

# CONTENT MARKETING'S EFFECT ON CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT

– A QUALITATIVE STUDY USING A  
MULTIDIMENSIONAL APPROACH

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## **Abstract**

The marketing landscape is changing, with the focus shifting from traditional marketing methods towards digital marketing. Enterprises must realize the importance of this new paradigm to not risk falling behind competitors. The new paradigm focuses on customer relationships and trying to attract and create loyal customers. A new way of creating loyal trusting customer relationships is by using content marketing, meaning providing customers with valuable information in the form of content and enabling two-way communication. To understand how consumers perceive content and why they choose to engage or not, is crucial for enterprises, in creating successful content marketing.

This study aims to provide knowledge and understanding of how content marketing affects customer engagement from a consumer's perspective. This study is a qualitative study using several semi-structured interviews and observations to gather data. A conceptual framework from previous research is used to analyse the result, this framework is a multidimensional approach of how consumers react and perceive different types of online content marketing.

The outcome of this study shows that consumer engagement is a psychological state that is hard to reach for any enterprise/brand, to be truly successful the consumers dimensions of cognitive, emotional and action response must all be affected, which can be enabled through credible, targeted and differentiated content marketing

**Keywords:** Content marketing, customer engagement, social media, consumer engagement, digital marketing, brand engagement

## Sammanfattning

Omgivningen för marknadsföring håller på att förändras, fokus har flyttats från traditionella metoder mot digitala marknadsmetoder. Företag måste förstå hur viktig detta paradigmskifte är för att inte halka efter sina konkurrenter. Det nya paradigmet fokuserar på kundrelationer och att försöka attrahera och skapa lojala kunder. Ett nytt sätt att skapa dessa relationer är att använda innehållsmarknadsföring (content marknadsföring), med det menas att tillhandahålla värdefull information i form av innehåll och att bistå med plattformar för att underlätta tvåvägskommunikation mellan kunder och företag. Att förstå hur kunder uppfattar innehåll och varför de väljer att engagera sig i den eller inte är avgörande för ett företag i att skapa lyckad innehållsmarknadsföring.

Syftet med denna studie är att förse läsaren med kunskap och förståelse för hur innehållsmarknadsföring påverkar kundengagemang ur ett kundperspektiv. Studien är en kvalitativ studie som använder semi-strukturerade intervjuer och observationer som dataunderlag. Ett ramverk baserat på tidigare forskning används för att analysera resultatet, som byggs på ett flerdimensionellt synsätt hur kunder reagerar och upplever olika typer av innehållsmarknadsföring.

Resultatet av studien visar hur kundengagemang är ett psykiskt tillstånd som är svårt för företag/varumärken att skapa hos konsumenten. För att uppnå lyckosam innehållsmarknadsföring måste kundens kognitiva, emotionella och viljan att ta handling stimuleras, vilket kan skapas genom trovärdig, målinriktad och differentierad innehållsmarknadsföring.

**Nyckelord:** Innehållsmarknadsföring, content marketing, kundengagemang, sociala medier, digital marknadsföring, varumärkesengagemang.

## Table of content

1	Introduction .....	- 1 -
1.1	Previous research .....	- 1 -
1.2	Problem discussion .....	- 4 -
1.3	Research purpose and question .....	- 5 -
1.4	Limitations .....	- 5 -
2	Theoretical framework.....	- 6 -
2.1	Content marketing.....	- 6 -
2.1.1	Social media marketing .....	- 7 -
2.2	Consumer behaviour online and on social media .....	- 7 -
2.3	Brand engagement .....	- 8 -
2.4	Customer engagement.....	- 9 -
2.5	Theoretical summary .....	- 11 -
3	Research methodology .....	- 13 -
3.1	Research approach .....	- 13 -
3.2	Research design .....	- 13 -
3.3	Sampling .....	- 14 -
3.4	Ethical principles .....	- 15 -
3.5	Data collection .....	- 15 -
3.6	Data analysis .....	- 16 -
3.7	Method reflection.....	- 17 -
3.7.1	Trustworthiness .....	- 17 -
3.7.2	Authenticity .....	- 18 -
4	Result.....	- 19 -
4.1	Cognitive.....	- 19 -
4.2	Emotional.....	- 20 -
4.3	Action.....	- 21 -
5	Analysis .....	- 23 -
5.1	Cognitive.....	- 23 -
5.2	Emotional.....	- 24 -
5.3	Action.....	- 24 -
5.4	Analysis of CE's fundamental propositions in relation to content marketing .....	- 25 -
6	Conclusion and contributions .....	- 27 -
6.1	Conclusion .....	- 27 -
6.2	Contribution to the field of marketing .....	- 28 -
7	Limitations and further studies .....	- 28 -
8	References .....	- 29 -
9	Appendix .....	- 32 -
9.1	Interview guide .....	- 32 -

## List of Figures

Figure 1	Erdoğmuş & Tatar's (2015) model on what drives brand engagement.....	- 8 -
Figure 2	Pansari & Kumar (2017), Customer management levels .....	- 11 -

# 1 Introduction

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*This chapter gives the reader an introduction to the need for change in marketing strategy, digital marketing and content marketing is introduced as alternatives to traditional marketing. Further on previous research within the area of content marketing and customer engagement is presented followed by a problematization and purpose of the research. Lastly the limitations of the study are presented.*

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Marketing is defined by Todor (2016, p. 1) as “Everything a company does to place its product or service in the hands of potential customers”. Throughout the years there has been a change in the concepts of marketing, from transactional concepts such as pricing, promotion and distribution, towards relationship concepts such as customer trust, risk and commitment (Baines & Fill 2016). Nowadays more traditional marketing methods, such as TV ads, email lists and online ads tends to be ignored which is one reason for changing marketing strategy (Rancati, Codignola & Capatina 2015). The change towards a digital society has forced enterprises to adopt new ways to meet the expectations from customers and other stakeholders, which has resulted in the concept of digital marketing (Wertime & Fenwick 2009).

Compared with conventional marketing communications, one major aspect in digital marketing is content, Bill Gates released a paper in 1996 named “Content is king”, where he predicted that success on The Internet would be created through content. This phrase has since then become a popular slogan in the digital economy (Rancati, Codignola & Capatina 2015).

There is reason to believe that the trend of decreased investment in traditional marketing methods is affected by the change in consumer behavior (Rancati et al. 2015; Opreana & Vinerean 2015). Nowadays consumers tend to not want to be interrupted and therefore more consumers ignore marketing messages that seem intrusive (Rancati et al. 2015). More consumers ignore TV commercials, unsubscribe to email lists and more phone numbers enters “do not call lists”, which are indications that it is easier for consumers to ignore interruptive ads (Rancati et al. 2015; Malthouse, Haenlein, Skiera, Wege & Zhang 2013).

Digital marketing was created in the early 90’s when the internet was first introduced to the public, in its earliest form it consisted of static messages and information with basically no interaction with the consumer (Kingsnorth 2016). Since then a lot has happened, Google, YouTube and smartphones have been invented and the ways for enterprises to market themselves online are many. Marketing an enterprise online is more or less exactly what digital marketing is about and an important aspect is to provide the online audience with the content it wants, this is called content marketing (Moran 2016).

## 1.1 Previous research

Marketing is about creating and retaining customers (Grigsby 2015; Tracy 2014; Patrutio & Baltes 2016); however the way to do this has changed and is still changing, much because of the digitalization and evolvment of internet technologies (Rancati et al. 2015). According to Patrutio & Baltes (2016) content marketing is a crucial part of digital marketing. The reason is that the major part of any enterprises digital marketing should be built on identifying the

consumer and its needs, by doing this enterprises can acquire trust and build a customer-company relationship (ibid). Content marketing strategies involve the usage of digital platforms such as blogs and social networks where high quality content is presented to the consumer (ibid). The content presented on these platforms as well as through other media is what creates value for the customers and will help enterprises attract, convert and retain them (ibid).

Content marketing should seek to be informative, entertaining and helpful; a proof of content marketing is if the content itself helps audiences solve a problem even though they never end up buying a product or service (Moran 2016). According to Moran (2016) content marketing should possess four properties; *credibility, targeted, differentiated* and *measurable*, which are further described in section 2.3. Content plays an important part in digital marketing since creative, good and valuable content can drive customer engagement (Ahmad, Musa & Harun 2016). The definition of content marketing is according to Content Marketing Institute (2015) “a strategic marketing approach that focuses on creating and distributing valuable, relevant and consistent content to attract and retain a clearly-defined audience to gain profit”.

