



**TURUN
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DIGITAL CONTENT MARKETING IN BUSINESS MARKETS

Activities and the Nomological Network

Lotta Siutla



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*I dedicate this work to my beloved children, Eemil and Aira.
I was blessed with you in my life during this project.*

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ABSTRACT

Buyer behavior has substantially changed the marketing landscape. Now, B2B customers have become more empowered; they spend most of their purchasing journey conducting independent online research and need not rely on a salesperson to share sufficient information, making it obligatory for B2B sellers to change their strategic priorities and provide relevant digital content along the purchasing journey, which is what most B2B firms have done to stay in the competitive markets. This shift has led to difficulties in differentiating with digital content, and B2B customers struggle to find the information needed for decision-making. However, academic research remains scarce by narrowly looking at different elements of digital content marketing (DCM), yet no systematic frameworks on how to implement DCM in practice exist. There is scant research on drivers for DCM implementation or the conditions impacting DCM and a firm's performance relationship. Hence, B2B companies substantially struggle with implementing and developing DCM. This extensive qualitative research uses a theories-in-use (TIU) approach based on interviews with 58 managers from 36 B2B firms that have heavily invested in DCM, thus providing three major contributions. First, this study provides an in-depth understanding of the three conceptual underpinnings for DCM—customer journey, customer engagement, and marketing technologies—through extensive literature reviews. Second, the study presents an extensive activity-based conceptualization of customer-centric DCM with its three dimensions: generating the intelligence of the customer journey, creating a valuable content portfolio, and engaging customers through content sharing. Third, this study presents an empirically driven nomological network of 12 propositions that describe the obligatory drivers for DCM implementation, DCM performance outcomes, and marketing organization-related and organizational moderators that have a positive or negative relationship between DCM and firm performance.

KEYWORDS: digital marketing, digital content marketing, customer journey, customer engagement, marketing technologies

TURUN YLIOPISTO

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TIIVISTELMÄ

Ostokäyttäytymisen muutos on muuttanut myös yritysten markkinointia. Tänä päivänä B2B-asiakkaat ovat enemmän valveutuneita, ja heidän ostoprosessinsa muodostuu pitkälti itsenäisestä tiedonhausta verkossa ja heidän ei tarvitse enää turvautua pelkästään myyjän jakamaan tietoon. Tämä on ajanut B2B-yritykset muuttamaan strategisia prioriteetteja ja toteuttamaan verkossa tapahtuvaa ostopolulle kohdennettua sisältömarkkinointia. Suurin osa B2B-yrityksistä on tehnyt näin pysyäkseen mukana kilpailluilla markkinoilla. Tämä on puolestaan johtanut siihen, että yritysten on entistä vaikeampi erottautua sisältömassasta ja toisaalta, asiakkaiden on vaikea löytää oikeaa tietoa päätöksenteon tueksi. Akateeminen tutkimus aiheesta on vähäistä ja keskittyy pitkälti digitaalisen sisältömarkkinoinnin eri elementteihin, strategista viitekehystä digitaalisen sisältömarkkinoinnin implementoinnille ei ole julkaistu. Myöskään aiempaa tutkimusta digitaalisen sisältömarkkinoinnin implementoinnille vaadituista ajureista tai tekijöistä, joilla olisi vaikutusta yrityksen suorituskykyyn ei ole tutkijan tiedossa. Tästä johtuen useat B2B-yritykset ajautuvat vaikeuksiin implementoidessaan tai kehittäessään digitaalista sisältömarkkinointia. Tässä laadullisessa tutkimuksessa, joka pohjautuu theories-in-use lähestymistapaan, haastateltiin 58 päällikköä 36 eri digitaaliseen sisältömarkkinointiin panostaneesta B2B-yrityksestä. Tämä tutkimus tarjoaa kolme merkittävää kontribuutiota aiempaan tieteelliseen tutkimukseen. Tutkimus tarjoaa kattavat kirjallisuuskatsaukset kolmeen aiempaan tutkimusalueeseen: asiakaspolku, asiakkaan osallistaminen sekä markkinointitekniologia, jotka kaikki liittyvät läheisesti digitaaliseen sisältömarkkinointiin. Toisena kontribuutiona tämä tutkimus esittelee kattavan aktiviteettipohjaisen viitekehysten asiakaskeskeisen digitaalisen sisältömarkkinoinnin implementoinnille, sisältäen kolme pääluottuvuutta: asiakaspolun ymmärrys, arvokkaan sisältöportfolion luominen sekä asiakkaiden osallistaminen sisältöjen avulla. Kolmanneksi, tämä tutkimus tarjoaa empiirisen aineistoon pohjautuvan nomologisen verkon, joka sisältää 12 propositiota, jotka kuvaavat digitaalisen sisältömarkkinoinnin implementointiin tarvittavat ajurit, sekä markkinointiosaston ja organisaation olosuhteet, jotka tehostavat digitaalisen sisältömarkkinoinnin suorituskykyä.

ASIASANAT: digitaalinen markkinointi, digitaalinen sisältömarkkinointi, ostopolku, asiakkaan osallistaminen, markkinointitekniologiat

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June 2024
Lotta Siutla



LOTTA SIUTLA

LOTTA IS AN ENTHUSIASTIC BUSINESS LEADER AND RESEARCHER INTERESTED IN SUSTAINABILITY, WOMEN’S HEALTH, DIGITAL MARKETING, AND NEW TECHNOLOGIES. THROUGHOUT HER CAREER, SHE HAS BEEN CLOSELY INVOLVED IN BUSINESS, SALES, AND MARKETING, APPLYING HER RESEARCH FINDINGS INTO PRACTICE IN HER POSITIONS.

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1 Introduction

Marketing takes a day to learn.
Unfortunately, it takes a lifetime to master.

- Philip Kotler

1.1 Research background and motivation¹

The motivation for this research arose from the author's desire to understand the contemporary marketing landscape to apply the right strategies in her practitioner roles. The author's background in sales, marketing, and business leader positions in several fast-growing business-to-business (B2B) companies has demonstrated to her the general lack of widely accepted frameworks for implementing digital content marketing (DCM) into practice. All this drove her to pursue her doctoral studies and dissertation with concrete managerial implications.

Relevant academic research approaches this topic from an organizational buying behavior perspective. The lack of integration of purchasing management literature into organizational buying behavior (OBB) literature is significant. According to Reid and Plank (2000), specifically the behaviors in purchasing, looking at what individuals in purchasing and their departments actually do, and how they are managing operations have not been well-integrated into understanding how and why organizations and individuals buy. This understanding could include communication strategies, decision-making processes, and the role of influencers in the purchasing departments. Understanding the communication dynamics within purchasing and how they influence buying decisions is crucial for effective marketing communications strategies targeting organizational buyers (Reid and Plank 2002).

During the last few years, the wars in Europe and Middle-East, and the digitally advanced post-COVID business environment have rushed B2B firms and B2B buyers to adopt new digital approaches. They have needed to find new business

¹ Parts of this chapter are published in Terho, Mero, Siutla, and Jaakkola (2022), 294, which builds on this dissertation.

partners without being able to meet in person, in case of sudden raw material shortages, travel restrictions, and increased costs. The latest circumstances, with overall digitalization developments, have increased access to information, including online. Thus, B2B buyers can now search and compare product and service information online, changing the traditional B2B purchasing and marketing environments (Edelman and Singer 2015; Halchak 2017; Steward, Narus, and Roehm 2018). These contemporary buyers seem to spend a substantial part of their purchasing process conducting online research and rely more on online information (Lehtimäki et al. 2009; Salo et al. 2013).

Therefore, when influencing purchase processes led by empowered B2B buyers, the supplier firm needs to possess new digital resources that are efficient in helping these B2B buyers advance their purchase processes independently (Holliman and Rowley 2014; Järvinen and Taiminen 2016).

This fundamental shift—from this more traditional firm-centric selling to this new customer-centric helping—has enabled the development of DCM.¹ Now that DCM has become prevalent as a mainstream B2B digital marketing approach today, it is difficult for the firms to stand out from the mass of available content while buyers, with their complex purchase processes and multiple stakeholders involved, have become overwhelmed with all the information online. This shift suggests that building strong customer understanding and educating customers based on that understanding might be the key to sales success in contemporary business markets. Still, companies need to adopt a customer-centric approach to benefit from DCM and start offering individual buying unit members unique and valuable content that they are willing to consume (Holliman and Rowley 2014; Järvinen and Taiminen 2016; Yaghtin, Safarzedeh, and Karimi 2022).

