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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore and identify those marketing activities in digital marketing ecosystems that have an effect on the customer experience. There is a research gap on how digital marketing ecosystems affect the customer experience in B2B context. The aim of this study is to create a framework that highlights the connections between functions of digital marketing ecosystem and improving of customer experience. These connections will be useful for marketers who decide on which marketing tools they need to invest in when they want to focus on customer experience.

Digital marketing ecosystems were found to offer several business benefits. These benefits include elements such as marketing automation, improved collaboration between sales and marketing, reduced costs and increased efficiency and profits, and improved customer experience.

The research purpose was explored with a qualitative research method. Expert interviews were conducted to gain insights of the digital marketing ecosystems and customer experience, and a connection between the phenomena was found. The ecosystem improves customer experience through building trust, helping with communication and improving the usability and interactivity. Thorough knowledge of the customer allows the company to properly target and personalize content for their customers automatically. This increases the relevance for the customer, which in turn improves their customer experience.

Companies do realize the benefits and even the connection between digital marketing ecosystems and customer experience, but they were not able to fully capitalize on the systems just yet due to lack of organizational resources. The systems in the digital marketing ecosystems are capable of much more than what is currently done, and they will keep improving the effectiveness of marketing in the future. One of the shortcomings was the need for high volume of high quality content for proper targeting and lead nurturing.

Key words	digital marketing ecosystem, customer experience, customer journey, automation
Further information	





**UNIVERSITY
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**IMPROVING CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE
THROUGH THE UTILIZATION OF DIGITAL
MARKETING ECOSYSTEM**

Master's Thesis
in Marketing

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1 INTRODUCTION

Traditional advertising used to be mass marketing. The same promotional message would be shown to everyone, whether they were target audience or not. (Orr & Cano-Lopez, 2005, 137.) Back then, the famous quote by John Wanamaker “Half the money I spend on advertising is wasted; the trouble is I don't know which half” might have been true. Previously it was not possible to track the customers and target them effectively. But in 2005, according to Orr and Cano-Lopez (2005, 140–141) marketers were starting to adopt customer insight driven marketing. Singer (2006, 51) maintained in 2006 that the amount of information produced outside of a company is significant. Nowadays companies have even more data available, and the new solutions that have emerged in the last decade have made it possible to target marketing to even smaller subsets of people and potential customers using this data. By integrating multiple digital marketing tools to work together and share data, it forms what is known as a digital marketing ecosystem. A company is able to get a richer and more comprehensive overview of their customer with the ecosystem approach, and that in turn translates into better targeting and more relevant content for the customer. Digital marketing ecosystem can be automated to send certain messages or show different ads to the customers if they show enough interest to be considered a potential and valuable customer. (Rantaruikka, Räsänen & Alikoski, 2017.)

Customer experience has gained interest, as the number and the complexity of touchpoints during the customer journey is increasing. A good customer experience is crucial to be able to create customer satisfaction. Companies need to find the moments-of-truth along the customer journey and focus on improving those touchpoints, as they have the biggest impact on the customer experience (Zolkiewski et al., 2017, 178). When the customer experience is good, it can also be seen in the bottom line, and it is considered to improve profitability by working as a differentiation factor. (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, 69; Lagercrantz, 2018.)

In this study, we explore the effects of selling company's digital marketing ecosystem on the customer experience of their customers. The ecosystem can be present in all of the touchpoints a customer has with a company, and the ecosystem can be used to fulfill many different marketing goals. How these tools are used, if used at all, effects the experience the customer has with the company. Customers make their way from need recognition to purchase along what is known as the customer journey. The journey has many touchpoints, where the customer interacts with the company and different parties related to it. Customer experience is progressively built along the customer journey, and different types of interactions between the customer and the company have an impact on it.

Different marketing tools that are part of the digital marketing ecosystem are used at different customer journey touchpoints to serve the customer in different ways. Some of

the biggest current trends in marketing are automation, social media and big data (Grossberg, 2016, 20). With the new trends comes new technology and new digital marketing tools. The marketing function is nowadays done with a multitude of different technological tools and software, and in 2015 it was estimated that an average company uses 17 different marketing tools in their marketing operations (Radius.com, 2015, 7). These tools are known as marketing technology, and as a market it was seen to grow by 42% from 2015 to 2018 (Radius.com, 2015, 2). When the marketing tools are integrated to share data and work together, they form a digital marketing ecosystem, a new concept that is gaining interest in the field.

1.1 Purpose of the study

Through digital marketing ecosystem implementation and usage of different marketing tools, the company can better understand and focus on how their customer's experience is built during the customer journey on an individual and personalized level. The main benefit of marketing ecosystem thinking are data integration and automation, which allow companies to properly target and personalize content to be able to deliver more relevant marketing. This in turn can lead to improved customer experience as well as increased profitability and revenue. (eg. Madhani 2015, 17; Putkinen, 2014, 71; Redding, 2015, 260.)

Digital marketing ecosystem is a new concept and the research about it is lacking. Digital marketing ecosystems are discussed among the marketing experts, but they are still new to the academic world. Many of the functions and technologies used by modern marketing that are a part of digital marketing ecosystems, such as automation, artificial intelligence implementation and analytics, are quite recent technological solutions, and they are still evolving. As the landscape rapidly evolves, so should the academic research. Customer experience was seen as one of the most important research challenges for coming years in 2014 by Marketing Science Institute (2014, 4). There is a research gap on how digital marketing ecosystems affect the customer experience in B2B context. B2B customer experience and digital marketing ecosystems are also by themselves little studied phenomena, which are worth studying more. The aim of this study is to fill the gaps by creating a framework for exploring the effects of digital marketing ecosystems on the customer experience of those companies' customers, who are utilizing digital marketing ecosystem approach.

The purpose of the study is to explore and identify those marketing activities in digital marketing ecosystems that have an effect on the customer experience. This research prob-

lem is investigated through three research questions. First two explore the two key underlying concepts, and the third question connects them to create knowledge on how ecosystems affect customer experience.

1. What does the digital marketing ecosystem consist of?
2. What creates the customer experience along the digital customer journey?
3. How customer experience is improved through the development of the digital marketing ecosystem?

By exploring the phenomena through expert interviews, the end goal of this research is to create a more refined framework based on the interviews. The framework will highlight the connections between functions of digital marketing ecosystem and creation of customer experience. These connections will be useful for marketers when they decide on which marketing tools they need to invest in when they want to focus on customer experience.

Digital marketing managers and experts from Finnish B2B companies will be interviewed, and their views on digital marketing ecosystems effect on customer experience will be compared with what the theory suggests. Some conclusions will be made and the framework will be created based on the results of the expert interviews and literature review. If differences between the two fields are found, further research ideas will be suggested to dive deeper into the subject.

These two topical subjects will be combined to create an interesting entity for both the academic and practical world. It is interesting to see, how marketing ecosystems and customer experience interact, and especially how a company can affect the customer experience through digital marketing ecosystem decisions. With this research, companies can better understand how their digital marketing ecosystem decisions reflect to their customers' experience.

1.2 Research approach

In 2018, I approached a Turku based marketing company, Idea Development ID Oy (IDBBN), with the idea of researching marketing automation. They pointed me towards a more current phenomena, digital marketing ecosystems and customer experience. Together we crafted the research topic, and the company commissioned me to conduct the research for them.

Using the knowledge of IDBBN Oy, we were able to find companies that have relevant knowledge about digital marketing ecosystems. Some of the participants were customers of IDBBN Oy and the rest were similar in terms of size, behavior and overall company profile. This limits the scope of this study, and may also limit the adaptation of the results

to other type and size of companies. Also all of the companies were already using these marketing technologies in one form or another. The sample size is relatively small as is normal for qualitative research, but the focus is on getting detailed opinions and visions from decision makers and managers who know what they want from their digital marketing now and in the future.

The results of this study will be interesting for both academic world and marketing experts, as it will give insight into the current state and possible future directions of marketing technology and ecosystems, as well as B2B customer experience. As previous academic research was not found to be done on this particular subject, the interviewees' insights are valuable for researchers and companies who wish to further explore this topic. The results will help marketing experts and executives to evaluate different marketing tools in the sense of their effect on customer experience. This study will offer insights about what tools and functions in the digital marketing ecosystem may be the most important for good B2B customer experience.

This study is divided into five main chapters. First is the introduction chapter, where the foundation is set for the research, the research problem is stated, and its background and delimitations are presented. Second chapter takes a look at the theoretical background of the two phenomena in this research, namely the digital marketing ecosystems and digital customer experience. Third chapter focuses on the methodological execution of this research, how the qualitative research was conducted and how its results were analyzed. Fourth chapter is discussion of the results, and finally in the fifth chapter conclusions are made based on the results presented in chapter four and the theoretical framework set in chapter two. The key concepts of the study are collected and defined in the following table 1.

Table 1 Key concepts

Concept	Definition
<i>Customer journey</i>	Different touchpoints and interactions a potential customer has between recognizing a need and making the purchase and consumption (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, 76)
<i>Martech, marketing technology</i>	Marketing tools that use some sort of digital technology to function (Techopedia.com)
<i>Digital marketing ecosystem / martech stack</i>	A collection of marketing tools that share data through integrations to create capabilities beyond a single tool. (Schwenn Sebring, 2018, 16)
<i>Customer experience</i>	Subjective response the customer forms in all of the interactions they have directly and indirectly with the company during the customer journey. (Lemke et al., 2011, 846; Jain et al., 2016, 658)

2 IMPACT OF DIGITAL MARKETING ECOSYSTEM ON CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

In this chapter, we will take a look at the current academic literature in order to set the theoretical framework for this research. First we will discuss about digital marketing ecosystems, especially what they consist of and what benefits they offer. Then, we consider what dimensions are important for digital B2B customer experience based on the current research using the customer journey as a frame. The main elements will be collected for both phenomena, and in the last part of this chapter the elements will be combined to form a framework on how in theory the digital marketing ecosystem influences customer experience at different phases of the customer journey.

2.1 Digital marketing ecosystem

2.1.1 *Definition and background*

Sääksjärvi and Talvinen (1992, 64–65) discussed the benefits of integrating marketing information systems already back in 1992. Managing, collecting and sharing market information was a new possibility that marketing information systems enabled that also Goldsmith (2004, 16) talked about. Integration in 1992 meant the same thing as today: multiple separate tools and systems working effectively together, for example in form of data connections. The integrated totality of marketing information system was formed of internal records system, marketing intelligence system, marketing research system and marketing decision support system, while further integrations with sales and other marketing tasks were seen as possible. The benefits of this integration were recognized as improved targeting, improved quality of service, increased orders, improved analysis potential and reduced costs, which all translate into more effective marketing overall. (Sääksjärvi & Talvinen, 1992, 65.) What they defined is now known as digital marketing ecosystem.

Marketing was seen to be the next business area that would be automated. On top of that, experts predicted that marketing would invest the most in technology resources in the future. Sääksjärvi and Talvinen (1992, 76) concluded that integration of marketing systems were needed for more effective marketing and workflows.

Schwenn Sebring (2018, 16) defined marketing tech stack (marketing ecosystem) as a “grouping of technologies to leverage and improve marketing activities, automate tasks for improved efficiencies and to streamline service delivery”. Ecosystem usually contains

tools such as CRM, automation, content management systems and tools for data handling and storage.

Marketing ecosystem is a rather new concept that hasn't completely settled down to one single term. Some marketing experts and researchers use the term "martech stack" to express the same phenomena that others call a "marketing ecosystem" (Slefo, 2017; Schwenn Sebring, 2018, 16). Some even talk about "customer experience stack" to emphasize the importance of customer experience (Lagercrantz, 2018). Some use the term digital marketing ecosystem to include all external actors and providers as well, and not just the martech tools (Stone, 2014, 71–72).

Not much academic research has been conducted on digital marketing ecosystems or martech stacks, probably due to the fact that the first tools and systems started appearing around 2010 (Brinker, 2018). Hence a lot of the definitions and descriptions of different tools are based on expert articles and blog posts. To maintain academic focus, multiple sources and a mixture of academic papers and practical sources are used where possible. From the different terms, digital marketing ecosystem will be used in this research, as it best encapsulates the interconnectedness and the idea of everything working together as one big comprehensive marketing toolset.

What makes the digital marketing ecosystem "digital" is the use of digital marketing tools, martech. The ecosystem is not completely limited to digital marketing channels however. Some physical channels could be used as well, for example digitally tracing campaign codes in a print campaign that eventually leads the customer to digital channels. (Techopedia.com). In the end the focus is almost completely in the digital channels.

Digital marketing ecosystems are formed of separate martech tools, platforms and software from different companies that each focus on a core function, and together the tools and systems form a coherent entity that shares data and resources to create functions and achieve marketing goals (Slefo, 2017). This is why digital marketing ecosystems are sometimes called martech stacks as well. While Stone (2014, 71) states that digital marketing ecosystems are not as clearly defined around a single service provider, system or platform as IT ecosystems, they can also be built around a single platform that includes most of the tools (Leadfeeder.com, 2018). The selection between a platform solution or an ecosystem built out of multiple point tools comes down to what a company needs from an ecosystem. In both cases the ecosystem supports its tools through shared data and integrating tools together (Stone, 2014, 71).

The goal of a digital marketing ecosystem is to achieve extra value out of the martech tools it has through synergies and integrations. Tasks that were traditionally difficult and too complex for individual tools, such as measuring the impact of marketing activities or recognizing at which stage of the customer journey the customer is, are made possible with an ecosystem of tools that work together. When the tools share resources and data,

the company is able to achieve goals beyond the scope of any amount of individual tools. (Singer, 2006, 52; Slefo, 2017; Optimizely.com.)

The concept of integrated marketing communications is to use all channels to push the same consistent marketing message. All the marketing tools and channels promote the mass message to all the customers. (Gurau, 2008, 170–171.) Digital marketing ecosystems provide a step away from mass marketing, as each channel is used to show personalized messages to each customers to guide them forward along their customer journey.

Even though the focus of this study is in the integrated digital marketing ecosystem and the idea is that all marketing tools share data and work together, in practice there are usually many tools that are not within the ecosystem or are not yet integrated. Digital marketing ecosystem is in no way a complete toolset for marketing in every case, but rather it has those tools in it that are the most beneficial to integrate to each other.

2.1.2 Integrated ecosystem of marketing tools

Digital marketing ecosystems are usually built around a core marketing system that allows the independent tools to share data. Some tools may allow direct one-to-one integration with other tools out of the box, but not all tools integrate natively with each other. This is where an integration hub comes into play to get the whole ecosystem working together. The integration hub acts as a middleman in data storage and delivery from one martech tool to another. (Slefo, 2017; Lagercrantz, 2018; Leadfeeder.com.) For this study it is important to know that most tools can be integrated to share data, but the way in which they are integrated is not relevant for this study.

The number of tools in a marketing ecosystem depends on the size of the company and how many different functionalities the marketing ecosystem carries out. Also the extent of the company's marketing naturally affects the size of the ecosystem. On average, a company has more than 17 tools in their digital marketing ecosystem. If the ecosystem is not planned out from the beginning, it will not function properly as a single unit, and all the data it generates ends up cluttering without achieving its goals. (Radius.com, 2015; IDBBN.com.)