Malthouse et al. (2013) mention that because of consumers’ ability to filter content to what appeals to them, enterprises must adapt communication strategies to fit inbound messages and create customer value. Content is a way of providing information which enables the customer to engage in a certain brand (ibid). The only reason for customers to visit a certain web page is not to purchase products but also to seek information about, for example already purchased products, through content provided on the page (ibid). To maintain brand credibility an enterprise must enable co-creation of content with the customer, for example a forum where customers can write and answer issues regarding products or enable customer reviews on products (ibid).

Boateng & Okoe (2015) mention that a consumer's attitude towards an object will make him/her act accordingly. The study concludes that social media is a positive platform to engage customers as a marketing tool. Enterprises should however be careful in choosing content since consumers play an active role in content sharing, they are no longer passive recipients of advertising, they now play a large role in what content they want to receive and engage in (Kilgour, Sasser & Larke, R. 2015; Keller 2009). Boateng & Okoe (2015) also mention that it is important for companies to link social media content to their website for the customer to validate the content posted on social media and improve credibility. If enterprises can stimulate consumers to share messages, they would be perceived in the community as more credible sources of information compared to commercial sources, therefore creating positive attitudes towards the brand (Kilgour et al 2015)

In the article “Impact of Social Media Content Marketing towards Brand Health (Ahmad, Musa & Harun 2016) the authors emphasize the role of Social Media Content Marketing (SMCM) in brand health as it is a platform for consumers to get familiar with the brand. Ahmad et al. (2016) mention content marketing as an important element in creating good brand health, which means the evaluation of the brand from digital audiences (ibid). Measuring of brand health is done by certain key performance indicators (KPI) such as time on site, likes, subscriptions, followers and repeat visitors (ibid). Ahmad et al. also emphasizes the need for consistent monitoring of brand health score which is how the customer engages in the content. What can be derived from previous research is that social media platforms has limited the control of an enterprises content and messages (Kilgour, Sasser & Larke, R. 2015; Baines & Fill 2014; Evans & Mckee). With this in mind it is important for enterprises to

create content that engages a consumer to share messages in their social networks (Kilgour et al 2015). Kilgour et al. (2015) mention key questions that need to be answered when creating content; “how do you stimulate customers to distribute your message?”, “who should you get to distribute your message?” Therefore it becomes important to understand your target group and their motives to be able to provide them with content that they would share in their social networks (ibid).

Online word of mouth such as online reviews have an impact on online consumer behavior, where the way a review is written also have an effect. Kronrod & Danziger (2013) found that using figurative language has a positive effect on how consumers perceive hedonistic goods. What is interesting is also that reviews that used explanatory language and described actions and emotions will affect the perceived helpfulness of a review (Moore 2015) while soft language makes the impact of a negative review greater (Hamilton, Vohs & McGill, 2014). Studies also show that people are less likely to transmit word of mouth on social media compared to offline because they perceive that there is a higher social risk on social media (Eisingerich, Chun, Liu, Jia & Bell 2015).

Content and messages that are developed by enterprises should be designed to enable users to enhance their self-esteem by sharing content, since the primary motive for use of social media is to improve feelings of self-esteem (Kilgour et al 2015). Kilgour et al. (2015) mention the importance of reaching key social influencers to spread messages on social networks since they are part of large networks within a certain community and therefore increases the likelihood of the content being looked at. Key social influencers’ social relationship status with the community will also reflect positivity and add credibility to the content since it will most likely not be perceived as a corporate message and advertising which is a key concept in content marketing (ibid).

The goal of content marketing is to provide consumers with content that they are willing to engage with. Ways of engaging in content means sharing, liking, commenting and adapting the message, then spreading it, thereby creating user-generated content. Psychological engagement in content is dependent on the consumer's goals needs and motives (Ashley & Tuten 2015). Consumers tend to engage in content to create positive self-images, which is an indication that consumers might not engage in content about products they like but rather in brands that corresponds with the ideal self (Schau & Gilly 2003).

There are many definitions of customer engagement (CE); this thesis however will use Brodie, Hollebeek, Jurić & Ilić (2011 p.260), definition;

Customer engagement (CE) is a psychological state that occurs by virtue of interactive, co-creative customer experiences with a focal agent/object (e.g., a brand) in focal service relationships. It occurs under a specific set of context dependent conditions generating differing CE levels; and exists as a dynamic, iterative process within service relationships that concrete value. CE plays a central role in a nomological network governing service relationships in which other relational concepts (e.g., involvement, loyalty) are antecedents and/or consequences in iterative CE processes. It is a multidimensional concept subject to a context- and/or stakeholder-specific expression of relevant cognitive, emotional and/or behavioral dimensions

In summary this definition explains customer engagement as a psychological state which occurs as a result of interaction with e.g. a brand, extending beyond individual transactions (ibid), meaning that CE extends beyond binary interactions thus it is not limited to a specific situation, behavior or context (Brodie et al 2011). This definition is used in this thesis because

it is not limited to any platforms or brands but rather to seek general knowledge of content marketing's effect on CE in a broader sense and not specific to any context and behavior.

## 1.2 Problem discussion

Research proves a paradigm shift in marketing from traditional marketing to digital marketing (Wertime & Fenwick 2009), consumers are less likely to engage in traditional marketing and means to ignore traditional advertising are increasing (Rancati, et al. 2015; Malthouse et al. 2013). Enterprises who do not accept changes in the marketing environment and consumer behavior risk falling behind.

Previous research states that content marketing is an important part of an enterprise's marketing (Patrutio & Baltes 2016; Ahmad, Musa & Harun 2016; Musa & Harun 2016). Content created and shared on various online platforms is what engages consumers which build a customer-company relationship and further leads to purchase intent. This is particularly important since the way content is shared and perceived by users cannot be controlled by an enterprise, whether positive or negative (Kilgour, Sasser & Larke, R. 2015; Baines & Fill 2014; Evans & Mckee), Users are no longer passive recipients of content, they actively engage and co-create by liking, sharing or commenting on content posted by enterprises (Kilgour et al. 2015), which is why it is important to understand why consumers chose to engage with content or not.

According to Kilgour et al (2015) it is important for enterprises to get customers to engage in their content, since it creates trust relationships and positive actions such as purchase or positive WOM. Eisingerich et al. (2015) on the other hand argues that customers avoid co-creation on social media, such as online WOM since it is associated with high social risk. Kilgour, Sasses & Larke (2015) further advocates the importance of choosing the right content since users play an active role in content sharing. What this thesis examines is what users of social media are being attracted by and what content they want to engage or not engage in.

Articles on content marketing (Colin 2016; Odden 2012), argue that content should seek to be informative, entertaining and helpful to help the audience solve a problem even though they might not actually buy a product on the same website as the content was found (Moran 2016). What is more important from the consumer's view? Can content in itself create and retain customers or is the product/service more crucial?

To summarize there are many indications that content marketing has to be considered as a marketing strategy and that it is an effective way of creating customer engagement. Content marketing is an important aspect in creating customer-brand relationships and engaging customers with the goal of driving traffic to the website and in the end driving profit. However there is a lack in research on the consumer's perceptions toward content. To what degree are consumers interacting, co-creating and engaging in content and why do they engage? And what part does content marketing play in consumer engagement?

### **1.3 Research purpose and question**

The purpose of this study is to provide knowledge and insights on why consumers choose to engage or not engage with content in an online environment. This thesis studies the phenomenon from a consumer perspective and more specifically it aims to contribute to research within customer engagement and content marketing. What will be studied is what the underlying reasons are for consumers to engage or not engage with content. Inbound marketing techniques such as content marketing are becoming more common (Patrutio & Baltes 2016), with the main goal of attracting customers to online platforms through high quality content (Kilgour et al. 2015; Kingsnorth 2016). Kilgour et al. (2015) mention the fast paced nature of social media environments and that the area is in constant need of validation and further research.

To reach the purpose this thesis aims to answer following research question:

*Why do customers decide to engage or not engage in online content marketing?*

### **1.4 Limitations**

This thesis is limited to the platforms for sharing of content marketing. The main focus is official websites of brands together with Facebook and Instagram which are the two most used social media platforms in Sweden, where the study is taking place (Davidsson, P. & Findahl, O. 2016). In regards to content marketing, these two platforms are mentioned most frequently, which further motivates the choice. Choosing the official website of the chosen brands is because content posted on other media is to drive traffic to the website. Boateng & Okoe (2015) mentions the importance to link social media content to their website to enable consumers to validate content, which further motivates the choice. The research is not a comparative study between brands, but rather seeks to gain generalized knowledge on the perception of content marketing from a consumer's point of view.

Note that in the thesis, the words customer and consumer is used, however we emphasize that in this thesis they have the same meaning and are used dependent on the context and reference used.