Today, B2B firms are encouraged to overcome ineffective customer learning challenges by teaming up with the sales and marketing leaders to rethink digital engagement and provide sales representatives with the proper tools and content. Seemingly, even when B2B firms understand the potential of a customer-centric DCM approach, they fall short of achieving the full promises, probably due to a lack of frameworks and marketing knowledge on how to effectively adopt, implement, and develop strategic DCM.¹

Academic research needs to help practitioners overcome the gap. Previous literature clearly defines DCM as a customer-centric alternative to promotional or company-centric marketing communications (Holliman and Rowley 2014; Järvinen and Taiminen 2016; Taiminen and Ranaweera 2019), but no studies have provided *a systematic DCM conceptualization that would outline the comprehensive set of activities for putting its customer-centric principles into practice*. Previous studies have contributed only limited notions on some elements of DCM, such as organizational processes around DCM, the use of technology (Järvinen and

Taiminen 2016), or specific content tactics (Wang et al. 2019; Taiminen and Ranaweera 2019).¹

So far, DCM has been approached rather scantily, first, by considering the creation and delivery of valuable content as the starting point of the concept without building more understanding of how firms gain insight into what is valuable information for multiple decision-makers (Holliman and Rowley 2014; Wall and Spinuzzi 2018). This understanding of what is valuable information becomes even more challenging in a complex business environment characterized by multi-actor decision-making processes, typically involving a diverse set of buying and usage center members and everyone having their own intentions (Johnston and Bonoma 1981; Macdonald et al. 2016; Huber and Kleinaltenkamp 2020).¹

Second, among the positive outcomes of DCM, such as increased sales performance (Järvinen and Taiminen 2016; Wang et al. 2019), improved customer relationship performance (Taiminen and Ranaweera 2019), and improved brand performance (Hollebeek and Macky 2019), there is a lack of research that explores the *nomological network of DCM*. A nomological network is often considered the antecedents and consequences of the interest of the study, which, in this study, means the antecedents for a firm willing to implement DCM, and the contingencies that boost or weaken the DCM performance. In other words, the nomological network can represent the concepts or constructs, their observable manifestations, and their interrelationships. This study applies the theories-in-use (TIU) approach, which helps add clarity and precision to the nomological network of relationships among constructs (Zeithaml et al. 2020). Strategic excellence may be a core component of DCM performance, but the related contingencies that boost or weaken the performance relationship are equally important to understand.¹ Moreover, understanding the antecedents that drive DCM's implementation is essential to overcome first. The TIU approach is applied in this study to overcome the gap of the comprehensively mapped nomological network in prior research (Zeithaml et al. 2020).

While most B2B firms around the world apply this relatively new marketing communication approach, managers and academia seem to fall short on three major issues. First, the lack of understanding of the essence of DCM and its key activities leads to challenges in implementing customer-centric DCM strategies. Second, academics' narrow approach to DCM and linking it to extant marketing literature is deficient. And third, managerial reports and academic research remain nonexistent toward two things: the antecedents for DCM, meaning the drivers needed when a firm is implementing DCM, and the contingencies of effective DCM performance, meaning the moderators that boost or weaken a firm's DCM performance. The three issues above formulate the research gap for this dissertation.

1.2 Research purpose

This research is written for several audiences. Acknowledging that many aspects of DCM remain poorly understood, this research aims to improve understanding and encourage future research suggestions that appeal to academic researchers and scientists working in larger private technology companies. This research is also written for business practitioners who seek to understand the leading thoughts behind contemporary marketing to align marketing strategies with overall business strategies and transform their legacy marketing organizations into this decade to become capable of advancing all the digital capabilities and opportunities to support in reaching overall business goals. Finally, this research intends to help policymakers understand digital marketing strategies and activities to better align their policy decision-making when modern technologies, networks, channels, and algorithms evolve and are adopted by firms. Lagging regulations and the substantial number of recent technologies being adopted by firms have led to uninformed decisions and broad concerns on data privacy issues, for example. Yet, previous research has not conceptualized the activities that supplier firms conduct to influence the customer journey. This research does not aim to influence political decision-making on how governments are to regulate digital markets but aims to give political decision-makers an understanding of DCM key activities that firms are already conducting to drive sales and business success in the digital environment (Gordon, Jerath, Katona, Narayanan, Shin, and Wilbur 2021).

The gaps presented previously are the lack of understanding of the essence of DCM and its key activities, academics' rather narrow approach to DCM (Holliman and Rowley 2014; Järvinen and Taiminen 2016; Yaghtin et al. 2022), linkage to marketing research, and research remaining nonexistent toward the nomological network of effective DCM, which will lead to the purpose of this research and the three research questions (RQs).

This study aims to conceptualize DCM in business markets and build an in-depth understanding of the nomological network surrounding the DCM construct.

This research builds on B2B digital marketing literature and answers these three RQs; the first research question (RQ1) is theoretical and helps build conceptual underpinnings for the remaining two RQs (RQ2-RQ3):

RQ1: What are the conceptual underpinnings of DCM in extant marketing literature?

RQ2: What are the key activities and components of DCM?

RQ3: What antecedents, performance outcomes, and related contingencies of DCM can be identified?

This research consists of an extensive empirical study involving 58 manager-level interviews within 36 B2B firms from various industries; this led to three main research contributions based on the three RQs above. First, the study adds conceptual depth to prior research by positioning DCM relative to the B2B marketing literature, which helps clarify this developing research domain. Second, developing a novel conceptualization of DCM that details its key activities offers an actionable framework for its customer-centric implementation. Third, the presented nomological network of DCM contains testable propositions about the antecedents, performance outcomes, and related contingencies of effective DCM (Terho et al. 2022).

1.3 Research structure

This dissertation is structured as Figure 1 illustrates to help the reader follow along. Chapter One's "introduction" introduces the research topic of DCM in business markets. It describes the research problem, highlights the relevance of the timely topic on contemporary marketing, and follows the review of the limitations of DCM research; thus, the research gaps are identified. The chapter continues to state the audiences for whom the study is written, the research purpose, and the three RQs and finishes with a description of the research structure.

Chapter Two starts by reviewing the extant B2B digital marketing literature, which provides a conceptual context for this dissertation, followed by a review of extant DCM research in business markets to uncover the three DCM principles: inbound logic, personalization, and journey facilitation. Chapter Three includes a theoretical deep dive into DCM's three main conceptual underpinnings: the B2B customer journey, customer engagement in business markets, and marketing technologies that play a crucial role in DCM. Chapter Three focuses on the literature review to answer RQ1: *What are the conceptual underpinnings of DCM in extant marketing literature?*

In Chapter Four, "Research Design," the research methodology is discussed, starting with outlining the philosophical underpinnings, continuing to the qualitative research methods applied, abductive research strategy, and inductive tactics, and then explaining the TIU approach, which was adopted as a qualitative research methodology for this research. Chapter Four continues with a discussion about the rationale behind methodology decisions like research approach, data collection, data management, data analysis and interpretation, and research ethics, and ends with an evaluation of the research.

In Chapter Five, the study discusses the findings of this research, starting with the conceptualization of DCM and following with a thorough discussion of the three dimensions of DCM: generating intelligence about customer journeys, creating a portfolio of valuable content, and engaging customers through content sharing (Terho et al. 2022). Chapter Five answers RQ2: *What are the key activities and components of DCM?*

In Chapter Six, an empirically derived nomological network of DCM is presented. It incorporates propositions reflecting the key antecedents, performance outcomes, and marketing unit-related and organizational moderators that boost or weaken the DCM performance. Chapter Six answers RQ3: *What antecedents, performance outcomes, and related contingencies of DCM can be identified?* Chapter Seven wraps up the dissertation by outlining the theoretical and managerial implications of the findings and ends by outlining the limitations and avenues for further research.

An article based on this dissertation has already been published. In some sections of this dissertation, that article from Terho, Mero, Siutla, and Jaakkola (2022) is referred to with a footnote: “Parts of this section have already been published in Terho, Mero, Siutla, and Jaakkola (2022) that builds on this dissertation.” In some parts, the specific page numbers are added to the footnote to provide transparency. Appendix 1 has a comprehensive review of the author’s contribution.

