketing content, while B2C marketing is more emotional and brand-oriented (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016). It is notable that being a B2B organization necessarily Does not exclude B2C functions. A company can have B2B and B2C sales at the same time. (Shopify, 2022) The definition of B2B by the e-commerce platform provider Shopify is provided below:

“Business-to-business (B2B) is a type of transaction that occurs between two businesses, such as a manufacturer and a wholesaler, or a wholesaler and a retailer. Business-to-business transactions usually involve goods and services that help one business to operate. Examples include raw materials for production, components for product assembly, and services such as advertising or consulting.” (Shopify, 2022)

As noted earlier, digitalization has been a major factor in the changing business environment. In B2B selling, digitalization including social media and so on, has been driving the revolutionary change in the way selling is done. (R. Rodríguez et al., 2020, p. 1) Traditional marketing is not only expensive but also

ineffective in comparison to the new approaches like digital inbound marketing, which is cost-effective and fits better for today's consumers (Opreana & Vinerean, 2015, p. 33). Thus it is important to increase the research in the are of the new era B2B marketing concepts, since deep understanding is required to utilize these methods effectively.

B2B marketing is shifting towards more B2C-like marketing, which according to Wiersema (2013) is related to the increasing influence of digital communication channels when customers make buying decisions. Wood (2015, p. 251) also calls attention to the fact that marketing teams have encountered a significant increase in available technology options to assist their operations. However, according to R. Rodríguez et al. (2020, p. 2) although companies make huge investments in digitalization, the correlation between the investment and increased performance and improved outcomes is unclear. Thus, this study aims to provide a comprehensive picture of how B2B organizations can benefit from digital content marketing the most with effective implementation.

According to R. Rodríguez et al. (2022, p.6), digitalization is the most important and essential in the identification of customers, in making sales proposals, and in follow-up support activities. However, the same study suggests that the more complex the sales process is the less digitalization is utilized in it, since the most complex processes demand more face-to-face interaction than simpler processes. However, marketers should not try to cling to the old traditional marketing methodologies and concepts, because technology is changing everything faster than ever (Wiersema, 2013, p. 476). In general terms, the B2B sales process is not described as digitalized as the B2C process, but it is steadily approaching the B2C level. When comparing B2B and B2C sales processes, in the B2B process more effort and input from the sales department is required than in the B2C process, where marketing makes the biggest difference. Also, the B2B sales process is more detailed with more stages. (R. Rodríguez et al., 2020, p. 3) Accordingly, the B2B buying process is characterized as complex, multilevel, and requiring many decision-makers. Also, transactions hold a higher value in B2B than B2C market. Hence the complicated nature of B2B processes might be one of the challenges that organisations face when implementing DCM or marketing automation strategies.

B2B organizations are known for their big gaps between marketing and sales departments. Sales have a crucial role in B2B organizations, as they maintain relationships with customers by personal selling, while the marketing department has more focus also on media relations, corporate reputation, and brand management. (Wang et al., 2019, p. 160; Redding, 2015, p. 260) On the other hand, B2B enterprises frequently prioritize their products heavily and have been slower to transition to a customer-centric model compared to B2C companies (Redding, 2015, p. 260). It has been stated that digital content marketing and its implementation by marketing automation could be the connecting factor between sales and marketing in B2B organizations (Redding, 2015, p. 261; Wang et al., 2019, p. 167). According to Holliman & Rowley (2014, p. 287) sales and marketing should align their digital content marketing

objectives with prioritizing the establishment of a trusted brand status, rather than focusing solely on short-term sales or lead generation objectives. Marketing can play a complementary role to the sales force's orientation to personal selling by emphasizing digital CM (Wang et al., 2019, p. 166). Sales and marketing co-operation is significant, to be able to provide great customer experience as well as profitable lead generation. In addition, when it comes to the implementation of DCM, also strong cooperation between IT and marketing is highly valued and required (Wood, 2015, p. 253). However, the cooperation remains insufficient if the experts from different departments do not recognize DCM as an effective and fruitful strategy.

B2B sales funnel

A sales funnel is a kind of marketing model that describes the journey that a potential B2B customer has from the opening of a deal to closing the deal. Different organizations have different funnels, but at least every one of them has a starting point and an ending point. (Griva et al., 2023, p. 1) It conceptualizes the customer acquisition process, breaking it down into four phases. These phases do vary from study to study, as well as the definitions of different phases are diverse, but in this study, the framework of D'Haen & Van den Poel (2013, p. 545) is followed, since it is still widely used and provides a clear understanding of the customer journey.

The light grey area in Fig. 1. illustrates the sales funnel that a consumer enters and exits in a varying pace. The first category: suspects, means all the possible companies that could be customers of the selling company (D'Haen & Van den Poel, 2013, p. 545). As this number of potential customers may be enormous, it is needed to narrow down the list of companies and this is made by scoring companies with predefined attributes. After that, there is a list of prospects, who have met these characteristics. Thirdly, these prospects will be qualified and only a certain number of them will be contacted, transforming into leads. Finally, leads who make the positive purchase decision and become clients are considered as deals and in other words, customers. (D'Haen & Van den Poel, 2013, p. 545) Naturally, every company is trying to move their customers forward on this funnel, towards the purchase.

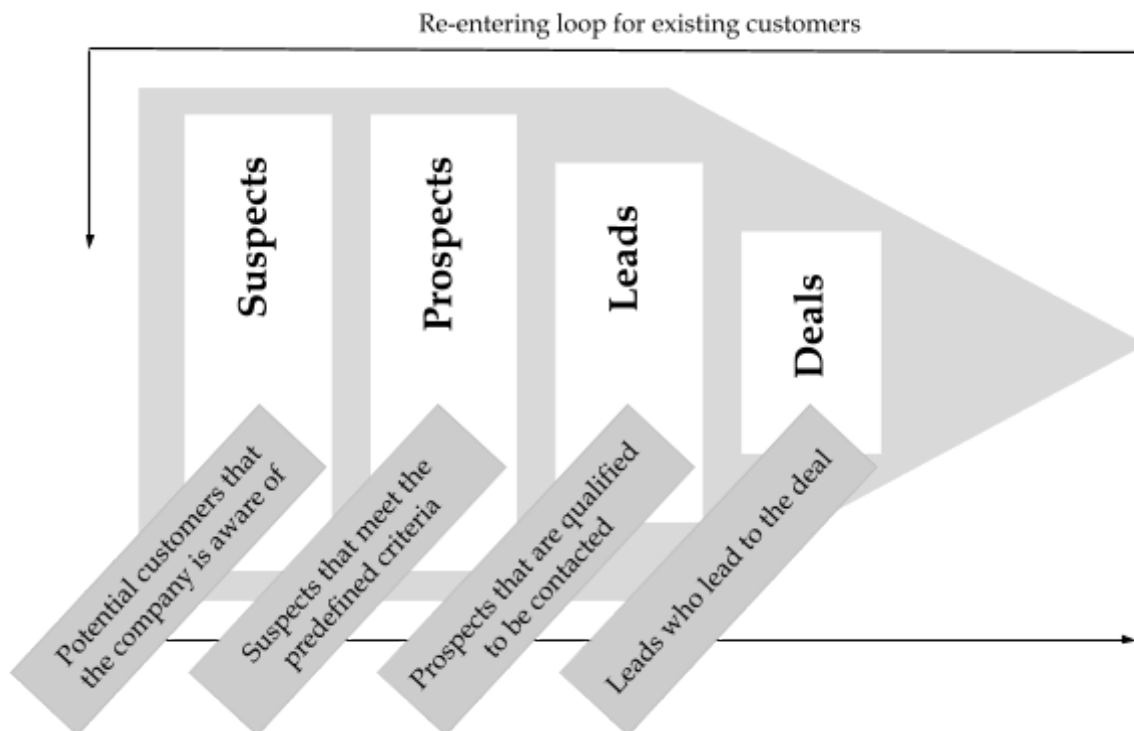


FIGURE 1 Sales funnel framework (adapted from D’Haen & Van den Poel, 2013, p. 545)

Järvinen & Taiminen (2016, p. 165-167) offer a more practical conceptualization of the subject where the first stage is that the suspect is identified by marketing automation software after he or she has left their contact information on the website. In addition, existing customers are identified automatically through IP addresses, cookies, email addresses, or website login. The MA software categorizes the suspect as either a marketing or sales lead. The difference between these two is that sales lead behavior indicates a stronger intention to buy, while marketing leads are identified and the company has some amount of data about them, but their intentions purchasing-wise are not clear. (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016, p. 165-167)

The second stage of the marketing and sales funnel includes nurturing and scoring identified leads. Nurturing means a process where marketers aim to transform existing marketing leads into sales leads. This happens by content delivery which attracts, educates, or/and engages marketing leads, targeting to push leads to make a purchase decision. Stage three in the marketing and sales funnel includes contacting the sales leads. After the MA software has transferred the qualified leads to the sales department, sales representatives take action in contacting the sales leads to offer them a product.

The final steps in the funnel are closing the deals and maintaining the customer relationship after the sale. This phase consists of negotiations and offerings and once the deal is closed or lost, the information will be saved in the CRM system. This is one of the best aspects of MA use, since the deal may be

lost at any stage of the funnel, but still, all the information remains saved in the MA software database. (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016, p. 172)

Regarding Järvinen et al. (2016, p. 172) it should be noted that a large deal of marketing leads are in fact existing customers. The company already has a good amount of information about them since the purchasing history is also an important source of data. Herewith it needs to be taken into account that marketing activities should not be targeted only for new customers, but also for old and existing customers. While technology isn't the sole solution, it can offer a structure for individuals to develop best practices for aligning sales and marketing efforts (Reddign, 2015, p. 264-25). Thus marketing automation is also explored in this research.

2.2 Digital Content Marketing

The Internet has a huge influence on the ever-evolving changes in marketing (Opreana & Vinerean, 2015, p. 29). Before, traditional marketing was the only strategy used for getting new customers and increasing brand awareness. Traditional marketing means outbound methods like cold calling, unsolicited emails and mails, and radio and TV marketing. (Opreana & Vinerean, 2015, p. 30) However, today the traditional marketing approach has gotten a competitor: inbound marketing. Digital content marketing (DCM) is one of the inbound marketing methods, that can be utilized in B2C and B2B contexts. Inbound marketing means that companies try to attract the interest of customers who are already searching for information and certain products or services. Thus this inbound logic encourages brands to adopt a customer-centric perspective on their propositions. (Holliman & Rowley, 2014, p. 269-270) Opreana and Vinerean (2015, p. 30) define inbound marketing as follows: "Digital Inbound Marketing represents the process of reaching and converting qualified consumers by creating and pursuing organic tactics in online settings." This means that instead of pushing marketing messages to consumers, marketers are trying to rather attract them to visit the websites and find the company by themselves. Inbound marketing also aims to create long-lasting relationships with customers rather than just increase sales momentarily (Opreana & Vinerean, 2015, p. 30). DCM is found to be a convenient tool for achieving as well as sustaining a good and credible brand status among consumers (Holliman & Rowley, 2014, p. 269). Also, Calder & Uzunoglu (2019) support this by stating that DCM crucially enhances the engagement, trust, and value in B2B relationships, especially when combined with more traditional marketing tactics. This naturally influences the company's profit and performance positively.

DCM definition created by Terho et al. (2022, p. 300) is "a digital marketing communication approach that generates intelligence about customer journeys, develops a valuable content portfolio that facilitates problem-solving for key buyer personas at different journey stages and engages customers by

sharing content matched to their timely needs.” According to Pulizzi & Barret’s (2008, p. 8) definition of digital content marketing, it is “the creation and distribution of educational and/or compelling content in multiple formats to attract and/or retain customers”. Also according to Järvinen and Taiminen (2016), content marketing is defined as creating and delivering content like messages, pictures, videos, and animations to target customers so that the content adds value to the receiver, thus the content might contribute to a relationship with the company. Content marketing can also be non-digital, but today as digital marketing is popular and effective, content marketing has an emphasis on digital platforms like social media, websites, email, and so on. Content Marketing Institute defines DCM to be a strategic approach that involves creating and distributing valuable, relevant, and consistent content that aims to attract and retain the targeted audience, leading to the ultimate goal of driving profitable customer actions. This means, that instead of promoting products and services directly, DCM provides prospects content that helps them to solve problems in their businesses or in their personal lives, depending on whether they operate in a B2B or B2C context. (Content Marketing Institute, 2024)

A big difference between the ideologies of content marketing and traditional marketing is that in content marketing “the core purpose is to tell a story” rather than just push selling messages about the products to the prospects and customers. To be able to take the story-telling approach, the content marketer should learn and adopt the mindset and role of a publisher. (Holliman & Rowley, 2014, p. 272; McShane et al. 2019, p. 15) Also, Pulizzi and Barrett (2009) have supported this insight by stating that on social media channels, B2B practitioners should concentrate on storytelling rather than product-focused content. Therefore the content plays an important role in this marketing tactic.

The key activities of DCM

Digital content marketing can be divided into parts by its key activities. There is different variations in the research about these key activities, and next the framework of DCM key activities by Terho et al. (2022) is explored. First of the key activities in DCM is creating intelligence about customer journeys. This process includes forming buyer personas, to gain proper identification of the different prospects. Buyer personas are more detailed “micro-level segments”, which include for example business problems, goals, motivations, purchase criteria, and personal values. (Terho et al. 2022, p. 300) Having enough customer intelligence about the targeted customer segment is crucial, since DCM is all about creating value to a certain audience, and without customer intelligence the content would most likely not serve the intended audience.

The second key activity in DCM is “creating a portfolio of valuable content” (Terho et al. 2022, p. 302). The marketing unit is usually responsible for content creation but it needs to be taken into account that the creation of valuable content usually requires also input from non-marketers, who are

experts in certain topics. This is because the B2B context is complex and content needs to reach a certain depth to be really valuable for the receiver. (Terho et al. 2022, p. 302) The customer intelligence gathered in the first phase, is utilized in the content creation process, and the content must serve the target audiences needs.

The third and last key activity in DCM is “engaging customers through content sharing” (Terho et al. 2022,p. 302). According to Terho et al. (2022, p. 302) this key activity includes enhancing organic content visibility in the digital channels, delivering relevant content pieces timely, and nudging buyer personas forward on their journeys. Organic content visibility means that the content achieves consumers naturally, without paid promotions. Effective organic content visibility refers to the fact that the content is compelling and relevant to the targeted audience. (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019) Below in the Fig. 2 the digital content marketing framework by Terho et al. (2022) is visually presented.