## 2 Theoretical framework

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*This second chapter provides the audience with a description of frequently used expressions regarding the domain, as well as the conceptual framework that is used for the result and analysis. The field of content marketing and customer engagement are described thoroughly since they are the focus area of the thesis.*

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### 2.1 Content marketing

Odden (2012 p. 99) describes content as “an approach to attract, engage and inspire customers to a logical conclusion to buy and share through content that emphasizes with the varied interests and behaviors during the buying cycle”. Customers nowadays educate themselves by searching various platforms to receive information about a specific object (ibid). Therefore it is important for enterprises to provide consumers with content that enables them to engage in the brand, which if successful leads to purchase intent (Kilgour et al 2015). Digital marketing sets the playing ground for content to be shared on, below are some of the most popular platforms for enterprises to create content (ibid).

Articles	Blogs	Case studies	Digital newsletters
E-books	E-mail	Images	Infographics
Microsites	Mobile content	News releases	PDFs
Podcasts	Research	Slideshows	Social media
Traditional media	Videos	Webinars	White papers

The concept of content marketing is that it should be informative, entertaining and helpful in the way that it helps the audience to solve a problem (Moran 2016). Moran (2016) states that for content marketing to be successful it needs to possess the four following properties: *credibility, targeted, differentiated and measurable*. These are further used in the result and analysis sections of this thesis. *Credibility* means that the content stands out from traditional kind of marketing which tends to be extravagant and loud, instead it is more similar to an article or documentary. Credibility is also created by not mentioning the specific product that is actually marketed since consumers nowadays are very prone to lose their trust towards content that explicitly does this. *Targeted*, just like other marketing, content marketing also needs to be targeted. However, it is more precise than most other marketing since today’s marketers have access to large amounts of customer data. It includes creating personas out of audiences such as motivations and psychographics, analyzing different stages of a buyer’s journey and also considering message resonance where the content exposed to a potential buyer matches his/hers relationship to the product/website. The third property is *differentiation*, meaning that an enterprise must offer to solve a consumer’s problem better than its competitors. This difference must, except from being different in product/service, also possess a difference that a market is willing to pay for. The last property is that the content strategy must be *measurable*, digitization has brought almost endless possibilities to analyze and measure different types of data that varies in volume, velocity, variety and veracity. Both structured data that can be put into spreadsheets and databases must be measured, as well as unstructured data such as images, videos and text. (Moran 2016)

### **2.1.1 Social media marketing**

According to the report “Swedes and the Internet” (Davidsson & Findahl 2016), time spent on internet especially on social media such as Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn is increasing for individuals in Sweden. Social media has become an everyday part of life where those who use social networks in Sweden spends about one hour per day browsing them (ibid). Previous research has also shown that investments in marketing are moving away from traditional marketing areas towards digital areas (Baines & Fill 2014).

Social media marketing (SMM) is a digital marketing technique that takes advantage of social technological platforms for the use of marketing activities (Baines & Fill 2014). Social media is changing the way consumers take part in offerings, nowadays anyone can comment, share and create information on brands or people (ibid). Enterprises can no longer control how they are perceived on the marketplace (ibid). Evans & Mckee (2010) put it in words as “The social web exposes the good, the bad and the ugly” meaning that all things regarding a specific brand can be shared whether positive or negative. Social media has had an impact on how enterprises work with marketing; many believe that traditional marketing methods might fade in the near future (ibid).

Another definition of social media marketing is “online resources that people use to share content: video, photos, images, text, ideas, insight, humor, opinion, gossip and news” (Alharbie 2015 p. 873). A large distinction compared to traditional marketing is that advertisers no longer have to pay large amounts of money to be seen or heard somewhere; they now have the possibility to create their own content to connect with consumers globally (Zarella 2010). Examples of common Social media platforms are; *Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube* and *LinkedIn* (ibid).

## **2.2 Consumer behaviour online and on social media**

The growth of Internet and social media usage has brought a change in how consumers feel and react to marketing (Stephen 2016). Among younger people, higher-income adults and college-educated in the US the use of internet is close to 100% and social media has more than 2 billion users (ibid). This increased usage affect how people search for, purchase and consume products as well as how they communicate with others about these products (ibid). This has naturally lead to more digital marketing from enterprises all over the world and the importance of understanding how consumers behave in these online settings needs to be examined and understood according to Stephen (2016).

Hwang & Jeong (2016) made a literature review on e-commerce and consumer behavior and found that price perceptions did not matter as much as for example reduced effort which was found to be the most salient factor when shopping online compared to traditional shopping. Customer service in the form of product returns, responsiveness on company policies and delivery times among others, was deemed as important according to consumers (ibid). The importance of a well-designed interface together with appealing product display and descriptions had an impact on how consumers felt about a website and affected their purchase decisions (ibid).

Ghose & Todri-Adamopoulos (2016) concludes that display advertising that does not require interaction from the user in an online setting triggers an interest to the advertiser's brand and product. Display advertising leads users to conduct active searches on search engines and websites as well as passively reacting to display advertising by showing a future behavior of clicking on banners and other display advertising (ibid). Furthermore Ghose & Todri-Adamopoulos (2016) acknowledges that a consumer's path towards a purchase on a website is always affected by a reservoir of previous experiences, brand equities and social influences, this makes it hard to prove the exact impact of any single advertisement.

Results of Boateng & Okoe's research said that a consumer's attitude towards an object will make him or her act accordingly. Tsai & Men's (2013) research further advocates this where they concluded that users that were more dependent on and had a positive attitude towards social media tended to engage more with brands social media platforms, especially in diffusing messages to their own personal pages. A consumer's motivation to engage in content and on social media platforms is also related to a sense of belongingness to a community where they are more likely to share content (Tsai & Men 2013).

### 2.3 Brand engagement

Hollebeek (2011, p. 790) defines brand engagement as:

“The level of an individual customer's motivational, brand-related and context-dependent state of mind characterized by specific levels of cognitive, emotional and behavioral activity in direct brand interactions”.

The meaning of “*direct brand interaction*” is a customer's interaction with a specific brand should be direct contact-based interaction, in comparison to indirect brand interaction meaning observing brand through mass communications (Hollebeek 2011). Further it is important to state the meaning of “*cognitive*”, “*emotional*” and “*behavioral*” activity to fully understand the definition. *Cognitive* activity is a customer's level of concentration and engrossment in the brand (ibid). *Emotional* activity can be a customer's level of brand related inspiration or pride. Lastly *behavioral* activity means a customer's level of willingness to interact with a brand.

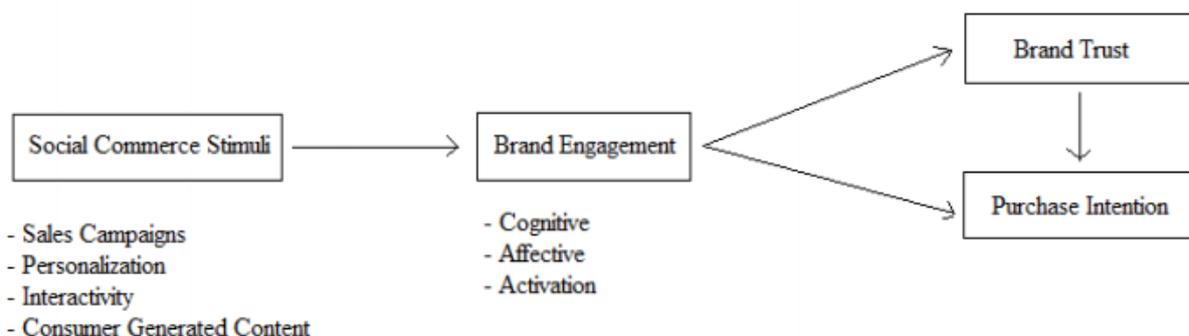


Figure 1 Erdoğan & Tatar's (2015) model on what drives brand engagement

Erdoğan & Tatar (2015) provide a model, see figure 1 that describes aspects on which social commerce stimuli can affect a consumer's engagement with a brand which further leads to customer brand engagement and to purchase intent. The model is based on hypothesis that

indicates that marketing promotions through social media such as sales campaigns and contest among other promotional activities drives consumer engagement. Consumer engagement then creates a bond between the consumer and the brand which leads to purchase intent (ibid). The model is based on Hollebeek, Glynn & Brodie's (2014) conceptualization of customer brand engagement containing three dimensions *cognitive*, *affective*, *activation*. The *cognitive* dimension refers to a consumer's level of brand-related thought processing in a brand interaction (Hollebeek, Glynn & Brodie 2014). The *affective* dimension refers to a consumer's degree of positive brand-related emotions in a specific brand interaction (ibid). Lastly *activation* is a consumer's level of energy, effort and time spent on a brand in a brand interaction (ibid).