This introduction chapter familiarized the reader with the research gaps leading to the three RQs for this study. As described above in detail, the structure of the study is built around answering these three RQs, with dedicated chapters on each, leading to this study’s contributions.

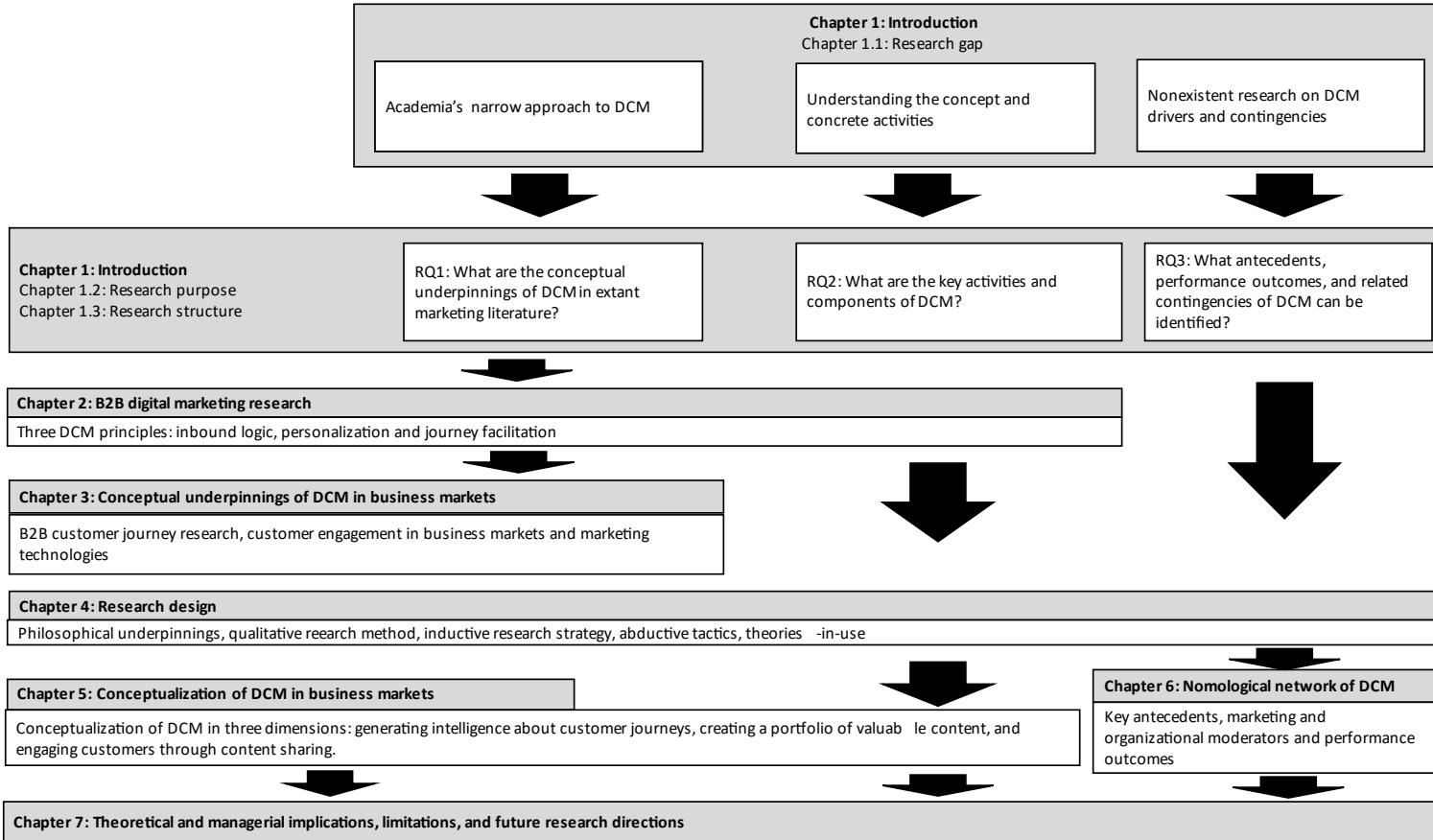


Figure 1. The structure of the dissertation.

2 B2B Digital Marketing Research

Chapter Two reviews the key elements of B2B digital marketing and the extant DCM literature in business markets to build the basis for the context of DCM in this dissertation. Section 2.1 starts by highlighting the characteristics of B2B markets and then reviews the five key elements of B2B digital marketing in respective sub-sections. Section 2.2 covers in more detail the extant DCM literature in business markets and the customer-centric DCM principles.

2.1 Key elements of B2B digital marketing

Understanding the difference between B2B and business-to-consumer (B2C) markets is crucial since certain characteristics set these two markets apart. B2B market characteristics need to be considered when reviewing extant digital marketing literature and applying it to the B2B context. Unlike B2C research, which focuses on the relationship between organizations and individual customers, B2B research aims to understand commercial business relationships between organizations and the characteristics of industrial markets (Kannan and Li 2017). Digital technologies play a major role in B2B and B2C by reducing information asymmetries between customers and sellers (Terho et al. 2022; Kannan and Li 2017). Already widely seen in the B2C context, with the ever-growing number of buyers' access to new technologies, buyer behavior is changing and primarily affecting information acquisition regarding the price, quality, search process, and customer expectations (Kannan and Li 2017). When comparing this consumer behavior to business market settings, four key notions are apparent: First, a higher level of cognition is present during the industrial buying process compared to private consumers; hence, industrial buyers presumably behave less emotionally and more rationally, whereas consumers are considered more driven by emotional consumption motives (Li and Kannan 2017; Hogueve and Fleischer 2020), causing more impulsive buying behavior (Li and Kannan 2017; Swani et al. 2014). Second, multiple individuals are often involved in industrial decision-making (Webster and Wind 1972; Cooper and Jackson 1988) and tend to connect differently. For example, a purchasing representative might focus purely on price, whereas a quality manager might be more concerned about product quality and details (Bowman and

Narayandas 2004). The number of stakeholders involved in the B2B purchasing decision differs greatly from that of consumer markets with one or few buyer unit members. Third, the context of formal organizational processes influences customer interactions in B2B buying. The context of formal organizational processes is influenced by budget, costs and profit considerations, and industrial offers, which are often more complex and tailored to a firm's needs (Webster and Wind 1972). Aligned with industrial buyers' rationality, the formal organization of the buying process traditionally reduces the influence of emotions, as industrial buyers follow more strict rules during decision-making (Hogreve and Fleischer 2020). Fourth, industrial buyers are often more prone to relationships (Johnson and Sohi 2001). The previously described product complexity and customization of solutions require a deep understanding of business partners' processes and objectives, thus highlighting the importance of a relationship. Industrial relationships can be linked through lock-in effects (e.g., interlocked production and delivery processes) (Lilien 2016). Similarly, the number of buyers and sellers is considerably smaller in B2B markets (Lilien et al. 2010), creating more dependency and longer relationships with repeated purchases (Saini, Rao, and Monga 2010).

Next, this section discusses digital marketing in this B2B marketing context. Different views exist on digital marketing. Some researchers ask whether digital marketing should be called just marketing since, today, all aspects of marketing include digital forms (Lamberton and Stephen 2016). However, digital marketing can be seen broadly: how digitalization affects marketing in general (Kannan and Li 2017) or how a strategic B2B communications-focused view emphasizes driving sales (Vieira et al. 2019). Next, this section will discuss these two views of digital marketing. Kannan and Li (2017) adopt a more inclusive perspective and define digital marketing as "an adaptive, technology-enabled process by which firms collaborate with customers and partners to jointly create, communicate, deliver, and sustain value for all stakeholders" (Kannan and Li 2017, 23). Kannan and Li's (2017) framework illustrated in Figure 2 for research in digital marketing identifies and describes the touchpoints in the marketing process and marketing strategy process, where digital technologies already have or will likely have a significant impact. Kannan and Li's (2017) digital marketing research framework starts by illustrating the environment (1) and analyzing the five C's: the customers, competitors, context, collaborators, and the company. Their main objective is to understand how digital technologies interact with these five C's and what their interfaces are with each other. Kannan and Li (2017) highlight the institutions, concepts, and structures that emerge from these interactions: contextual interactions, consumer behavior, search engines, social media, user-generated content, and finally, platforms and two-sided markets. These form the input for the actions, including all the company's marketing mix elements with market research. In their

framework, Kannan and Li (2017) are interested in the previous actions mentioned and the value creation that digital technologies impact.