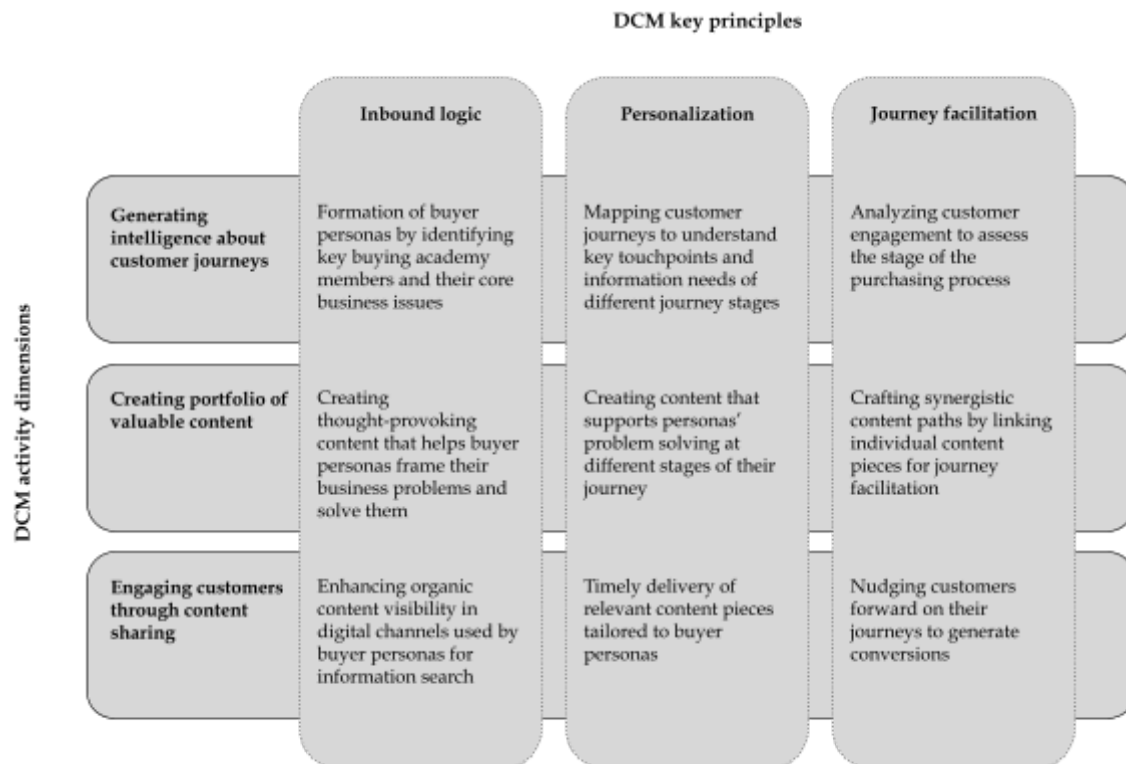


FIGURE 2 Digital content marketing framework according to Terho et al., 2022, p. 300

Another framework of the digital content marketing process is created by Jami & Karimi (2023, p. 18), where the process is divided into six stages. The first stage is strategic awareness, which emphasizes the priority of strategic choices linked to the DCM activities and the strategic influence of DCM on the whole organization. As mentioned previously, organizations cannot utilize DCM as a strategic approach rather than just a tactical tool. Next, according to Jami & Karimi (2023, p. 18), organizations must create an appropriate

infrastructure in order to use DCM effectively. This can mean for example adopting certain technologies or software. Also, organizational changes might be needed, so also them should be finished during the stage two. Required changes might be for example hiring more content creators or adopting a new marketing automation system for the organization's use. The third stage includes the actual content creation, which follows, stage number four, content publishing. Jami & Karimi (2018) emphasize that the content creation includes planning, producing and editing the content. It is also notable, that the content creation process is not always straightforward, but might require steps backwards and certain flexibility from content creators as well as subject matter experts. During content publishing it is urgent to use the best fitting and targeted channels and also pay attention to the timeliness of the publishing. Regarding Jami & Karimi (2018, p. 18) the most ignored stage is the fifth one, which includes the post-production like evaluating the content response and reengagement. According to the evaluation, organization performs the last stage which means optimizing the content and improving it according to the received data. (Jami & Karimi, 2018, p. 18) The figure 3 below summarizes the digital content marketing framework made by Jami & Karimi (2018), and it can be stated that it approves the framework created by Terho et al. (2022). Still, this framework explains the process more in detail.

Stage 1: Strategic awareness - What is the strategic value of DCM to the organization?

Stage 2: Creating suitable infrastructure - Does the company need any new technologies for effective implementation of DCM?

Stage 3: Content creation - Planning, producing and editing content

Stage 4: Publication of content - Considering channels and timeliness

Stage 5: Evaluation of the content - How has the audience received the published content?

Stage 6: Optimization of the content - Editing and improving content according to the evaluation data

FIGURE 3 Digital content marketing framework according to Jami & Karimi, 2023, p. 18

Cawsey and Rowley (2016) have created a concept that recognizes six different most important brand-building activities that specifically B2B organizations can succeed with social media. These are also applicable in digital content marketing. They are “monitoring and listening”, “empowering and engaging employees”, “creating compelling content”, “stimulating E-WOM” (electronic word-of-mouth), “evaluating and selecting channels” and “enhancing brand presence through integrating social media”.

Monitoring and listening calls for deep customer understanding, and the sufficient level is acquired by monitoring and listening to what customers are doing and what they need online. This involves tracking customer conversations, clicks, likes, feedback, and behaviors across various digital platforms to gather insights that can inform customer engagement and content strategies (Cawsey & Rowley, 2016, p. 766-767). Another, yet different activity compared to the earlier mentioned concepts is empowering and engaging employees. This means that employees should act as brand ambassadors and share their own experiences of the brand and working with it. Creating compelling content is rather self explanatory, but notable is that the content must be compelling to the certain customer group. Stimulating eWOM is necessary because regarding Gruen et al. (2006, p. 455) suggest that eWOM communication crucially influences the perceived overall value of a company's offerings. Stimulating eWOM means encouraging satisfied customers to share their experiences with the brand. Thus content marketing in this respect can also take place from customers to customer, since the company can for example collect the good eWOM customer experiences and share them forward. The evaluation and selection of channels means a strategic approach to choosing the right channels for the content. It is noteworthy that not all channels are equally valuable for every audience. Last but not least, Cawsey and Rowley (2006) suggest that brand presence needs to be enhanced in social media. This is applicable for all channels, and marketers need to take into account the visual presence as well as consistent messaging at every digital touchpoint. Integrated content marketing, brand communication as well as marketing communication in all channels ensure that all channels work seamlessly together and the company is able to achieve the objectives as a consistent brand (Keller, 2007).

Digital content marketing objectives

Companies can achieve many different objectives with the help of content marketing. These objectives are often related to enhancing customer engagement, building trust, and driving profitable actions. According to Salonen et al. (2024, p. 13), existing research on B2B digital content marketing suggests that it contributes most to sales-related outcomes, as well as to shaping brand perception and customer relationships.

One of the most clear outcomes that are intended in digital content marketing is to increase customer engagement. It means that by sharing relevant and interesting content, customers are more willing to interact with and engage with a certain brand and organization. That contributes to an increased level of trust toward the brand on the customer's end, which can also be listed as a DCM objective. (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019, p. 29-35) Naturally, when content is distributed widely to consumers, it raises the brand awareness levels among consumers in the market, and this may lead to more customers for the company (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016, p. 166). Clearly, if the company succeeds in these previously mentioned goals, digital content marketing most likely also contributes positively to driving customer acquisitions and retention. Providing content that guides potential customers through the buying journey generates leads and supports the sales processes, which is self-explanatory the main goal of any profit-making business. (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019, p. 29-35; Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016, p. 166) Succession in these goals also contributes to improvements in search engine rankings, when the created content is properly SEO optimized and has a good quality. The ranking drives more traffic to the organization's website, which again contributes to the brand awareness and customer engagement goals (Evans, 2007, p. 21-37).

One more detailed objective under the brand awareness goal is top-of-mind awareness, which can also be seen as one of the objectives of digital content marketing. Top-of-mind awareness refers to the extent to which individuals or groups actively consider or recognize your brand in an unbiased environment. Essentially, it describes whether consumers are aware of the brand's existence and what it offers when they're not being influenced by advertising or branded content. In practice, it means that a consumer who has higher top-of-mind awareness of the company and the brand is more likely to make a purchase and become a customer. However, it needs to be taken into account that top-of-mind awareness can be positive or negative. (Abstrakt Marketing Group, reviewed 19.4.2024)

To sum up, it can be stated that all the above-mentioned DCM objectives link to one another in some way and influence each other. Anyway, the extant literature on DCM sees that the biggest goal is to increase customer engagement, which leads to profitable business outcomes (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019; Holliman & Rowley, 2014; Salonen et al., 2024; Terho et al., 2022).

Digital Content Marketing Objectives

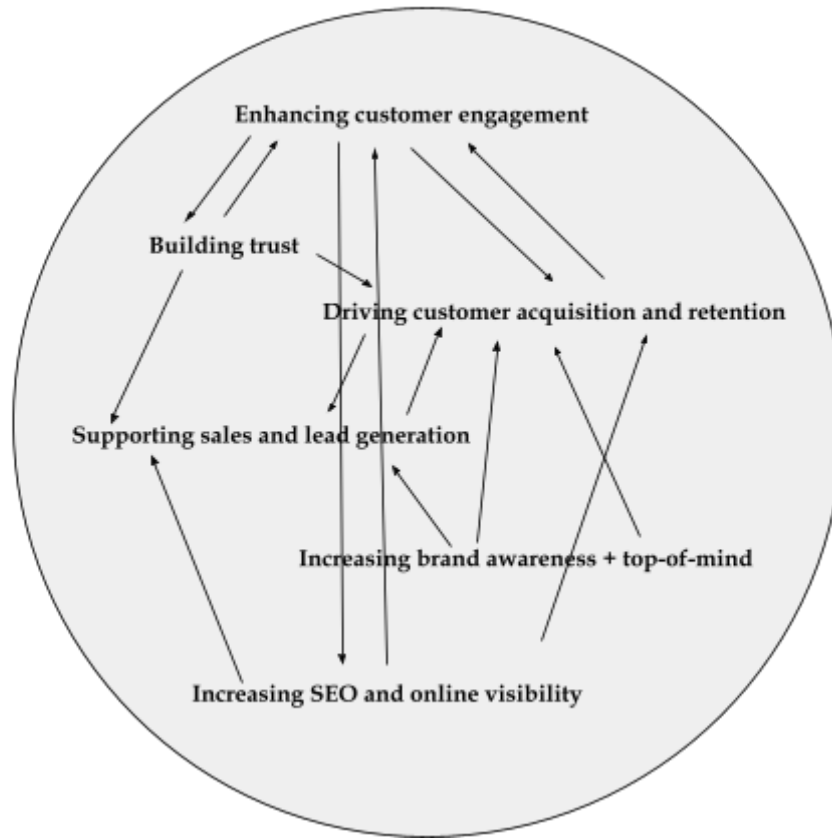


FIGURE 4 Digital content marketing objectives influence one another

2.2.1 B2B Digital Content Marketing vs B2C

The diversity of B2B and B2C markets affects the marketing communication of offered products and services, as well as its planning, such as target audience selection, channel decisions, message content, and presentation style (Isohookana, 2007, p. 71). Digital content marketing is more widely known and used in B2C companies than in B2B companies. However, DCM is increasing its position as a compelling marketing technique in the B2B sector, and regarding Holliman & Rowley (2014, p. 274) B2B companies are becoming more active in managing the digital presence of their brand. Similarly, Terho et al. (2022, p.476) state that B2B markets have developed massively when it comes to digital content marketing. Not long ago DCM was a point of differentiation in B2B markets, but now there is content everywhere and it is harder to attract and maintain customers' attention. B2B digital content marketing is described as "creating, distributing and sharing relevant, compelling and timely content to engage customers" at relevant points in their buying journey, to contribute to a profitable outcome (Holliman & Rowley, 2014, p. 258).

A large number of this content usually is found on a B2B company's website and in addition on social media, emails, and paid media. B2B

companies create more website content than B2C companies. As mentioned earlier, B2B marketing content is usually more technical and detailed having a focus on the return on investment (ROI) and efficiency, rather than emotional and brand-oriented content often seen in B2C marketing (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016, p. 168; Pulizzi, 2012, p. 199). Also, the target audience differs between B2B and B2C digital content marketing. B2B marketing aims to reach business decision-makers (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016, p. 166), while B2C marketing is targeted to individuals (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019, p. 31). In addition, B2B digital content marketing is often targeted to a more detailed and niche audience, when B2C content is shared to broader audiences, according to the nature of the offerings (Pulizzi, 2012, p. 177). According to the research, B2B and B2C businesses use somewhat the same and different distribution channels for their content marketing. For example, LinkedIn is more widely used in the B2B marketing, but for instance email marketing is widely recognized in both markets. (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016, p. 170; Pulizzi, 2012, p. 123) These differences should be taken into account when planning and delivering content in different businesses.

2.2.2 Content

When discussing digital content marketing, it is essential to pay attention to the content itself and what it should be like in B2B marketing. However, in B2B context, the concept of content is not so well known and consequently, not as clearly defined as in the B2C context (Holliman & Rowley, 2014, p. 271). Content is a crucial element in online marketing strategies that aim to attract and engage customers organically (Vinerean, 2017, p. 97). Marketer's mission is to create successful digital content marketing campaigns that even acquire the status of "viral content" (Vinerean, 2017, p. 95), but this perspective applies more to the B2C market.

Digitalization has many pros in content marketing as using mobile devices and videos enables fast, cost-effective, timely, and manageable access to content (Wood, 2015, p. 252). This research focuses on digital marketing and thus only digital content is discovered. According to Pažeraitė and Repovienė (2016, p. 98), using valuable content is a direct and simple way of gaining a competitive advantage compared to other competitors. Also according to Jami & Karimi (2023, p. 19), content creation is the most important phase in the digital content marketing process, and thus businesses should allocate more resources to the creation of relevant, value-adding content. In addition, Cawsey et al. (2016) have also noted that the creation of attractive content is a critical activity for successful brand-building. Hereby content itself is a crucial part of making the DCM work efficiently.

First and foremost, in order to take advantage of content marketing, a cultural transformation from "selling" to "helping" is required (Holliman & Rowley, 2014, p. 269). This means that the content created needs to support the "helping" agenda. Content is the main component of inbound marketing and content marketing, and hence it is very important to gain knowledge on how to

use content in marketing in a customer-engaging way. Only then can organizations develop an effective inbound marketing approach. (Holliman & Rowley, 2014, p. 270).