In a literature review of research within the area of dimensions of consumer engagement Kuvykaitė & Tarutė (2015) concluded that consumer engagement is a multidimensional construct with three main aspects, which are; *cognitive*, *emotional* and *behavioral*. The *Cognitive* aspect is a consumer's focus and interest in an engagement object, which could be a brand, product or organization. The *emotional* aspect is the feelings of pride and inspiration created by an engagement object. The *behavioral* aspect means, consumer effort and energy necessary for interaction with the engagement object. In other words a consumer becomes familiar with a certain engagement object, which leads him/her to positive or negative emotions and associations with it. Eventually this leads the consumer to action and the consumer becomes an active participant in interactions with the object (ibid).

For their research, Muntinga, Moorman & Smit (2011) created user typologies in social media context. The user typologies they presented are; *consuming*, *contributing* and *creating*, which are levels of involvement with brand content. *Consuming* is the lowest level of involvement with content. According to Muntinga et al. (2011) motives for consuming content are information, rewards and entertainment. *Contributing* to content, meaning commenting, discussing with others and posting reviews is the middle layer of involvement in content. It is driven by three motives; personal identity, integration and social interaction. Finally the highest level of involvement in brand related content is *creating*, which is driven by the same motives as contributing. Sub motives of creating and contributing to content are self-expression, self-presentation and self-assurance.

## 2.4 Customer engagement

Brodie, Hollebeek, Jurić & Ilić (2011) describe five fundamental propositions (FP) to create a distinctive conceptual framework of customer engagement (CE), these are:

- FP1: *CE reflects a psychological state, which occurs by virtue of interactive customer experiences with a focal agent/object within specific service relationships.*

The psychological state of a customer is created through first hand experiences, meaning the customer must in some way interact with an agent/object. This agent/object is often a specific brand and its platforms/channels of communication. These interactions then lead to customer behavior that extends beyond transactions and purchases. The interactional experiences a customer has with brands and their products, services and online content depicts the engagement and loyalty the customer will have toward the specific brand (Brodie et al 2011).

- *FP2: CE states occur within a dynamic, iterative process of service relationships that co-creates value.*

This FP describes the importance of a customer's ability to be a part of creating content and CE is created through iterative dynamic relationships. This content can be in the form of dialogue, service delivery and communication between a customer and a firm. Co-creating contributes to the creation of loyalty among customers. The interaction and co-creating process is iterative and lead to different levels of engagement states in customers. Through iteratively engaging with an object/agent a customer's relationship can go from being short-term to long-term as well as from stable to variable (Brodie et al 2011).

- *FP3: CE plays central role within a nomological network of service relationships.*

The concept of CE does not exist isolated from other relational concepts; it is rather a part of a network of social relationships. While some relational concepts are required antecedents (participation and involvement) to CE, flow and rapport are potential antecedents but not required. CE relational consequences on the other hand may include commitment, trust, self-brand connection, emotional brand attachment and loyalty (Brodie et al 2011).

- *FP4: CE is a multidimensional concept subject to a context- and/or stakeholder-specific expression of relevant cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions.*

In the analysis of the definition of CE a conclusion is made that it is a multidimensional and complex concept. It can be seen that CE includes combinations of cognitive, emotional and behavioral dimensions. The importance of the different dimensions may also vary depending on the specific environment in which the CE level is observed which further indicates the multidimensional view of the concept (Brodie et al 2011).

- *FP5: CE occurs within a specific set of situational conditions generating differing CE levels*

Depending on the situation and context that CE is observed in, different levels of engagement can be found. There is a difference between online and offline environments as well as advertisement and other types of marketing. These different environments in which CE is observed might affect the level of engagement regarding a customer's cognitive, emotional and behavioral aspects from an interactive experience (Brodie et al 2011).

Pansari & Kumar (2017) propose another framework for CE that is partially influenced by Brodie et al. (2011). They explain how managing customers, from a firm's perspective, has changed over the years, where the focus has shifted from transactions to relations during the 1990's, however relations with customers and a focus on profitability, loyalty and satisfaction is not enough (ibid). This has led to the term "engagement", meaning to engage customers in all possible ways, leading to an emotional bonding between a firm and its customers (ibid). Pansari & Kumar (2017) define the mechanics of CE as "*the mechanics of a customer's value addition to the firm, either through direct or/and indirect contribution*". Direct contributions are customer purchases and indirect contributions are referrals that a customer provides on social media through conversations about a brand as well as feedback/suggestions to a firm through any platform (Pansari & Kumar 2017). They also argue that the focus of firms is shifting towards personalizing interactions, delighting its audience and understanding their customers, which are what leads to CE.

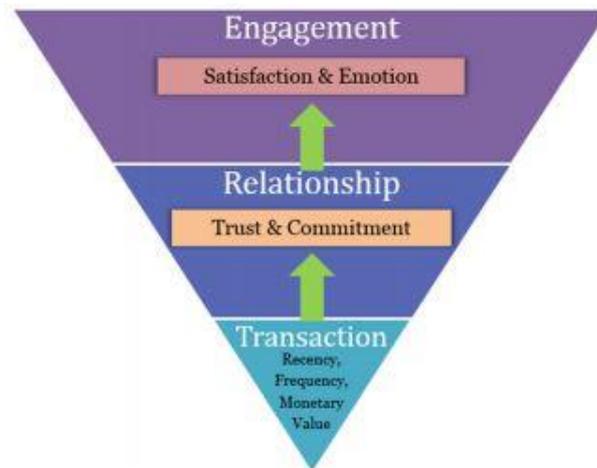


Figure 2 Pansari & Kumar (2017), Customer management levels

## 2.5 Theoretical summary

Moran (2016) states that successful content marketing should include following properties; *credible, targeted, differentiated and measurable*. The point of all marketing is about creating and retaining customers (Grigsby 2015; Tracy 2014; Patrutio & Baltes 2016), but as mentioned, relationships that focus on binary transactions, profitability and customer satisfaction is not enough (Pansari & Kumar 2017). Attracting customers and creating customer-brand relationships through inbound messages and marketing methods such as content marketing are needed to create customer engagement and further trust and purchase intent (ibid). This thesis will study content marketing based on these properties, all except one, and if the successful use of them creates CE. The one that will not be used is *measurable* since it is performed by the firm/organization side of marketing, this thesis studies content marketing from a consumer's point of view.

In this thesis content marketing's impact on CE is analyzed using a framework based on Glynn & Brodie's (2014), Kuvykaitė & Tarute's (2015) and Hollebeek's (2011) dimensions of CE, the dimensions are combined and expressed in this thesis as:

- *Cognitive*: content marketing's effect on the level of concentration, focus and interest in an engagement object.
- *Emotional*: content marketing's effect on a consumer's emotional response towards an engagement object.
- *Action*: content marketing's ability to create consumer actions for example, following, commenting, sharing and reviewing.

These dimensions are used as a framework to understand if content marketing can create CE and further if this affects relationships with engagement objects and create trusting relationships.

The findings from the qualitative study will also be matched with the fundamental propositions proposed by Brodie et al. (2011) and Pansari & Kumar (2017). To analyze to what degree content marketing creates CE. FP1 and FP2 are deemed to be the most relevant to

this research since they explicitly describe the phenomenon of CE from a consumer's perspective while FP3 focuses on the relation and antecedents to other conceptual frameworks and therefore not relevant to this thesis. FP4 is embedded throughout the analysis chapter since it focuses on the multidimensional aspect of content marketing while FP5 is not applicable since this thesis only focus on the online environment and is not compared to the effects of offline content marketing. All the FP's are explained to provide the audience with a context of the phenomenon of customer engagement.

### **3 Research methodology**

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*This chapter presents the reader with a motivation for the choice of research approach and design. Thereafter a motivation of sampling method and ethical principles is presented. At the end of the chapters the motivation of data collection method in the form of semi-structured interviews is described and lastly a guide on how the data analysis was made is presented.*

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#### **3.1 Research approach**

In this thesis a qualitative approach has been chosen to be able to answer the research question. Qualitative research aims to gain deeper knowledge of a phenomenon in the social world according to Bryman & Bell (2015) and is therefore a suitable approach for this research. Understanding the underlying reasons and motivations to why consumers engage in content from various brands is complex to describe and understand which is why a quantitative approach would not be able to provide the rich data that this thesis requires (ibid). A quantitative study could contribute to making this thesis more generalized since it emphasizes on collecting a vast amount of answers which makes a research more credible according to Recker (2013). However, Motivations, thinking patterns and underlying reasons that people possess are better described in words and flowing text than numerical data (Bryman & Bell 2015) and that is the aim of this thesis.