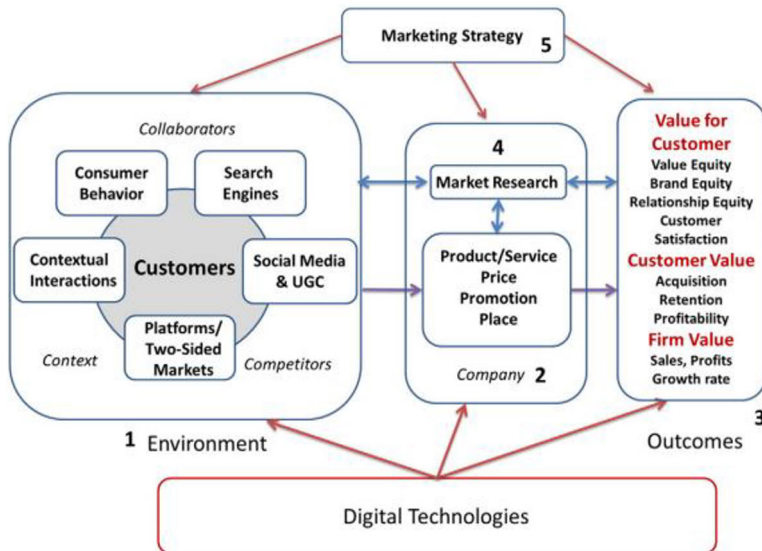


Figure 2. The framework for digital marketing research (Kannan and Li 2017)

Next this section discusses Vieira et al.'s (2019) B2B communications-focused view that emphasizes driving sales. Vieira et al. (2019) view digital marketing as a strategic element of the digital echoverse, which includes firm- and market-initiated digital communications. Origination and control characteristics are fundamental to categorizing their different digital media communications, which are summarized in the owned-inbound-earned-organic search O-I-E-O framework for driving sales (Figure 3). Firm-initiated digital communications such as paid media, owned media, and digital inbound marketing are considered the firm's investments and communication that firms have control over (e.g., blogs the firm has created or the sponsored ads the firm bought to increase website traffic), whereas earned social media and organic searches are defined as market-initiated digital communication as they cannot be controlled or purchased by the firm but may result in, e.g., free traffic to the company website. Vieira et al.'s (2019) study was done in the emerging market context, but the key elements are basically the same in the developed market context.

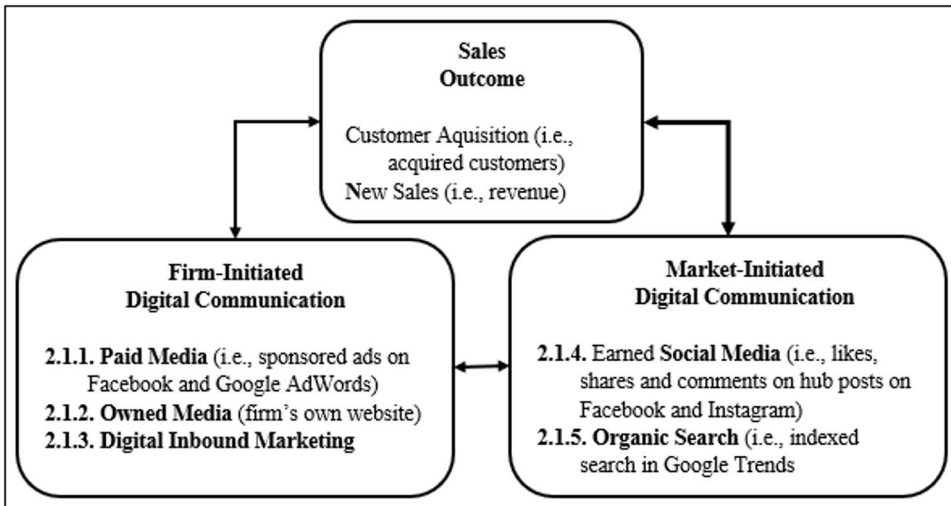


Figure 3. Conceptual O-I-E-O framework for driving sales (adapted from Vieira et al. 2019)

The strategic B2B communication-focused view of digital marketing aligns more closely with the DCM concept. Thus, this dissertation discusses the key elements of B2B digital marketing based on the OIEO framework (Vieira et al. 2019). Sub-sections 2.1.1-2.1.5 review these key elements for B2B digital marketing.

2.1.1 Paid media

Paid media is media bought by the firm, such as sponsored advertising in search engines (e.g., search engine marketing: SEM), on platforms, or social media (e.g., video ads, display advertising, pay-per-click ads, pop-ups, or sponsored posts on Facebook or LinkedIn) (Choi and Mela 2019; Vieira et al. 2019; Yoon, Yoon, Nam, and Choi 2021). When conversion is being evaluated, paid media is considered a highly profitable approach toward gaining leads, awareness, engagement, and revenue (Dinner, Heerde Van, and Neslin 2014). Hence, measurement is a valuable characteristic of digital marketing efforts compared to more traditional marketing approaches, where the exact reach or return on investment (ROI) is more difficult to measure quantitatively. SEM has been studied more extensively in the B2C context (Abou Nabout and Skiera 2012; Angeloni and Rossi 2021; Jiang 2023), yet researchers have mainly been interested in sales effects to optimize using search terms (Lemon and Verhoef 2016) and the targeted placement of online media through placing ads on sites related to a company's offerings. Interest has revolved around the ability to place ads based on search engine keywords to reach people who have started the buying process (Batra and Keller 2016).

Cross-channel effects studied in online advertising show that measuring the impact of advertising on only a single channel can significantly underestimate its effect, and the success of paid media depends on several factors (e.g., ad position, keyword positioning into a search engine, costs of drawing customers, impressions, clickthrough rates) (Vieira et al. 2019). Cortez, Gilliland, and Johnston (2020) found that social media had three diverse implications when adding it to their B2B advertising theory: the advertising channel's effect on the potential ad stimulus that a particular ad creates, social media confounding work and time with friends or family, and difficulty in identifying the thinking pattern and increase in competing messages that buying center members are exposed to.

In other words, paid media (e.g., advertising on social media or in search engines) can be considered the opposite of inbound thinking, where customers are pulled toward a firm organically.

2.1.2 Owned media

Owned media is a website fully controlled and owned by the firm (thus, the firm does not need to pay or promote content there) and is used as a place for the firm-initiated digital content (e.g., press releases, videos, podcasts, blogs, webinars, product/service information) organized on different landing pages, and is where the firm intends to drive traffic through other digital marketing elements (Hanna, Rohm, and Crittenden 2011; Vieira et al. 2019). Owned media (e.g., website or app) can be considered a platform for customers to initiate contact with a focal firm (Vieira et al. 2019). A trace is always left from all the supplier firms' or customers' actions in the digital environment (e.g., owned media); hence, the actions become trackable (e.g., in marketing automation or web analytics). In some studies, owned media can be referred to as a representation of customer activity metrics (e.g., website visits) (Vieira et al. 2019; Srinivasan et al. 2016). Srinivasan et al. (2016) found that website visits are about three times more valuable than a Facebook like for the brand they studied, suggesting caution in excessive reliance on earned media (e.g., social media).

Marketing automation and web analytics capitalize on similar techniques by tracking website visitors' online behaviors (e.g., navigation paths and page views) using cookies and IP addresses (Batra and Keller 2016). However, it is commonly accepted that multiple methods should measure digital marketing performance, and B2B firms applying web analytics is just one component of overall performance measurement. Section 3.3 reviews web analytics on B2B marketing technologies in more detail.

2.1.3 Digital inbound marketing

As stated, B2B digital marketing can be considered a high-level concept for all marketing based on data and technologies, whereas digital inbound marketing can

be considered one of the key elements of B2B digital marketing that relies heavily on pull thinking (Vieira et al. 2019). Indeed, Vieira et al.'s (2019) view on digital inbound marketing comes close to the DCM concept studied in this dissertation. Yet, this dissertation notes that inbound thinking represents a customer-centric principle underlying DCM. This sub-section gives a short overview of the digital inbound marketing concept, and Section 2.2 reviews pull thinking, extant DCM literature, and inbound principles in more detail. Section 3.3 reviews the latest marketing technology research relevant to DCM.