Regarding Pažeraitė and Repovienė (2016, p. 99) high-quality content should include characteristics such as relevance, information, reliability, value, uniqueness, emotions, and intelligence. Relevance in content means that the content has to be useful for the receiving reader. In addition, when a consumer crosses paths with relevant content it contributes to creating communication between the company and the consumer. This is supported by Salonen et al. (2023, p. 15) who state that high content relevancy can be seen as an attribute for increased customer engagement with the content, meaning likes, comments, etc. That also contributes to positive outcomes when it comes to brand reputation and sales. Information-wise, the content should show the receiver the company's knowledge and expertise in certain topics. Content needs to be reliable to achieve a high-quality level. Reliability determines the correctness of the information in the content. Creating unique content allows the company to win the attention of the consumer. Also, uniqueness is a way of achieving a competitive advantage. When it comes to emotions, according to some studies, content that has some emotional characteristics is more attractive and attention-drawing for consumers, than content that lacks any emotions. Lastly, intelligence in content means that it has many different goals. Intelligent content can be understood by consumers, but also processed in machines and technology. (Pažeraitė & Repovienė 2016, p. 99-101) McShane et al. (2019, p. 12) emphasize that fluency is important when it comes to content effectiveness. That means that content should be easy-to-process, and according to the study (2019), easy-to-process content is more likely to be shared with other online users. Therefore marketers should take into account not only the content topic and its nature but also how the message is presented, message features like hashtags, embedded media, and text difficulty. For example, using industry jargon and difficult words can cause disfluency and thus decrease content and brand engagement, also in B2B marketing. Hashtags are not so crucial in B2B marketing, but they may improve topic exposure as online users tend to search content with keywords. (McShane et al. 2019, p. 14) regarding details in content, McShane et al. (2019, p. 14) also suggest that marketers should pay attention to the visual impact of the content, for instance, embedded media like photos or videos can make the content more engaging.

Another study by Shahbanezhad, Dolan, and Rashidirad (2021, p. 5) divides engaging content into three categories. According to them, engaging content can be rational, transactional, and interactional. Rational content can be described to be informational, functional, educational, or related to a current event. Interactional content can be described to be more like experiential. cause-related, personal, related to employees and brand community or customer relationships. Finally, transactional content refers to content that is remunerative and regards brand resonance or sales promotions. (Shahbanezhad et al., 2021, p. 5) Shahbanezhad et al. (2021, p. 22) also argue that it is important to take into account the type of platform where content is shared since different

platforms deliver different engagement from customers. When it comes to B2B settings, Salonen et al. (2023, p. 14) have categorized different types of content as educational, product-related, and cause-related content. Also other studies support this categorization when it comes to relevant content in B2B content marketing. The objective of educational content is to further frame the business problems of B2B companies in the early stages of their journey. This type of content is supposed to make the receiver familiar for example with new technologies and emerging market needs. The content doesn't aim to straight-forwardly advertise the company's value proposition but to increase the trust for the company's competence in a certain topic. (Salonen et al., 2023, p. 14; Terho et al., 2022) Educational content also supports the above-mentioned new philosophy of marketing: marketers should try to help customers instead of only selling their products (Holliman & Rowley, 2014, p. 269). However, also promotional content is necessary for B2B marketing, and thus organizations should also focus on product-related content. It helps customers to gain new knowledge about the company's offerings and to make the right choices. (Salonen et al., 2023, p. 14) According to Salonen et al. (2023, p. 14), product-related content is valued by customers as it makes it easier to compare different products and have enough information before making the purchase decision. Last but not least cause-related content refers to the type of content that explains to customers what kind of values the company holds and behavioral traits (Salonen et al., 2023, p. 14). Cause-related content may help the company to differentiate from other competitors and to show customers their soft side. Today the awareness of social problems and responsibility has increased, and thus also organizations are required to have more input and sayings about social and societal issues.

According to the authors of one of the very first research studies about B2B digital content marketing Holliman & Rowley (2014, p. 269), valuable content is "useful, relevant, compelling and timely". The study made by Terho et al. (2022, p. 302) supports this as their opinion is that a valuable content portfolio should include content that is problem-framing, supports buyer personas' problem-solving, and creates synergistic content paths. This demands that business knows their target audiences' needs and habits. Here marketing automation software can be really helpful. As the content should help receivers, like business owners, to make better choices and solve professional problems (Holliman & Rowley, 2014, p. 284), the research of Järvinen et al. (2016, p. 173) suggests that companies could promote collaboration between marketers and subject experts in order to create rich, correct, and accurate content for leads. Timeliness is highlighted in several research studies (Holliman & Rowley, 2014; McShane et al. 2019). McShane et al. (2019, p. 14) discuss timeliness in detail, and according to them, content that is delivered after working hours is more effective and creates more engagement than content that is posted during business hours. One could simply imagine that when it comes to B2B marketing it is wise to post during business hours, but studies show otherwise. According to Salonen et al. (2024, p. 18) digital marketers should focus on understanding

the optimal timing for sharing the content, instead of solely identifying what engaging content should be like.

Content formats and channels

There are several formats of content that marketers can use in digital content marketing. The format of the content depends on the digital channel used, the targeted audience, and the objective of the content. Social media marketing is probably the most popular approach for digital content marketing, and thus a lot used formats are social media posts and stories, and as a newer innovation reels for example on Instagram. According to for example McShane et al. (2019, p. 2), the academic research on B2B social media content creation is expanding but still not yet very developed. However, there has been recognized a recent increase in social media participation from B2B companies (McShane et al., 2019, p. 2), so also social media use in B2B content marketing deserves attention. Previous research on the subject indicates that B2B organizations can benefit from social media content marketing in the form of new customer attraction, awareness creation, stronger relationships, enhanced communications, increased web traffic, increased customer feedback, shared knowledge and all in all: enriched brand building (Breslauer and Smith 2009; Cawsey et al. 2016; Järvinen et al. 2012; Kaplan and Haenlein 2010; Michaelidou et al., 2011; Salo et al. 2013 as cited in McShane et al., 2019, p. 3).

When it comes to B2B digital content marketing, the most important channel for content sharing is the website. Websites can provide different kinds of content like blogs, ebooks, white papers, videos, webinars, and infographics (Salonen et al., 2023, p. 12; Opreana & Vinerean, 2015, p. 30). Not to forget, also email marketing is a type of digital content marketing. A comprehensive listing of different DCM tactics is provided later.

According to Salonen et al. (2023, p. 13), individuals have diverse preferences for the types of content they prefer to see at different stages of their customer journey. Therefore companies must have sufficient technological resources available for personalization of the targeted content creation and timely delivery. (Salonen et al., 2023, p. 13, 19) Regarding Salonen et al. (2023, p. 20) companies should create a significant and diverse content portfolio that enables delivery of content that takes into account the individual needs of every customer in different stages of the customer journey. However they suggest that above mentioned educational content fits best in the pre-purchase stage and product-related content in the purchase stage. Marketing automation is one of these innovations, that can help in more detailed targeting when it comes to digital content marketing. Marketing automation will be discussed in a later chapter.

3 IMPLEMENTATION OF DCM

In today's dynamic business environment, the advent of digital technologies has revolutionized marketing strategies, propelling the shift toward digital content marketing. This paradigmatic transformation has not only reshaped consumer behaviors but also redefined the parameters of effective communication between businesses and their target audiences. As organizations navigate this ever-evolving digital landscape, the implementation of digital content marketing emerges as a pivotal strategy, offering multifaceted opportunities and challenges. Despite the DCM is studied more, only limited studies have created an understanding of its implementation (Jami & Karimi, 2023, p. 17). Considering the existing research gap, the third chapter examines how digital content marketing is put into practice by reviewing the existing literature about marketing automation, the formation of buyer personas, and content personalization.

3.1 Marketing automation

Developments of information technology provide more opportunities for increasing cooperation between marketing and B2B selling processes. (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016) This is highly beneficial for increasing sales more efficient and automated way. Every aspect of marketing processes can now be automated, spanning from segmentation and targeting to service delivery, advertising, distribution, retailing, and pricing (Wertenbroch, 2021, p. 19). Nevertheless, automating unsuccessful or bad-quality processes won't automatically make them better (Wood, 2015, p. 253). Thus, the processes must be well thought out and functioning strategically well.

One of these developments is marketing automation (MA). Marketing automation is a sub-concept that is utilized in the implementation of digital content marketing. From a practical point of view, this cooperation means using software like Eloqua, Hubspot, Marketo, and Pardot to align marketing and sales systems and make them more automated. With this software, a company can improve and speed up the lead generation and qualification processes with "lead scoring" and "lead nurturing". However, marketers using MA should be aware that the interaction and engagement have to be as personalized and individualized as possible (Wood, 2015, p. 254).

Since marketers are not able to be everywhere all the time to track the movements of marketing leads, MA software comes in handy. The automation software tracks all the movements and navigation paths, creating a comprehensive understanding of what the lead is really interested in (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016, p. 171). Marketing automation software is activated for example when the website visitor leaves their contact information on the website to access the content, such as a blog post. Thus the marketing journey

begins with those contact information details towards a desirable purchase. (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016) After the MA software has gathered enough information, the lead can be contacted and asked if they would like to be contacted by the sales team. After that, the marketing lead becomes a sales lead and the management of the particular customer relationship is transferred to the sales department. (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016, p. 171)

Content Marketing Automation

According to Järvinen et al. (2016, p. 167) to maximize the advantage of content marketing, a company needs to employ marketing automation software to be able to have quick responses to online queries. Marketing automation tools offer companies a way to produce digital content marketing more efficiently. (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016) For instance, Wood (2015, p. 253) has described the pros of marketing automation with factors such as “efficiency”, “timeliness” and “personalized experience for each client”. However, Wood (2015, p. 253) also states that it improves the efficiency of CRM (Customer Relations Management), but cannot be used instead of CRM. Also other studies have argued that it is important to invest in marketing automation technologies to be able to deliver well targeted and timely content for customers in different stages of customer journey (Salonen et al., 2023, p. 14; Terho et al., 2022; Mero et al., 2022).

In practise, today marketing automation softwares can offer AI-powered tools for content generation which give content ideas, but can also generate content automatically (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016, p. 167). Additionally, Hollebeek & Macky (2019, p. 35-37) add that automation helps identifying and nurturing high-quality leads through personalized content journeys. Thus, marketing automation is also a great tool for personalization, which is a corner stone of digital content marketing. The marketing automation software can provide detailed analytics on the customers and their actions, so that marketers can create content based on the data (Evans, 2007, p. 28-30; Pulizzi, 2012, p. 121). Not forget the scheduling tools that softwares offer. With these softwares, marketers are able to automate repetitive tasks and use automated content production work flows, which naturally increases the efficiency and productivity (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016, p. 169).

Marketing automation needs a software platform that allows the user to set specific “rules” based on which the tool produces content (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016). There are multiple marketing automation software providers and the softwares mainly differ in looks, user-friendliness, and some functions, but the main idea behind them is the same. Below in the table 1 the definitions of marketing automation from the most popular providers are listed as well as the factors that the definitions emphasize.

The third subactivity in creating intelligence about customer journeys is analyzing the engagement of customers. Here marketing automation software is useful. Engagement of customers is measured by data such as clicks, page and video views and downloads. These factors reveal the important touch

points on the buyer persona journeys. Analyzing these kinds of data will also display whether the content matches the buyers needs or not. (Terho et al. 2022, p. 302) All this data can be used to further improve the created buyer persona profiles and content personalization.

TABLE 1 Table of the definitions of marketing automation by different providers

Provider	Quote of the marketing automation definition on the company's website	Emphasis
Hubspot	<p>"Marketing software helps you engage and convert leads with dynamic, automated campaigns across various channels and measures the effectiveness of your strategies with powerful built-in reporting tools. Use marketing software to make it easy to organize all your business' marketing assets, data, and tools in one place – bridging the gap between Marketing and Sales. No matter what size your team is, HubSpot's marketing software can connect you with your customers, teams, and data." (hubspot.com, 2023)</p> <p>"Marketing automation uses software to automate monotonous marketing work. Marketing departments can automate repetitive tasks such as email marketing, social media posting, and even ad campaigns - not just for the sake of efficiency, but also to provide a more personalized experience for their customers. The technology behind marketing automation makes these tasks faster and easier to do." (hubspot.com, 2023)</p>	<p>Automation Easiness Linking marketing and sales</p>
Eloqua	<p>"Create more closed-loop marketing and sales activities and manage cross-channel B2B marketing campaigns that nurture leads across each stage of the buying process. A best-in-class B2B marketing automation solution, Oracle Eloqua Marketing Automation offers campaign design, advanced lead scoring, real-time firmographic data, and integrated sales tools. Execute campaigns flawlessly and deliver quality sales leads while providing buyers with a unique experience at every touchpoint. With Oracle Eloqua, your marketing team can intrigue audiences with brilliantly personalized campaigns across multiple channels." (oracle.com, 2023)</p>	<p>Linking marketing and sales Lead nurturing Quality Personalization</p>
Marketo	<p>"Marketing automation is technology that allows companies to centrally orchestrate and manage their interactions with customers, handling marketing campaigns and processes across</p>	<p>Automation Efficiency Easiness</p>

	<p>multiple platforms automatically. It uses software to schedule and complete routine marketing tasks.</p> <p>Automation is efficient, saves time and money, and increases a brand's ability to put the right content in front of customers at the right moments, all of which leads to greater marketing ROI.</p> <p>Some of the tasks that can be automated include sending emails, posting to social media, A/B testing, lead scoring, and ad retargeting. Good marketing automation software integrates with your other platforms, such as a CRM, uniting marketing and sales." (business.adobe.com, 2023)</p>	<p>Personalization Integration</p>
<p>Salesforce Pardot</p>	<p>"Marketing automation is technology that manages marketing processes and multifunctional campaigns, across multiple channels, automatically. With marketing automation, businesses can target customers with automated messages across email, web, social, and text. Messages are sent automatically, according to sets of instructions called workflows. Workflows may be defined by templates, custom-built from scratch, or modified mid-campaign to achieve better results.</p> <p>Marketing and sales departments use marketing automation to automate online marketing campaigns and sales activities to both increase revenue and maximize efficiency. When automation is used effectively to handle repetitive tasks, employees are free to tackle higher-order problems, and human error is reduced.</p> <p>Marketing automation helps with lead generation, nurturing, and scoring, as well as with measuring overall ROI on campaigns. The time- and cost-saving effects of automation increase as an organization grows in size and complexity. Good marketing automation systems are designed to scale alongside your business. " (salesforce.com, 2023)</p>	<p>Automation Personalization Efficient Lead management</p>

3.2 Buyer personas

Regardless what objectives have been set for digital marketing or content marketing, a deep understanding of customers is the most important prerequisite for achieving the objectives. Traditionally, companies have created customer segments based on some factors like demographic factors. However, today with digital marketing, marketing has moved to increasingly targeted and personalised content, and standard segments are no longer enough. Hence there has risen a need to create buyer personas that help to further understand customers in more depth. (Lahtinen, 2022, p. 86)

In the B2B purchasing process, decisions are shaped by the actions and opinions of various members of the purchasing academy, each with their different needs and preferences, which change during the buying process (Salonen et al., 2023, p. 13; Terho et al. 2022). Marketers need to understand these opinions and concerns of the purchase academy, and solve any problems or barriers that may arise during the customer journey. Buyer personas are semi-fictional representation of organization's potential and ideal customers, created based on the existing data and research. The objective of buyer personas is to help businesses to understand their target audiences needs, behaviors, challenges and motivations (Hootsuite, 2021, reviewed 19.5.2024). The buyer persona is based on the expectations about certain customer segment's demographics, behaviors, needs, and motivations. Although, the buyer persona is semi-fictional creation made by the company, it is noteworthy that the buyer persona generation must be based on real data and customer research (Lahtinen, 2022, p. 87).