If the company is able to create their digital marketing ecosystem in a way that considers customer experience one of its main values, customers are more likely to give data, which in turn will benefit the marketer and their marketing ecosystem. (Stone et al., 2017, 220). One of the main advantages of digital marketing ecosystems is that it allows for personalized one-to-one relationship with the customer at the right time with the right creative content (Slefo, 2017). Delivery of truly personalized, relevant and engaging content requires and deep knowledge of the customer's behavior. Luckily data is something virtually all companies could have access to. With the right tools, companies could collect

data about the customer and their relationship with the company from almost any touch-point along their customer journey. (Stone & Woodcock, 2017, 4.)

Digital marketing ecosystem evolves rapidly alongside of the evolution of information and communications technology (Stone, 2014, 72). According to Brinker (2018) the number of marketing technology solutions and tools has increased from just 150 in 2011 to almost 7,000 in 2018. Latest inclusions in digital marketing ecosystems is the application of artificial intelligence in automation and personalizing content (Stone et al., 2017, 220–221). Slefo (2017) found in their interview that AI enables handling of the vast amount of customer data that we have available through different tools and channels these days. With artificial intelligence and automation, companies can reach potential customers that previously couldn't even be recognized.

The most often found digital marketing tools in the literature are: advertising, email, content management, search engine optimization, marketing automation, CRM, data & analytics and management (Radius.com, 2015; Brinker, 2018; Optimizely.com). Brinker (2018) has divided the digital marketing ecosystem landscape into 6 main tool categories, with a total of 51 different subcategories. In this study, we will use his categorization, which is as follows:

- Advertising and promotion
- Content and experience
- Social and relationship
- Commerce and sales
- Data
- Management

Different martech tools are used in different tasks and in different touchpoints of the customer journey. Martech tools are used for lead generation and nurturing, content management, marketing automation, result analytics and much more. The core martech tools are presented in the table 2. The tools were gathered from various marketing ecosystem / martech stack descriptions and categorizations (Radius.com, 2015; Wright, 2015; Purvis, 2017).

Table 2 Core martech tools

Category	Tool	Uses and functions
Advertising and promotion	Search engine advertisement	Manage, test and measure search engine advertising, display ads and video ads in Google's AdWords environment for example. Used to reach the right potential customers when they are searching for information (Jansen & Mullen, 2008, 115.)
	Social media advertising	Systems that help with advertising in Facebook, Instagram, YouTube etc.
Content and experience	Email	Create mailing lists, customize email content, helps with designing emails, track results with analytics. (Mailchimp.com)
	Content Management System	Platform for managing content for a web-based platform, website or a blog and managing marketing campaigns based on targeted leads (Purvis, 2017; Schwenn Sebring, 2018, 16).
	Search Engine Optimization	Build your web pages and content to be search engine friendly, so that your company is at the top of the search results, organically. (Moz.com)
	Marketing automation	Automatically perform certain repetitive digital marketing tasks and decisions by customizing content and communications on a customer by customer basis. This is done based on data and analytics about the customer, and the automation can perform tasks in multiple channels at the same time. Marketing automation is usually working tightly together with CRM, and it is often used to nurture leads and provide analytics on customer behavior. (Heimbach et al., 2015, 130; Grossberg, 2016, 21; Schwenn Sebring, 2018, 16.)
Social and relationship	Social media tools	Control and automate social media tasks, such as content publishing and scheduling and private messaging. Also helps with analyzing social media metrics. (Purvis, 2017.)
	Customer Relationship Management tools	Sales-focused tool to track and manage your customer relationships and customer data across different platforms. Allows for customer analysis and CRM automation and lead nurturing. (Schwenn Sebring, 2018, 16.)
Commerce and sales	Ecommerce	Different tools that help with webstore and online buying. (Brinker, 2018)

Data	Analytics	Analytics tools help with following and measuring different marketing campaigns effectiveness. Without analytics, the data is useless. By tracking the results of marketing and sales, the company knows what works best and what to focus on. (Purvis, 2017.)
	Integration	Integration allows individual tools to interact with each other and share data. Instead of having to manage point to point integrations between different tools, integration middleware can integrate and synchronize the data of the whole ecosystem. Middleware is beneficial as everything goes through one system, and this helps with manual work and data handling. (Lagercrantz, 2018.)
Management	Projects and workflow	These are software that manage business processes that are repetitive in nature, but also distinct and well defined. (Schwenn Sebring, 2018, 16.)

The tools that appeared in the listing most often were chosen for the table. This is just a brief overview of different technologies that could potentially be integrated in a digital marketing ecosystem, there are plenty more as seen in Brinker's (2018) yearly martech round-up.

2.2 Benefits of a digital marketing ecosystem

A lot of the benefits that digital marketing ecosystems and martech tools offer are related to bringing sales and marketing functions closer together. Data integration and the possibility of automation help marketing to be able to support sales more effectively. (eg. Putkinen, 2014, 71; Madhani 2015, 17; Redding, 2015, 260.) While marketing automation is a tool in digital marketing ecosystems, it is also one of the main benefits that is enabled by having an integrated digital marketing ecosystem. Data integrations and ecosystem structure help with gathering all the data from different sources to form a clearer image of the customers. This customer tracking and data enables the use of targeted and personalized marketing through automation. Benefits and goals of digital marketing ecosystems include:

- Marketing automation
- Improved collaboration between marketing and sales
- High quality lead generation and nurturing
- Better overview of the customer's journey
- Reduced costs and increased efficiency and profits
- Improved customer experience

These benefits will be discussed in detail in the following chapters.

2.2.1 Marketing automation

Marketing automation is a solution that aims to enhance and automate different manual marketing processes and tools that are needed along the customer journey. These tools can be unified using marketing automation. Automation includes e-mail marketing, website analytics, campaign management, database management, lead generation and nurturing, and helps with targeting specific customer segments with personalized content. (Rantaruikka et al., 2017, 5; Schwenn Sebring, 2018, 14.) Automation also helps with tracking the customer in the customer journey touchpoints (Grossberg, 2016, 21).

Marketing automation is enabled by data integration. This means that one of the biggest benefits of having an integrated digital marketing ecosystem is to have the possibility to implement a marketing automation solution. Without the data coming from different tools and channels in the ecosystem, automation struggles to reach its best effect. In an ecosystem with multiple integrated data sources, marketing automation has more information about the customers, and more precise decision and predictions can be made based on this data. (Heimbach et al., 2015, 130.)

Customers are present in multiple channels at the same time, and it is difficult to gather, analyze and use all of the data created in each of the channels with traditional marketing tools. One of the leading marketing software providers, Marketo.com (2013, 3), advertised marketing automation as “the technology that allows companies to streamline, automate, and measure marketing tasks and workflows so they can increase operational efficiency and grow revenue faster”. Its main goal is to transform prospects into leads and further into customers as effectively as possible (Rantaruikka et al., 2017).

Even though large corporations with a lot of customers and data may benefit the most from marketing automation, companies of any size on any industry can use and get results from marketing automation (Marketo.com, 2013, 3; Heimbach et al., 2015, 131). Marketing automation is used for supporting sales with warm leads, and it makes it possible to connect personal information and purchase data with activity data, and tweak marketing campaigns automatically with this information. (Rantaruikka et al., 2017.)

Marketing automation has four distinct goals: building a relationship, personalizing content, engagement and predictive analytics (Keskitalo, 2016, 20). Marketing automation takes the responsibility of making micro decisions from marketers to a “machine” that operates based on parameters set by the marketer. Data of the customer is collected during the various customer journey touchpoints the customer has had with the company, for example from emails, social media and behavior during website visits. Automation tools analyze this behavior data, and acts on more complete data set of the customer,

instead of relying only on one source of information, such as Google Analytics search phrases that brought the customer to the company's website. This information is then used to measure three characteristics that define a good customer: *fitness*, *engagement* and *intent*. A fit customer suits the company's offerings, engaged customer interacts with the company and a customer with an intent implies they are willing to purchase. Once this profile is created, marketing automation can perform marketing actions based on this customer data. When the company and the automation know how the customer has behaved during different customer journey touchpoints, it's easier to guide them towards the purchase. (Grossberg, 2016, 21–22.)

Marketing automation answers the need of delivering individual marketing messages and creating personalized customer journeys in a digital world, where personal contact is often replaced by mass messages. Through automation, personalized content, advertisement and messages can be shown to the customer at the right time of the customer journey. This in hand is assumed to increase involvement and attention by customer. (Heimbach et al., 2015, 130.)

2.2.2 *Improved collaboration between marketing and sales*

A CRM system (customer relationship management) is a platform to manage contacts, leads and customers, and also target and nurture generated leads and aid them to progress through the customer journey (Schwenn Sebring, 2018, 14). Redding (2015, 261) also mentions that CRM systems make the sales pipeline more visible, and it has enabled more accurate analysis and forecasting.

CRM is a tool that is used by both sales and marketing (Purvis, 2017; Schwenn Sebring, 2018, 16). It has been found that when the marketing and sales functions work closely together, it enhances business performance. Effective marketing intelligence systems are one aspect that is required for effective collaboration. (Le Meunier-FitzHugh & Piercy, 2007, 214). Marketing intelligence solutions such as CRM and automation help bridge the gap between marketing and sales and make collaboration easier.

Madhani (2015, 17) speaks for integrating marketing and sales closer together. These two functions have a direct impact on the bottom line of the business. If the collaboration between the two does not work, and leads are missed due to poor timing or inadequate nurturing, the company loses sales. Redding said (2015, 261) that well-implemented CRM possibly also in combination with marketing automation is the key factor in linking marketing and sales together in a B2B organization to get better customer focus. Also Järvinen and Taiminen (2016, 173) found the same connection.

High user adoption and willingness to use the system is key in implementing a CRM successfully. Combining a CRM with an automation tool allows almost all sales and marketing information to be found and managed from one system. This also helps with communication between the functions. Information flows are improved, as marketing sees performance data and metrics directly from the tools. Also sales function is only getting the most prominent leads, as leads are scored according to the behavior qualifications set up by both marketing and sales. (Hitachi Solutions.)

2.2.3 High quality lead generation and lead nurturing

One of the biggest benefits of digital marketing ecosystems is automation, as it enables more effective lead generation and nurturing and provides sales with higher quality leads. Thus digital marketing ecosystem benefits both sales and marketing in achieving company-wide business goals. (Redding, 2015, 260.) The goal of marketing is to support sales by taking away work from sales and preparing them warm leads and creating brand image (Madhani, 2015, 18; Redding, 2015, 260). While the customer data is readily available in a CRM system for both marketing and sales departments, marketing must first prepare the customer for sales during the first customer journey touchpoints (Putkinen, 2014, 71).

Lead generation is the process of recognizing unique people or visitors, who have interacted with company in some way. Lead generation can be done through search engine or social media for example. Also different forms on the company website such as newsletter sign-up form or comment box act as channels of lead generation. With analytics tools, a company can recognize these unique people who have been in touch with the company, and add them to CRM database. (Schwenn Sebring, 2018, 14.) More behavior data and information is collected in further touchpoints with this person, and if there is enough information, lead nurturing programs can begin and the company can feed them personalized communications and content.

With a CRM and marketing automation integration, leads are forwarded to sales at the right time in their customer journey. Predefined triggers and requirements are set to measure how ready a lead is to purchase. When the leads behavior with the company matches certain requirements, automation system may send them personalized messages based on the actions that the lead has made during the touchpoints with the company. These actions can be anything from filling an online form, liking the company on social media or subscribing to a mailing list. The communications through marketing automation is aimed to help the lead to progress in their customer journey towards the purchase. This is called lead nurturing, feeding them relevant information and communications. Once the lead reaches the point that is defined as being sales-ready or the most likely to make the purchase, the lead is given to sales to make contact with them. (Rantaruikka et al., 2017;

Hitachi Solutions.) In an interview conducted by Redding (2015, 262), it was told that oftentimes leads are passed to sales too early in the process. This means that the lead hadn't reached a suitable stage in the customer journey before a sales rep approached them. Marketing wasn't able to do their part in preparing the lead, to which digital marketing ecosystem and especially automation can help. In B2B context sales is seen as a tactical unit that interacts more closely with the customers, and marketing is more of a supports unit for sales (Madhani, 2015, 18; Redding, 2015, 260).

2.2.4 *Better overview of customer journey*

Marketing ecosystem approach and modern martech solutions allow for improved tracking and measuring of marketing activities. By having a more complete overview of a customer's journey in different channels and touchpoints, a company is able to measure the costs and ROI (return on investment) better than before. (Redding, 2015, 260; Schwenn Sebring, 2018, 14–16.)

Keens and Barker (2009, 223–225) speak for the need of leveraging customer data to drive marketing. They see that the customers increased influence and diversified channels create a need for a more customer centric marketing approach. Wider and deeper usage of customer data is one solution to answer to this need, as it allows better targeting and personalization.

2.2.5 *Reduced costs and increased efficiency and profits*

Keens and Barker (2009, 223–224) argue that implementing any IT related marketing solution is challenging, and that they should always keep in mind the ultimate marketing goal of driving revenue and improving financial performance. Marketing automation is seen to both reduce costs and improve profits. When the company is able to leverage a higher volume of high quality customer data, their marketing is more effective on a customer to customer level and they are able to recognize potential leads that would have been previously missed. Personalization and targeting drive more impactful marketing. Automation makes many processes easier, and it especially reduces manual work. (Keens & Barker, 2009, 223–225.)

There's no denying that workforce is expensive for any company. According to Redding (2015, 260), marketing and sales automation tools can reduce the need for expensive salespeople, as the automation does some of the work for them. On the same note, marketing automation also allows for better scaling when the business grows.

Putkinen (2014, 71) recognizes marketing automation as a tool that changes the role of marketing from a support function to an important actor in the revenue creation process in the company. With automation, marketing is able to have a bigger impact on the beginning of the customer journey, as well as the post purchase phases.

2.2.6 *Improved customer experience*

In many cases, the desired impact of having an integrated marketing ecosystem that uses automation and other tools is to offer more relevant information to the potential customers, which in turn means that they are less likely to abandon your website and more likely to continue interacting with your company. This translates into getting the customer further in their customer journey, and closer to the sale. (Schwenn Sebring, 2018, 14–16.)

In the interview conducted by Redding's (2015, 262), one of the main benefits that rose was that sales and marketing automation was able to provide customers with the information they wanted. Targeted and customer behavior driven marketing communication has been able to support sales channels much better than before. This was seen as one of the main benefits of integrating marketing systems already back in 1992 by Sääksjärvi and Talvinen (1992, 65).

Rae (2016, 21–24) collected different ways in which marketing automation affects customer experience. The key conclusions were that automated marketing communications and actions could improve customer experience by adding value to the customer journey. The company can serve their customers' needs more precisely and effectively with automated marketing, when the company has data of them.

Combining the behavioral data from website interactions and the integrated data from other channels allows for better and more impactful targeted and personalized content delivery in form of unique landing pages, content recommendations, targeted marketing communications and more. (Putkinen, 2017, 71; Schwenn Sebring, 2018, 14–16.)