Digital inbound marketing can be considered a marketing strategy focusing on helping customers find a company. The American Marketing Association's (AMA's) definition from 2017 states: "Inbound is when customers initiate contact with the marketer in response to various methods used to gain their attention. These methods include email, events, content, and web design, meaning inbound marketing is seen as more consent-driven, where customers are willing to consume the content compared to the overall digital marketing that covers all sorts of advertisements and tools of persuasion. One purpose of inbound is to establish the business as a source for valuable information and solutions to problems, thereby fostering customer trust and loyalty." The term "inbound marketing" was mentioned from practice and originally coined in 2005 by Brian Halligan, HubSpot's co-founder and CEO. With the rise of content marketing and Google's new algorithm, the digital inbound marketing concept took off. In 2015, the term "inbound marketing" was used in a variety of practice books and management reviews (Sweetwood 2016; Halligan and Shah 2014; Odden 2012) but was absent within the academic marketing literature. Meanwhile, digital inbound marketing practitioners were discussing this proactive, prescriptive approach (Toman et al. 2017), which guides customers through decision-making by deeply understanding the customer journey and addressing it with marketing approaches and tactics such as content marketing, social selling, web analytics, search engine optimization (SEO), and marketing automation (Toman et al. 2017; Sweetwood, 2016; Edelman and Singer 2015). Digital inbound marketing aims to drive customer engagement (Halligan and Shah 2014), where the firm can have direct (buying) or indirect (social media influencing, feedback systems, references) contributions (Pansari and Kumar 2017).

Tentative evidence shows that digital inbound marketing tactics can provide value to businesses (Wang et al. 2017; Toman et al. 2017; Edelman and Singer 2015). Yet, firms face two major challenges in inbound thinking: First, firms lack a holistic understanding of the digital inbound marketing field, as well as the key contents of different functions and activities inside digital marketing and digital inbound marketing, and then integrating them and the business itself (Karjaluo et al. 2015; Rodriguez 2014; Pomirleanu 2013). Second, aligning marketing and sales organizations to work toward a common goal is challenging; for example, when web analytic and marketing automation systems create leads, salespeople often find these

leads poor and do not contact them (Järvinen and Taiminen 2016). Further research is needed to understand how inbound elements (e.g., DCM) affect interactions in the buying process (Wang et al. 2017). Equivalent evidence exists in deeply aligning marketing and sales to create positive outcomes. The tight alignment of sales and marketing teams is needed to support the customer journey from start to finish, breaking down the historical barriers between those functions (Toman et al. 2017). A powerful research institution, CSO Insights (2016), showed tangible impacts in win rates when sales and marketing social strategies were formally aligned. Wiersema (2013) named sales and marketing alignment the biggest future challenge for B2B marketing, along with sales enablement and innovation, which still holds true. Information technology was highlighted as one potential factor in breaking down inter-organizational barriers, particularly between marketing and sales (Wiersema 2013). Notably, sales and marketing could report to the same individual and have an open discussion (Biemans et al. 2008) focusing on systematized feedback and the digital exchange of information (Karjaluoto et al. 2015). Hence, an opportunity exists to integrate marketing and sales. Biemans et al. (2008) highlighted that not all B2B firms have separate formal marketing and sales departments; some are integrated. Through that integration, firms can gain better business performance (Biemans et al. 2008) and take full advantage of different inbound marketing activities (Järvinen and Taiminen 2016; Marshall, Moncrief, Rudd, and Lee 2012).

After the short overview above of the inbound marketing concept, Section 2.2 goes more in-depth and reviews extant DCM literature, and Sub-section 2.2.2 discusses the inbound principles in more detail.

2.1.4 Social media

This sub-section summarizes the literature on B2B social media by examining how it has been adopted, how it evolved to become part of the sales process, and what challenges firms have faced when adopting social media in business markets. Sub-section 2.1.1 already covered paid social media marketing.

The ease with which customers can share word-of-mouth information, not only with a few close friends but with strangers on an extended social network, sets the digital and traditional marketing environments apart (Kannan and Li 2017). A company's social media presence is highly valued for building trust (Akman and Mishra 2017), and given social media's unprecedented reach, firms increasingly rely on it as a channel for marketing communication (Kumar et al. 2016). In the digital environment, customers can post reviews on products, services, brands, and firms on different websites and social networks, reaching many more potential customers (Kannan and Li 2017). Entrepreneurs find social media less time- and resource-consuming than other options (Pulizzi 2015; Drummond, McGrath, and O'Toole 2017). Extensive practitioner interest in using social media for B2B marketing has

existed since the early 2000s (Brennan and Croft 2012). Since Lambertson and Stephen (2016) labeled the latte period from 2011 to 2014 as the age of social media, it was not until the last decade that B2B organizations and their customers learned the advantages of social media (Keinänen and Kuivalainen 2015). B2B firms have learned that social media offers the potential to experiment, evaluate, embed, and engage (Cawsey and Rowley 2016) with stakeholders who might want to be associated with strong brands (Swani, Brown, and Milne 2014). Extant research highlights several factors to consider when using social media in business markets. Organizations willing to adopt social media should concentrate on influencing the management's attitudes toward social media's usefulness (Siamagka et al. 2015). Organizations not using social media feel pressure from competitors and customers (Siamagka, Christodoulide, Michaelidou, and Valvi 2015), but the environment can be an enabler (Schultz, Schwepker, and Good 2012; Andzulis, Panagopoulos, and Rapp 2012).

Swani et al. (2014) argue that buying behavior must be considered in the social media strategy. The organization's brand channels can communicate about company affairs, whereas employees can interact more on social media (Huotari, Ulkuniemi, Saraniemi, and Mäläskä 2015). Guesagala (2016) studied the antecedents of social media usage and learned that the organization's social media competence matters the most in social media usage. Employees must be trained (Guesagala 2016; Agnihotri et al. 2012; Terho, Giovanetti, Cardinali 2022) and encouraged by the top management (Agnihotri, Konthandaraman, Kashyap, and Singh 2012; Andzulis et al. 2012; Terho et al. 2022b) to use social media rather than being controlled (Huotari et al. 2015). It seemingly took time for B2B firms to understand social media's advantages and move from controlling to encouraging employees to use it in their professional roles. Marketing and sales were the first organizational functions to adopt social media. The concept of social selling quickly took off; the next paragraph reviews social selling in greater detail.

Social selling is a salesperson selling approach that leverages social media platforms to understand, connect, and engage influencers and potential and current customers at relevant customer journey touchpoints to build valuable business relationships (Terho et al. 2022b; Ancillai et al. 2019). Extant research provides best-practice activities that have led to successful social media usage in the B2B sales environment. For example, top management can enable social selling by offering combined social media strategy, social selling tools, and firm content support for salespersons (Terho et al. 2022b). B2B firms are recommended to have a social media expert with enough authority to influence senior management (Guesagala 2016). Getting the entire staff to utilize social media is possible, but marketing and salespeople are easier to motivate (Hansen and Levin 2016). Some studies investigate the characteristics of someone who can benefit from using social media. Selecting personnel with social media commitment (Guesagala 2016), skills, and interests is a strategic decision (Schultz et al. 2012). Age was discussed earlier

to negatively correlate to social media usage (Schultz et al. 2012; Marshall et al. 2012). However, Moore et al. (2015) discovered that sales managers use social media more than sales representatives, who are usually younger. The implementation of social media in the sales process (Andzulis et al. 2012) has been studied a little. The biggest advantages have been differentiation and choosing the right sales strategy in the early sales process.