Another reason for adopting a qualitative approach is that it offers flexibility. During the progress of writing this thesis changes in the course of what was found, in literature as well as empirical data, could be handled since qualitative research is not as structured as quantitative research (Bryman & Bell 2015). This thesis does not test any existing theory but rather sees it as something that was created through the collection of data from literature and empirical findings. The chosen research strategy for this thesis is abduction since it uses a theoretical framework built on previous research as a foundation for deriving theory. Abduction involves jumping between existing theory and the data collected during the study (Bryman & Bell 2015).

#### **3.2 Research design**

To be able to answer the research question and gain knowledge about what makes consumers engage with online content the most appropriate way to obtain data was deemed to be semi-structured interviews and observations. By conducting semi-structured interviews the interviewees were able to answer open questions that were general while elaborating in areas that motivated them on an individual level. It was important to use this kind of interview since closed questions do not let the interviewees answer freely, which could lead to important aspects being overseen by both parties (Bryman & Bell 2015). Observations were of good help to this research since it gave an opportunity to see how the respondents acted and felt in a real life context while actively consuming different types of content.

As the goal of this thesis is to understand and describe how consumers engage with content in their daily lives it was important to make both the interviews and the observations as natural and relaxed as possible for the respondents. Semi-structured interviews enabled the

interviewees to feel relaxed and talk naturally since the questions could be asked in an order that followed the natural way of the conversation. New questions that emerged during the interviews could easily be included in the empirical findings thanks to the structure of the interview. While conducting the observations it was important to let the consumers browse and engage on the online platforms without being interrupted to create an environment that was as close as possible to how they engage in their daily lives (Flick 2002).

Several previous researchers have argued for the need of more research within the customer engagement area such as Brodie et al. (2011), which in the article “Customer Engagement: Conceptual Domain, Fundamental Propositions, and Implications for Research” mention that the CE concept can contribute to service-centric research frameworks concerning interaction and co-creation experience among consumers. Stephen (2016) also states that further research is needed since the area of digital/social media consumer behavior is growing rapidly and online WOM as well as the relationship between transmitters and receivers of content and their interplay is important to consider. The outspoken need for research on CE and the way consumers interact with online content is the reason for choosing the semi-structured interviews and observation in this thesis.

### **3.3 Sampling**

The purpose of this thesis is to gain knowledge and insight on why consumers engage or not engage in marketing content provided to them by enterprises/brands in an online environment. For this reason a sampling with respondents that regularly take part in consuming online content and are used to receiving content on various online platforms. Since this thesis has not chosen a specific industry to study but rather seeks to gain general knowledge about the phenomena the sampling was not chosen dependent on a specific brand criteria but rather that the respondents are continuously consuming brand content. Therefore choosing respondents who are known to consume content on online platforms was important to ensure that they could contribute to the empirical data needed for the study.

Robson & McCartan (2016) describes that sampling should have a variance in sampling, which motivates the choice of choosing respondents the authors know to have different interests and therefore consume content from different brands. The gender segmentation in this thesis is equally divided and the age segmentation is between 18-30, the motivation is that this is the generation that has grown up in the digital era and is familiar with the modern media and content landscape. The age distribution of the respondents were three respondents between the age of 18-21 whereas two females and one male. Three respondents were between 22-25, whereas two females and one male. And lastly three respondents between 26-30 whereas two males and one female. The respondents are situated in Borås, Sweden and the interviews were conducted in closed group rooms in the library at the University of Borås.

The sampling method chosen is of a non-probability sample, since the chosen respondents are known to the authors and are targeted for a certain reason. Because of this the research is not generalizable to a population (Bryman & Bell 2015); however this is not the aim of the research. The aim is rather to seek underlying reasons, cognitive behavior, thoughts and feelings towards engagement in content marketing.

### **3.4 Ethical principles**

Flick (2002) argues that ethics are to be considered when conducting interviews in qualitative studies since the interviewees personal thoughts will be public and they also have different relations to the interviewer. The interest and trust of the interviewees as well as the protection of the data obtained must be considered, the researchers aim and transparency must be clear to the interviewees to make them feel comfortable (ibid). The people participating in this thesis have done so willingly and have been informed of what the purpose of their participation is. They have also been informed that their answers and actions are anonymous and will only be used in the purpose of research; therefore the names used in the presentation of the empirical data are made up.

### **3.5 Data collection**

The study was made using semi-structured interviews and observation with nine respondents chosen by the authors. To aid the researchers and to maintain a good flow and dialog with the respondents an interview guide with pre written questions was used. Semi-structured interviews are flexible and enable the questions to be answered in the most suitable order (Robson & McCartan 2016). It also allows the respondents to express themselves freely without restriction, which was needed for this study since the aim is to gain insight of underlying thoughts and reasons for engaging in content. During the interviews the interview guide and openness of questions enabled a two-way communication and gave the respondents room to elaborate when they wanted to.

The interviews took place at the library inside the University of Borås, in booked group rooms. By using closed rooms it was made sure that no disturbance would be caused to the interview and no background sounds in the recordings. The interviews took approximately 30 minutes each. At the end of the interviews an observational study took place where the respondents guided the interviewers on how they actively consume content, what platforms they use and how they engage with the content. Instructions were given to them to try and use the online environment as they would normally do and that they should comment on what appealed as content to them as well as describe feelings that arose when they pointed out something, whether associations were negative or positive. The respondents browsed both websites and social media, with a heavy focus on Facebook and Instagram. No observation guide was used but an active part was played in asking questions to the respondents regarding what and how they felt when they consumed content, the observation itself took approximately 20 minutes each.

When conducting the observation the respondents were asked to speak freely when actively consuming content. By not guiding the respondents to specific brands pages or platforms the research maintained to be unbiased and increased the trustworthiness of the observational study and not restraining the respondents to a specific context.

Structured interviews and focus groups have been considered as methods for data collection. The aim of structured interviews is for the respondents to give answers in the exact same context and the answers can then be aggregated (Bryman & Bell 2015), which is not the aim of this study. This study aims to study underlying reasons and thoughts which would not have been provided if structured interviews were used. Focus groups could also have been chosen as a method, this was not chosen since focus was on individuals reasons to engage in content

and not how a group discuss the phenomenon. The risk of the respondents being affected by peer pressure was also avoided, by using semi-structured interviews focus was on the individual's thoughts and feelings.

The interviews and observations that were conducted were all recorded and transcribed shortly after they were conducted. Robson & McCartan (2016) mentions that transcribing interviews are necessary to be able to analyze the data. One of the two interviewers also noted specific gestures, pauses or changes in the voice to further try to understand the feelings of the respondent. Oates (2006) states that this is proved successful in trying to understand the true meaning of what the respondents are trying to communicate.

The theoretical framework was created using the databases provided by The University of Borås, where articles and publications regarding content marketing and consumer engagement were found. Relevant literature regarding the phenomenon was also found in the university library.

### **3.6 Data analysis**

Qualitative studies can be hard to analyze because of the large amounts of data (Bryman & Bell 2015), which in our case is nine transcriptions of thirty minute interviews and observations. During the study the analysis process was made iteratively where analysis of the interviews and transcriptions were made before the next interview took place. By doing this, the insight of the phenomena and the study became richer during the interview and analysis process. The analysis of the data was made according to Bryman & Bell (2015), where the first step is to start with the coding as soon as possible after the interview, by doing so we minimized the feeling of being swamped with work, by having to transcribe and analyze nine interviews at the same time. The second step in the analysis process was to read through the initial set of transcriptions and field notes (Bryman & Bell 2015). At this stage main focus was to read the transcriptions, discuss and make summary notes of interesting responses from the respondents of the interviews. We then decided to read the transcriptions again but this time making notes in the margins, using google docs where the transcriptions were made, notes on tone of voice and gestures was also added in the margin. Key words were noted which generated themes that were recurrent in the interviews. The coded transcriptions was then compared and analyzed further by using the theoretical framework which was built earlier in the study.

This thesis involves people and their engagement in content marketing, it aims to describe how consumers think and feel about online content and why they chose to engage in it or not. Therefore we decided to link theoretical data in the form of previous research, using mainly two conceptual frameworks and converge them, to link with the empirical data from semi-structured interviews. This was made in the form of descriptive text together with citations from the respondents in section four where the results are presented; here the citations were matched with the corresponding dimension of cognitive, emotional or action which is described in the theoretical framework. Further on the empirical data linked to the chosen dimensions is analyzed together with the fundamental propositions in section 5 which is the analysis. Later in the analysis it is shown how our empirical data and chosen framework is linked to previous research and theory.