When creating a buyer persona, it is important to focus on knowing the buyer persona's demographic details, but also modelling buyer persona behaviour. Without understanding the behavioral aspect, it is impossible to target the content timely and to the right channels for real used by the potential customer. (Lahtinen, 2022, p. 88) By knowing the most important descriptive information, like gender, age and pain points, the company can divide big customer target segments into much smaller clusters, and that makes the personalization process easier. It is notable, that different organizations might need more than one buyer persona profiles, if the selection of their goods is wide and there are many different target audiences. (Slavkova, 2023, p. 327-328)

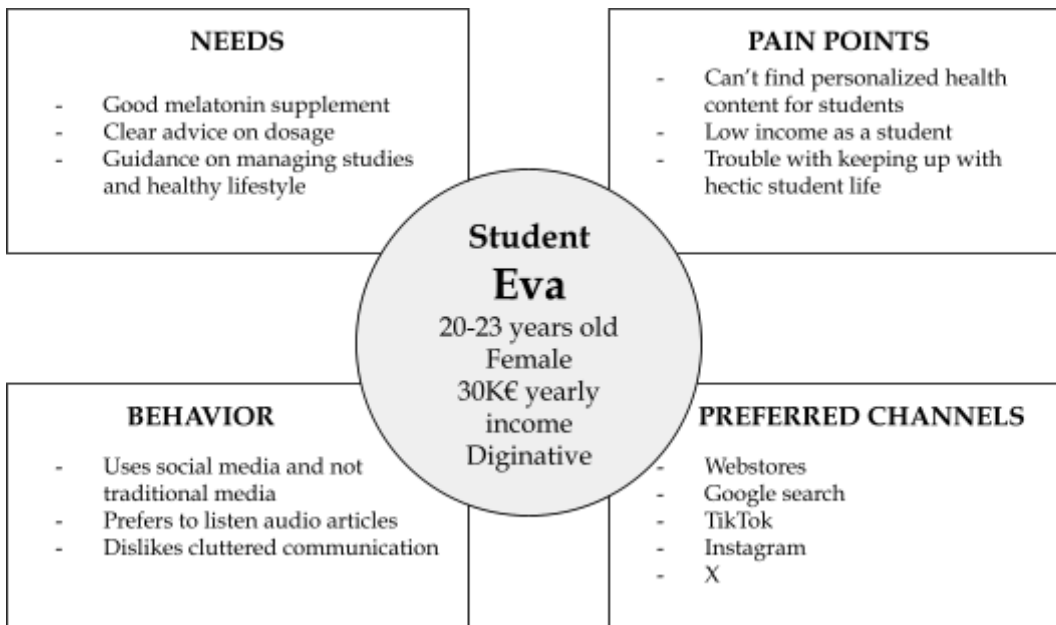


FIGURE 5 Example of a buyer persona of an imaginary pharmaceutical company

Above in the figure 5 an example of a possible buyer persona is presented. This buyer persona can be a part of a bigger target customer segment like “People searching for health guidance in Europe” or “Low income customers”, but those segments cut out even more important details that can help make content marketing even more personalised and effective. Now, according to the buyer persona above, marketers can take into account for example the gender, student status, interests and pain points of the buyer persona in the content creation.

In addition to creating buyer personas, customer journey intelligence includes mapping these customer journeys, to be able to recognize the key touch points. Customer journey mapping should include “the typical stages of the target customer journeys from pre-purchase to post-purchase stages.” (Terho et al. 2022, p. 300) All this information can be added to the buyer persona profile, according to which the content marketing tactics should be implemented.

3.3 DCM tactics

As mentioned earlier, content has some rules when it comes to its favorable and effective nature. However, there is multiple tactics through which content marketers can share compelling and valuable content to their target audience. The most common content marketing formats and tactics are listed below in the table. The tactics listed are not targeted for B2B companies, but can be implemented in any market.

TABLE 2 Content marketing tactics according to Sobal, 2017; Kolowich, 2016 & McGill, 2017, as cited in Vinerean, 2017, p. 96

1. Blog posts	Blog posts are article like writings which are posted on the company's website and can then be shared on social media. Blog posts should be published in regular basis.
2. E-books	E-book is a comprehensive and in-depth resource of information about a particular topic, published online. Usually e-books are used as lead generators, as customers need to leave their contact information in order to access the free of charge e-book content.
3. Templates	Templates can be for example worksheets that are made for helping the customer in a certain problem effortlessly. Templates can also be used similarly as a lead generator as e-books.
4. Infographics	Infographics visualize data, providing more compelling information for customers. Infographics demonstrates the expertise and reliability of the company.
5. Videos	Videos as a content format have the highest level of engagement. Videos can explain certain issues or demonstrate a service or a product. Videos are also great for expressing the brand.
6. Podcasts	Podcasts are pre-recorded interviews where experts discuss about a certain subject. Podcasts can also be cut into shorter clips that can be shared on social media.
7. Guides	Guides prove the expertise of the company and help the customer with step-by-step instructions, making the company more attractive to the customer.
8. Kits	Kit is a combination of different pieces of content around a particular topic. Companies may use this tactic to repurpose existing or old content by combining it with something else and forming a new offering for the customer.
9. Tip sheets and checklists	Tip sheets and checklists provide help for customer in a concise format. It stimulates customer engagement as customer possibly downloads the checklist for themselves and thus return to the brand again later.
10. Webinars	Webinars are interactive online events where typically a company representative or expert educates customers about a particular subject. Webinars increase the trustworthiness of the company.
11. Whitepapers	White papers remind of academic papers as they are very detailed and heavily information loaded presentations of research findings or reports. E-books are generally more practical and visually appealing entities, whereas whitepapers are more formal.
12. Case studies	Case studies showcase the potential customer the possible outcomes if they were to become a customer of the company.
13. Surveys/Research reports	Surveys and their results are utilized to gauge perceptions of the respondents or to convince the potential customers about the benefits and effectiveness of the offered product or service by conducting a

	research.
14. User-generated content	User generated content refers to any format of content piece that is created by a existing customer or user of the company's product/service. UGC is gaining popularity as it is easy to utilize through variety of social media channels.

3.3 Personalization

Marketing can provide personal experiences to the receiver if the content and messages are targeted at certain target groups (Reinikainen et al., 2018, p. 12). Personalization is an essential aspect of contemporary digital experiences, naturally also in DCM. It involves tailoring content, products or services and interaction to align with the different preferences, requirements and behaviour of an individual consumer or a specific target audience. (Slavkova, 2023, p. 324) Personalized content is *“any brand messaging that creates an unique, targeted experience using specific data and information about the customer”* (Adobe, 2023). A generally familiar example of basic personalization is when an organization uses a customer's first name at the beginning of the email or in the subject line, to encourage them to open the message (Adobe, 2023). This means that marketing is shifted from “push” messaging that is targeted for mass audiences to more individual messages (Reinikainen et al., 2018, p. 12). Above all, personalization is based on an automated process where the marketing automation system adjusts the content or message according to the data of the certain customer. Thus there is no need for explicit input. (Slavkova, 2023, p. 325)

Personalization recognizes that individuals have different unique preferences, interests and behaviours, and strives to tailor digital content to match these opinions (Slavkova, 2023). Thus creating high-quality content requires continuous learning and exploring what the target audience wishes to receive and what are their needs. One note that came to light in the case study of Järvinen et al. (2016, p. 169) is that often marketers create content that touches a wide audience but is not successful in engaging real potential customers. Also Wood (2015, p. 254) highlights that customers don't want to receive group spam marketing. Here personalization comes to the game. Another aspect is that high-quality content is supposed to rather just add value for its receiver than directly promote the company's goods. This means content should solve the audience's problems and offer advice for issues that the audience might be unsure about. In practice, the company possibly won't even tell about their products in the content, but the topic deals with the subjects that the company expertises in. (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016) This pushes the customer to the right way, so to speak. Additionally, according to a fairly recent industry research, 71 % of consumers are expecting personalized interaction and offerings from companies (McKinsley & Company, 2021). Fortunately, technology

development offers companies with even more advanced options, when it comes to technology generated personalization in marketing (Slavkova, 2023).

According to research made in the article by Järvinen et al. (2016, p. 171), nurturing is all about personalizing the content and communication according to the profile information of the lead. In practice this means greeting the lead by name and referring to their industry, as well as using the local language. However, in addition to these personalization details, it is essential to pay attention to 'behavioral personalization', which means delivering content for example based on what the lead does on the company website. This nurturing process is serving both sides as the lead is targeted with personalized material and at the same time the company marketing learns even more about the potential customer. (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016, p. 171) Also, Holliman and Rowley (2014, p. 284) state that the content should be personalized by the location that the customer have on the customer journey. Different customer journey stages require different types of content. However, Slavkova reminds that in the content rich online environment, offering relevant and personalized content is only the bare minimum for businesses (Slavkova, 2023, p. 324).

Thus, to be able to deliver valuable content the marketer needs to understand what the target audience wants to see and hear (Holliman & Rowley, 2014, p. 287), and the company needs to listen to them actively. In practice, this means collecting customer feedback and data through social media monitoring. Then the company is supposed to fulfill customer needs by offering their knowledge and expertise in the shape of content. (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016) However, Reinikainen et al. (2018, p. 12) remind that organizations need to avoid the situation where customer feels like they are being "*stalked*" due to overly personalized content targeted to them. So balance is the key to this matter as well. After all, if implemented successfully, regarding Slavkova (2023), personalization enables greater customer engagement as personalized content lures customers as they value the convenience and relevance in the marketing they come across.

4 RECOGNIZED CHALLENGES AND CONCEPT SUMMARY

As digital content marketing is a fairly complex concept, which requires attention and focus on many different aspects to be successful and efficient, there are also many challenges that organizations, especially B2B organizations might face. The current academic research literature has not reviewed the challenges of digital content marketing, at least as far as the author knows, and at least not comprehensively. Most articles about the challenges regarding DCM are conducted by commercial institutes. However, some challenges are reviewed here in the fourth chapter of the thesis, and this aspect will be complemented in the empirical section of the thesis.

New innovative opportunities and marketing trends are not only great but also bring major challenges for B2B organizations (Wiersema, 2013, p. 474). When technology develops, stakeholders expect more and more from B2B organizations when it comes to new digital media outlets (McShane et al., 2019, p. 12). This leads to some B2B organizations running out of resources. Some decision-makers in organizations may not consider content marketing and social media marketing relevant enough, and thus they use resources for other, more urgent projects. (McShane et al., 2019)

Some challenges that previous researchers have found regarding technology sourcing, and when it comes to especially content marketing automation are that MA really requires time and effort and that efficient utilization of MA is not possible without concrete cooperation between the marketing and sales departments. This means not only IT collaboration but also co-planning and functional alignment between the experts of marketing and sales departments. MA utilization calls for a shift in the mindset of marketers from a more traditional 'message marketing' to more personalized customer-centric marketing. (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016, p. 172) Also, the scoring system has been thought of as a challenging part of MA. In order to overcome these challenges, the company needs to make a financial contribution.

According to Vinerean (2017, p. 97), the most important challenge is to be able to change the company philosophy from selling online to helping consumers online, by customer nurturing with content marketing tactics. Also, research made by Content Marketing Institute (2024) supports this by stating that content marketers find it difficult to create the right kind of content. This challenge was voted the most in the survey. The second most voted challenge was to be able to create content consistently enough. That supports the statement that content marketing can be lacking resources. Also challenge regarding differentiating content from competitors' content received as many votes as the consistency challenge. (Content Marketing Institute, 2024) The research report mentioned that AI and B2B companies enormously increased use of online platforms has made it even more difficult to stand out with content creation. With AI one can simply create thousands of words of general content that does not bring forward the exclusive traits of a certain company and its offerings. The challenges will be explored more in detail in the empirical

social media and email. Additionally, marketing automation softwares may be used in order to make the digital content marketing more effective and productive. As the digital content marketing is a versatile and complex entity, it has its challenges and opportunities.

5 RESEARCH APPROACH & METHODS

The purpose of this study is to provide a comprehensive and compiling picture of how digital content marketing can be implemented effectively in B2B organizations. The research constructs a literature review and an empirical part, which aims to answer the set research questions. The sixth chapter introduces the research approach and methods utilized in this research. First, the concept of qualitative research is presented, after which the methodological choices for conducting this research are reviewed and reasoned.

5.1 Qualitative research

Research can be either qualitative or quantitative. In qualitative research, meanings are derived from words and possibly images, while in quantitative study, numbers and statistics convey results (Saunders et al., 2007). Qualitative research is empirical and involves empirical observations and their analysis (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009, p. 22). It is characterized by subjectivity and conditional answers that are tied to a specific time and place. Also, one unique characteristic of qualitative study is that it explores real-life phenomena. (Hirsjärvi et al., 2009, p. 162).

While quantitative research is focused on testing and measuring theories in a more structured way, qualitative research has an emphasis on theory building, forming meanings, and learning to understand answers for how and why questions, in a more unstructured way. Qualitative research is inductive, which means that the research starts with smaller questions and details and builds up an understanding and theory about something in question. (Carson, 2001, p. 63) In qualitative research, the researcher seeks to describe and understand the subject of the research (Mäntylä et al., 2013). Thus interpretive qualitative research is seen as suitable for gaining an in-depth understanding of marketing phenomena (Carson, 2001, p. 65), and thus qualitative methodologies were selected for this research.

The nature of qualitative research methodologies provides a flexible chance for interpretation of marketing management situations, better than questionnaires in quantitative research would do (Carson, 2001, p. 65). Therefore qualitative research methods are highly used in marketing research. Research should not only provide new scientific information but also create practical value for the world about the chosen subject (Flick, 2009). This research aims to provide B2B organizations with insights on how to implement digital content marketing efficiently, and qualitative methods help with recognizing and understanding matters influencing the process of digital content marketing and its implementation. In light of the existing research, the qualitative approach supports the main goal of providing a comprehensive and cohesive overview of the implementation of B2B digital content marketing.