The labels “social CRM” and “CRM 2.0,” meaning social customer relationship management, have been used to describe integrating traditional customer-facing activities, including processes, systems, and technologies with emergent social media applications to engage customers in collaborative conversations and enhance customer relationships (Trainor 2012). Trainor, Andzulis, Rapp, and Agnihotri (2014) concluded that firms with high social media use in conjunction with customer-centric management systems developed greater social CRM capabilities than firms with low social media technology use, supporting the claim that social media technology use, when viewed as a resource, positively influences customer relationship performance via firm-level capabilities (Trainor 2012). Terho et al. (2022b) claim that social selling measurement proves that salesperson customer orientation does not drive social selling, whereas sales technology orientation represents its central antecedent. For social CRM to be effective, a firm must understand how customers respond to firm-generated content (FGC) and whether certain segments of customers can benefit more from the firm’s social engagement efforts (Kumar et al. 2016). Social media is noted to be a good addition to other sales tactics and is not there to replace other tactics (Itani, Agnihotri, and Dingus 2017; Agnihotri et al. 2016; Marshall et al. 2012) or traditional CRM (Trainor 2012). Many studies urge companies to use digital channels more softly than hard selling to build relationships (Brennan and Croft 2012; Swani et al. 2014; Swani et al. 2017). Knowledge sharing indirectly creates customer satisfaction (Agnihotri et al. 2016). Knowledge sharing is crucial in forming long-lasting business relationships in complex settings. Hence, business markets create a propitious environment for social media and digital channels to be used more.

Also, internal barriers to social media adoption have been studied on some level. These barriers reportedly include salesforce unfamiliarity and lack of training for using social media to support their role (Michaelidou et al. 2011) and a weak organizational social strategy (Itani et al. 2017). Salespeople might be resistance towards new technology and unrealistic performance metrics (Agnihotri et al. 2012). Many studies also highlight the sales marketing cooperation (Andzulis et al. 2012; Marshall et al. 2012) as enabling social media use, emphasizing technology-related awareness and competencies when selecting and training salespeople (Terho et al. 2022b). If sales and marketing could stop claiming each other and see the opportunities created through social media and how both can benefit from it, such would be optimal.

2.1.5 Organic search

This sub-section summarizes the relevant research on organic search as a digital marketing element emphasizing the empowerment of customers, the requirement of new capabilities within the marketing organization, and the role of organic search being a key driver for other digital marketing elements now and going forward. Sub-section 2.1.1 on paid media covers SEM.

Organic search (e.g., search engine optimization; SEO) is a digital marketing element that aims to increase a website's natural ranking, free traffic to owned media (Li and Kannan 2014), customers from search engines (e.g., Google or Bing), and different algorithms (e.g., chatbots; ChatGPT) (Cutler 2023). An organic search can be seen as an organic online activity because "customers click on the nonadvertised results returned by search engines" (Haan, Wiesel, and Pauwels 2016, 494), which can provide a "valuable measure and [be an] indicator of customer interest in [a] product, concept or term" (Kulkarni, Kannan, and Moe 2012, 604). Organic search results use search engine (e.g., Google) rankings and an indexed algorithm according to the importance and frequency of a term on the web (Yang and Ghose 2010).

The change happening in B2B customer behavior certainly powers search engines. Search engines have transformed the information search options by empowering customers to lead the information search, decreasing the dependency on salespeople's involvement in the purchasing process and making the purchasing process not dependent on time and place (Edelman and Singer 2015). Digital marketing elements, like organic search, require new capabilities in marketing organizations to build meaningful performance metrics needed for DCM. Organic search should be considered in content marketing strategies (Odden 2012; Fishkin and Høgenhaven, 2013) with the help of digital marketing technologies (e.g., web analytics or tools like Google Trends). Marketers can generate traffic through organic search by knowing the specific and most commonly searched terms and utilizing that information to post precise content (Vieira et al. 2019). Digital marketing technologies provide benefits for organic search through their ability to gather objective data (e.g., which activities or what kind of content drives potential customers to engage with the firm) on genuine online customer behavior (e.g., the number of unique clicks on a page, the time potential customers spend there, and where they went next), and subsequent business outcomes (e.g., how many sales leads are generated and what the sales outcome is) (Järvinen and Karjaluoto 2015).

Practical managerial books also highlight the changes in Google's algorithms and the increasing focus on Google's organic search engine traffic (Pulizzi 2015; Odden 2012). Lately, as seen by following the market's general development, Google usage has decreased outside Western countries, and Chinese Baidu and Russian Yandex are leading search engines in their respective countries, although the governments heavily supervise them; thus, not all information is found there.

Since paid and optimized content is becoming dominant on Google (Vieira et al. 2019), it heavily reflects the search results; hence, new alternative search engines have recently evolved that take privacy issues more seriously, like DuckDuckGo or the Swedish text-based search engine, Marginalia.

After ChatGPT was launched in 2022, users of this new chatbot were provided with information based on their populated questions (e.g., prompts). Unlike traditional search engines, this new technology can be used to write code or stories, create business proposals, and answer complex questions. Traditional search engine companies (e.g., Microsoft) are investing in these ecosystems (Kutler 2023).

2.2 Extant DCM literature in business markets

After reviewing the key elements of B2B digital marketing, this section will concentrate more on extant DCM literature in business markets. This section introduces the pull marketing concept that DCM strongly builds on. Sub-section 2.2.1 reviews B2B content marketing and DCM in more detail; Sub-section 2.2.2 discusses the three customer-centric DCM principles.

As the introduction stated regarding reverting to digital marketing, DCM builds strongly on pull marketing (Vieira et al. 2019); digital marketing is widely understood to have push elements, especially in digital advertising. Hence, shortly reviewing the *push and pull concept* is relevant for this study to build an understanding around the foundations of these earlier concepts, thus building the conceptualization of DCM and linking its key elements to existing concepts. Push and pull concepts were first introduced in logistics, engineering, research and development (R&D), and production literature, which are used to help explain how firms accomplish goals and complete projects (Zhang, Ren, Wang, and He 2018). Next, services marketing started highlighting the pull concept, referring to it as a customer promotion method to create more “engagement in self-managing conditions and deliver greater opportunities for co-created value” (Keeling, Ruyter, Mousavi, and Laing 2019). Afterward, business literature acknowledged the pull concept for several decades, but in few and narrow contexts and mainly through its promotional efforts (Olhager and Östlund 1990). A characterization of pull promotions is that pull promotions rely heavily on the recipient’s active request (Varadarajan, 2010) as they involve click-throughs before the final subscription is done (Hoffman and Fodor, 2010). This similar conception of a pull concept seems crucial toward a firm’s DCM activities and building the mindset of an opt-in and willingness to receive firm-generated DCM, acknowledging that promotional settings are crucial in today’s digital marketing environment.

2.2.1 B2B Content marketing and digital content marketing

The AMA writes and updates the most popular definition of content marketing every few years. The AMA (2017) defines content marketing as creating and distributing *valuable, relevant, and consistent* content to attract and acquire a clearly defined audience to drive profitable customer action. As DCM's terms state, "digital" refers to the assumption that digital technologies are required in addition to content marketing. In the big picture, the digital technologies' role can be the structural, action, and management layers of DCM, which can be a strong element in which relationship management activities are implemented to improve the relationship's consistency and performance (Makkonen and Vuori 2014). Studies have highlighted that DCM is concerned with engaging customers at the right points in their buying processes and gaining a desired business outcome (e.g., a sale). Content marketing's role is claimed to be an inbound marketing tactic directed at generating valuable content based on the needs of potential buyers who have already searched for information on a product or service (Halligan and Shah 2010) by offering a solution to the declining effectiveness of traditional interruptive marketing techniques (Rowley and Holliman 2014). Content marketing can also be considered effective in B2B firms' ability to bring new sales leads and opportunities and complement the existing sales force (Wang, Malthouse, Calder, and Uzunogly 2017).

It is widely accepted that two kinds of content should be considered: firm-generated content (FGC) and user-generated content (UGC). FGC refers to messages that firms post on their official social channels, which can help build relationships with individual customers (Kumar, Bezawada, Rishika, Janakiraman, and Kannan 2016). Forms of digital FGC can vary among webinars, whitepapers, newsletters, digital brochures, blog texts, social media posts, infographics, pictures, and videos. UGC has been widely studied in the B2C context, given the number of consumer-generated online reviews and the fact that consumers use UGC to make decisions (Kannan and Li 2017; Lamberton 2016). However, Huotari, Ulkuniemi, Saraniemi, and Mäläskä (2015) also concluded that firms can influence content creation directly through corporate user accounts or indirectly through employees. The objectives of B2B content marketing are to foster brand awareness and image, drive customer engagement, increase sales through customer acquisitions, and facilitate lead generation, upselling, and cross-selling (Holliman and Rowley 2014). One objective is thought leadership (Lipiäinen and Karjaluoto 2015; Rowley and Holliman 2014; Brennan and Croft 2012), which is rather close to the concept of social selling, where individuals post content to become a thought leader on a specific topic or realm of expertise. Creating relevant content and delivering it through various social media channels can help a company or organization become an opinion leader (Lipiäinen and Karjaluoto 2015). Opinion leadership is "the degree to which an individual can informally influence other individuals' attitudes or overt behavior in a desired way

with relative frequency” (Rogers 1962). Other objectives of UGC can include building better mutual relationships (Mehmet and Clarke 2016; John, Emrich, Gupta, and Norton 2017; Brennan and Croft 2012; Wang et al. 2016), lead generation (Järvinen and Taiminen 2016) through generating traffic to their websites (Rowley and Holliman 2014), and knowledge sharing (Quinton and Wilson 2016).