## 3.7 Method reflection

Qualitative and quantitative research are different and therefore the evaluation of the method can also be viewed differently (Bryman & Bell 2015). When evaluating the chosen method in quantitative research reliability and validity are often measured by analyzing the results of measurements and theory base collected in a research (ibid). Qualitative studies are different from this since all the data collected is in the form of text, a clear result is therefore hard to derive since numbers and generalization of answers is not the result (ibid). This thesis is therefore evaluated according to the criteria of trustworthiness and authenticity that was specified by Guba & Lincoln (1994). Trustworthiness consists of four criteria, *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability* and *confirmability*.

### 3.7.1 Trustworthiness

To ensure *credibility* in this thesis it was made sure of that the canons of good practice were carried out. The respondents who have been studied have validated that what has been said during the interviews and observations corresponds with what has been written in this thesis. This was done by providing the respondents with the written transcripts and texts before it was published as well as letting them comment on anything they felt did not correspond with what they intended to say and may have been misinterpreted.

Empirical data in this thesis was collected from a small group of people and in a unique context. To ensure the *transferability* the culture and context in which the data was collected is described thoroughly in section 3.3 and 3.5. The description enables readers to make a judgement and decide whether the content in this thesis can be transferred and used in similar research.

The criteria of *dependability* in regards to qualitative studies are to what degree the authors have presented a complete and accurate statement of the research process (Bryman & Bell 2015), the reason being that colleagues should act as auditors of the thesis during and after the production (ibid). To maintain the criteria of dependability a precise description of the research process has been provided to the reader. During the interviews one of the interviewers noted gestures, pauses and tones in voices, to add to the data, which enabled feelings other than described in words to be taken into account. Transcription was also made shortly after the interviews took place to ensure that nothing was missed.

*Objectivity* is the main word of the criteria confirmability, meaning that the authors remain unbiased and remain objective to their greatest ability during the process. By using semi-structured interviews and open questions the interviews became a dialog and not leading the respondents to answers that would “benefit” the research but rather reflect the respondents’ truths about the phenomena. When conducting interviews the interviewer always affects the respondents in some way, for example by the tone of the voice when asking questions, attitudes or relationships with the respondents (Bryman & Bell 2015). However to try and not affect the respondents, non leading questions were used in an effort to exclude values of the interviewers and hopefully not affect the respondent's answers. To ensure that the respondents’ answers were correct the transcriptions were sent to them to receive feedback if anything was misinterpreted.

### **3.7.2 Authenticity**

Respondents in this thesis were chosen based on the demographic characteristics of age, gender and to the extent they engage in online content. They possess different viewpoints of the social setting in which this research was conducted, leading to greater authenticity according to Bryman & Bell (2015). During the interviews and observations the respondents had the chance to ask questions and get feedback whenever something was unclear, the interviewers evaded from interfering and asking leading questions which also makes the empirical findings authentic (ibid).

## 4 Result

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*The results are presented based on the chosen qualitative research method and separated into the dimensions of cognitive, emotional and action. Citations from the empirical study are included to provide the audience with examples and context.*

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### 4.1 Cognitive

When asked if they have special relationships with any brands, the study shows that some of the respondents had existing customer-brand relationships. The study also shows some concrete examples of relationships that had been created through differentiated and credible content, which creates an increased cognitive response from the respondents.

*When I search for football shoes I don't visit the producer's webpage to search for information. I visit unisportstore.se, they have excellent content that attracts me as a customer and I'd rather buy there. They have great information about the product, more than the producer themselves. They have YouTube videos where they try shoes and post reviews. I visit the page daily to read articles and stuff even when I don't need to buy anything - Adam, 23*

Many of the respondents mention that their level of cognitive engagement is increased when content that is posted by other sources than the brand itself. An example is when content is posted by key social influencers. However it was clear that it depended highly on if the content was credible, the respondents said that it is obvious if the message was “bought”.

*I find it very useful when someone other than the brand itself promotes a product. If I read a blog it is because I like the person who writes it and if they try a pair of jeans that I think look good on them I feel very comfortable in buying them myself. - Ellen, 19*

*It can affect me sometimes, it depends on who they use, if I can relate. If they use a so called “nobody” I think it's pretty stupid and it affects the brand in a negative way - Natalie, 25*

*I think that you are affected by content that is shared by others than the brand, if a person you follow tells you to try something I'm more willing to do so, of course depending on whom and how it is shared. If the person recommends several brands and products all the time it feels like they are “bought”, but if someone sticks to one or two brands and do it fully it feels more credible and genuine. In summary if it's done in a good way it increases my interest in the brand - Adam, 23*

Several respondents mention that online social stimuli in the form of contests do not appeal to them because of the small chance to actually win; it is also viewed as disturbing to their own social feed because all of their friends and followers are exposed to pictures that they post. What also seems to matter is the size and geographic location of the firm that arrange contests.

*Sometimes I wonder if anyone actually wins anything when participating in online contests when you are supposed to share a picture and tag your friends. I mean, they have like a million followers. It feels more realistic when a local store post a contest, I also think it's a good way for small businesses to arrange contests since it creates attention for them as well as a stronger relationship to their customers- Anna, 24*

*I shared a picture to take part in an online contest once, but then I felt embarrassed and took it off again, I wouldn't do it again because I feel like the chance of winning is too slim. When a huge brand like for example Nike shares a contest it feels unserious in a way because they don't need the publicity, it feels more legit when small local stores shares a contest and I also think it benefits them more - Johan 28*

In the observation there are results that indicate that content can increase the level of cognitive engagement in focal brands. One case shows that the level of focus and interest increased when the respondent is exposed to content provided by a key social influencer. The respondent consumed content and described a picture where a blogger used a specific product and the respondent cognitive level increased in the brand because of the content even though it was not posted by the brand itself.

*I like this blogger a lot, she always wears cool clothes and does cool stuff like traveling and eat at nice restaurants. You can say I'm jealous of her lifestyle. In this picture she has a Louis Vuitton phone case and when I saw it the first time I actually visited their website to have a closer look at it. – Natalie, 25*

## **4.2 Emotional**

One type of content that creates emotions toward an object among the respondents is images on social media of products that they wanted to share within their social groups, many times to reach an emotion of self-assurance and increase self-esteem.

*If I send a picture of for example a shirt that I want to buy, to a group of friends on Instagram, it is to assure myself that they like it too - Hampus, 18*

*I think it's insignificant to share posts on Facebook or Instagram on my feed, what would I want to communicate with that? I only share it with my closest friends so they can comment on if I should buy it or not. - Vera, 19*

The study shows that some of the respondents got emotional responses through content that is not seen as commercial, but rather as lifestyle or inspirational content such as travel pictures posted by fashion brand employees. The case where content creates a high level of emotional response is focused on much more than the actual product itself, for example the surrounding.

*Instead of posting campaign pictures and discounts, they have people who post pictures when they are for example in Spain. They post content where they show what they do. It affects my view of the brand positively since they post content that fits well with the brand - Natalie, 25*

*To me the entire surrounding around the content posted is important, everything gives an impression - Adam, 23*

*A brand I like very much is Ralph Lauren since it resonates well with my style. They always have nice clothes on their website and a lot of my friends wear their clothes as well. When I'm browsing social media such as Facebook or Instagram I often find pictures and styles from friends, famous people and other online stores that share and sell their products - Johan, 28*

Content shared by someone other than a brand itself creates stronger emotions according to the respondents; these emotions concerned the feelings of trust and motivation to buy a product or service.

*I follow several people on YouTube that make tutorials for example. Seeing someone else trying on makeup or clothes makes me want to buy the product myself since I know that they have liked it. Sometimes they collaborate with brands that sponsor them with products but that doesn't feel as genuine since I know that they have been paid to try them - Ellen, 19*

*If I'm buying jeans online it's hard to know what size is right for me. Then I read reviews from other users to see if the jeans stretch a lot or perhaps shrink when they wash them. The quality of clothes also varies a lot and I trust other consumers experience more than what is written in the description on a brand's website - Johan, 28*

In some cases during the observation respondents shows emotional reactions to content where no product was actually marketed, but rather the style of the picture, light and the entire setting is what drives emotional response.