Effective cooperation between sales and marketing means more relevance and timeliness for the customer (Rae, 2016, 22). This comes from knowing the customer better, and properly nurturing the leads with personalized content along the customer journey, and making the sales contact when the customer is ready. In this regard sales and marketing collaboration is seen as improving the value transmitted to the customer and, loyalty, trust and ultimately the customer experience. (Madhani, 2015, 18, 26.)

Everything about marketing ecosystems do not improve customer experience however, or at least everyone's customer experience. Some people feel vulnerable giving too much information of themselves to a company, and automated marketing messages that are highly targeted and personalized may feel intrusive. (Rae, 2016, 23.)

2.3 Customer experience along the customer journey

2.3.1 Customer journey

Customer journey is the path a customer chooses to progress in their process from need recognition to consumption. The journey is formed of all the different touchpoints and interactions a potential customer has with the company before, during and after the purchase. (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, 76.)

In many texts regarding digital marketing and sales the terms purchase funnel and customer journey are mentioned. These two terms are very close to each other, as they both mean the path a customer takes from having no knowledge of the product to purchasing it and consuming it. There is a slight nuance difference between them. Firstly, purchase funnel is a concept that usually focuses one-time purchase event, and it's from the viewpoint of the sales function (Patterson, 2007, 186–187). Customer journey takes an approach that is closer to a relationship, and the customer is at the center of inspection. Følstad and Kvale (2018, 208) found in their systematic literature review that there are multiple schools of thought about customer journey. It does not necessarily end when the purchase is made, instead it continues in the best case scenario to multiple repurchases. Purchase funnel inspects a more cognitive decision making process, while the customer journey takes both the emotional and cognitive aspects into consideration. Their review (2018, 211) found that the inspection of customer journey is most often linked to customer experience. Hence for this study the concept of customer journey will be used, as it better supports the theme of creating better customer experience.

Customer journey is not a straight forward process. The customer will bounce around in different channels, gathering information from the company and also from other customers. The current technology allows marketers to tackle this challenge with customized content in each channel at the same time, creating a consistent and personal marketing experience. (Grossberg, 2016, 21.)

Lemon and Verhoef (2016, 76) present a three stage customer journey model to be used when inspecting customer experience. The stages are prepurchase, purchase and postpurchase. The customer journey starts from the *prepurchase* stage. This is where everything happens before the actual purchase event. In this stage, the customer recognizes the need, searches for information and considers their options. It can contain everything before the actual purchase.

Purchase stage comes second, and it contains the actual purchase event interactions such as choice, making the order, deciding the payment method and paying it. This can be the shortest stage of the three, but in B2B context it will cover multiple functions and roles. (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, 76.)

In the last *postpurchase* stage the customer uses, consumes the product or service, requests service or otherwise interact with the company related to this purchase. At the end of the postpurchase stage the customer may repurchase, or return to prepurchase stage, and start the cycle over, considering other providers. Companies should try to recognize the triggers that cause the customer to start searching for new providers, so that the company can better focus on that critical moment in the customer journey. (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, 76.)

The digital marketing ecosystem tools and functions can be divided by purchase funnel phases (Lagercrantz, 2018). Likewise we aim to divide the marketing tools by customer journey phases. Each tool in the ecosystem has its specific role during the journey, and one way to look at how the ecosystem affects the customer experience is by looking at which systems are at play during each phase.

2.3.2 *Defining customer experience*

Customer experience is the holistic subjective response the customer forms in all of the interactions they have directly and indirectly with the company during the customer journey touchpoints (Meyer & Schwager, 2007, 128; Lemke et al., 2011, 846; Jain et al., 2016, 658.). The experience is partly based on previous experiences with the company, as customers normally compare experiences with the previous experience, and exceeding expectations makes for good customer experience (Meyer & Schwager, 2007, 129; BusinessDictionary.). The focus on online customer experience has come from the evolution of e-commerce, and how it is becoming more interactive and dynamic than before (Klaus, 2013, 445).

Customer experience is an important concept that creates business advantage and success. This is especially true in B2B context, where long-term relationships are important, so improving customer experience should be considered a necessary business goal. (Zolkiewski et al., 2017, 173). A good B2B customer experience is not seen as being a thrilling experience, rather a trouble-free experience that and it satisfies the needs of the customer and reduces the customer's efforts (Meyer & Schwager, 2007, 2; Zolkiewski et al., 2017, 174). It should not be forgotten that the customer can also be a co-creator of their experience, especially in service environment (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, 74).

While most customer experience research focuses on B2C environment, where the customer is a single person, a lot of the concepts are usable in B2B as well. What is important to notice, is that in B2B context the buying organization has a lot of different roles. The person who actually decides on the purchase may not be the user of the product or service at all. (Zolkiewski et al. 2017, 173). The managers who decide on the budget

may delegate the selection of a suitable offering to someone else, and the IT team is the one who must implement the new solution into the company, for example.

Customer experience is a holistic multisensory phenomenon, which is usually seen as having five separate dimensions: cognitive, emotional, physical, sensorial and social (De Keyser et al., 2015, 6; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, 70; Keiningham et al., 2017, 150–152). Keiningham et al. (2017, 152) see customer experience improving customer commitment. When commitment is achieved, it will then improve further experiences with the company. A satisfied customer is usually a committed customer. If the customer hasn't had a satisfactory experience with the company, they rarely can be regarded as committed customers. (Keiningham et al., 2017, 155–156.)

With the increase of different channels and touchpoints the customers interact with a company, the focus on customer experience has gained managerial interest. The experiences are influenced more by social environment, as the touchpoints during the customer journey are not limited to interactions only with the company, but other stakeholders as well. (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016.)

2.3.3 *Customer experience during the customer journey*

The concept of customer journey is important when talking about customer experience. Potential customers cross paths with the company and its communications in many different channels at different times. (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, 69.) Grossberg (2016, 20) emphasizes that the brand experience must be consistent and consistently good across all channels and devices, and throughout the customer journey touchpoints, as inconsistent touchpoint experience is found to cause negative experience.

Dividing the customer experience into different stages along the customer journey makes the phenomenon easier to analyze. Different customer journey touchpoints lead to different experiences, so instead of focusing on the whole journey, inspecting one stage at the time gives us a more understandable view of the overall experience. Lemon and Verhoef (2016, 76) divide the experience process into three stages: *prepurchase*, *purchase* and *postpurchase*. Each stage has different touchpoints that affect the overall customer experience.

The customer journey touchpoints can further be divided into four groups based on who controls the touchpoint. This helps to understand how many different groups can have an influence on the customer experience. The groups are brand-owned, partner-owned, customer-owned, and social/external/independent. Each customer journey stage may have touchpoints from all four groups, and the groups' importance also differs from stage to stage. (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, 76–78.)

- **Brand-owned touchpoints** are the easiest to influence, as they are directly controlled by the company. These touchpoints include company websites, social media pages and advertising in different channels, as well as physical product packaging, customer service, sales team and support. (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, 76–77.)
- **Partner-owned touchpoints** are somewhat controlled by the company. It could be a distribution channel, external support, marketing agency etc. (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, 77–78.)
- **Customer-owned touchpoints** mean the touchpoints where the customer for example thinks by themselves about their needs and assess and define the specifications. These touchpoints cannot directly be controlled by the company. Customer-owned touchpoints are especially present in the pre- and postpurchase stages, where the customer thinks about their need and later uses the purchased solution. (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, 78.)
- **Social and external touchpoints** bring in the environment, other consumers and other external factors that may influence the customer experience. This includes talking with other people about their experience with the company, the elements in the consumption environment that are not controlled by the company etc. Even things like economic situation, weather and customer's personal situation can affect the customer experience. (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, 78.)

To improve customer experience, a company must find the most critical touchpoints at each stage for every individual customer and try to influence those touchpoints. But as the focus of this study is on how the digital marketing ecosystem of a company affects customer experience, we will inspect the brand-owned touchpoints, as they are directly controlled by the company. Also the partner-owned touchpoints can be influenced to an extent, but they are not as relevant for this study. The other touchpoints are outside of company's reach and hence are not interesting for the purpose of this study.

2.3.4 Core elements of digital customer experience

As we see, customer experience is built from many different elements and environments. In their study, Lemke et al. (2011, 857) recognize the seven most important elements that are present in a good B2B customer experience.

1. **Extent of personal contact** – how much the company uses personal contact through face-to-face discussions, email or phone calls. The more personal contact there is between the company and the customer, the better it is for the customer experience.

2. **Flexibility** – how much is the company willing and able to customize offerings to meet customers specific needs or how well they react to changing requirements. Standardized products without any flexibility on a customer to customer basis is not good for the customer experience, while a completely custom made solution to match the customer’s exact needs improves the customer experience.
3. **Implicit understanding of customer needs** – how well the company understands what the customer actually needs in their business context. When the selling company understands how the offered solution helps the customer, it is easier to deliver a solution that will work in that context. When the company has prior knowledge of or relationship with the customer, the company will have an understanding of the customer’s needs more quickly, as it requires less explanation at the beginning.
4. **Concern to elicit customer’s objectives** – this ties to the previous point, the amount of how much the company actively find out and understand the customer’s purchase motives, what problems they are trying to solve and so on. Active interest in fulfilling the customer’s needs as well as possible enhances the customer experience.
5. **Proactivity in checking that everything is OK** – a proactive company checks that everything is OK with the customer. This creates trust and caring relationship between the parties, when customers concerns are actively heard and asked for.
6. **Promise fulfillment** – How well the company is able to hold on to the promises they make to the customer.
7. **Knowledge** – how much value-adding knowledge and expertise does the company have.

All these aspects could be summarized in one sentence: Good B2B customer experience comes especially from active interest in fulfilling customers specific needs as well as possible and trying to fulfill those needs. Lemke et al. (2011, 850) recognize that while B2B purchasing focuses more on the utilitarian goals than B2C, they both share similarities in the customer experience and how customers assess their interactions with the company. In B2B context the process of designing and delivering a solution is more visible to the customer. Hence it is important that the seller shows knowledge during the value delivery process. The customer experience can be improved by focusing on understanding the customer’s needs and creating specific solutions that deliver the value that the customer desires. (Lemke et al., 2011, 865.)

Klaus (2013, 447) identifies functionality and psychological factors as the two main dimensions of online customer service experience. Even though the elements found by Lemke et al. (2011, 857) match the context of this research, Klaus’s (2013, 443) broader view of online customer experience elements will be used in the framework. Functional dimension evaluate the technical performance of the website, and it is further divided into

usability, product presence, communication, social presence and interactivity. Psychological dimensions include context familiarity, trust and value for money. (Klaus, 2013, 443.)

Usability is the first aspect of functionality and it encompasses things like the sites loading speeds and ease of use. Usability is an aspect that has direct impacts on the experience the customer has on the company website. When the site has the elements a customer sees as necessary from a website, and the site functions well functional, the customer feels more comfortable using the website and is then more likely to proceed to purchase. A bad website design that is difficult to use may well cause the potential customer to leave the site and never come back. (Klaus, 2013, 447.)

Product presence comes from the ways in which the customer is able to view more details about the products in the digital environment. This can be small sneak peeks at the content, zoomable product images, rotatable 3D-models of the product etc. that would normally be available if it was physically in your hands. In digital environment, assessing options may be difficult because there is no physical product the customer could try, which is why alternative ways to interact with the product and its attributes are important, and make the purchase event more concrete. (Klaus, 2013, 447.)

Communication is key to reduce customer's worry about the exchange. Getting confirmations about the order, shipping and delivery are all ways in which the company can assure the customer that the process is going as planned. In digital environment the customer doesn't see the product until it's delivered, so it's important that they know in which stage the delivery is, for example. (Klaus, 2013, 448.)

Social presence comes from the comments, discussions and reviews other users and customers have about the product. This aspect of customer experience is especially impactful during the information search and alternative evaluation stages, as peer-reviews are often seen as the most trustworthy opinions. Social presence, when it's positive, assures the customer about the products benefits. (Klaus, 2013, 448.)

Interactivity means how the website is in dialogue with the customer. This dialogue can come from customized content, pre-filled address information or suggested products that are based on the customer's previous interactions with the company. This customization can offer time-savings and more relevant experience on the website. (Klaus, 2013, 448.)

The psychological factors help with convincing the customer of unknown brand or website. The first of the three factors is **context familiarity**. It means how well the website can create a customer experience that is similar to what it would be in a physical store. (Klaus, 2013, 448.)

Trust is usually built upon personal contact. This is more difficult to achieve in digital environment, where the interactions are not personal, but it doesn't reduce its importance. The trust can be built by giving proof of trustworthy business that reduces the worries a customer may have. (Klaus, 2013, 448.)

Value for money means how well digital channel compares to physical channels in terms of perceived value. The products purchased from digital channels may sometimes be cheaper, so it may offer more value to the customer to use digital channels. (Klaus, 2013, 448.)

The customer experience is not a result that is created at the end of purchase interaction. It is a dynamic structure that evolves along the customer journey. Different aspects of customer experience can be positioned in different stages of the customer journey. Klaus (2013, 448) presented a customer journey timeline model for the customer experience dimensions they identified in their study. It is presented below in the figure 1.