5.2 Data collection

Interviews were selected as the data collection method since interviews provide a good amount of information from the field and the data collection method is easy to conduct online. There are several types of interview methods, but data for this research is collected with semi-structured thematic interviews. Semi-structured form of conducting research interviews is the most popular one and it means that the interviewer follows a generic plan about how the topic is discussed but does not follow a pre-established question order and the discussion is supposed to be authentic and varying (Packer, 2011, p. 43). The semi-structured method was selected because it helps the interview discussion move forward and ensures that the conversation stays on track with the right topics. Thematic interviews involve set topics that all participants discuss, but the researcher has the freedom to adjust the questions' format and sequence during the interview (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998, p. 87). The thematic interview is the most accurate and fitting option for this kind of research since the themes are easily recognizable.

The interviews were held during March and April 2024. Since the study concerns B2B marketing, it was found best to interview marketing specialists from B2B organizations, who are experienced in digital content marketing. Thus it was possible to discover the current insights about the topic in the marketing professionals' field. Potential candidates for the research interviews were scouted with random sampling on LinkedIn, by searching people with search words like "B2B marketing", "content marketing" and "B2B digital content marketing". Then the LinkedIn profiles of selected candidates were examined and whether the candidate seemed suitable for the interview based on their working background, they were contacted by email. The only criteria for the interviewees were that they needed to work in a B2B organization's marketing and have experience in digital content marketing. Gender, age, or years of experience were not restricted as the study aims to gain a versatile and fresh perspective on the topic. After contacting multiple people by email, 10 professionals agreed to participate in the interview. Both sexes were interviewed and the B2B marketing experience varied from 0,5 years to 10 years among participants.

Prior to conducting the interviews, an interview protocol was created based on the literature review. The interview protocol holds the set themes and detailed questions, that aim to gain high-quality and extensive answers to research questions (see Appendix 1). In the protocol, all the research questions were broken into parts, first into themes and then into interview questions. The themes created were: B2B digital content marketing, implementation of DCM, and challenges and opportunities. Each of these themes was discussed in the conversation and the goal was to get deep and versatile answers for each question. The interviewee must be prompted to generate their response as much as possible and stay within the confines set by the question (Hyvärinen, Nikander & Ruusuvaori, 2017, p. 97). Interview questions were formed so that

they were not leading and were able to be answered otherwise than only with a yes or no. Also, four background questions were created to shed light on the interviewee's background and experience.

Interviews were conducted online on Microsoft Teams, because of time-management- and distance-related reasons. All participants were informed about the privacy policies and they all agreed that the interview was video recorded. Microsoft Teams also provided live transcription, which was utilized as the research data in a Word document format after the interview. All the interviews were conducted in Finnish, as some of the participants were requesting it.

TABLE 3 List of the research interviewees and interview details

Interviewee	Field	Title	Experience in B2B marketing	Interview duration	Date
1	Marketing Agency	Content Marketing Specialist	Did not say	1 h 6 min	8.3.24
2	Consulting	Marketing expert	3 years	40 min	11.3.24
3	IT	Content Marketing Manager	4 years	36 min	27.3.24
4	Marketing Agency for B2B firms	Content Marketing Specialist	4 years	48 min	11.4.24
5	Energy field	Marketing Manager	10 years	32 min	2.4.24
6	Sustainable development, consulting, and software services	Marketing Manager	5 years	25 min	2.4.24
7	AI technology field	Marketing and Communication Director	9 years	52 min	19.4.24
8	Software services	Marketing Manager	0,5 years	29 min	16.4.24

9	Energy field	Marketing employee	2 years	20 min	17.4.24
10	IT	Marketing Specialist	1 year	33 min	18.4.24

5.3 Data analysis

The data collection produced 118 pages of transcribed interview data, which needed to be carefully analyzed in order to get new insights for the set research problem. Regarding Boeije (2011, p. 11), qualitative research has three main components: 1) it seeks meanings, 2) it employs adaptable research methods for interaction, and 3) it produces qualitative results.

As interviewees are not directly answering interview questions, it is necessary to carefully and patiently analyze the collected data, in other words, the answers obtained in the research interviews (Ruusuvuori et al., 2010). Thus the research starts a new chapter and the researcher is facing new questions again. Before conducting the analysis itself, it is important to familiarise yourself with the data and classify it (Ruusuvuori et al., 2010).

Thematic analysis was selected as an analysis method for this research. The thematic analysis is useful when solving practical problems (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998, p. 178), such as in this research the main question concerns the practical implementation of DCM tactics. To increase the concreteness of the research, the findings are also reinforced with quotations from the interviews. This is the typical way of presenting the most relevant pieces of information in qualitative research, to justify the collected data and the interpretations made (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998, p. 175).

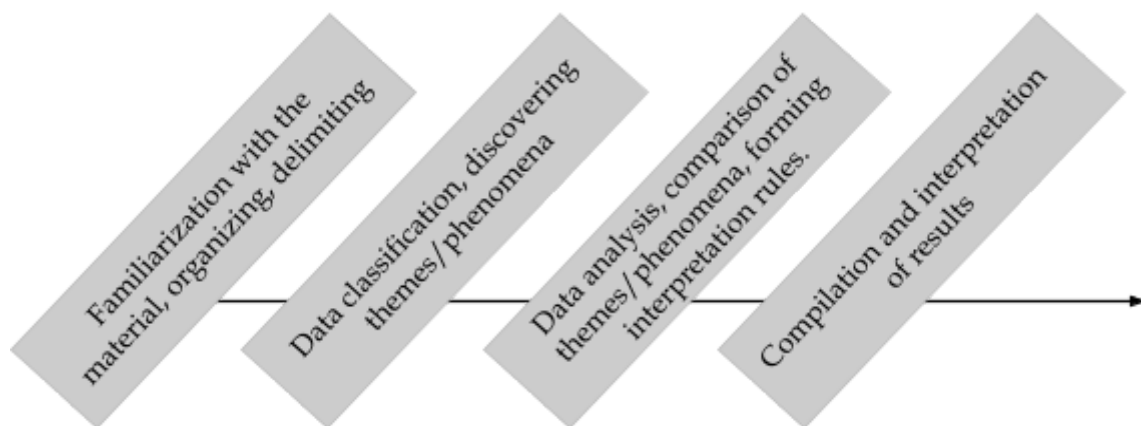


FIGURE 7 Data analysis process according to Ruusuvuori et al., 2010

According to Ruusuvuori et al. (2010), it is advisable to formulate sub-questions to be posed to the data, thereby beginning to identify various themes in the interview responses. Thus, in this research data analysis included examining for instance meanings for challenges and opportunities in DCM, that constructed the themes in the thematic analysis.

Regarding the statement of Ruusuvuori et al. (2010) the task of classification is to systematically go through the material in a manner defined by the research problem, central concepts, and premises. It is important to note that classification needs to be highly systematic, and the researcher is not supposed to select only the 'best fitting' themes from the data.

As mentioned earlier data in this research means 118 pages of interview transcription in total. The data analysis was started by carefully reading the data twice and the third time, the most important sections and phrases were bolded, to indicate that those parts of the text are worthy of more focus. After that, the data was sorted and color-coded around five different themes. The themes formed were: a description of what digital content marketing is, how digital content marketing is implemented, goals that can be achieved with digital content marketing, challenges in digital content marketing, and opportunities in digital content marketing. Then the data was listed according to themes, vertically one theme at a time. To make the data analysis as systematic and clear as possible, the data was also shared on a sheet. Each theme was on one Excel sheet, and the data was further divided into smaller sections, separating different meanings and interpretations, and marking their emphasis in the whole data.

6 FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings made in the research interviews. Findings are categorized by six themes that could be recognized in the data analysis process. The themes that the interviews were built upon are “the concept of DCM”, “implementation of DCM”, “objectives”, “increasing effectiveness”, “challenges”, and “opportunities”. By exploring the insights of the experts relating to these six themes, the research questions can be answered comprehensively. The tables underneath present the themes and more detailed codes concisely.

6.1 Concept of digital content marketing

To deepen and broaden the understanding of the concept of digital content marketing in the B2B sector, the interviews were started with questions relating to the concept definition. Below in the table 4 the analyzed codes are presented in a table, with a quote illustrating the code. This provides the reader with a concrete example of what the interviewed experts have stated about a certain topic.

TABLE 4 Summary of the themes and codes/The concept of DCM

Theme	Codes	Quote
The concept of DCM	All marketing content in digital format	<p><i>“--digital B2B content marketing is all content in digital form, whether it's on social media or on a website or some other digital platform, it's all digital content, some content guides, ads, webinars, blogs, articles.”</i> (Expert 1)</p> <p><i>“-- content that is readable in different digital formats--”</i> (Expert 6)</p>
	B2B and B2C DCM differ	<p><i>“-- channel choices differ, for example, according to where business directors are, not necessary on TikTok--”</i> (Expert 1)</p> <p><i>“-- it (DCM) more tailored in B2B marketing, vs. larger and more diverse target audiences in</i></p>

		<p>B2C marketing--" (Expert 3)</p> <p>"-- in B2C marketing, they usually experiment with new platforms bolder than in B2B--" (Expert 4)</p> <p>"-- in B2B the 'buyer persona' usually includes more than one person--" (Expert 6)</p> <p>"--a certain level of expertise is expected in a different way, so it may not be so much about perceptions but perhaps more about facts--" (Expert 10)</p>
	B2B and B2C DCM do not differ	<p>"--processes are quite same (in B2B and B2C)--" (Expert 1)</p> <p>"The same process goes with B2B and B2C, there's not anything decisive in it--" (Expert 5)</p>
	Big variety	"-- it (DCM) can take many forms--" (Expert 2)
	Never finished, long-term tactic	"-- in B2B, it is long-term work--" (Expert 3)
	Building trust and credibility, creating value	<p>"--it is clearly much more credible for a specialist company to promote itself with some content using its own expertise, than in a more traditional way--" (Expert 7)</p> <p>"-- producing value in the form of written content--" (Expert 3)</p>
	Moving customers forward	<p>"-- it's not about the customer pressing a button and ordering something, it's more about convincing the customer to buy from the company in the run --" (Expert 3)</p> <p>"-- we move the customer forward through online platforms, website, and newsletters, on the customer</p>

		<i>journey, towards the purchase--" (Expert 4)</i>
	Top-of-mind phenomenon	<i>"-- with DCM, the company gets top-of-mind status--" (Expert 4)</i>
	High maturity	<i>"-- the content needs to be high maturity content – so clear and easy to read, but by no means overly so, content has to be something that gives even pretty hardcore professionals something." (Expert 4)</i>

Initially, the B2B content marketing experts were asked what they think digital content marketing is in general, and in the B2B sector, and how they would define it. This question was proposed to deepen the pre-formed conceptual framework and to discover whether the participants agree with the digital content marketing literature or if new aspects occur. Further questions asked were "What kind of parts would you divide the implementation process?", "Do you think that B2B DCM differs from B2C DCM, if yes, how?", and "What objectives can be achieved with DCM?"

When asked interviewee number 2 what is digital content marketing their answer was "various". This reflects well the diverse understanding of the concept among the experts involved in the study. However, all interviewees agreed that B2B digital content marketing is a strategic approach where the company produces and shares its target group expertise content in a digital form. Digital content marketing is an inbound marketing method that utilizes various digital formats and channels. According to the interviewees, the content can be, and in most cases should be, informative, educating, relevant, useful, and even inspiring, but entertaining content is mostly absent in B2B content marketing. Digital content marketing revolves around the following objectives: reaching the target audience, value creation for the target audience, and increasing engagement, all of which should lead to support for sales. The joint opinion of the interviewees was that the end goal of DCM is to influence the financial benefit of the company through sales. One very important aspect that came to light in the interviews was that content marketing is a never-ending process that will never be finished. Almost all the interviewees indicated that there are always new content pieces to create, there is always more optimization to make and there are always new themes to write about. One participant described content marketing as "*an iterative process*", which means that it is constantly evolving and moving forward. When it comes to moving forward, interviewees described that another important objective for DCM is to move the customer along the journey toward the point of purchase. With every piece of content, marketers aim to move the customer another step closer to the purchasing decision.

One question that was posed to the interviewees to be able to deepen the definition of content marketing in the B2B context was “Do you think that B2B and B2C digital content marketing differ from each other?”. Most of the interviewees answered that in their opinion and according to their knowledge they do, and do not differ. One divergence was found to be the channels used and the nature of the content. For example, the social media platform TikTok was less used in B2B digital content marketing, as participants ponder whether business decision-makers are using it or not. One candidate also mentioned that possible links to China and data protection concerns are affecting the decision to not use TikTok as one of the digital content marketing platforms.

Many interviewees emphasized that in B2B content marketing it is necessary to stress expert knowledge and solution-oriented approaches, while in the B2C sector, content marketing is constructed around feelings and images of the product and the company. Also in B2B marketing, target groups are mostly smaller and more specific in comparison to B2C marketing. Thus the nature of the content requires more attention, personalization- and targeting-wise. In B2C marketing the target groups are often bigger and more diverse, which is why targeting and personalization may not be such a critical aspect. Comparing for example a complex product of an IT industry with the confectionery industry, it is clear that the target groups differ in size and accuracy. In addition, B2B purchasing processes are usually much more detailed, bigger, and longer, including more people and big financial investments. In B2B investments there may be a whole “*purchasing academy*” dealing with the purchase and questions around it, including for example chief financial officers, chief technology officers, managers, and different kinds of experts. B2B content marketers may need to convince all of these people of the company and the product. As similarities, the same kind of content marketing production processes, tools, practices, and objectives were mentioned.

The quality of the content was also a main concern when analyzing what digital content marketing is in the B2B sector. As mentioned earlier, in B2B content marketing, expertise is highly valued and according to interviewees, it is very important to be able to show it in the content. This means that content needs to be in-depth by its nature, regardless what is the topic. Interviewee number 4 described that the content in B2B should be “*high maturity content*”, meaning that it is clear and easy to understand, but it should also provide insights for the best and most experienced experts in the field. Providing engaging expert content builds the brand positively. According to the interviews quality content attracts potential customers, increases brand awareness in a positive way, and engages existing and potential customers. The content should be extremely relevant to the needs of the target group and designed according to the interests of the potential customers. Here some interviewees mentioned that customer surveys are utilized to be able to stay on track of the attributes that B2B customers value in the content they consume.