Since some studies on DCM already exist, this chapter continues reviewing the key research in this area for developing a theory-based understanding of DCM. Table 1 illustrates the review of the literature, confirming that most definitions of DCM converge on creating and sharing valuable content to direct customers toward commercial outcomes (see Holliman and Rowley 2014; Järvinen and Taiminen 2016; Wang et al. 2019; Hollebeek and Macky 2019; Taiminen and Ranaweera 2019; Vieira et al. 2019; Wall and Spinuzzi 2018). Marketers have applied DCM strategies and tactics for nearly two decades, but academic B2B marketing research described the concept rather recently. Currently, Holliman and Rowley (2014) is the most cited definition of DCM as a strategic B2B marketing communication approach: *B2B DCM involves creating, distributing, and sharing relevant, compelling, and timely content to engage customers at the appropriate point in their buying consideration processes, such that it encourages them to convert to a business building outcome*. Some variations of the definition exist, but the studies mainly state that DCM entails creating and sharing valuable digital content for engaging customers to achieve performance outcomes (e.g., sales or improved brand relationships) (Terho et al. 2022, 295–296).

Table 1. Definitions for DCM (Terho et al. 2022).

STUDY	DEFINITION OF DCM
Holliman and Rowley (2014)	DCM involves creating, distributing, and sharing valuable content to engage customers at the appropriate point in their buying process, encouraging them to convert to a business-building outcome.
Järvinen and Taiminen (2016)	DCM creates and delivers content to target customers in ways that add value and engage them in a relationship with the company.
Wall and Spinuzzi (2018)	DCM is a method of marketing a product or service by creating and distributing free informational or entertainment content, especially online.
Wang et al. (2019)	DCM creates and delivers helpful information that engages customers and supports the firm’s selling process.
Taiminen and Ranaweera (2019)	DCM is a relationship marketing activity that culminates in creating and disseminating helpful brand actions through digital content, leading to favorable brand engagement and relationships.
Hollebeek and Macky (2019)	DCM creates and disseminates relevant, valuable, brand-related content to current or prospective customers on digital platforms to develop favorable brand engagement, trust, and relationships.
Vieira et al. (2019)	Digital inbound marketing focuses on digital content creation and investment in organic tactics based on interactivity and engagement to promote an organic search.
Ho et al. (2020)	DCM optimizes and accelerates brand content on shared media to earn audience engagement by delivering content-generated value.

While the previous studies agree on several key elements, such as creating and sharing valuable digital content for engaging customers to achieve performance outcomes, they have not yet operationalized the concrete activities through which DCM is implemented. Therefore, this study's qualitative research indicates that DCM is a three-dimensional construct. This study defines DCM *as a digital marketing communication approach that generates intelligence about customer journeys, develops a synergistic content portfolio that facilitates problem-solving for key buyer personas at different journey stages, and engages customers by sharing content matched to their needs.*

2.2.2 Customer-centric DCM principles

The extensive literature review this chapter discussed helped identify the three fundamental principles of DCM that can support the conceptualization work: (1) inbound logic, (2) personalization, and (3) journey facilitation. These principles were identified through careful reading and appeared as themes that were persistently included in the definition or within an in-depth elaboration of DCM. This chapter dives into the essence of customer-centricity and discusses the three fundamental principles around DCM. Extant research is rather aligned when claiming that successfully implementing content creation and sharing requires a customer-centric approach (Terho et al. 2022). There has been a change from a product-centric philosophy to a customer-centric marketing approach, where previously, the company sold products to whoever wanted to buy them rather than a company building a valuable portfolio of customers and serving their needs (Kumar 2015). In other words, *customer centricity* seeks to understand and satisfy the needs of individual customers rather than mass markets or broad market segments to create superior value (Shah et al. 2006; Sheth, Sisodia, and Sharma 2000; van den Driest, Sthanunathan, and Weed 2016; Terho et al. 2022). Such a shift in philosophy highlighted the importance of nurturing profitable customer relationships and offering products that satisfy customer needs rather than driving product profitability and market share (Tuli, Kohli, and Bharadwaj 2007). This change must have been transformational for companies that used to apply product-centric principles in their operational strategies. Changing the culture requires time, effort, and probably new people to enter the company to drive the change.

Although customer centricity has been encouraged for several decades, the availability of individual-level customer data has enabled focusing on individual customers (Lemon and Verhoef 2016). As mentioned, with the help of marketing automation technologies, companies have started tracing the individual customer in their journey. The concept of customer focus or centricity has been widely discussed in the marketing literature, and the notion of customer centricity as a valuable strategic approach has been proposed, implemented, and debated since the 2000s

(Lemon and Verhoef 2016; Kumar, Venkatesan, and Reinartz 2008). Customer centricity is the “set of beliefs that puts the customer’s interest first, while not excluding those of all other stakeholders such as owners, managers, and employees to develop a long-term profitable enterprise” (Deshpandé and Webster 1993).

The true essence of customer-centricity seems to rely on several factors. Instead of a company thinking about how to sell its products, it should start fostering a customer-focused culture, where the focus is creating value for the customer and, thus, the company (Shah et al. 2006). The earlier literature primarily focuses on the performance benefits of an organization with a customer focus; however, more recent research starts highlighting the steps required in shifting toward a customer-focused organization with a strategy that aligns the company’s product(s) and service(s) with the needs of its most valuable customers to maximize the long-term financial value of those customers (Fader 2020; Kumar et al. 2008; Shah et al. 2006). Usually, the steps toward a customer-focused culture include steps around customer information gathering from past customer behavior (e.g., their product and service needs and consumption habits), developing an understanding of likely future customer behavior, and providing real-time responses for customer needs (Kumar et al. 2008; Gulati and Oldroyd 2005). This shift has enabled organizations to prepare for the interdisciplinary and cross-functional coordination required to design, understand, and manage the customer experience (Lemon and Verhoef 2016).

After an extensive literature review of DCM, three customer-centric principles of DCM were identified. These principles are used to establish a clear conceptualization: inbound logic, personalization, and journey facilitation (Terho et al. 2022). As Figure 4 later illustrates, these principles helped identify three conceptual lenses to help form this conceptualization (e.g., customer journey, customer engagement, and marketing technologies). Chapter Three reviews these marketing literature streams. Next, this chapter continues to review these three DCM principles of inbound logic, personalization, and journey facilitation.

Table 2. Key principles of DCM in extant literature (adapted from Terho et al. 2022).