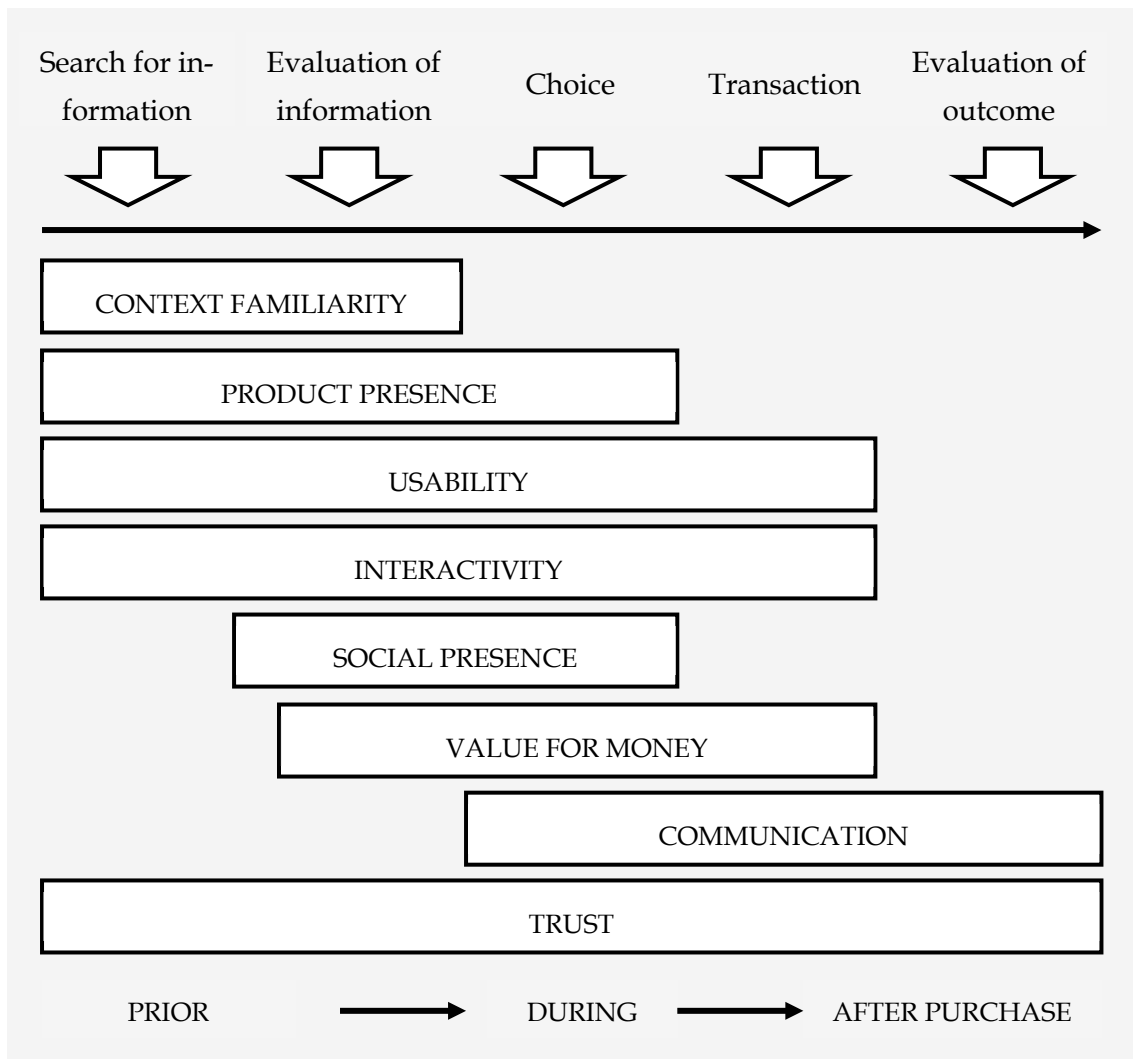


Figure 1 Dynamic model for online customer service experience (Klaus, 2013, 449)

Klaus (2013, 450) concluded their study with the finding that customer experience is a dynamic phenomenon that evolves along the customer journey. Customer experience should be considered a strategic goal for a company. Communications rose as one of the most important elements for relationship building in the online operating environment.

Communications included things like automatic e-mail updates, letting the customer know how their order progressed and making sure everything is all right with the customer. The study recognized the growing impact of social networks in the forming of customer experience. While the company cannot directly control external touchpoints, they can reduce the need of turning to outside channels by providing more relevant information about the product. Consistency matters, so all channels and marketing should both visually and functionally feel similar, so that the customer can conveniently navigate in the touchpoints. (Klaus, 2013, 450.)

The seven most important B2B customer experience elements found by Lemke et al. (2011, 858) were the extent of personal contact, flexibility, implicit understanding of customer, concern to elicit customer's objectives, proactivity in checking that everything is OK, promise fulfillment and knowledge. When we look at the customer experience categories by Klaus (2013, 443), these most important aspects mostly represent the categories of trust, interactivity and communication. We will use Klaus's customer experience categories in our study, but we will keep in mind Lemke's et al. findings on which categories are suggested to be the most important in B2B context. This decision is based on the explorative nature of this study. We start from a broader view and aim to create a more accurate understanding based on the interviews. The important elements found by Lemke et al. (2011, 858) will be used in the analysis of the results.

2.3.5 Measuring customer experience

Customer experience is a complex and dynamic phenomenon and measuring it requires us to operationalize it with appropriate metrics. Customer experience is usually measured with proxies such as satisfaction and willingness to recommend. (Zolkiewski, et al., 2017, 175.) Keiningham et al. (2017) found that positive customer experience causes customer commitment to the company, and customer commitment may enhance further customer experiences, as the customer is already positively biased. The trust built by good customer experience then reduces the cognitive efforts in further interactions and purchase situations, which will be beneficial for subsequent customer experiences (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, 74).

Lemon and Verhoef (2016, 71) see customer satisfaction as an important metric for customer experiences. This view comes from comparing the customer expectations with the actual delivered solution. They also noted that it is difficult to form a set of measures that adequately measures the whole range of customer experience environments. Zolkiewski et al. (2017, 178) emphasized this difficulty especially in a B2B context. The multitude of channels, actors, industries and customer journey touchpoints makes it al-

most impossible to properly measure all customer experience situations with a single tool-set. They do however recognize the need for finding the moments-of-truth along the customer journey, the critical situations that have the most impact on the overall customer experience.

2.4 Framework for building a better customer experience with digital marketing ecosystem

Digital marketing ecosystem benefits found in theoretical review in chapter 2.2 strongly suggest that marketing automation and CRM system are the tools that benefit the most of an integrated ecosystem. These two tools and especially automation can have a big impact on customer experience, as it drives communications, targeting and personalization.

The connection between digital marketing ecosystems and customer experience can be explained as follows:

- The marketing goals of the company drive the decision of the tools that they integrate in their marketing ecosystem (Radius.com, 2015; Slefo, 2017).
- Different marketing tools are used to perform different marketing tasks in different parts of the customer journey: prepurchase, purchase and postpurchase (Lagercrantz, 2018).
- The customer starts their customer journey, and interacts with the company in multiple touchpoints, whether they are brand owned, customer owned, partner owned or external & social touchpoints. These touchpoints can be initiated by either the customer or the company. (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, 76–78.)
- If the touchpoint is owned by the brand, meaning the customer is in direct contact with the company or its material and content, the company can control what happens in this touchpoint. They may have marketing tools to address that specific touchpoint interaction, such as search engine advertisement, email newsletter, social media post or customer support service call.
- There are usually multiple touchpoints along the customer journey, as every mention and every sight of the brand is a touchpoint.
- Customer experience is cumulatively formed during the customer journey touchpoints.

Digital marketing ecosystem plays a role in the creation of customer experience by initiating touchpoints and targeting relevant content to the customer in different channels based on the customer's behavior. Since customer experience is regarded as a sum of the touchpoints, each contact with marketing shapes the customer experience. Through the use of marketing tools during the brand-owned touchpoints, a company can affect the customer experience with the digital marketing ecosystem.

In chapter 2.2.6 we found that one benefit of the digital marketing ecosystem is that it improves customer experience. From that notion, we can form a model of how it actually affects customer experience. This is displayed in the figure 2 below.

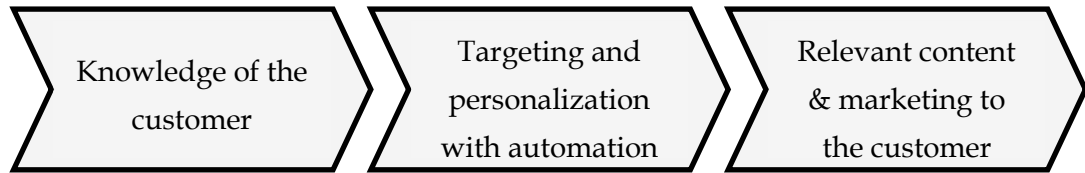


Figure 2 Digital marketing ecosystems effect on customer experience

By collecting and analyzing behavioral data of the customer in the customer journey touchpoints a company gains knowledge of the customer (Redding, 2015, 260; Schwenn Sebring, 2018, 14–16). This knowledge then translates into better targeting and personalization that is enabled by marketing automation (Rantaruikka et al., 2017, 5; Schwenn Sebring, 2018, 14). Personalized content that is targeted to right people at the right time improves the relevance to the customer, which improves their customer experience (Rae, 2016, 22).

The next figure 3 presents the framework that is used in the empirical part of this study. This framework displays the structure of the connections between digital marketing ecosystem, customer journey and ultimately customer experience.

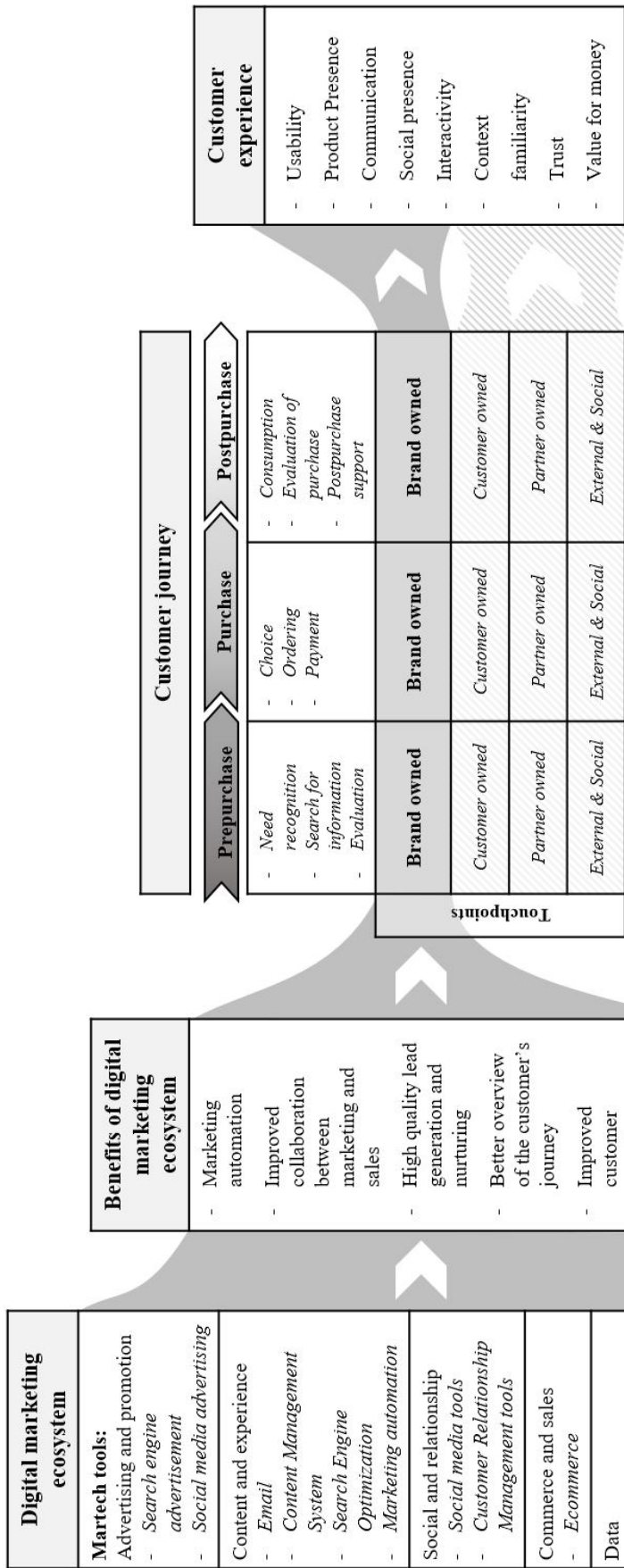


Figure 3 Influence of digital marketing ecosystem on customer experience during customer journey

The framework starts from the digital marketing ecosystem and the martech tools that are in it. As outlined previously in this chapter, these different tools and tool categories help achieving the benefits of the digital marketing ecosystems. These benefits are then present and affecting the brand owned customer journey touchpoints. The overall customer experience is formed of the customer's cumulative experience with the company during all various touchpoints. These touchpoints can be directly (brand owned) or indirectly with the company. In other words, both direct and indirect touchpoints affect the customer experience, but a company is only able to affect the direct brand owned touchpoints with their digital marketing ecosystem, hence we only consider the effects of brand owned touch points in this study.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research method

The research purpose of this study is to explore and identify those marketing activities in digital marketing ecosystems that have an effect on the customer experience. As the topic of the study is very current and it has not been directly discussed before in academic studies, an exploratory approach is chosen for this study. According to Saunders & Lewis (2012, 110), exploratory research is especially good for topics that revolve around new phenomena that have not been researched well yet. Exploratory research approach is good for getting initial understanding before a large scale research can be conducted on the subject in hand. Common methods for exploratory research are academic literature reviews, expert interviews and conventional interviews (Saunders & Lewis, 2012, 110).

The nature of explorative research is usually to start with a wide focus and basic understanding, and narrow the focus when more knowledge is gained through the qualitative methods. Exploratory research doesn't usually offer definitive conclusions, but it gives insight from some perspectives, and it will offer further research topics as a result. (Saunders & Lewis, 2012, 111).

This study is conducted with a qualitative research method. As for the type, it's a basic qualitative study (Merriam, 2014, 5). In qualitative research, the interest is in understanding how different individuals understand and interpret different phenomena in their context, which suits the goal of this study (Merriam, 2014, 5). Qualitative research usually means focusing on fewer high-quality sources of empirical information instead of having a high-volume of data for quantitative analysis. The data is not numerical, but rather descriptive interviews or pictures. Often qualitative research method is used because the theory explaining the phenomenon is lacking or there is none. It is not necessary to know every aspect of the phenomenon throughout, because new knowledge and understanding is being created with qualitative methods. (Merriam, 2014, 16.)

In qualitative research it is important to build the research method and research questions carefully, so that when the empirical research is conducted, it answers to what is asked. If the questions asked from experts are too vague for example, they may not give answers to what is being researched, and the actual value of that interview for the research is minimal. (Merriam, 2014, 17.)

The goal of this study is, in the nature of explorative research, to first form an initial understanding and a model of how digital marketing ecosystem is seen to affect cus-

customer's experience based on a literature review. That review was done in previous chapter. With the empirical part of this study, more insights and understanding of the topic will be gained, and a more refined model will be suggested as a conclusion.

3.2 Collecting data

In this research the empirical data is gathered through expert interviews. Several heads of digital marketing departments or equivalent were interviewed to hear their understanding of the themes in this research, and which activities, tools and touchpoints they see of key importance for customer experience formation. This research is cross-sectional, meaning it will only express the current situation (Saunders & Lewis, 2012, 123). Some thoughts of the future will be given, but those are mostly speculative, and based on the findings of the expert interviews.

This research is conducted using a purposive sampling. This means that the sampling was done by purposefully choosing suitable companies and their representatives for interviews. The sample does not necessarily represent the whole population, but a certain subgroup that is considered important or knowledgeable for this research. (Saunders & Lewis, 2012, 138; Merriam, 2014, 78.) The purpose of the sampling in this research was to find companies that were already using and developing digital marketing ecosystems in their marketing work and were familiar with the concepts of customer experience, and knew how customer navigate through the ecosystem and how they interact with it.

The participants were chosen from a list given by IDBBN Oy. The list was gathered from their customers and contacted leads, and they represented a typical case of companies that already had knowledge and usage experience of digital marketing ecosystems. A typical case is considered to be illustrative and representative of the population segment, but not statistically representative (Saunders & Lewis, 2012, 139). In the interviews it turned out that the companies represented a more heterogeneous case, with quite varying degrees of digital marketing ecosystem implementation. However, all the participants were able to answer the questions and offer insights on the subject.

From IDBBN's listing, nine companies were contacted and six of which agreed on an interview. Sample size of six companies is seen to be enough to provide saturation on the subject. This means that further samples would not offer any new information. In this case, it was seen to give a good overview of the current situation on the field. The aim of this study is not to get a comprehensive knowledge, but rather the goal is to gain some deeper insights from few quality sources in the explorative nature of this study. (Boddy, 2016, 427–428.)