“--This is how the brand is built, that ‘ahaa, apparently this company is offering me these interesting expert content pieces’--” (Expert 4)

One factor that determines the B2B digital content marketing is that the results are not immediate, but require long-term work and regular investment. Especially in B2B marketing, decision-making processes are long and complex, so marketing strategies need to be designed to meet these needs. Expert number 3 stated that digital content marketing is not at all about immediate purchases that the potential customer is being motivated to make. But rather little by little building trust and confidence and thus moving the potential buyer further on the purchasing funnel. Although this research focuses on the digital form of content marketing, interviewee number 3 also reminded that B2B marketing cannot only rely on digital platforms, as in B2B marketing face to face encounters and making the company visible through company employees in physical activities such as fairs is important. This is because although in the 2020s people and businesses are functioning highly digitally, still human interaction is valued when trying to build relationships and trust in big decisions.

6.2 Implementation of DCM

Because this research focuses particularly on the implementation aspect of digital content marketing, and more specifically in B2B markets, research interviews aimed to build up as broad a picture as possible of the implementation process and all its details. All participants started to answer the implementation questions fairly differently. Some participants listed the marketing technology that is used in DCM, others started by emphasizing the importance of strategy and some explained their daily tasks working on content marketing. The table 5 beneath presents the codes and quotes related to the implementation aspect.

TABLE 5 Summary of the themes and codes/Implementation of DCM

Theme	Codes	Quote
Implementation of DCM	Strategic choices	<i>"Well, I think it all comes down to the company's strategy and how clear it is, that if it is a bit shaky, then it is also visible in the content marketing, it can not be terribly effective if it is not clearly clarified what the company is communicating and what are the key messages--" (Expert 3)</i> <i>"-- it starts with strategy--" (Expert 2)</i>
	Planning	<i>"-- with a content plan and a marketing</i>

		<i>plan-- annual calendar and publication calendar" "Everything starts with a good plan" (Expert 1)</i>
	Defining target-group	<i>"(thinking of) who are we producing content for and where are they. It is really important to know the audience." (Expert 1)</i> <i>"everything for everyone is nothing for no one" (Expert 1)</i> <i>"defining target groups, what are their needs, what content they are interested in?" (Expert 2)</i> <i>"--we have very, very specific buyer personas for our software services. So you can find the title, you can find the countries, you can find the pain points." (Expert 6)</i>
	Various formats	<i>"it includes blog posts, website content, social media content, releases, guides--" (Expert 1)</i>
	Different channels	<i>"(thinking of) what is the channel strategy, what channels will be used?" (Expert 1)</i>
	Content production	<i>"-- writing work--" (Expert 1)</i> <i>"--production and editing--" (Expert 4)</i>
	Delivery	<i>"--eventually the publishing of the content--" (Expert 4)</i>
	Optimizing and editing	<i>"-- (implementation) does not end with the publication of content, but can also be optimised afterwards based on analytics--" (Expert 2)</i> <i>"-- optimizing continuously--" (Expert 4)</i>

All participants agreed that implementing digital content marketing initially starts with thinking about the firm's strategy. First, a marketing plan is derived from the company's strategy, leading to an even more detailed content plan or annual content marketing plan. In relation to the strategy, for example, interviewees 1 and 3 recommended clarifying the definition of the company's core story, vision, mission, and values. Marketing teams need to clarify why

content marketing is being implemented in the organization and define objectives. According to the interviews, marketing is all about differentiating from other businesses, and the competitive advantage of certain firms should be crystal clear when consuming their content. Then it is crucial to also define target groups and recognize their location in the sales and marketing funnel. Only then content marketing can be effectively delivered at the correct time and well-targeted.

There are multiple formats in digital content marketing that can be implemented according to the interviews. The most popular formats amongst the participants were: social media posts mainly on LinkedIn, but also on Instagram, Facebook, and Youtube, website content like articles, blog posts, white papers, and webinars, and paid media like ads on search engine marketing. Interviewee number 7 also counts in also podcasts when talking about digital content marketing formats. They stated that even if a potential customer would listen to a couple of minutes of the produced podcast episode, it is a more effective marketing tactic than a regular ad like a website banner. According to them, a podcast is a useful way of promoting the persona and expertise in a more concrete and personal way. The interview discussion also touched on the fact that in today's society, people are overloaded with information and media. However, interviewee number 7 pointed out that even the best podcast episodes have only two or three important points, that can be shared for example on social media platforms as short podcast clips.

After selecting the best fitting formats and channels, experts suggested that writing, taking pictures, consulting subject experts, and optimizing and editing the content are the next implementation actions. Then content will be delivered using the selected channels personally or with the help of marketing automation software. However interviewees also emphasized that the digital content marketing work should not end there, and it is very important to measure the marketing results and effectiveness. However, some interviewees also pointed out that in Finnish B2B markets, it might be difficult to get enough data to make data-based changes in the future, since the customer amount is at such low level. Anyway, implementing digital content marketing tactics was commonly seen as an iterative process that never slowed down.

When it comes to implementing effective and good DCM, it is necessary to think about the attributes of good content. Interviewees emphasized that content must be flawless, factually correct, and packed in an interesting way. One content marketer said that their most important job is to package the received expert knowledge in an understandable and appealing format for customers.

6.3 Objectives

To explore the digital content marketing concept comprehensively in the B2B sector, it is necessary to find out what goals can be achieved by implementing it.

The interviews included questions considering objectives, such as “What objectives can be achieved with DCM?” The coding and quotes are presented in the table 6 below.

TABLE 6 Summary of the themes and codes/Objectives

Theme	Codes	Quote
Objectives	Awareness	<p>“--you remember this brand because you are attracted by interesting content --” (Expert 4)</p> <p>“-- (one objective is) increasing the brand awareness” (Expert 1)</p> <p>“strengthening the brand” (Expert 4)</p>
	Customer acquisition	<p>“-- (one objective is) customer acquisition” (Expert 1)</p> <p>“getting new customers” (Expert 9)</p>
	Supporting sales	<p>“in the end, it's all about supporting sales” (Expert 4)</p>
	Lead nurturing	<p>“--we can help those customers to move forward with something, for example, to get a solution or streamline a process --then when the customer is ready to make a decision, then they can contact us.” (Expert 3)</p> <p>“-- we could get the customer move forward on the buying funnel from awareness level to the purchasing decision--” (Expert 1)</p>
	Interaction with customers	<p>“increasing the number of contacts and interaction with customers” (Expert 2)</p>
	Convincing with expertise	<p>“--to convince with our expertise, to make the expertise of our experts visible with interesting content, but a small part of it is purely promotional content.” (Expert 3)</p>

In order to understand the concept of digital content marketing in depth, it is also necessary to define the objectives it can achieve. All the possible goals discovered are great opportunities for companies that benefit them in one way or another, and the following sub-section discusses how these objectives could be achieved in practice. Expert number 4 divided possible objectives into two

categories: awareness objectives and lead objectives. The awareness objectives refer to that a wider audience recognizes the company and its products and maybe the company gets more space on different platforms. The lead objectives are mainly focusing on increasing the number of leads and nurturing the existing ones.

“The objectives can be very different depending on the strategy of the company--” (Expert 2)

As mentioned earlier, one of the biggest objectives for DCM is to reach the target audience of the company in various digital channels. The target group knowledge has a significant role as the content needs to be targeted effectively, especially in B2B markets, which are more complex and specialized than B2C markets. Content should be personalized and targeted to meet the needs, preferences, and purchasing behavior of the target group. Hereby, digital content marketing can help with increasing sales, acquiring new customers, and nurturing the existing ones. According to the interviews, objectives are influenced by the strategy of the company, and there can be plenty of different and different level objectives for DCM. For example, increasing the number of contacts and leads, and increasing customer loyalty or the number of social media followers or impressions can be smaller targets for companies.

“--but more often it can be that you're in a coffee table discussion about which companies could be our partners--” (Expert 4)

Another theme that provoked the discussions of objectives was improving brand image and awareness. Interviewees agreed that by constantly posting high-quality content and expressing specific expertise, potential customers would start to remember the certain company as a thought leader and possible partner. For example, interviewees numbers 4, 6, and 7 mentioned the top-of-mind concept as one of their content marketing objectives. The aim is to become the first and preferred option in the minds of potential customers. With the help of different kinds of content, the company is able to move potential customers forward in the customer journey, possibly up to the point of purchase. Expert 4 stated that B2B buying processes are not always so straightforward, and it is all about staying in minds of the certain decision-makers. Another theme when it comes to possible accomplishments with B2B digital marketing is improving marketing efficiency and cost-effectiveness. Content marketing is a more efficient way to showcase the uniqueness and competitive advantages of the company, compared to for example regular ads. However, interviewees also implicated that content marketing production is time-consuming, but AI is a great tool to decrease the amount of work. After all, implementing digital content marketing strategies is all about increasing sales and gaining new customers.

6.4 Increasing effectiveness

This research aims to find the best practices and untapped opportunities for increasing the quality and efficiency of digital content marketing. To discover factors that B2B experts perceive as improving digital content marketing, the interview discussions included also a question like “How would you describe the “effective” implementation of DCM?”.

TABLE 7 Summary of the themes and codes/Increasing effectiveness

Theme	Codes	Quote
Increasing effectiveness	Target audience knowledge	<p><i>“it needs to be clear who for the content is made and for what channels” (Expert 1)</i></p> <p><i>“the target audience knowledge is super important” (Expert 2)</i></p>
	Sales funnel influence on content	<p><i>“-- that not necessarily every piece of content is that now is the time to sell, that piece of content may be published a little later, there is top-funnel, middle-funnel or bottom-funnel content. Selling at every point can be a bad idea especially when in B2B ninety-five percent don't want to buy at that moment.” (Expert 6)</i></p>
	Paid Advertisement	<p><i>“-- like of course organic content will get you to a certain point, but paid advertising is quite profitable in many cases--” (Expert 1)</i></p>
	Marketing automation benefits	<p><i>“(with Salesforce)--you can send different messages to different target groups, for different segments, and then also automate them when they do certain actions, for example on our website or with sales, so then it automatically sends out certain types of communication.” (Expert 2)</i></p>
	Using subject experts	<p><i>“--It's one thing if we as a company or any B2B company communicates something about itself versus another if you get those subject experts to also communicate on social media and digital channels and tell their own stories and</i></p>

		<p><i>produce content and share their own expertise." (Expert 3)</i></p> <p><i>"As there is influencers in B2C marketing, the subject matter experts should act as influencers in B2B marketing" (Expert 3)</i></p>
	Reusable content	<i>"the content needs to be reused and republished many times to get the most out of it" (Expert 3)</i>
	Own way	<i>"as the resources are limited, there is no point in pushing content to every channel, but we should find the own special way to be in the certain channel" (Expert 4)</i>
	Continuous development	<i>"the results need to be continuously monitored, so that we can see what works and what doesn't, and then we can make changes--" (Expert 9)</i>

One theme that was posed in the discussions related to efficiency was defining target audiences in detail and with precision. It is important to find out exactly who your content is being produced for and which channels they are active on. This allows content to be targeted to the right people at the right time.

"--Personalisation increases the match between content and the recipient, vs. sending the same message to a large audience -- the recipient gets the feeling that, hey, these people maybe understand my challenges and my business." (Expert 2)

One participant also pointed out that there should be different levels of content when it comes to the sales and marketing funnel. Content should be created and categorized as top-funnel, middle-funnel, and bottom-funnel content. Paid advertising, with for example Google and Meta, was seen as really useful when trying to increase the efficiency of digital content marketing. According to interviewees, content marketing needs to be easily scalable and the volume of content consumed was seen as a major factor. If only a handful of people are consuming your company's content, the content marketing is basically useless and failed. While organic content can reach a certain audience, paid advertising can be profitable in order to make content visible to a wider audience. Thus many interviewees did recommend using paid advertisement.

When it comes to inorganic tactics, marketing automation got surprisingly mixed and contradictory feedback from interviewees. Automation can be used to personalize messages for different audiences and track their behavior on websites or other content consumption. Many interviewees saw marketing automation as an opportunity to make digital content marketing

more efficient, but some found it hard to use marketing automation in the B2B sector. This is because some experts think that B2B content marketing needs to be extremely personalized, but target groups are so small, that it is challenging to employ automation software so that the results would be worth the effort.

“(addressing the receiver by their first name at the beginning of the newsletter) --OK that's the minimum level but then it should be sent from the email of the guy (salesperson) you last talked to and then it should refer to for example a conversation you last had and then continue in the same way in a somewhat natural way to the event invitation and the tone of voice should be the tone of voice used by the seller--” (Expert 7)

Thus interviews discovered that in certain cases it might be more effective to just produce emails and other content messages personally, instead of using marketing automation. However, this is highly dependent on the company, nature and amount of its customers, and the industry.

As earlier emphasized using subject matter experts in content creation was seen as a major factor in improving the content quality. By involving experts, content can reach a more interesting and credible form. However, only consulting experts for a blog or an article wasn't seen as sufficient. According to the interviews, companies should employ subject matter experts in the same way that B2C companies have influencer marketing on their channels. Thus, subject matter experts should physically appear in pictures and video clips, and provide personal experiences in emails and blog posts with their own names.

Another effective tactic for content creators was to replicate and version already existing content. High-quality content should be used in a variety of formats and channels to maximize impact. For example, after a webinar, it may be beneficial to chop the webinar's main message into pieces and add those educational pieces to the next newsletter or make some video clips for social media. Reusing old content pieces with a little variation was also mentioned in the interviews. One participant also argued in favor of “maxing out” one digital channel at a time and giving it full focus. LinkedIn was seen as the most relevant channel in B2B digital content marketing, and the participant said that they would put all the effort into that channel to get the most out of it, before extending the content marketing to new channels.

Interviewee number 2 pointed out that to make digital content marketing effective, it is necessary to find your own way of doing for your company and to maintain those actions and practices that best fit that organization. Also, interviewee number 4 supported this thought by stating that resources are so limited that there is no point in filling every possible channel to capacity. Altogether, well-defined operations and accurate and careful induction of new marketers as well as the transfer of tacit knowledge within the company are key to success. Regarding some answers, it is important to regularly assess what is working and what is not, and to adapt the strategy accordingly. Companies must not get stuck in old patterns and have to be able to reform and stop bad practices. Interviews also explored that companies should not forget the content after publication, but optimize and edit them also later according to the data obtained. All of these strategies can significantly improve the efficiency and

effectiveness of digital content marketing, which can bring positive business results to B2B organizations.

6.5 Challenges

To be able to explore opportunities in B2B digital content marketing, it is essential to first examine the possible challenges that experts face in implementing DCM. Thus interviewees were asked if they have encountered any problems and challenges when implementing content marketing tactics and whether possible challenges are caused by technology or human error. The codes and quotes relating to this topic can be found below in the table 8.