*I like this picture partly because I like the dress itself, but also the entire picture itself. I get very inspired by it because I imagine myself at my own prom and it inspires me in the choice of clothes and how to style my hair. I also like the lighting, the light is warm and in my opinion it expresses joy and happiness. I could easily see myself tagging my friends in this picture - Ellen, 19*

### **4.3 Action**

The study shows that the level of action many of the respondents took towards content was not of the co-creating type. Many of the respondents feel that they do not want to disturb their own online-profiles or disturb their followers' feeds. They worry about how they are perceived by their followers or friends if they share content, regardless of what type it is. Therefore almost all of the respondents are of the consuming type. Meaning that the action taken when being exposed to content is mostly only consuming rather than creating or contributing.

*I never share content, it's not worth the while and I don't want to disturb my friends or other who follow me - Adam, 23*

*My Instagram is private, I only post stuff that I do myself and if I'm not doing anything I won't post anything - Natalie, 25*

A reason that several respondents mention for taking some kind of action was to be reminded that a brand exist or that a new product is being released. Another reason is to provide user-generated content by writing reviews or communicating with other consumers.

*I follow brands on Instagram or sign up to newsletters to make sure that I notice when they drop a new item or have a sale for example - Ellen, 19*

*When going on vacation it is extremely important to me to read what others think of the hotel I'm going to stay at. If I write a review myself it is to warn others of a really horrible hotel for example - Hampus, 18*

*When it comes to products that I really care about, such as cameras or phones I find it very useful and credible to discuss with like-minded people. That's why I join groups on Facebook - Fredrik 29*

The study shows that most of the actions taken by the respondents are in the form of liking and following brands on various platforms or subscribing to newsletters, however newsletters are mostly subscribed to because of specific discounts.

*I subscribe to newsletters to receive discounts, I don't think I have read a single one though - Vera, 19*

*I just mark the newsletters as read, so I usually don't open them. Sometimes I've seen that there are some nice content posted in them, and since I have bought from there website before I knew that they have nice products as well - Ellen, 19*

The respondents are more likely to share content within certain groups such as friend discussion forums or branded communities. Action taken is also tagging friends in specific content to receive feedback from them.

*Say for example, if they post a new product, I sometimes tag my friends on the content to show like "look at this new pair of shoes", to then receive feedback if they also like it, then I might think of purchasing it - Johan, 28*

*I think it's insignificant to share posts, for example if I share content from Nike, what do I want to say by doing so? If I share it is only to share with my closes friends, it's nothing that I want everyone to take part of - Hampus, 18*

## 5 Analysis

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*This chapter consists of an analysis of the empirical data; it is divided into four sections. The three dimensions of customer engagement: cognitive, emotion and action are used as a framework for this study where an analysis is made on its relation to content marketing. This ends up in an analysis of two fundamental propositions of customer engagement related to content marketing, which is motivated in the theoretical summary.*

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### 5.1 Cognitive

Analyzing the results on how content affect the cognitive aspect shows that customers are more prone to engage in content that is created by someone else than a brand itself. Content created by key social influencers, other consumers as well as social groups online creates strong cognitive influence and brings credibility to the content which is a crucial part of content marketing (Moran 2016; Kilgour et al. 2015). The respondents that took part in the empirical study clearly articulated that content on blogs, third-party websites and videos on for example YouTube feels differentiated and more credible than what can be found on a brand's own online platforms which is also an important part of content marketing (Moran 2016). The content created by individuals or communities online leads to both positive and negative cognitive perceptions in customers, if content online provides customers with for example rich descriptions, videos and tutorials it is likely to lead a customer to iterative interaction and purchases. This is enabled since content answered to the customer's goals, needs and motivations which are seen as crucial in content marketing according to Ashley & Tuten (2015).

Consumers express the importance of user-generated content in the form of reviews when buying a service in the form of a travel or restaurant visit. In this case negative reviews play a greater role since the importance of avoiding a bad experience is important. The results show that content generated by a hotel or restaurant is not deemed credible since consumers do not seem to believe that they would post negative descriptions of themselves and could therefore not be trusted. This corresponds with Belk's (2013) article on the importance of online word of mouth impact on consumer behavior.

Schau & Gilly (2003) argue that consumers will engage in content that correspond with their ideal self. This was also evident when analyzing the semi-structured interviews. For example, a respondent explained that the relationship to a certain brand lead to repetitive purchases and interaction since its content was shared on various platforms, such as social media and within his social groups online. The visibility of the brand's products on websites, social media, as well as being used by famous people lead to positive perceptions of the brand. Purchasing and using the products also lead to feeling part of a social group and getting closer to the ideal self for the respondent, this behavior can be linked with Brodie et al.'s (2011) multidimensional concept of cognitive, emotional and behavioral dimensions leading to the psychological state that is CE.

Malthouse et al. (2013) states that consumers filter content to what appeals to them. This becomes clear when the respondents talk about online contests since this phenomenon does not seem to appeal to them. Several of the respondents explain that online contests come off as unserious and not credible since they do not feel like they are going to win and that the

effort to be part of the contest is too great. They also state that their perception of a brand remains the same whether they see someone in their social network participating in a contest or notice a contest that a brand has posted.

## **5.2 Emotional**

The result of the study showed that content has a limited effect on the level of emotions. Most of the respondents said that they did not have an emotional connection with a certain brand. In some cases the study shows signs of emotional responses as a result of content marketing. In those cases the content itself was not of a selling type but rather seen as lifestyle posts. These relationships created positive emotional feelings towards the engagement object and created online and offline WOM. There were examples of content which created emotional responses in the form of memories or placing themselves in the specific setting emotionally.

What Odden (2012) mentions about content marketing as being an approach to attract engage and inspire customers through content is confirmed from the results in this study. However what this study concludes is the importance of how good the content is. The respondents were showered with content all day long, but still most of them had a hard time explaining their relationship with specific brands, in the few cases where the content played its part the relationships became iterative and seemed very strong in creating emotional reactions.

Of the four typologies Muntinga et al. (2011) mention, enterprises should seek to transform customers from the consuming type, towards the creating or contributing type, where the latter ones are driven by motives of self-expression, self-presentation and self-assurance. This is true in some context in this study whereas shared posts within branded communities or friend groups on social media are motivated by receiving feedback and thus creating self-assurance.

## **5.3 Action**

The results show that content marketing might not trigger responses of taking action in content. There is a fear of how the respondents are perceived by their online social peers. Therefore content might not be the most useful way to transform customers from the typology type consumers to contributors or creators (Muntinga et al. 2011). Kilgour et al. (2015) showed in their research that content creates trust relationships, which is true in one way but not in another. The study indicates that customers create limited relationships to the brands, where they might follow them but not create a dialogue. The theory that consumer co-creation is avoided because of high social risk is confirmed. There is a lack of willingness to share brand specific content on private platforms. The risk of jeopardizing online social status to share specific content is too high, or the content itself is not good enough to increase the level of cognitive and emotional affect to take action on. The issue then remains for enterprises on how they can get the customer to take more action towards their content more than just consuming it.

As previous research stated, consumers are no longer passive recipients of marketing messages (Malthouse et al. 2013; Kilgour et al. 2015). Content can easily be ignored and customers have a choice in how and where to receive messages. This study shows indications that respondents only consume content and messages that they themselves want to take part

of, personalization and the possibility to relate to the content play a large part in how it is perceived. The content marketing properties that Moran (2016) states as the most important one's found in this study, is that to create action responses through content it must be targeted and credible. These messages are what create the highest level of action and most positive associations with an engagement object. Enterprises must be able to realize their target group, send messages at the right time and also evaluate where the most valuable content should be posted. As noted, individuals are unlikely to share and co-create content, therefore the most important questions to be answered when creating content remains: how do you stimulate customers to distribute your message?

When the purpose of content is reached, meaning when a customer takes action towards an engagement object, content marketing as a tool is very powerful. Iterative and trusting relationship towards certain engagement objects are created, not because of products or good prices, they are rather driven and motivated through the content. The main purpose of the specified content platform therefore, was not to purchase but rather to consume and interact with content and generate a high level of action responses. This shows that content can work but it is very important to make sure that it is good content and not seen as commercial but rather informational.

Tsai & Men (2013) describe that consumers tend to take more action towards content that is posted on platforms and in groups where consumers feel a sense of belongingness. This is true because individuals tend to feel safer in taking action within certain groups where they know that the audience has the same interests as themselves since they will not be judged. Enterprises should provide platforms for consumers to engage in their content (ibid), not only is the content more likely to be shared and co-created, it is also more likely to be perceived as credible.