The persons for the interviews were proposed by IDBBN Oy, as they had relationships with the companies and knew who would be the person in charge of digital marketing

ecosystems in the company. The aim was to find those people who were in charge of developing the digital marketing and the ecosystem of the company specifically. In total 7 people from 6 companies were interviewed. The participants are listed below in the table 3.

Table 3 Interview participants

Alias	Title	Ecosystem status	Interview length
Marketing director A	Marketing director	<i>In good shape</i>	34 minutes
Marketing technologist B	Marketing technologist	<i>In good shape</i>	36 minutes
Digital marketing manager C	Digital marketing manager	<i>In good shape</i>	65 minutes
Marketing director D & Customer experience director D	Marketing director & Customer experience director	<i>Starting to form</i>	54 minutes
Business solution manager E	Business solution manager	<i>In good shape</i>	30 minutes
Marketing automation specialist F	Marketing automation specialist	<i>Starting to form, but difficulties</i>	51 minutes

The participants represented an array of marketing professionals ranging from marketing directors to marketing technologists. What they had in common however, was that they all were that person in the company who had most knowledge and experience with the company's digital marketing ecosystem and its technologies. Five out of the six participants were B2B companies and one was operating in B2C field. This is not seen as an issue however, as their operating environment made their customers resemble business owners. The companies represented different industries, and the amount of customers each one had was relatively high. The companies had varied situations with their marketing ecosystem implementation; some had some years of experience and while the ecosystem was not perfected yet, it was functioning effectively with automation and various integrations, while others knew the benefits but were only just starting to look into their options in forms of trials.

Next is the operationalization table 4 that is used to recognize which empirical research elements and questions answer which purpose in the research.

Table 4 Operationalization table

Research purpose	Research question	Categories and key concepts	Theme	Operationalization
To identify those activities and touchpoints in digital marketing ecosystems that have an effect on customer experience along the digital customer journey	1. What does the digital marketing ecosystem consist of?	Functions of DME <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Advertising and promotion - Content and experience - Social and relationship - Commerce and sales - Data - Management 	Nature of the company's digital marketing ecosystem	Questions 1-3
		Marketing tools in a DME		
		Benefits of digital marketing ecosystem <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Marketing automation - Improved collaboration between marketing and sales - High quality lead generation and nurturing - Better overview of the customer's journey - Reduced costs and increased efficiency and profits - Improved customer experience 	Marketing goals of using the digital marketing ecosystem	Questions 4-6
	2. What creates the customer experience along the digital customer journey?	Customer journey <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Prepurchase - Purchase - Postpurchase - Touchpoints 	Dimensions of CX <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Usability - Product presence - Communication - Social presence - Interactivity - Context familiarity - Trust - Value for money 	Nature of customer experience
3. How customer experience is improved through digital ecosystem development?		The effects of DME to CX <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Knowledge - Targeting & Personalization - Relevance 		
			Development of the digital marketing ecosystem for better customer experience	Questions 14-15

3.3 Expert interviews and the interview frame

For the research method a semistructured interview frame was used. The interview questions were quite narrow, so that the participants answered to the right subject. The interview frame can be found in the Appendix 1. The questions were not set in stone, however. The wordings were adjusted slightly after the first two interviews to make the questions clearer, and two irrelevant and overlapping questions were merged into others.

Semistructured interview models are common for research, where the participant has deeper knowledge on the subject, and the purpose of the interview is to get them to share their insights on the subject. In a semi-structured interview the researcher has pre-planned topics and broad questions for the participant to answer. The interview will not follow strictly the questions, but it will move freely around the questions to induce open discussion and knowledge sharing. The point of the questions is more about guiding the participant to the areas and perspectives being researched. For semi-structured interviews, it is important to know who the participant is, in order to prepare for the interview with the right questions for them. (Saunders & Lewis, 2012, 151–153; Merriam, 2014, 90.) The questions were prepared with the fact in mind that the participants were mostly from managerial level. Hence it was possible to ask them about the development and the realities of benefitting and implementing digital marketing ecosystem solutions.

The interview frame can be found in the Appendix 1. The interviews themselves were conducted face to face with the participants. The interviews were recorded and processed through a voice to text application simultaneously to speed up the transcribing. When the interviews were finished, the whole discussion was transcribed into text for further empirical analysis. All the interviews were held in Finnish, and the parts of the interview that were used in this study were translated into English.

3.4 Analysis

In qualitative analysis, the first step is to decide, what is the point of interest in the collected data from the perspective of this study and its purpose, and how interesting points would appear in the data. Then this data is processed to find and highlight these points and to reduce the irrelevant data. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2002, 94, 110.) Categorization of the data under relevant themes helps with comparing the findings with existing knowledge (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2002, 95; Saunders et al. 2003, 381). These categories can be derived from the theoretical framework, and in the case of this study they can be such as benefits of the digital marketing ecosystem or dimensions of customer experience. (Saunders et al. 2003, 381.) If the collected data matches with the existing knowledge,

the propositions enforce the current theories. (Saunders & Lewis, 2012, 191). If the opposite occurs, and the analyzed data contradicts with existing material, there might be something new in the research, or something has changed. It can also mean, that there has been some errors in the gathered data, but that must be recognized by the researcher.

The analysis in this study uses inductive logic, meaning it generalizes the answers of few individuals to create base for new theories and models (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2002, 94). Generalizability requires strong argumentation based on the findings. In qualitative research the generalizability comes from analytical generalization, where the results are compared with prior theories and results of other studies. (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, 293–294.)

In total there was 52 pages of transcribed material from the interviews. The transcripts of each participant were then analyzed individually, and the irrelevant parts of the interviews were reduced to create a concise conclusion that summarized each interview question. Once all the interviews were analyzed like this, they were compared for similarities and differences. If there was a clear agreement between the participants, it was highlighted in the results. Separate citations were also taken from the answers to give evidence to results. While the main goal of the analysis was to see if there was a consensus, individual answers that offered good insights were also regarded as results and cited. The results from the interviews were then compared to the framework in the discussion chapters by clustering the results to the same categories and phenomena that were found in the literature review (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2002, 112–114).

A lot of the questions are probing and preparing the participant for the main questions about the subject. The main interest of analysis was on the questions about the most impactful tools and touchpoints, how they see the digital marketing ecosystem affecting the customer experience, and how they as a company consider customer experience when planning further development. These are the questions that will provide the most interesting insights, not so much the company specific questions about just the tools they use for each specific task.

3.5 Reliability

The validity of a study comes from researching the right thing, meaning the subject of the study, while reliability means how well the results can be repeated. Researchers have expressed that validity and reliability are not perhaps the best metrics for measuring the accuracy and correctness of a study. In qualitative research the truth can be seen as a subjective thing that is dependent on the viewer. This means that differing findings may not be a results of false analysis or an error in the data, but rather it may be caused by

subjective views of the topic in hand. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2002, 134; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, 292.) When using expert interviews as the qualitative data source, differing opinions and experiences can be found.

A study is valid, when the results and findings represent the subject truthfully. This doesn't rule out the fact that there can be multiple truthful ways to represent the subject however. Lincoln & Guba (1985, 301–320) suggested the aspects of credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability for assessing the trustworthiness qualitative research. Dependability means that the research has been a logical process and it's traceable and documented. Transferability comes from the display of similarities and differences between this study and the prior studies done about the same subject. Credibility assesses how believable the claims made in the study are and whether the data is sufficient to support these claims. Finally conformability means that the findings are interpreted in a way that makes sense and is apparent.

In this study, the reliability is considered by selecting proven experts known by ID-BBN Oy for the interviews, recording the interviews and carefully analyzing the results. All the participants were allowed to answer the questions as broadly as they wanted to, and in case some interesting notions came up, further questions were made to get full understanding of their answer. The interviews were then transcribed word by word and analyzed as presented in previous chapter 3.4.

The results present the customer experience from the viewpoint of the selling company. Hence it cannot be confirmed, if the customer actually sees the value of the things the companies do to supposedly improve their customer experience.

4 INSIGHTS FROM EXPERT INTERVIEWS

4.1 The formation of digital marketing ecosystem

4.1.1 *Nature of the company's digital marketing ecosystem*

The first interview theme was explored through the functions of digital marketing ecosystem categorized by Brinker (2018) and the benefits of digital marketing ecosystem (eg. Putkinen, 2014, 71; Madhani 2015, 17; Redding, 2015, 260.) The six ecosystem function categories are:

- Advertising and promotion
- Content and experience
- Social and relationship
- Commerce and sales
- Data
- Management

Those participants that had already implemented proper marketing automation system and had integrated data sources felt that their ecosystem built around the automation and CRM platforms. Some had integrated tools such as ERP, CMS and online store to be used as extra data sources for their ecosystem.

Table 5 Description of the ecosystems

Participant	Answer
Marketing director A	Ecosystem is built around marketing automation. Tools such as CRM, ERP and online store are integrated into it.
Marketing technologist B	Marketing automation and CRM are primary tools. Marketing automation is the center of the ecosystem and marketing functions, and the aim is to bring all the data to one place.
Digital marketing manager C	Marketing automation, CRM, CMS and analytics are primary tools. Due to rapid growth of the company it is sometimes difficult to keep the ecosystem up to date, especially with the different priorities of marketing, sales and customer support for example.
Marketing director D & Customer experience director D	Website is the central place for marketing. No marketing automation yet, and the role of ERP and CRM is being discussed. Some integrated tools are being used and there are plenty of potential data sources, but mostly unintegrated tools that are outside of the ecosystem are used.

Business solution manager E	Marketing automation and CRM are integrated together in the center. Also different analytics tools and CMS are used, but all in all the ecosystem is quite simple and doesn't have too many separate tools.
Marketing automation specialist F	Marketing automation is the central tool and works with their CRM. Social media tools are used as well.

Most companies had big plans to integrate all possible marketing tools into their ecosystem, so that all data could be captured and utilized. For most this was still a long way ahead, as they were only starting to integrate and look into different CRM and automation platforms. All six participating companies had at least piloted marketing automation tools, and saw their benefits. Those companies that did not have automation set up and integrating their ecosystem saw that their most important tool was their website.

The participants described their ecosystems, and some of the same tools and categories were found than in the categorization by Brinker (2018). Advertising and promotion specific tools that companies are using revolve around search engine marketing and social media marketing.

In digital advertising we invest in Search Engine Marketing, in which Search Engine Optimization with organic results has its own big value. SEM is basically the only advertising we do directly, and it answers two goals: brand awareness and lead generation. (Digital marketing manager C)

Content and experience tools are a relevant martech category for this study, as they are closely related to the customer experience. Marketing automation and content management systems rose as the prevalent tools that companies use to manage content and experience. Automation is important in delivering the customers and leads the right content that the company wants them to see. CMS is used to manage the website and its contents, and website analytics is the basis for the content delivery with automation. However all companies are not using marketing automation effectively yet, even if they had the system already implemented. Content delivery was done with mass emails instead of targeted and personalized messages.

For that we use our marketing automation, where we have built these content sets that are related to the customer journeys. (Marketing director A)

For the third category, social and relationship, most companies did not have any integrated tools in their ecosystems that would handle customer interactions. Customer service systems were being integrated into the ecosystem, so that the company could have a better overview of the customer journey.

We implemented our customer service solution only a month ago. We have it on our roadmap to integrate it with our CRM in the near future, so that we can have all the tickets visible underneath each customership. (Business solution manager E)

Commerce and sales category was a bit divided. CRM was mentioned as an important tool for sales. Also ERP systems were a part of managing sales and getting marketing the needed sales data.

When discussed about data tools, it became clear that while companies with proper marketing ecosystems and automation usage have usually integrated the important systems, they are still in the process of integrating more quality data sources into their ecosystem. Their goal is to achieve a complete overview of their customers and their customer journey, and bring this information available equally to sales and marketing teams. Website analytics tools such as Google Analytics were the most common data tools that were used in marketing.

Automation enables us to be able to track how the customer reacts to different things on our website. The most important thing about automation and data is that when we use so many different channels, automation combines all that data into one. - - It is a constant job to collect all the data in one place, it's not as easy as one would think. Our goal is to have all integrated into our automation software. (Marketing technologist B)

Our challenge at the moment is that we need an overview of the customer that would reach through the whole purchasing funnel. So that we could see how it converts from the first touchpoint in the beginning of the funnel into a sale... -- At the moment this requires manual labor. (Marketing director D)

On top of our CRM, we have over a dozen of different systems that are integrated into our data warehouse. This data is then analyzed, and we use PowerBI to form useful information to be used. This same tool will be used for a customer 360-overview, which we will bring into our CRM to populate it with better visualized data of our customerships. (Business solution manager E)

In the next table 6 the answers are gathered together showing the mentioned tools for each marketing tool category. A brief conclusion of each company's ecosystem was made in the bottom of the table.

Table 6 Marketing tools that are used from different categories

Category	Company A	Company B	Company C	Company D	Company E	Company F
Advertising and promotion	Native marketing tools, SEM and social media advertising	SEM, social media advertising	SEO and SEM, social media	SEM, social media advertising	Only email promotions	No advertising
Content and experience	Automation	Automation	Automation, CRM, CMS	Email and CMS	CMS	-
Social and relationship	Social media is only for advertising	Customer service is not integrated, but sales communication is recorded	Social media tools, email automation, CRM	-	Customer service is being integrated into ecosystem	-
Commerce and sales	CRM, ERP	Sales funnel and independent buying process	CRM, better email automation is in the works	ERP	-	Ecommerce platform is coming
Data	Integrations to automation	Automation, Google Analytics	Lots of data connections, and integration process is still ongoing	Google Analytics Lots of un-integrated tools	Data warehouse	Google Analytics
Management	-	Automation could be used for some management tasks	Project management tools	Project management tools	Project management tools	-
Overall status	Good Wide utilization of tools	Good Wide utilization of tools	Good Wide utilization of tools	Starting to form First steps are taken, but there is still a lot to do and key tools are not used effectively yet.	Good Wide utilization of tools for their specific needs	Poor The tools are not used for their purpose and the ecosystem is not being used

The digital marketing ecosystem doesn't have a single most important tool, as the ecosystem functions as an entirety. No single tool could be said to be the most important one on its own, as single tools only fulfill one task or function. Regardless, the participants mentioned that marketing automation enables the most, for example effective personalized communication and sales support through lead nurturing. Automation is also reliant on data that is integrated from other tools. Hence CRM was seen as a central tool that works tightly together with automation and acts as a data source. Naturally different marketing tasks and functions had different tools that are important for them, such as search engine tools for brand awareness.