TABLE 8 Summary of the themes and codes/Challenges

Theme	Codes	Quote
Challenges	Technology problems	<p><i>"--for example, HubSpot is actually kinda good app in the sense that it has a lot of possibilities. You can do a lot of things (with it), but it's quite complicated in some ways and there would be a lot to learn if you had enough time for it (learning)." (Expert 8)</i></p> <p><i>"digital content marketing and digital marketing in general develop all the time, so we need to be quite aware of what new things are coming, for example the Instagram Threads" (Expert 1)</i></p> <p><i>"sometimes some simple tasks might take a whole day because of technical problems" (Expert 8)</i></p>
	People related issues	<p><i>"They need to understand how important it is and how it supports the sales objectives of the whole company in the end, that it's not a lottery win. It's not a sprint, it's a marathon, but there's a reward for doing it." (Expert 6)</i></p> <p><i>"it's hard to come up with new interesting content ideas" (Expert 5)</i></p> <p><i>"hard to engage sales people in the marketing" (Expert 6)</i></p>
	Slowness of progress	<p><i>"The second (challenge) is that sales cycles are long, the transaction does not come like this (immediately), we are talking about 3, 6 months to 9 months, so there are no quick wins, so one marketing activity is not enough to make anything,</i></p>

		<p><i>but there must be many touch points and company must remain on the top of mind (of customers), which means that the content and market activities must be done all the time.” (Expert 6)</i></p> <p><i>“there are no quick wins” (Expert 4)</i></p>
	Insufficient resources	<p><i>“the resources are not sufficient for everything” (Expert 2)</i></p> <p><i>“how to constantly keep up the good quality content flow” (Expert 3)</i></p> <p><i>“there’s never enough resources – it’s about prioritization” (Expert 5)</i></p>
	Personalization	<p><i>“in Finland personalization is hard in the B2B sector as there are so few customers after all” (Expert 4)</i></p>

Except for interviewees 3, 7, and 10, all other participants felt that technology poses problems and challenges when working with content marketing. Especially Pardot (the old name for Salesforce’s marketing tools) got bad feedback from experts. Also, Teams, Meta Business Suite, and WordPress were mentioned as tools that have caused technical problems. However interviewee number 7 expressed that it doesn’t matter what technology the company uses, but it is the internal “mess” that is the biggest challenge.

Also, people-related issues were discovered during the discussions with the B2B experts. First, possibly the most affecting challenge was to be able to motivate, engage, and resource the necessary experts in terms of time and money to be involved in content creation. It is important to engage all the employees and management and clarify why content marketing is important and what can be achieved with it. Interviewee number 7 stated that it is challenging to get enough experts involved in the content creation, to avoid over-using one expert. However they had solved the problem by approaching the company CFO instead of managers, and thus enough time and resources were successfully allocated to the content creation work for subject specialists also. Content creators may need to wait for a long time to get answers or interviews with subject experts in order to produce subject-specific content. In addition, some participants expressed that everyone in the company has their own opinion when it comes to marketing and content marketing, and it may be hard to cooperate and make decisions in that kind of environment.

Also, long sales cycles and the need for a long-term mindset were stated as minor challenges. Nevertheless, it was pointed out that generally in marketing departments the slow delivery of sales results was mainly understood well. According to some answers, content marketing must be ongoing continuously to be able to maintain customer relationships. Here, we cross with another challenge that was discovered: the limited resources. The absence of enough

resources was mentioned many times in the discussions. According to interviewees, there is so much to do, and so many new opportunities to improve and scale up, so hands are really full. One expert pointed out that not even two more marketers to their team would solve the resource problem. However another interviewee had a more positive approach and stated that it is not about the amount of resources, but the way you use them. Therefore prioritization was highly emphasized when it comes to the effective implementation of DCM. Interviewee number 8 also expressed that resources are necessary to be able to utilize different technology tools like Hubspot at their full potential.

Another topic recognized was understanding customer profiles and target groups at a required detail level. Defining customer profiles and target groups can be challenging, especially when the Finnish B2B market is comparatively small and target customer groups are also small. Interviewee number 7 mentioned that there can be a lack of objectivity in defining target groups and buyer personas when for example salespeople are in contact with only a bunch of B2B decision makers as the potential customers are quantitatively small but financially large. This challenge directly affects the personalization and data-based working and measurements negatively. Implementing data-driven marketing can be a challenge, especially when information about new customer groups is not yet widely available. Personalization has been perceived as difficult in the Finnish market due to the small number of customers.

Interviewees had also concerns about the changing nature of digital marketing and the ever-evolving opportunities. Again, due to limited resources, some participants found it challenging to stay on track with every new platform, channel, and trend to deliver the best possible and topical content for their customers. Also, certain industries pose their own challenges for content marketing, as some B2B industries are more old-fashioned than others and for example, price sensitivity was mentioned as a limiting factor.

6.6 Opportunities

Last but not least, this research aimed to find out what untapped opportunities B2B companies might have in the field of digital content marketing. Interviewees were posed questions like “Do you have any new ideas on how digital content marketing could be improved even further?”, “Do you recognize any untapped opportunities in DCM? What kind of?” and “How these (earlier discovered) challenges could be tackled?” The codes and quotes are presented in detail in the table 9 below.

TABLE 9 Summary of the themes and codes/Opportunities

Theme	Codes	Quote
Opportunities	Artificial intelligence	<p><i>"--little by little, as it also improves and improves, then surely there are really big possibilities that even some blog posts could be made directly with the help of artificial intelligence--" (Expert 8)</i></p> <p><i>"--no tool is perfect, but it will be difficult not to use it (AI) in a few years time. And of course, if you don't start now, you won't learn--" (Expert 7)</i></p>
	New platforms	<i>"-- new online channels are new opportunities--" (Expert 1)</i>
	More entertainment	<p><i>"Although it is a B2B company, probably very personal content production could work pretty well. That, however, I myself am a millennial and we are beginning to be in decision-making positions in companies and we are relatively native in the digital world, so for us, perhaps such dry content production is not the thing. --but it could be especially for many Finnish B2B companies such a gold mine if you dare to shake a little bit of this B2B marketing." (Expert 6)</i></p> <p><i>"there is space for more personal content (in the B2B sector)" (Expert 5)</i></p>
	More structure to the work	<i>"prioritization is important" (Expert 5)</i>
	Cooperation	<p><i>"--in the marketing team you can take advantage of the fact that colleagues have different kinds of expertise and new perspectives, so in my opinion you can definitely find help from your colleagues." (Expert 4)</i></p> <p><i>"promoting sales and marketing cooperation" (Expert 6)</i></p> <p><i>"cooperation between different marketing divisions" (Expert 10)</i></p>
	Original content	<i>"For me, it's no longer enough that we get some blogs out but we should get some real original content, like some research or some studies or something like that." (Expert 7)</i>
	Expert influencers	<i>"--those experts who are producing the content so tell them what is the impact of them appearing in</i>

		<i>a webinar, and what we have achieved from it.” (Expert 3)</i>
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Artificial intelligence was mentioned as a new and developing opportunity for content creators by many interviewees. According to participants, AI today is at that kind of level, that it cannot be trusted to make finished content pieces or not even half of the work. Nevertheless, it is considered a great ideating tool, and a great help for producing basic text that content creators can then continue. Some experts use it more widely than others. All the interviewees agreed that AI technologies will improve quickly and can be implemented even more in the future. Interviewee number 7 also emphasized that it is mandatory for marketers to start using AI now, or they will fall behind in the development of marketing.

New digital media platforms and channels were also seen as opportunities in digital content marketing. For example, Instagram’s new extension Instagram Threads was seen as a possible platform for content creation. Especially when interviewee number 4 stated that the significance of the social media platform X (previously Twitter) has dramatically decreased, probably due to the big influence of Tesla’s CEO Elon Musk and the polarised opinions of the public about him. However, some participants expressed that usually, B2B companies are slower and more careful when it comes to trying new platforms or jumping on the bandwagon of a new trend. TikTok was also raised on the taböe in some discussions, but participants were not generally sure whether it is the best platform to reach potential B2B decision makers. Also, data security issues were mentioned as a restricting factor.

Some of the participants thought that more personal and entertaining content could be a solution for B2B firms as well as for B2C firms. Interviewee number 6 suggested that because also millennials are working at higher levels in companies, and they are generally really digitally involved and enjoying different digital applications in their free time, entertaining content could work. Creating more casual content, such as team presentations and personal stories was suggested as new forms of marketing content. On the other hand, one participant raised concern that it would be hard to create entertaining content in their industry, and especially all bold and experimental content should be avoided, since the companies need to be very careful about not causing distress or suspicion, even accidentally. Thus answers about experimenting with new areas and topics were fairly polarized.

Another opportunity for even more effective content marketing work was discovered to be planning and organizing work better. For example sprint model was presented as a possible solution for strict resources and schedule pressure in content marketing work. In the sprint model, all content creation tasks are given an estimated delivery time, similar to in the software development sector. A sprint means a time-boxed period when marketing teams will complete all the agreed tasks. After the sprint the used time was examined and then it was easier to prioritize and resource the tasks of the next

sprint. This approach makes marketing more agile. In addition, better prioritization, and targeting of resources were generally presented as an opportunity for digital content marketing. If possible, increasing resources like content creators and better marketing technologies would benefit digital content marketing as well.

Related to resources also better management on the matter of utilizing experts in content creation was seen as a relevant opportunity. Co-creation with subject matter experts should be maximized to enable in-depth expertise level in content pieces. One participant also highlighted the fact that for example in their company using consultants in content creation is very expensive.

*“--when a consultant writes a blog by themselves, it is the most expensive blog ever--”
(Expert 7)*

All in all cooperation and asking for help when needed were seen as important things in content marketing, making it more efficient. All the above-mentioned opportunities are pretty general, but also one more innovative opportunity was discovered. One participant was very keen on creating totally original content in their company. According to them, that would solve the issue of considering how to differentiate yourself from others in a highly competitive marketing field. The participant suggested that the marketing team should publish some original content like research or reports, to properly stand out from the competitors.

7 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study aimed to examine the effective implementation of trendy and topical concepts of digital content marketing in B2B organizations, through three research questions that provide background on the concept, implementation, challenges, and opportunities of the subject. The research started with a theoretical background review, which presented the main areas related to digital content marketing. The literature review is constructed of presenting the concepts of B2B DCM, DCM implementation, marketing automation, and challenges related to DCM. These sections provide a comprehensive picture of the concept of digital content marketing and its implementation. The research was conducted by interviewing DCM experts in the B2B field, leading to results in six different thematic areas. These six themes, 1) concept of DCM, 2) implementation of DCM, 3) objectives of DCM, 4) effectiveness factors, 5) challenges, and 6) opportunities, were presented in detail in the previous findings chapter. Chapter 7 discusses the theoretical and managerial implications of the research, with the help of existing literature. The research questions will be answered and managerial recommendations will be given. The chapter strives to answer questions about what implications the findings hold, why is it noteworthy, and what relevance it carries for the audience. In addition, a revised theoretical framework will be presented.

7.1 Theoretical implications

First of all, all research questions were able to be answered, and the findings were diverse and innovative. The revised conceptual framework grounds the theoretical contribution, detailing how an understanding of the studied phenomenon was refined during the research process and what new insights were uncovered. Below the research questions will be gone through one by one, explaining how this research contributes to them.

RQ1: What is B2B digital content marketing and what can it be used for?

According to this study, B2B marketing experts recognize the concept of digital concept marketing widely, but in many different ways. It is noteworthy that experts came from different industries and had different experience backgrounds in marketing, and thus they have different perspectives on the concept of DCM. However, also similarities were found between definitions. According to the empirical part of the research, a compiled definition of B2B digital content marketing was created:

“B2B digital content marketing is a strategic approach where the company produces and shares its target group content in a digital form, in order to increase brand awareness,

improve customer acquisition and nurturing existing customers, in addition to creating value for the customer.”

The results mainly agreed with the literature review on the concept of DCM. For example, Holliman and Rowley (2014) have emphasized customer-centricity in digital content marketing, and also this research supports the importance of it. Although the objectives around DCM are rather focused on the company's success and growth, the main philosophy and premise is a customer-centric approach to help customers and provide value through content (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016). Additionally, Holliman & Rowley (2014) have called attention to a shift from “selling” to “helping” when it comes to the marketing approach. The research results agree with this and the interviewees have indeed said that the DCM needs to target building trust and credibility between the customer and the company. On the other hand, former research has also emphasized the need for storytelling rather than just pushing selling content (Holliman & Rowley, 2014, p. 272; McShane et al. 2019, p. 15; Pulizzi & Barrett, 2009), but in this research results did not at least directly indicated that experts focus on exactly storytelling. This might be because some experts did mention that the content must be “high maturity” content in B2B, and thus the content is often really technical and not so describing or brand-focused. This difference may be due to the difference between B2B and B2C marketing.

Another interesting fact is that almost all of the interviewees mentioned that content marketing is an ever-evolving process and that the work bears fruit in the long term. To be more specific, as this research has resulted, B2B digital content marketing is an optimal tool for developing long and strong customer relationships and increasing brand awareness. According to the experts, B2B content marketing is slower than B2C content marketing because of the long and complex sales cycles in B2B business. It is noteworthy, that in B2B content marketing the work needs to be consistently focusing on bigger long-term goals. When it comes to the objectives of DCM, experts emphasized that the important role of digital content marketing is to convince customers about the company's expertise in certain industries and topics. Thus, the content itself is generally more technical and advanced than in B2C marketing. The main purposes of use in digital content marketing are increasing brand awareness, customer acquisition, and lead nurturing, regarding the interviewees.

RQ2: How is digital content marketing implemented in B2B organizations?

Regarding the results of this research, digital content marketing is implemented rather widely in different B2B organizations and experts have their own views on the effectiveness and practices of the marketing method. Technology plays an important role in implementing any digital marketing, as digitalization offers cost-effective, timely, and manageable possibilities for digital content marketing (Wood, 2015). However, according to the results, it is people and practices that really determine how DCM implementation is done in practice. In other words, experts did not put emphasis on any particular technology

solutions, but they stated that all technology solutions including marketing automation software and website platforms have their own pros and cons. To sum up, the results show that the effective implementation of DCM is dependent on the strategy, in-depth planning, and amount of human-related resources.

Another interesting aspect is that the experts highly valued proper and careful planning processes and practices. All the participants expressed that an effective digital content marketing implementation process requires systematic planning on how, when, and what will be done. As consistency is a key to content distribution, marketers need a systematic approach in order to keep the DCM work clear and effective. The digital content marketing concept builds from many different key activities and sub-tasks (Terho et al., 2022), and therefore it might be difficult to stay on track with everything, especially if there is an insufficient amount of resources available. As mentioned before, not only what kind of content should be taught but also at what times during the customer journey the content should be shared requires attention (Salonen et al., 2024).