## **5.4 Analysis of CE's fundamental propositions in relation to content marketing**

**FP1: CE reflects a psychological state, which occurs by virtue of interactive customer experiences with a focal agent/object within specific service relationships.**

As Brodie et al. (2011) states, it is the interactions with a focal agent/object that a customer has that leads to CE. Agent/object is most often in the form of a brand but may also include other aspects of service and product interactions and on specific platforms (ibid). What can be derived from the empirical results is that consumers are not easily motivated to engage in content. For a brand to reach the psychological state of CE within consumers is therefore a difficult task, partly because consumers do not seem to want to identify themselves with brands on social media in particular but also on other platforms. Another part seems to be the lack of motivation and willingness to put in the effort of engaging with brand-specific content. The respondents that participated in the study more or less all expressed that they do not follow specific brands online and even less engaging in their content. The reason for this is that the official website and social media of most brands publish too much content, meaning that even if they do publish useful and entertaining content that creates value, they also publish content that is seen as disturbing and/or excessive. Several respondents state that the reason for not following or visiting a brand's official website directly is that they will be reached by the information anyway, through some other channel or platform. As Kilgour et al. (2015) states, enterprises should be careful in what content they share since consumers both

filter out, and chose what content they want to engage with. Wanting to reach consumers is of course an important aspect for any enterprise that sells products or services but there might be a risk of enterprises overwhelming their customers with content that they do not appreciate.

The results from this thesis show that consumers are willing to engage and interact with content when it provides them with useful information about a product or service, which corresponds with what Moran (2016) states.

**FP2: CE states occur within a dynamic, iterative process of service relationships that co-creates value.**

The main goal with content is to get the consumers to engage in the content and thus creating some kind of response, cognitive, emotional or taking action towards it (Odden 2012; Kilgour et al. 2015). Enterprises should focus on getting the consumer to return to platforms to continue to consume and engage in content thus creating trusting relationships. This proposition states that CE states occurs within dynamic iterative processes that co-create value. This study wanted to see if content marketing could provide a dynamic and iterative platform where customers were able and willing to co-create. However as mentioned in previous paragraph about FP1, the respondents in this study were not particularly interested in co-creating content. Iterative relationships were not enabled through the content but rather the liking of products provided by the brand.

When the content actually played its part it was very effective in creating dynamic and iterative processes where positive online and offline WOM was created, still not much co-creation but cognitive, emotional and action responses were implied, actions in the form of returning to the engagement object, liking and following. The respondents that had this response to a specific engagement object did not visit it because of products that was offered but rather to consume the content, thus creating a trusting relationship which when time comes will be turned into profit when the customer is ready for a purchase. This study shows that content can provide a platform and enable a dynamic iterative playing field for consumers when implemented properly and precise, however when implemented wrongly it can create negative brand health.

## 6 Conclusion and contributions

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*This sixth and final chapter is based on the analysis and provides an answer to the research question. At the end of the chapter contribution to the field of marketing, limitations of the research and recommendations to further research is presented.*

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### 6.1 Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to gain knowledge and insight of why consumers choose to engage in online content marketing. This purpose is reached by answering the research question:

*Why do customers decide to engage or not engage in online content marketing?*

The results in this thesis are in line with previous research regarding the dynamic and open online environment and consumers' ability to search and filter information about products/services/brand. The results show that the official website of brand's are visited to consume information rather than purchasing or engaging. Therefore enterprises should focus on descriptive content that provides information valuable to their customers in a way that is not seen as marketing. Results show that this kind of content is hard to find and parts of the content created by enterprises are perceived as disguised content marketing, meaning traditional marketing in the form of for example discounts and contests. Consumers find it easy to distinguish "disguised marketing" from real content marketing and do not want to engage in it.

What can be concluded from the results and analysis is that the perception of brands are built more on third-party generated content such as blogs, key social influencers, friends, online communities and websites since this content is more credible, targeted and differentiated. This content is therefore more attractive for consumers to engage in. Offers in the form of discounts through digital newsletters or becoming a member on official websites lead to single purchases, which is engagement on the bottom level of the management levels, *see figure 2*, and is therefore not deemed to be true content marketing. Weak relationships are in some cases created through these offers since consumers iteratively interact with the agent/object through repeated purchases but the cognitive and emotional dimensions are not affected, or at least not perceived by the consumers. The engagement with an agent/object will hence not exceed to create a meaningful relationship between the consumer and enterprise/brand but instead remain weak and only involve the action of repetitive purchases.

Another conclusion drawn is that consumers are not willing to engage fully and become contributors or creators of content because they are not willing to risk their social status. The risk of people judging them by what they post is too high to sacrifice for the gain. Enterprises must focus on what type of content they want to be shared and where it should be shared to enable the highest possibility of it being so. On what platform the content is shared should matter the most, creating content which creates emotions but has less to do with the brand might have a higher possibility of being shared. A picture on Instagram compared to a YouTube video on Facebook has little chance of being shared according to this study.

A goal of content is to create non binary relationships that extend further than a single transaction, a transaction not being only a purchase, it might be a visit to a website, following or liking a picture. To enable this, enterprises must stimulate consumers. Our conclusion is that enterprises need to focus on content that creates true value and extends beyond products, it needs meaning. It is difficult to get consumers to create relationships where they feel truly engaged with the brand, content can provide this, however it must be done with precision for it to work. Consumers are exposed to marketing messages in many forms every day and will in most cases only notice and consume them if they are credible, targeted and differentiated.

Many products and services from well-known brands are being sold on several websites, by third-party retailers as well as on enterprises own official website. This means that the product or service itself is not hard to find for the consumer and consumers seem to agree that they will end up purchasing the product/service wherever the least effort is required or the price is the lowest. The results have also proved that content provided by someone other than the brand's official website is both more credible and differentiated while at the same time creating more value for the consumer.

## **6.2 Contribution to the field of marketing**

The field of content marketing is still in a developing phase and enterprises have not yet fully explored its full potential, which this study shows indications on. In previous research there is a gap in the relationship between content marketing and customer engagement. This empirical study complements to the already existing research within customer engagement but with an added dimension of content marketing. However it might not be generalizable since non probability sampling was used and few respondents were used. This study shows that it is hard for enterprises to create successful content marketing that engages customers. It also shows that when content fills its purpose to a high degree it can be a very powerful tool in creating a long lasting relationship with customers. The main contribution of this study is to add credibility to previous research by supporting theories with empirical data as well as strengthening theory of the relationship between content marketing and customer engagement.

## **7 Limitations and further studies**

This study aims to find out how content marketing affects CE using a three dimensional approach which are cognitive, emotional and action behaviors. The results of the study show why consumers are not co-creating and contribute to brands content marketing, the reason being that the respondents are of the consuming typology rather than contributors or co-creators (Muntinga et al 2011). The choice sampling method for this research could be done differently. For future research a recommendation would be to try and identify respondents of all typologies, namely of the consuming, contributing and co-creating types. A recommendation would be to use all three typologies to understand why individuals react to content as they do and not only decide to not engage. To find samples for future studies a non-anonymous questionnaire can be sent out to try and identify suitable respondents. The results of this study do not indicate why co-creators act the way they do and their relationships to specific engagement objects. The observations can also be done differently since it is hard to pinpoint unconscious reactions, which is what content marketing aims to do. A recommendation is to identify content that has proven to be successful and expose all three typologies to the content and understand their feelings and actions towards it.

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## 9 Appendix

### 9.1 Interview guide

1. What platforms containing “content” do you consume on a daily basis?

Articles	Blogs	Case studies	Digital newsletters
E-books	E-mail	Images	Infographics
Microsites	Mobile content	News releases	PDFs
Podcasts	Research	Slide shows	Social media
Traditional media	Videos	Webinars	White papers

2. Except from consuming “content”, do you engage yourself in it somehow? Engaging meaning comment, liking, sharing etc.

If yes, why and how?

If no, why not?

3. What type of content makes you want to engage in it?

4. Have you ever engaged in content in the form of a contest or offer?

If yes, what was the reason for doing so?

If no, what made you refrain from it?

5. What is your opinion on of contests/offers online?

6. How does an online contest posted by a brand/enterprise affect your perception of that brand/enterprise? For example, follow us, like this picture and you have the opportunity to win a product.

7. How are you affected by messages shared by someone other than a brand/enterprise itself? For example bloggers, friends, celebrities.

8. In what way do these messages affect your perception of a brand? Do you have an example?

9. Do you actively consume content from specific brands?

If yes, On what platforms? For example Instagram, Facebook, blogs etc.

If no, Are there any particular reason that you do not?

10. Do you feel that you have a special relationship with a specific brand? For example a brand you often buy products from, comment on, like etc.

11. Do you have an example of a product/service you want to buy/have bought recently and can explain how different types of content affected you decision, engagement and purchasing process?

12. If you visit an official website of a brand, what is the main reason? For example to buy the product, find information, writing/reading reviews?
13. What would you say is the most important aspect to you, the product itself or the brand?



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