4.1.2 Digital marketing ecosystem along the customer journey

The customer journey was seen to be divided into three main phases in the literature: prepurchase, purchase and postpurchase (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, 76). In the interviews, the participants were asked about which marketing tools were important in each of these phases. Marketing technologist B explains how the beginning of the customer journey is handled:

For being able to direct them to our website, we have social media and Google Ads for that in the beginning [of the customer journey]. And when they go through our blogs, there are usually some form that they can fill, and by filling it they get access to more content and we get the potential customer into our [CRM] systems . . . Then at some point when we have sent enough emails [with automation] and we notice that they have viewed our content, either they will tell us through a form that they are interested in contacting us and book a meeting with us, or our sales team simply calls them "Hey, you downloaded this and this content, are you interested in hearing more?". (Marketing technologist B)

After the purchase the information that the company has got of the customer and their recent purchase transaction will be used in following up on the customer relationship:

If a customer has purchased something specific, we use automation to target them additional sales based on their purchase history. We also have these personalization tools in our online store that personalizes what the customer sees on the page based on what they have purchased. (Marketing director A)

The tools that are used in different phases of the customer journey are gathered in the table 7 below.

Table 7 Important marketing tools along the customer journey

Customer journey phase	Tools
Prepurchase	<p>Advertising, search engine optimization and social media tools are emphasized before the purchase to improve visibility and brand awareness.</p>
	<p>Marketing automation is used once the lead has showed interest by joining a mailing list for example. Marketing automation will enter the picture to nurture a potential customer and deliver targeted and personalized content.</p>
	<p>Website also has a key role in distributing information and content as well as leading to sale before the purchase.</p>
Purchase	<p>CRM, ERP and other sales related tools are in a central role during the purchase.</p>
	<p>The role of automation increases the further into the customer journey the customer gets.</p>
Postpurchase	<p>Emails and communication tools are used after the purchase to stay in contact with the customer.</p>
	<p>Communication is often delivered via marketing automation tools. Messages such as delivery notifications and operating instructions are common after the purchase.</p>
	<p>The product or service itself can have a part in the marketing in the postpurchase touchpoints.</p>

4.1.3 Goals and benefits of the ecosystem

From the literature review we formed an understanding of the benefits of the digital marketing ecosystem (eg. Putkinen, 2014, 71; Madhani 2015, 17; Redding, 2015, 260). The found benefits included:

- Marketing automation
- Improved collaboration between marketing and sales
- High quality lead generation and nurturing

- Better overview of the customer's journey
- Reduced costs and increased efficiency and profits
- Improved customer experience

In the interviews the participants described their goals for digital marketing ecosystem, and supporting sales function was clearly a major goal for the participants. Delivering the right content to the right customers at the right time, in other words relevance, was also a key goal in having a digital marketing ecosystem.

I think that our goal is to be able to help sales by offering right things to the right buyer at the right time. So that it is relevant and that it is targeted to the right part of the customer's journey. Another goal that we have had is that we could increase digital sales. (Marketing director A)

Yeah we have noticed that marketing has to be used for supporting the sales, like we can't just throw the customer directly to the salespeople. We have a lot of things that we can take away from the salespeople by automating those tasks. (Marketing technologist B)

The participants identified varied benefits of their digital marketing ecosystem. Some of the most prominent benefits were possibility of proper personalized targeting, ability to track and to better understand the customer's journey, and easier measurement of marketing metrics. Automation as a part of the ecosystem also offered scalable marketing for some participants.

Our hope was that with marketing automation we could do it. In fact maybe in the coming years with AI and machine learning we could have truly personalized targeting. (Marketing director A)

Once you get things rolling, you can start developing it further and you can measure it. Measurability and constant development and if everything is found in one place, it is easier to plan and it's possible to be managed. And of course, when you do it automatically, it reduces the manual work a lot. (Marketing technologist B)

It [the benefit] is still definitely engaging customers – current customers. If you think about email marketing for example. But similarly it is at least, if not even more, the acquisition of new customers. (Marketing director D)

In the small end of companies we know that automation is worth it because it will then bring that scalability... In the large end it [the benefits] comes from sharing the information to help with the sales so that they can then close the large deals. (Digital marketing manager C)

Engaging current customers and reaching new ones was seen as a benefit from digital marketing ecosystems. A lot of the benefits that companies see that the ecosystem approach has are not yet realized however, and they see a big untapped potential in the marketing automation systems.

Well we cannot yet at least do things at the right time in the right place. It was more of a dream when we started this journey that with marketing automation we could do this. Actually it is starting to become possible with things like artificial intelligence and machine learning that we could use to achieve genuinely targeted marketing, but that is still maybe a few years away. (Marketing director A)

4.1.4 Discussion on digital marketing ecosystem

The digital marketing ecosystem was defined as a “grouping of technologies to leverage and improve marketing activities, automate tasks for improved efficiencies and to streamline service delivery” in the literature (Schwenn Sebring, 2018, 16). The goal is to achieve additional benefits and capabilities from tools through synergies (Singer, 2006, 52; Slefo, 2017; Optimizely.com).

Marketing ecosystem tools were divided into six main categories by Brinker (2018). The most common individual marketing tools mentioned in the literature and articles were advertising, email, content management, search engine optimization, marketing automation, CRM, data & analytics and management. While the ecosystem itself could not be defined by any single tool, those companies that had a sophisticated digital marketing ecosystems implemented, had built their ecosystem around marketing automation and CRMs. All the main tools that were found in the literature were mentioned in the interviews as well, and these were gathered in the table 6. Many of these tools acted as data sources for the ecosystem. The key takeaway was that the ecosystem is an entity of tools that works together. This is well in line with the definition that was found in the theoretical part of this study (Schwenn Sebring 2018, 16).

You can't say that there is one important tool, because this is an ecosystem of tools. Because you can't do this with one tool, there is no tool that could

take care of the customer journey and personalization... (Marketing director A)

Not all the marketing tools have to be within the ecosystem, and this was also seen in the interviews. Many companies told in the interviews about the tools that they used to perform various marketing related tasks, but these tools were not a part of the ecosystem in the sense of integration. From the ecosystem perspective, these tools were irrelevant until integrated. The companies did however recognize the benefits if those unintegrated tools did in fact share data for CRM and automation as well.

The theory suggested, that most of the benefits and functions that digital marketing ecosystem had over individual unintegrated tools was the possibilities of automation and utilizing CRM better for both marketing and sales (eg. Putkinen, 2014, 71; Madhani 2015, 17; Redding, 2015, 260). This also lead to high quality lead generation and nurturing, reduced costs and increases in business performance, and finally improved customer experience. In the interviews it was found that the participants had very similar ideas of the benefits as with what was found in the literature. Marketing automation enables a lot for the companies in regards to personalization and targeting, which matches the benefit of high quality lead generation and nurturing. This in hand turns into improved customer experience. The different tools and integrations also helped with getting to know the customer and their needs better, which is a prerequisite for accurate targeting and delivery of relevant information.

4.2 Creation of customer experience along the customer journey

4.2.1 *The meaning of customer experience for companies*

In the literature, customer experience was defined as the subjective response the customer forms in all of the interactions they have directly and indirectly with the company during their customer journey touchpoints (Lemke et al., 2011, 846; Sas.com). When the participants were asked to define what customer experience meant for them, their definition supported the literature. They agreed that customer experience is the sum of the experience in all of the touchpoints along their customer journey. It should be noted however that these are the views of the selling organization and not the customers. The customer experience was said to comprise of the following aspects:

- Customer should feel that they benefit and get additional value out of the service they receive.

- Customer experience is about managing expectations – they should be met or even exceeded in each touchpoint.
- Problem situations should be handled well
- Personal contact in touchpoints is more impactful than non-personal
- Both rational and emotional aspects are present in the customer experience

Customer experience is often measured through proxies such as customer satisfaction (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, 71; Zolkiewski, et al., 2017, 175). The most usual metric that was found in the interviews was NPS-score, net promoter score, but the measuring of customer experience was lacking. The companies struggled to combine different customer experience point data from different touchpoints into one coherent overview of the whole customer journey experience, and hence the measuring was often limited to single touchpoints or interactions.

At the moment we have single points, and our goal is now to be able to measure customer experience on a customer segment basis, so that we could measure the whole experience and make conclusions of it . . . At the moment the data [from different touchpoints] doesn't merge, yet. We are trying to build the big picture now, so that we could understand the NPS of the customership. (Marketing director A)

4.2.2 Customer journeys

Lemon & Verhoef (2016, 76) have divided the customer journey into three phases: pre-purchase, purchase and postpurchase. These phases can include several touchpoints, some of which are brand owned. These are the touchpoints that the company can affect. In the interviews it was explored if there was a clear standard customer journey for the customers, and which touchpoints were usually present in the journey. The participants were quick to point out that there is no such thing as a standard customer journey, and that it differs a lot on a customer to customer basis. For some the most usual touchpoint was a customer representative. Companies that have proper digital buying funnels set up try to guide the customer to use those to make the purchase process easier.

We follow to a large extent a pretty normal awareness funnel, where you first have some kind of knowledge that this company exists. Then if you have a need, then you will probably check out the companies you already know. We are talking about some sort of consideration or after-awareness phase here. And from there we come to some sort of evaluation phase, and to that we offer trials and that sort of things. There the customer begins the final comparisons

between different products. Then finally at some point a purchase decision is made, and if we look at it, retention is basically the last phase. There we keep the customer satisfied and we keep in touch with them. So we have quite a normal funnel idea of the customer journey. And if we think about what touchpoint that it includes, during the awareness phase it revolves around giving out press releases, social media buzzing and search engine advertising. - - - Once the purchase decision has been made, then it expands, and we have of course our own website and our partner channels... (Digital marketing manager C)

Personal contact is still key according to participants. Automation can drive communications, but visits and other face-to-face contacts are still important especially in B2B context. Digital marketing can surely help, but it is only one part of the equation in which the most weight is given to personal contact in regards to customer experience.

Tying in to the previous interview questions of customer journey, the participants were asked which touchpoints have the biggest impact on customer experience before, during and after the purchase. This question was not necessarily limited to marketing touchpoints, as it also included all other touchpoints along the customer journey. The majority of participants felt that personal contact, whether it is through a digital or physical channel, has the biggest impact on the customer experience in the touchpoints that are directly with the company.

I think that for customer experience the most important thing are the meetings with the account manager. (Business solution manager E)

You are probably not surprised when I answer personal contact. [in reference to previous answers] (Marketing director D)

Getting relevant information was mentioned as an important factor for improving customer experience in the touchpoints. For this the participants talked about the importance of a website that offers an easy access to relevant information:

Website interaction, so basically the content that is on the website. You need the kind of content that trains and grows the buyer's expertise. . . . The content is blogs, white papers and the website itself, those are the most important touchpoints. And of course the salespeople, the human interaction as well, if there is such. (Marketing technologist B)

What was interesting, was that the seven most important aspects of a good B2B customer experience that Lemke et al. (2011, 857) found were all also mentioned directly or indirectly in the interviews. These aspects and comments are listed in the table 8 below.

Table 8 The most important customer experience aspects in B2B (based on Lemke et al., 2011, 857)

Customer experience aspect	Comments in interviews
Extent of personal contact	<p><i>“I think that for customer experience the most important thing are the meetings with the account manager.”</i> (Business solution manager E)</p> <p><i>“You are probably not surprised when I answer personal contact. [in reference to previous answers]”</i> (Marketing director D)</p>
Flexibility	<p><i>“Some of our clients want to be active themselves, and others want that someone else takes care of things, and we offer the customer just the kind of service experience that they want and suits them.”</i> (Customer experience director D)</p>
Implicit understanding of customer needs	<p><i>“I wish that we could constantly measure the customer satisfaction when they have visited or interacted in our service, and if they are not satisfied, why. And from this we could get to the customers actual needs.”</i> (Business solution manager E)</p> <p><i>“The most important thing is to understand and recognize the customer.”</i> (Digital marketing manager C)</p>
Concern to elicit customer’s objectives	<p><i>“During the whole customer journey, the most important tool is website, and it has to represent us and focus on the challenges and problems the customer may face.”</i> (Marketing technologist B)</p> <p><i>“I think [customer experience] is about solutions sales, meaning that we sell a solution that benefits both parties.”</i> (Marketing technologist B)</p>
Proactivity in checking that everything is OK	<p><i>“[With automation we can] ask how you are doing, are you satisfied, or it could be something sales-related. Or it could be about what they have bought from us and we help them for example use it better or we give some instructions and help them do self-service.”</i> (Marketing director A)</p> <p><i>“The salesperson follows up on the sale and tells how things will proceed, and this is automated. Then we offer a lot of material on how the buyer can basically implement our service into their company.”</i> (Marketing technologist B)</p>

Promise fulfillment	<p><i>“With a digital marketing ecosystem, we can help the organization to keep those customer promises.” (Marketing director A)</i></p> <p><i>“Customer experience is largely about managing expectations, our customers expect something from the service, and then we have to deliver based on their expectations and even exceed them.” (Customer experience director D)</i></p>
Knowledge	<p><i>“[About trust] We are experts, and we can deliver real benefits and insights to our clients on what kinds of effects different solutions have and on what they should focus on when making their decisions.” (Business solution manager E)</i></p> <p><i>“You need the kind of content that trains and grows the buyer’s expertise. Basically, you need to tell how they succeed better at their job and then they realize that our service is a thing that improves their expertise.” (Marketing technologist B)</i></p>

4.2.3 Discussion

The theory strongly suggested, that the customer experience is formed as a sum of the experience in all of the individual touchpoints along the customer journey (Lemke et al., 2011, 846; Sas.com), and this was supported by the interviews. Also the participants were familiar with the structure of customer journey from prepurchase to postpurchase (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, 76), and they did consider customer journey when planning their marketing actions. The companies used the terms customer journey and purchase funnel almost interchangeably in this case, while the customer journey did have a more customer centric focus than the sales-minded purchase funnel.

A good customer experience came from meeting the expectations or even exceeding them (BusinessDictionary), and the participants had the same thought of it. The customer should feel that they benefit from the service and that they get additional value. Situations where things don’t go as planned were seen as key moments by the participant, in the same vein as Zolkiewski et al. (2017, 178) recognized the importance of handling well the moments-of-truth along the customer journey.

4.3 Developing digital marketing ecosystems to improve customer experience

The main research goal of this study is explored through two themes, the role of the ecosystem in customer experience and development of the digital marketing ecosystem for better customer experience. The key concepts for these themes are the dimensions of customer experience and the effects of digital marketing ecosystems on customer experience, which were found to be knowledge, personalization and targeting, and relevance.

4.3.1 *The role of the digital marketing ecosystem in customer experience*

One of the key questions in the interviews was what the participants consider to be the central tools in their marketing ecosystem that improve customer experience. It was pointed out again that the ecosystem works as a whole, and the single tools are not as relevant as the ecosystem or how the data it produces is used. Marketing automation was a tool that was mentioned by almost all of the participants, when they started talking about the tools that improve the experience.

And then this automation in the content management, as you can there follow which blogs people read and through that you can perhaps target them for example with emails that kind of content that they like. Automation is an important content management tool. And we can recognize maybe where the customer is going and what content we should deliver them next. (Marketing technologist B)

There are two parts to this: high quality and fitting online content for the customer's exact need in that exact moment. This means that in whichever part of the customer journey they are, we have the exact fitting content for that readily available. Also the usability of the website has to match customer's expectations. (Marketing director D)

Marketing automation enables that in that exact moment when a customer has a need, we can offer them some marketing message for that. (Customer experience director D)

The following understanding was formed based on the answers:

- Knowledge and data support the customer experience, as it allows targeting of relevant information and content to the customer through personalization.
- Automation helps with content delivery and in collecting and analyzing the data, but in the end it is the content that is being delivered that is the most important.