One factor that did not come up strongly in the existing research is using experts in content creation. However, consulting experts was one of the most important implementation tactics for the participating experts as the results indicate. Results indicate that in order to create expert content that will stand out in B2B content marketing, it is necessary to use a lot of subject matter experts widely in the DCM processes. It was even suggested that the experts would present their expertise in person for example in social media posts or blogposts and act as the face of the companies. It was also seen as a factor that increases the effectiveness of content marketing. All in all, experts stressed that a company must differentiate itself from other competitors through its content. Valuable, high-quality content was seen as a differentiating factor, creating a competitive advantage for the company.

In addition, experts highlighted the role of customer intelligence in the effective implementation of DCM. Content marketing needs to be well and specifically targeted and companies should find a niche angle for their content taking into account the exact target customer group. Targeting and personalized content is also widely recognized as an important factor in the academic literature (Järvinen et al., 2016); Reinikainen et al., 2018; Slavkova, 2023; Wood, 2015). To sum up the implementation cornerstones in DCM, it can be stated that the effectiveness of digital content marketing implementation depends on people, content creation skills, and the right choices made for channels, consulting experts, and resources.

RQ3: What are the key challenges in effective implementation or potential untapped opportunities?

The results show that there are some challenges being a burden for more effective implementation of DCM. The fundamental challenge is the limited resources for marketing. According to the results, also insufficient and

inefficient DCM processes were a major challenge in the implementation. Some interview participants said that the processes can be rather slow and long, including waiting for an expert's input and getting enough focus from other departments for marketing. All of the participants also claimed that there are technical difficulties on a regular basis, but rarely serious enough to have a significant impact on work. However, one expert said that some platforms require a lot of manual work, which could be done more easily and more effectively if the platform offered technology capabilities for that. As mentioned before, resources and their lack were considered widely as a factor that influences negatively on the effectiveness of digital content marketing. In most cases the missing resources were linked to human work power, and not so much to digital tools. For example, even though consulting and inclusion of subject matter experts were considered highly effective and important, it was seen as difficult to motivate them to participate and also hard to find the time and prioritization for marketing-related tasks. Also money and insufficient budget was a limiting factor.

An interesting point of view was that it is difficult to keep up with the continuously developing online platforms and their nature and expectations related to these new sites. Marketing was found to be a significantly changing field, described as an ever-evolving and expanding sector. Naturally, that raises new questions for companies on where they should be, what to prioritize and what is the certain angle and point of differentiation in content marketing. Some companies are concerned about how they can continuously offer content that is high quality, and interesting enough. So to sum up, worldwide marketing development, technically and ideologically, offers great opportunities for companies to market themselves at a low cost and in a creative way, but on the other hand, it produces challenges in allocating resources and time to be everywhere and learn all the principles and practices. This theoretical contribution is supported by Wiersema (2013, p. 474) and McShane et al. (2019), as they also recognize that new innovations create also new expectations, which can be difficult for companies.

However, although new online possibilities were seen as a challenge, they are also considered great opportunities for B2B digital content marketing. Especially Instagram Threads and TikTok were seen as the most interesting opportunities for B2B companies. TikTok is already widely used in B2C marketing, but in B2B marketing companies have not yet fully jumped on it. Another big opportunity for B2B marketing is AI, according to the results. Regarding some participants, taking part in AI transformation is a requirement to stay on track as a business. The AI utilization can also be a great solution for the lack of resources, as later the AI might be able to generate high-quality content without human input. Additionally, this research suggests that using subject matter experts highly benefits the effectiveness of digital content marketing, especially in the B2B sector. Therefore another opportunity for companies implementing B2B DCM is cooperation, and to be more specific cooperation over departments, cooperation of sales and marketing, cooperation of IT and marketing, cooperation with the top management, and cooperation

with colleagues within the marketing department. Although increasing resources was considered a major opportunity, it was also suggested that companies should try to seek a balance in marketing, since the world is full of marketing content and people are loaded with excessive amounts of information. Related to resources, this research also promotes the wise use of them. Many participants suggested that companies should cut content into pieces and also reuse and modify it to get the most out of a certain content piece. This saves resources and is effective.

B2B marketing is arguably transforming into more like B2C marketing, and companies should harness it as a great opportunity. According to this study, B2B companies could try out more entertaining and personal content on their digital content marketing platforms. According to this research, marketers should remember that it is the human-kind problems and issues that marketers should answer and help the customers with, regardless of how technical products the company has. Participants emphasized that there is space also for showing some persona in B2B marketing as well. On the other hand, one interesting suggestion was that companies should conduct organic research and reports that they could share in content marketing. That would authentically provide organic content for customers, and it is a great way to differentiate oneself from competitors.

Below the revised framework is presented as figure number 8. The preliminary conceptual framework was edited and expanded according to the contributions of this study. Especially, factors affecting the efficiency of DCM were found and on that part the framework is well extended.

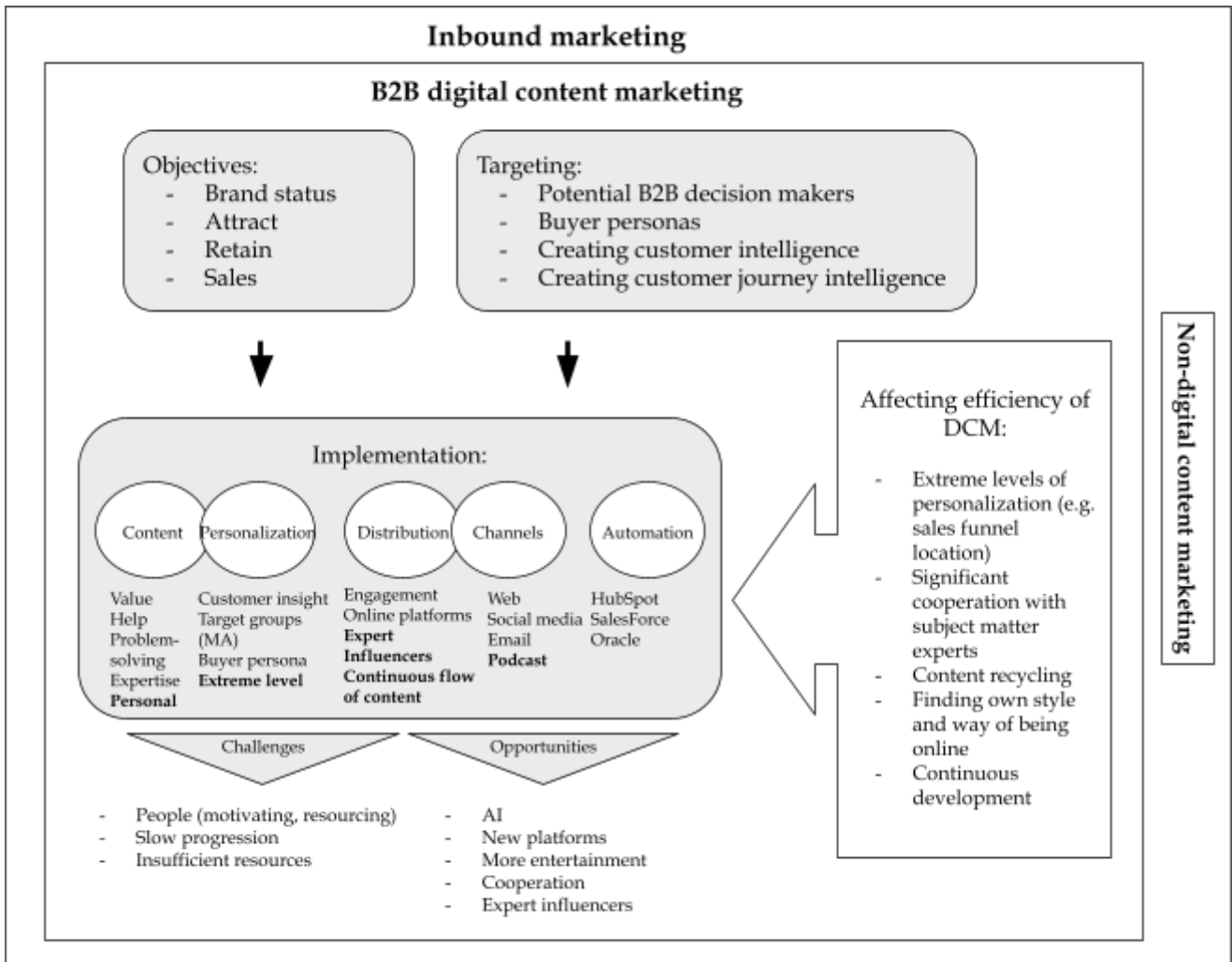


FIGURE 8 Revised conceptual framework

7.2 Managerial implications

Aside from the theoretical contributions, this research offers a bunch of managerial implications. Thus this section provides insights on how marketers and B2B companies can implement content marketing tactics and strategies effectively in practice. First of all, this study implicates that companies need to prioritize marketing and content marketing, in order to make it effective and successful. This means that company decision-makers need to allocate enough financial and human resources for marketing. Additionally, digital content marketing needs to be taken seriously in B2B companies, as it really is an effective and rather cheap tactic that is proven to result in positive sales and brand-related outcomes. In practice, that means that top management needs to

maintain conversations in the workplace that lead to respect towards content marketing.

B2B marketing leaders should pay attention to developing a comprehensive content strategy, as this research implies that effective digital content marketing requires significant planning and structured work. The top management also needs to organize time for subject matter experts to take part in the content creation process, aside from their regular workload. Managers need to promote and take into account that digital content marketing is a long process that provides results in the long run. It is also noteworthy that increasing the number of content pieces published does not affect efficiency, but it is about quality over quantity.

7.3 Evaluation of the research

Like any study, this research has its limitations and it belongs to the research process to also critically examine the validity of a study. In qualitative research, validity describes how well the phenomenon under investigation has been studied and analyzed and how well the implementation of the research corresponds to the phenomenon under investigation from the point of view of the research method (Hirsjärvi et al., 2002, p. 213). First of all, the set of three research questions are in favor of validity, as the topic has been approached from many different angles in this study. It is also necessary to take into consideration that the sample size of the interviewees is rather small. That influences the validity of the results of this study. It is noteworthy that this research did not focus on some specific industry, and that might influence the results as the experiences of the interviewees concern different industries. The validity of the result would perhaps be higher if the study had been conducted by interviewing only experts in a specific industry. Additionally, it is notable that the interviews were held in Finnish, since some participants were asking for it, and the translation process to English might have slightly influenced the reporting and interpretation of the results. Possibly also another data collection method like a survey, could have influenced the results. Generally can be assumed that the anonymity of the interviewees has affected positively their openness and truthfulness in the interviews.

Clearly, qualitative research is highly subjective and as the author has been the only one making the interpretations of the research results, it may produce biased contributions. However, in the methodology chapters of this study, the analysis and interpretation processes have been described transparently. Another factor that may have influenced the validity of the study is, that in this study the visual aspect of the content was not explored. In case the visuality of the content marketing would have been taken into account, it could have affected some results. Additionally, in this research, the interviewees had various backgrounds and experiences in marketing, and some had less experience in B2B than others. That contributes a wide-ranging view on the

matter in question, but the results could be different if there had been more detailed criteria for participation in the study.

When examining the quality of research, it is necessary to also pay attention to the reliability of the study. According to Eskola & Suoranta (1998, p. 214), reliability means that the study and its process are free of contradictions. Reliability refers to the reproducibility of the study, in other words, it means whether or not the results are stable. The strong interpretability of the analysis must be taken into account when assessing the reliability of the results. However, the interview data was gone through carefully several times, and that affected the reliability positively. The reliability of the study could have been increased if there would have been two data analysis methods instead of one. Anyway, as this study is a master's thesis, it was not practical to utilize more than one analyzing method, because of the limits in resources and time.

7.4 Future research

While this research offers various insights on the topic of digital content marketing implementation in B2B companies, it is clear that there is a need for further research. Future research could build on this study by examining specific industries to gain more tailored insights into DCM implementation. Future research could focus on case studies on how companies use digital content marketing to create a competitive advantage for businesses. This study did not concentrate on the visual aspect of content marketing, and thus that would require more research. The case studies could also provide insights into the practical applications and strategic benefits of digital content marketing in certain B2B industries. It would be interesting to study whether there are significant differences between industries regarding digital content marketing.

As academic research on B2B content marketing especially on B2B buyer personas remains at the infant level, it is suggested that future research would continue examining those topics. However, since technology is accelerating, it is necessary to include technological aspects like AI implementation in future digital marketing research. It would also be interesting to research how cooperation between marketing and subject matter experts should be implemented in practice, as it emerged as one of the most important topics in this study, but also has its challenges.

To conclude, this research provided a comprehensive and modern overview of digital content marketing in B2B organizations. The importance of integrating digital content marketing into strategic business processes cannot be overstated, as it offers great possibilities for enhancing customer engagement, and brand awareness, and ultimately driving sales. While all the industries continue to navigate in an increasingly digital world, the role of DCM will undoubtedly maintain its important role which will require continuous investigations also in the future.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: Interview protocol

Objective of the study: Exploring the effective implementation of digital content marketing in B2B organizations.		
Background questions	1. What field do you work in and what is your title?	
	2. How long have you worked in B2B marketing implementing DCM strategies?	
	3. What digital content marketing tools do you use?	
	4. What marketing automation tools do you use?	
Research question	Theme/keyword	Interview question
What is B2B digital content marketing and what can it be used for?	B2B digital content marketing	<p>How would you describe and explain the term “digital content marketing”? What can it be used for?</p> <p>What kind of parts would you divide the implementation process?</p> <p>Do you think that B2B DCM differs from B2C DCM, if yes, how?</p> <p>What objectives can be achieved with DCM?</p>
How is digital content marketing implemented in organizations?	Implementation of DCM	<p>How would you describe the implementation of DCM?</p> <p>How DCM is implemented in your organization?</p> <p>What kind of experiences do you have with marketing automation softwares?</p> <p>Do you design contents for generic buyer personas? If so, can you describe the process of influencing the decision making of these buyer personas through DCM? What are the challenges?</p>

		<p>How would you describe the influence of personalization in DCM?</p>
<p>What are the key challenges in effective implementation or potential untapped opportunities?</p>	<p>Challenges and opportunities</p>	<p>How would you describe the “effective” implementation of DCM?</p> <p>Have you faced any challenges when implementing DCM? If yes, what kind of challenges? / What challenges do you face when implementing DCM in your organization?</p> <p>How these challenges could be tackled?</p> <p>How the organization you work for could get even more out of the DCM? How can the DCM process be improved?</p> <p>Are the possible challenges dependent on the system or the user/content creator? Why?</p> <p>What would need to be changed in order to make DCM more effective?</p> <p>Do you recognize any untapped opportunities in DCM? What kind of?</p>