This matches with the model that was suggested for the connection between digital marketing ecosystems and customer experience in the chapter 2.4.

It became apparent in the interviews that the customer experience dimensions by Klaus (2013; 447–448) were not completely familiar to the participants at least in the sense of tools that would affect them. The dimensions of social presence, context familiarity and value for money were not even seen as relevant for the participating companies. *Usability* was the first dimension, and participants felt that it was an important segment of customer

experience. Companies measure the usability of their websites with different analytics tools, and improve the site based on the results. For some usability came from communication and guidance that was possible with the tools in the ecosystem, and for others improving usability meant improving the content and the website design with CMS tools. Some companies had personalization tools on their websites that improved usability as well as the dimension of *product presence*. Most companies did not have any specific tools for product presence, but the participants saw that on the website quality product images and videos as well as testimonials from other users were effective.

The third customer experience dimension, *communication*, was tackled with automated communication. The marketing automation system sends the customers messages such as welcome message, status updates on the orders and follow-up guidance. Automation is also an important tool in lead nurturing, which is to a large extent communication. Also different customer service tools, helpdesks and chats were present in the ecosystems of the participating companies.

I believe that marketing automation could be the workhorse behind communication of many kinds. (Marketing director A)

We also have automatic follow-ups after the customer has ordered, like here's what's going to happen next. "Please wait a moment while this is happening", so that the customer doesn't have the feeling that they don't know what's happening next especially after the purchase, so we have found it extremely important to tell them what's happening. . . It comes with email or the salesperson tells what is going on. (Marketing technologist B)

Interactivity tied in a lot with the communication dimension. Interactivity comes from the personalization of the content. Some companies did personalize their automated messaging, but for others interactivity meant being in touch with the customers on social media for example. Interactivity through personalization requires data of the customer, and if the company had that, it was possible to take personalization to individual customer level.

According to the participants, *trust* is especially built on communication and keeping the customer promise. Communication has to be on time and it has to be informative for the customer. Everything a company does has to radiate trustworthiness. Once again, marketing automation was mentioned as a tool that helps with building trust, as it makes on-time communications easy and it delivers content. Personal contacts are important touchpoints for building trust, as was found earlier in the interviews as well.

Everything that requires manual communications or is dependent on memory, can be automated. So I think that the trust is also built on that, as the machine is more reliable on many things, as you can create a trigger that send this message, instead of having a person to remember to do so. (Marketing director A)

For example we have put the faces of the customer service people on the app. This is very much a trust business, so we aim to strengthen the trust. And that all of our services work and the marketing works and of course that everything is truthful. (Marketing director D)

A lot hangs on the interaction with the salesperson, they take care of the customer. They often have strong personal relationships between the customer and our people. (Marketing technologist B)

Social presence was for most a dimension that hadn't really been considered before, and they had no solutions for it in the ecosystem. The participants did not have much to say about *context familiarity* either, as well as *value for money*. These dimensions didn't apply to the type of business the participating companies were doing. The tools that the participants mentioned to affect each dimension are compared to what literature suggested in the table 9 below.

Table 9 Marketing tools that affect customer experience

CX Dimension	Findings in literature	Findings in interviews
Trust	Social and relationship <i>(Email, automation, customer service)</i>	Automation, communication tools
Communication	Content and experience <i>(Email, automation)</i>	Email, automation, chat
Usability	Content and experience, Commerce and sales <i>(CMS, Ecommerce tools)</i>	CMS, Analytics, personalization tools
Interactivity	Content and experience, Data, Social and relationship <i>(Automation, analytics, integration, CRM)</i>	Personalization, automation, social media, communication tools
Product presence	Content and experience <i>(CMS)</i>	Personalization tools
Social presence	Social and relationship <i>(Social media management)</i>	-
Context familiarity	Commerce and sales <i>(ecommerce tools)</i>	-
Value for money	All	-

As we see from the table, the dimensions that were seen of biggest importance, usability, interactivity, communication and trust, had similar findings in both the empirical analysis as well as the interviews.

4.3.2 Development of the digital marketing ecosystem for better customer experience

The final interview theme was probably the most interesting theme, as it focused on what the companies were planning to do and what they saw as worthy of investing in. The questions focused on the functions that needed to be changed or developed in their digital marketing ecosystem in order to improve the customer experience, or if they saw any

problems in their ecosystem that they would like to fix. All of the problems and improvements were seen to improve customer experience when fixed or put into practice. The first main problem was that the ecosystems are not being used to their maximum potential. Even though the tools could do so much, companies were not able to use them effectively yet due to organizational restrictions. On the flipside it also means that tools such as automation will bring increasing results for companies in the years to come.

The tech that we have enables us to do whatever we want, but it's restricted by our organizational capabilities. For example we would need enormous resources for content creation so that we could create the amount of content that would be needed to actually offer blogs, white papers and whatnot that match the customer interests. (Marketing technologist B)

Not reaching the maximum potential of these new digital marketing ecosystem tools also comes from a shift to a new more tech-centric marketing approach. All changes in general take time to be implemented and adopted, and so is the case here with new marketing technology. Participants talked about some difficulties they face with acceptance and adoption especially among the salespeople in regards to marketing automation.

The hardest thing probably is that we've had to adopt completely new kinds of things in marketing than what we are used to. That is not traditional marketing to build infrastructures and think about data and integrations. (Marketing director A)

We have a historical burden that we have old legacy systems from the Stone Age, but we have to live with them and they don't allow us to do things like this. (Customer experience director D)

Many participants talked about the need for a complete overview of the customer's journey. This data and knowledge of the customer is needed for effective and relevant marketing communications as well as sales, but also for marketing automation. This

We have to know about the customer, what they do, what they want, so much more than what we know now. (Digital marketing manager C)

We need to have the complete overview of the customer visible to our people in every situation, so that we see how the customer has been encountered in different physical and digital channels, so that we could do the right links. (Customer experience manager D)

[We want to bring this behavioral data] to our CRM and overall the role of the CRM is intended to be emphasized, so that there is all the data for such users that don't use any specialty programs. (Business solution manager E)

This need for data is fixed by integrating more tools into the ecosystem, so that CRM and automation can use the data that is available from the integrated systems. But integrations are not always straight forward in large and well-established companies, as old legacy systems don't allow for direct integrations.

All of our legacy systems don't have that [integration] possibility to discuss to one another. And that is a very long process how to integrate those in a smart way. That is something where we need also a lot of external help as well, and that is costly. (Marketing technologist B)

Once the companies have the needed data integrations and knowledge of their customers actual needs, they can start targeting and personalizing content for them. This however requires a lot of readily available content, so that proper targeting and personalization could be achieved, and that is something companies don't seem to have resources for.

I wish that we could constantly measure the customer satisfaction when they have visited or interacted in our service, and if they are not satisfied, why. And from this we could get to the customers actual needs. I would like to improve our targeted communications, so that whichever our system they visit, the content that is produced for them is somehow related to the customers profile and role. (Business solution manager E)

And then building these real lead nurturing paths so that when we actually have more of that content, then we could concentrate more and more on the customer experience based on the customers behavior. (Marketing technologist B)

[Our upcoming ecommerce platform] helps us to actually reach leads, so that we can initiate lead nurturing programs. (Marketing automation specialist F)

While the plan and goals for using digital marketing ecosystems might be clear, it doesn't translate into action. Many companies hadn't set up proper targeting and personalization, and marketing automation was basically used for delivering mass messages.

At the moment our communications is the same for everyone, unless we have done some smaller target groups in the CRM. (Business solution manager E)

I have to get the segmentation groups from sales and marketing managers who know and discuss all the time who to target. But then it disappears at some point. You know like: "Send it to everyone". I mean you have planned it though, and it says here to target these and the persona could be this. But somehow it all disappears before it gets to me. (Marketing automation specialist F)

The key findings are presented in the table 10 below.

Table 10 Improvements to digital marketing ecosystems that would benefit the customer experience

Improvement or problem	Reasons	Solutions
Ecosystem and especially marketing automation are not used to their maximal potential	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - New age for marketing, where it's about data and tech - Old fashioned procedures and management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Operating procedures must be improved Training users
A more complete overview of the customer is needed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Automation requires knowledge and data of the customer 	Data sources and tools must be integrated into the ecosystem so that CRM and automation have sufficient data
True content personalization and targeting is lacking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Automation requires lots of quality content for personalization - Companies do not have resources for wide scale content creation 	Increased investments in content creation

Creating a well-working digital marketing ecosystem also requires a lot of management, as Marketing director A put it concisely: *"The more you build [your ecosystem], the more you have to build the management model."* The systems must be managed in order to get the benefits from them.

4.3.3 Discussion

The selling companies are focusing in their customer experience management on the marketing tools that affect the dimensions of trust, communication, usability and interactivity. For this study a bit broader customer experience framework was selected. This was due

to the explorative nature of the study and wanting to hear from the participants how they felt about the subject without guiding them too much with the questions. Hence Klaus's (2013, 443) customer experience dimensions were chosen. It was apparent, that not all of the dimensions were found relevant. Especially value for money, context familiarity and product presence to some extent were not regarded as important and they were something that the companies hadn't really focused on. Instead the answers emphasized the dimensions of trust, communication and usability. This finding is in line with what Lemke et al. (2011, 857) found in their study, as we placed their findings into the dimensions of trust, communication and interactivity in chapter 2.4.

Knowledge of the customer's needs enables the company to have proper targeting and use personalized messaging based on the data they have of the customer. The customer sees this as getting relevant information, which was in the interviews seen as one of the important aspects for the customers. This finding supported the effect model that was established in the figure 2, which found that customer experience was improved through better targeting and personalization (eg. Redding, 2015, 260; Rae, 2016, 22; Schwenn Sebring, 2018, 14–16). Personalization was enabled by better understanding of the customer's needs. Digital marketing tools that had the biggest impact on customer experience were related to this knowledge-personalization-relevance connection. Especially the effect and the potential of marketing automation was recognized by all of the participants.

Not all of the companies are there yet, and there are still many obstacles on the way to reach the full benefits of marketing ecosystems. The need for more customer data and knowledge was clear, as it was mentioned by several participants when discussed about potential improvements in ecosystems.

5 CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Improving customer experience through a proper digital marketing ecosystem

Finding a strong connection between previous B2B customer experience research (Lemke, 2011) and the empirical results increases the reliability of this study. As all of the most important B2B customer experience aspects found by them were also mentioned while discussing about marketing ecosystems, a connection between the most important B2B customer experience aspects and digital marketing ecosystems can be suggested. This connection is supported both by the interviews as well as the various studies and articles found for the theoretical review.

With this finding, we can suggest how a digital marketing ecosystem should work along the customer journey based on the findings of how marketing tools work and what benefits they offer, as well as the important customer experience aspects. As Stone et al. (2017, 220) said, a good customer experience leads to the customers being more willing to give data. This can be seen as coming from lower bounce rates from the website, interest in the content and more page views. All these interactions increase the company's knowledge of that particular customer, and their customer experience can be further improved with this knowledge. From this we can improve the model that was first presented in chapter 2.4. This model in the figure 4 represents the connection from digital marketing ecosystem to improved customer experience.

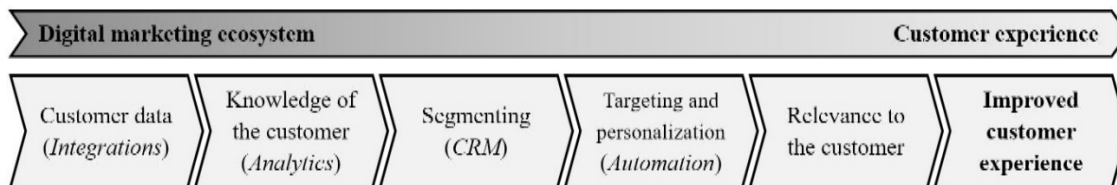


Figure 4 The connection between digital marketing ecosystems and customer experience

This figure displays the steps from ecosystem functions and tools to customer experience. In parenthesis are different martech tools that were recognized as being important for each step in the model. Customer data is the first step in improving customer's experience. If the company does not have data about the customer, how could they know what improves their customer experience. This data is gathered from various tools that are in use in the company, and the data is then connected to the marketing automation systems

through integrations. This data is then analyzed to form knowledge from the data. With this knowledge the customers can be divided into customer segments, and targeting and personalization can begin. This is usually done through the use of marketing automation and CRM. Different personalized content is delivered to the customer based on their previous behavior. When the communication and the content matches customer's needs, it is relevant, which is seen to improve their customer experience.

Based on the results of the expert interviews, it was noticed that the framework that was prepared for this study was not completely relevant. The results showed a clear connection between the phenomena, and based on the findings a refined model in figure 5 can be suggested for how the digital marketing ecosystem affects the formation of customer experience and how this process positions along the customer journey.

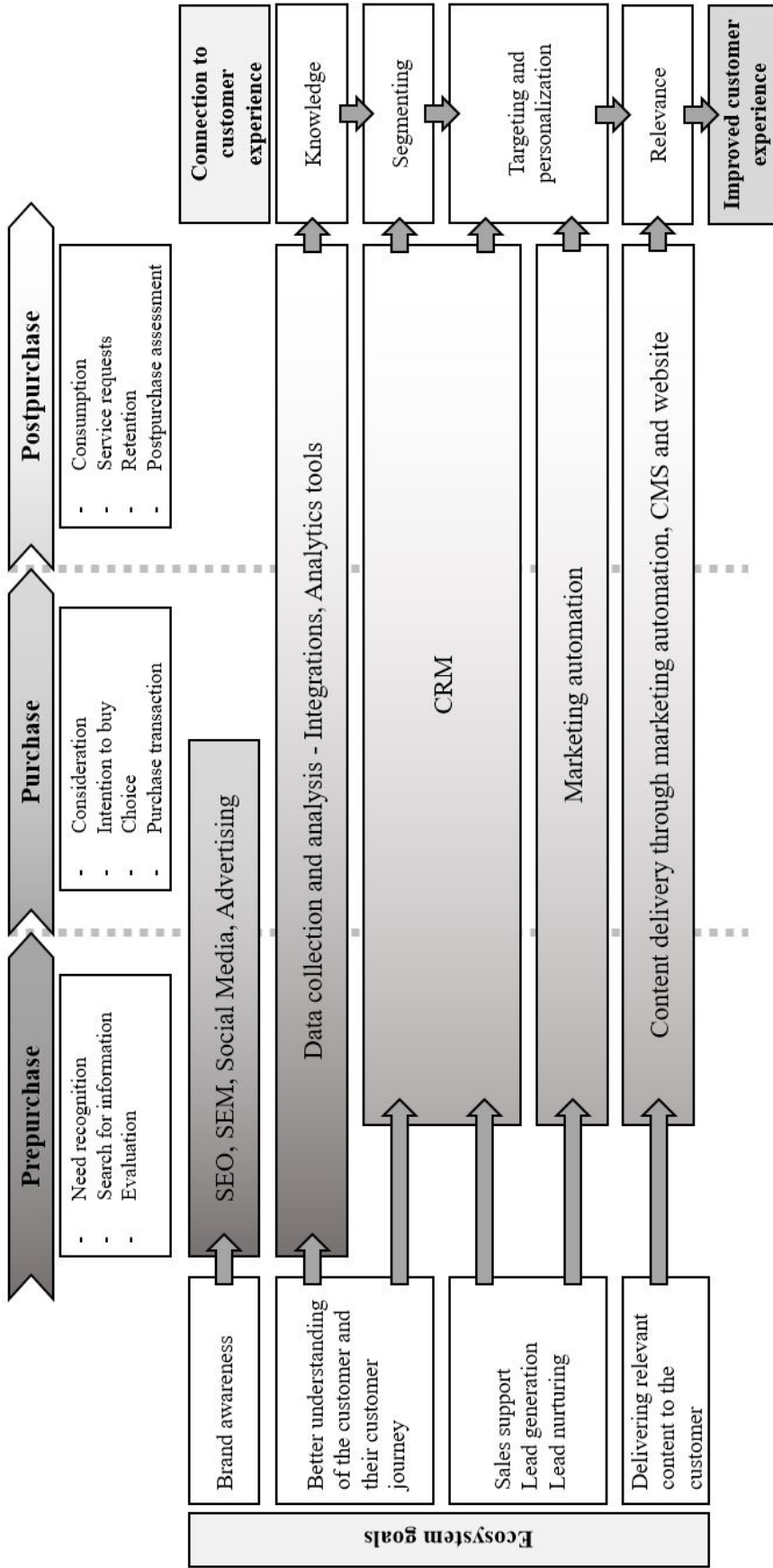


Figure 5 The effect of marketing tools on customer experience along the customer journey

This model shows which tools are used in each phase to fulfill the marketing goal. Then, it is pointed out how the usage of these tools to achieve ecosystem goals translates into effects on customer experience. On the top of the figure the progression of the customer journey is divided into the three phases: prepurchase, purchase and postpurchase. Also, some typical steps in each phase are presented below this timeline.

On the left-hand side of the model there are the goals of the digital marketing ecosystem that were found during the interviews. The goals are similar to the benefits that were found in the literature review. These goals of the ecosystem can be seen as the steps that are needed to be taken to progress through the stages presented in the figure 4. The goals are connected to different marketing tools that were seen to be used to achieve these goals and they are used during different stages of the customer journey, as visualized with the timeline.

In this model the dimensions of customer experience were replaced by the term relevance. As was seen in the interviews, the choice of customer experience dimensions by Klaus (2013, 443) in the framework did not match completely with the actual situation. Trust, interactivity, usability and communication were seen to be the most relevant categories, but the tighter and more refined aspects of B2B customer experience by Lemke et al. (2011, 857) proved to be accurate for this digital marketing ecosystem context as well. Those customer experience dimensions by Klaus (2013) that were found relevant can all be seen to be improved with right content at the right time, which in practice means relevance.

Table 11 Relevance at the core of customer experience

Dimension	Comments
Trust	<i>We are experts, and we can deliver real benefits and insights to our clients on what kinds of effects different solutions have and on what they should focus on when making their decisions.” (Business solution manager E)</i>
Communication	<i>[With our automated communication] we ask for example how are you doing, are you satisfied, or it could be something sales related. Or it can be related to something that the customer has bought from us and we help them for example to use it better or we give some instructions or help them do self-service. (Marketing director A)</i>

Usability	<p><i>... the right kind of communication that we can do with the ecosystem, offer instructions and guidance and through that it affects the usability. (Marketing director A)</i></p> <p><i>We have a help center with posts about “how to do things” and quick help and instructions to our systems... Also here that guidance and information and on the website easy access to customer service if they want to speak with someone. (Marketing technologist B)</i></p>
Interactivity	<p><i>And if we think about personalization elsewhere, of course we aim to personalize emails very much according to the segment. Meaning which target audience it is. And then, if the data allows, we take it all the way to personal level... (Digital marketing manager C)</i></p>

Relevant information, content and communication help with building trust. Communication is more effective and gives the customer more benefits, when the message is relevant to them. Usability improves, when proper guides and information is available easily, and interactivity is better when the content and communication changes based on the customer and their behavior.

It was found that the interviewed companies were still struggling with the implementation and effective utilization of digital marketing ecosystems and marketing automation. The systems could be used for much more in the marketing, and especially the possibilities of marketing automation were seen to be almost limitless. The whole idea of integrated digital marketing ecosystem is still such a new concept that companies have not been able to get the systems working yet completely. Naturally the participants represented large enterprises, where new implementations may not be as agile as elsewhere, but all companies did see the value of digital marketing ecosystems.

Even though the initial implementation and integration of different marketing tools to kick off the ecosystem might be possible, content creation proved to be a bottleneck. As was found in the interviews, proper lead nurturing and personalization requires a lot of diverse content to suit different customer needs. The biggest improvements to customer experience come from relevance, which is not possible with content that is mass-delivered to all customers without targeting. This content creation is something that many companies do not have resources at the moment, and is one of the key issues perhaps slowing down the spread of digital marketing ecosystems.

5.2 Managerial implications

These results are being useful for any company that is looking to implement modern marketing solutions. The found benefits of digital marketing ecosystems are applicable for any company, and the understanding of how they can affect customer experience offers

good insights to not only digital marketing and ecosystems, but also to other scenarios as well. The problems that the interviewed companies had had a lot to do with slow organizational paradigm shift to a new age of marketing. Smaller companies may be able to implement and benefit from ecosystem approach more quickly, and legacy systems may not be as binding for them. If the change is planned properly and the whole organization commits to it, effective utilization of automation and other digital marketing ecosystem aspects may be realized faster.

Based on the results and discussion, suggestions can be made to marketing managers who are looking to integrate their marketing tools into an ecosystem. Following managerial statements can be made:

1. Set up proper integrations to ensure enough data for targeting and personalization.
2. Both the sales and marketing must be trained in order to achieve results from automation. They must know the principle and the way integrations, automation and CRM work so that they can be used effectively.
3. The building of customer experience starts from the very beginning of the journey and is formed in each touchpoint from there on.
4. Not all touchpoints are in the reach of the company, so brand owned touchpoints are not completely decisive factor for customer experience
5. Companies should focus on content creation, as without content true personalization cannot be achieved.
6. Use time to plan the ecosystem and proper lead nurturing paths.
7. The digital marketing ecosystem is not a direct sales tool, but it is a tool that strongly supports sales and can have effects on the bottom-line with reduced costs, higher revenue and scalability.
8. It takes time and effort to set up the digital marketing ecosystem with automation and proper lead nurturing, but it takes away the manual work from the salespeople and it helps with effective and targeted personalization.
9. Companies know the benefits of having a digital marketing ecosystem, but they can't capitalize on them fully yet.
10. Marketing ecosystems are capable of much, much more than what is currently done, and especially in the future with the implementation of artificial intelligence and machine learning capabilities.
11. Marketing is only one area of business and implementing a large scale marketing ecosystem takes time and resources. Limited resources in the companies means that it's not a quick answer to marketing.
12. Digital marketing ecosystem can be seen affecting customer experience by improving communication and usability, building trust and offering interactive content. A lot of these aspects also boil down to relevance.

Managers should invest more resources in effective implementation, usage and support of automation as it has direct connection to improving customer experience. The resource investments should be in form of training personnel to operate in a way that supports the use of automation, such as linking all the campaign in CRM and using the CRM system to track customer interactions. Also, more resources should be invested in content creation, so that automation has enough targeted content to be delivered. Segmenting and then using these target segments in marketing is also a starting step for proper automation usage.

On an organizational level it's about finding a balance between investments, and marketing is only one area in the company. Digital marketing manager C concluded well: *"It's a double-edged sword in that sense that marketing is not always the number one priority."* This suggested that even though a proper digital marketing ecosystem with effective automation and personalized messages on a customer to customer basis may offer a lot of business benefits as well as improved customer experience, companies simply do not have the resources to invest in such solutions and go all out with their ecosystems. Hence the implementation is slower and gradual, but companies do understand the benefits.

5.3 Limitations and suggestions for future research

While the topic of digital marketing ecosystems and their implementation is still rather new, some definitions and information in this study comes from non-academic papers and sources. To counteract this, multiple sources were attempted to be found for each non-academic proposition. Also, the expert interviews verified or were in line with the definitions made in the study.

When asked about different marketing tools that the participating companies had for different customer experience dimensions, it was noticed that the customer experience framework was not fully relevant to the digital B2B marketing environment or at least that the participants did not see the relevance for some dimensions. This study is only based on the insights given by six companies. The usage and finesse of their digital marketing ecosystem was unclear at the time of interview. The situation in the companies was varied, and hence the given comments differed. This also means that comments were given from different perspectives, both from companies who had established digital marketing ecosystems as well as from companies who were only just implementing their first marketing automation systems for example.

These results and managerial implications are based on comments by Finnish medium and large enterprises. No small companies were interviewed, so the utilization in such companies may differ.

The results of this study pointed that the most direct way a digital marketing ecosystem can affect customer experience is through the delivery of relevant content to the customer. It would be interesting to delve more into the area of B2B content creation and content delivery. What type of content should be produced and delivered for each touchpoint, and how different content should be produced for different customer segments. Also further research into customer knowledge could be made. Especially interesting would be to study how instead of passively collecting information, companies could encourage their customers to tell more clearly what their preferences are and what they need, so that the company is then able to understand them better and target them relevant content.

The customer experience dimensions by Klaus (2013) were not completely relevant in this ecosystem context. It could be further studied what are the actual dimensions that are relevant and operable with marketing tools. It would be interesting to ask this from the customers, and not the selling company, as in the end it is the customer whose opinion matters in customer experience.

6 SUMMARY

In this study, the connections between digital marketing ecosystems and customer experience were explored. The research purpose of exploring and identifying those marketing activities in digital marketing ecosystems that have an effect on the customer experience was tackled with a qualitative research method. First, an initial framework was created based on information found from a literature review. This framework was then used to form a set of interview questions for the empirical expert interviews.

Customer experience is built along the customer journey touchpoints, where the customer is in contact with the company in some way. The touchpoints can be either brand-owned, or external, meaning the company cannot affect them directly. The customer experience is the sum of the experience in these touchpoints.

Digital marketing ecosystem adaption and utilization varies a lot between companies. Some have sophisticated lead nurturing paths and automations set up, while many are only just getting started. Companies know the benefits of what a properly set-up digital marketing ecosystem can offer through data integration, automation, personalization and lead nurturing. These benefits include elements such as marketing automation, improved collaboration between sales and marketing, reduced costs and increased efficiency and profits, and improved customer experience.

The ways in which a digital marketing ecosystem can improve customer experience, is through building trust, helping with communication and improving the usability and interactivity. Especially relevant communication and content is key to improving the company's customers' experience. Relevance comes from knowing the customer and their needs, being able to segment them into subgroups and then automatically target them relevant content and personalize their experience. Targeted content answered the customers' needs, hence creating relevance. This finding was later confirmed in the empirical expert interviews, where the participants suggested the same connection between the phenomena.

Based on the results of the interviews, a model was created that highlights the connection from digital marketing ecosystem and its different goals to creation of customer experience. This connection was presented along a customer journey model that further highlights how different marketing tools should be present during different phases of the journey to create the customer experience improving benefits. With this model, a clear connection between the two main topics of the study was found. Also the findings from the interviews reinforced the previous perceptions of the most important B2B customer experience aspects.

Even though companies did realize the benefits and even the connection between digital marketing ecosystems and customer experience, they were not able to capitalize on the systems just yet. Reaching the full potential of the benefits and the systems requires

more work to be done, such as more integrations and data sources were needed for better overview of their customer.

To get the whole ecosystem working, especially in large enterprises, it takes time and resources. It takes efforts from both marketing and sales to implement these systems and to use them effectively. Especially content creation was a function that needed to be invested in in order to fulfill the content need of personalization and targeting. While the marketing ecosystems are still a relatively new topic of interest for companies, they are looking forward to implementing digital marketing ecosystem solutions to improve their business effectiveness.

Most of the shortcomings of digital marketing ecosystems were found to be organizational, rather than stemming from the ecosystem itself. The interviews strongly suggested that the tools in the ecosystem have a lot more to offer in terms of functionality and possibilities. In the coming years, artificial intelligence and machine learning will further improve the capabilities of the digital marketing ecosystem, so the marketing will continue to evolve and gain new possibilities.

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APPENDIX 1 INTERVIEW FRAME

Question	Research goal
Title, organization type	<i>Background information</i>
<i>Theme 1: Nature of the company's digital marketing ecosystem</i>	
1. Describe your digital marketing ecosystem. What are its primary tools?	<i>Defining the ecosystem</i>
2. What tools do you use for the following marketing functions and how do you use them? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Advertising and promotion b. Content and experience c. Social and relationship d. Commerce and sales e. Data f. Management 	<i>Scoping question for following questions</i>
3. Which marketing tools are used and important during the different phases of the customer journey, namely before, during and after the purchase?	<i>Which tools have the biggest impact on different touchpoints</i>
<i>Theme 2: Marketing goals of using the digital marketing ecosystem</i>	
4. What is the most important area of your marketing ecosystem, without which it couldn't work?	<i>Which tool in itself drives the marketing success of a company?</i>
5. What is the marketing goal of your ecosystem?	<i>What segment of customer journey and marketing actions are the most important, and do the other questions back this.</i>
6. What is the main benefit of the digital marketing ecosystem for your company?	<i>Do the participants see the same benefits as was found in the literature review?</i>
<i>Theme 3: Nature of customer experience</i>	
7. How do you define customer experience in your company?	<i>Defining a term in the company's context</i>
8. What forms the customer experience?	<i>Comparing to the framework</i>
9. How do you measure customer experience?	<i>Are companies able to measure it?</i>
10. What are the usual touchpoints where your customer interacts with your company along their customer journey?	<i>Defines the customer journey in the company's context</i>

<i>Theme 4: The role of the ecosystem in customer experience</i>	
11. Which touchpoints have the biggest impact on customer experience before, during and after the purchase?	<i>What are the moments-of-truth</i>
12. What do you consider to be the central tools in your marketing ecosystem that improve customer experience?	<i>Which tools should be focused on when building a customer experience centric ecosystem</i>
13. How does your digital marketing ecosystem take the following customer experience categories into consideration: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Usability b. Product presence c. Communication d. Social presence e. Interactivity f. Context familiarity g. Trust h. Value for money 	<i>How well the ecosystem takes different online service customer experience dimensions into consideration</i>
<i>Theme 5: Development of the digital marketing ecosystem for better customer experience</i>	
14. What functions would you change or develop in your digital marketing ecosystem in order to improve the customer experience?	<i>What the focus should be, what could be improved and how?</i>
15. Are there any problems you would like to fix in your current ecosystem?	<i>What is not working</i>