	PRINCIPLE 1: INBOUND LOGIC	PRINCIPLE 2: PERSONALIZATION	PRINCIPLE 3: JOURNEY FACILITATION
Holliman and Rowley (2014)	DCM is an inbound marketing technique that encourages customers and prospects to actively seek out brands providing engaging and valuable content.	A key aspect of DCM is that it targets messaging to prospects and customers according to where they are in their buying cycle.	B2B DCM encourages customers to convert to a business-building outcome.
Järvinen and Taiminen (2016)	Content marketing applies inbound tactics as an effective means of attracting suspects who are motivated to identify themselves.	Combining marketing automation technology with content marketing enables the precise personalization of the content to meet the target customers' information needs.	DCM links closely to selling processes as an effective tool for managing incoming leads at different purchasing stages.
Wall and Spinuzzi (2018)	Content marketing creates and distributes content designed to be valuable or intriguing on its own merits so that customers will willingly consume it.	As diverse audiences are interested in different kinds of content, marketers should customize their content so that individuals see blog posts or other content that relate to their interests when they land on a webpage.	Content marketing is the art of selling without selling by creating content in genres that readers find useful and is collectively designed to lead readers toward a purchase decision.
Wang et al. (2019)	Unlike advertising-centric marketing, DCM does not seek to persuade customers but share valuable content that brings the customer into contact.	<i>N.A. The study builds on customer data and confines analysis to the frequency of engaging with the content.</i>	B2B content marketing effectively influences the buying center and purchase decision process and complements sales.
Hollebeek and Macky (2019)	Unlike advertising designed to persuade consumers to buy, DCM seeks to increase customer appreciation of the brand or firm by adding value to their lives to indirectly cultivate sales over the longer term.	<i>Not addressed directly.</i> The study notes that consumers may select media content because it is functional, hedonic, or authentic, implicitly emphasizing the need to personalize shared content to meet customers' needs.	<i>N.A. Focuses on identifying important consumer-based antecedents of DCM.</i>
Taiminen and Ranaweera (2019)	DCM adjusts marketing communications to reach customers and prospects by offering content they want to engage with.	<i>Not addressed directly.</i> The study identifies the perceived helpfulness of brand action as a major driver of brand trust and engagement in DCM, implicitly emphasizing the need to personalize shared content to meet customers' needs.	DCM incorporates brand-initiated engagement triggers that foster customer engagement to build long-term relationships.
Vieira et al. (2019)	Digital inbound marketing strategies voluntarily attract potential customers to a company's website.	Digital inbound marketing employs customized content, personal interactivity, and engagement to promote organic search.	Digital inbound marketing seeks potential leads to transform them into active clients by matching their needs to specific content.
Ho et al. (2020)	Content marketing uses owned media to gain earned media through content-generated value.	<i>N.A. The study builds on consumer markets and suggests adapting content to the target audience due to channel expectations.</i>	The study is heavily branding-oriented but mentions product-centric sales promotional content.

Next, the study will review these principles of inbound logic, personalization, and journey facilitation in more detail (Terho et al. 2022).

Inbound logic, originally named by HubSpot founders Halligan and Shah (2014), implies pull communications: By sharing relevant, helpful information, the firm can attract attention to its firm-owned media space, whereas push communications interrupt people with unsolicited, firm-generated messages (Halligan and Shah 2014; Ho et al. 2020). That is, DCM should primarily focus on earning customers' attention and letting customers find them on their own rather than forcing their attention with intrusive advertising (Barry and Gironde 2018; Hollebeek and Macky 2019). Thus, firms must seek to create engaging, relevant, and valuable content to ensure customers choose to consume it by increasing customer appreciation of the brand or firm, cultivating sales indirectly and over the longer term, and, if lucky, inspiring customers to share the content on their own networks (Holliman and Rowley 2014; Wang et al. 2019; Tellis, McInnis, Tirunillai and Zhang 2019; Hollebeek and Macky 2019; Terho et al. 2022, 296).

Inbound logic is also referred to as *outside-in orientation* (Bruhn and Schnebelen 2017; Quach et al. 2020), which emphasizes the principles of *earned attention* and "getting found" rather than *bought attention*, which is typical conventional advertising designed to persuade customers to buy (Barry and Gironde 2018; Hollebeek and Macky 2019; Wang et al. 2019). DCM focuses on actualizing customers' willingness to consume content on its own merits; this is based on granting permission, opting in, giving consent (Wall and Spinuzzi 2018; Taiminen and Ranaweer 2019; Hollebeek and Macky 2019), or expressing voluntariness (Vieira et al. 2019).

As mentioned, inbound logic is relatively close to the *pull marketing* concept (Smith and Chaffey 2013). In pull marketing, the web is considered an environment where companies pull customers to their brand websites through SEO and social media (Vieira et al. 2019) to capture the interest of customers who already seek information, advice, a product, or service (Holliman and Rowley 2014) and through applying inbound tactics as an effective means of attracting prospects motivated to identify themselves (Järvinen and Taiminen 2016). This pull effect is enabled since the contemporary buyers already have access to data and are, therefore, in a strong position to direct their own purchasing processes (Edelman and Singer 2015; Wall and Spinuzzi 2018).

Managerial books add to the above aspects of the inbound logic setting that DCM stands firmly against paid advertising, interruptive marketing, and chasing customers and, instead, highlights customers' roles as ambassadors. These books refer to DCM as a *process of attracting*, suggesting that *the loyalty experience* be perfected first so the company's current customers can become evangelists and then look into *buyer journeys*, as Table 3 illustrates.

Next, the second DCM principle, *personalization*, is reviewed. Much of the extant research highlights personalization's role in DCM (Holliman and Rowley 2014; Järvinen and Taiminen 2016; Terho et al. 2022), which means meeting multiple B2B buyers' individual needs when sharing content (Holliman and Rowley 2014; Wang et al. 2019). Many studies also note that the value of content in B2B contexts is principally determined by its ability to facilitate buyer problem-solving (Taiminen and Ranaweera 2019; Wang et al. 2019). In this regard, evidence shows that technologies (e.g., marketing automation) are critical for personalized, timely content delivery (Järvinen and Taiminen 2016) in their buying cycle (Holliman and Rowley 2014). As diverse audiences are interested in different kinds of content, personal interactivity, and engagement, content on the web should be customized so that individuals see blog posts or other content that relate to their interests when they land on the firm's website or start an organic search (Wall and Spinuzzi 2018; Vieira et al. 2019).

Personalization refers to the need to meet customers' interests when sharing content (Järvinen and Taiminen 2016; Wang et al. 2019). The value of content in any B2B context depends principally on its ability to help individual buyers solve problems in their professional lives (Taiminen and Ranaweera 2019; Wang et al. 2019). Hence, firms must personalize content delivery to match varying customer needs in a timely fashion (Järvinen and Taiminen 2016; Terho et al. 2022). Managerial books (see Table 3) discuss the importance of buyer personas as foundations for value creation, finding the right tools and technologies to be put in place for DCM, and encouraging organizations to see the internet as an enabling environment to treat people in a more personalized way.

The third principle of DCM is *journey facilitation*. Previous research suggests that firms should design streamlined, compelling pathways that actively guide customers along their purchasing paths (Edelman and Singer 2015; Holliman and Rowley 2014). Specifically, firms must link individual content pieces as persuasive content pathways that sequentially address the questions customers have at different journey stages, enabling customers to move closer to their purchasing decisions (Wall and Spinuzzi 2018). Customer-centricity is inherent to journey facilitation as it requires closely aligning content creation and sharing efforts with customers' informational needs at various journey stages (Terho et al. 2022).

Journey facilitation seeks to trigger behavioral engagement as content subscription or consumption (e.g., newsletter subscription, webinar attendance, whitepaper downloads) in pursuit of influencing the buying center, purchase decision process, and finally, sales conversions, leads, deals, upselling, cross-selling, and repeat purchases (Holliman and Rowley 2014; Järvinen and Taiminen 2016; Wang et al. 2019). Hence, journey facilitation is closely linked to the selling process as an effective tool for managing incoming leads at different purchase stages (Järvinen and Taiminen 2016). Yet, Wall and Spinuzzi (2018) characterized this

approach as “the art of selling-without-selling,” where companies use persuasive pathways containing useful content matching customer’s specific content needs (Vieira et al. 2019) rather than overt sales messages to lead customers toward a purchasing decision.

Managerial books, reviewed in Table 3, recommend answering every question at each stage of the customer journey—just like a salesperson would in a sales conversation but designing it so a customer can easily find the relevant answers to move forward. The managerial books also suggest making it easy to contact the supplier firm—if and when the customer is willing. Finally, the managerial books highlight the need to build customer understanding to facilitate the journey (e.g., how to turn Facebook fans into newsletter subscribers) and ultimately change the situation into a mutually beneficial business relationship.

The literature review was extended to cover the mentioned managerial literature around DCM for several reasons. First, since this study seeks to conceptualize DCM in B2B markets and provide managers with a framework to implement DCM activities in practice, it was crucial to broaden the researcher’s understanding of the managerial, more practical side of this phenomenon, enabling the use of TIU approach, and the study to concentrate on the urgent gaps and issues identified around DCM. Second, this study wanted first to understand if consent existed between DCM academic literature and managerial literature within the three fundamental principles identified from the academic DCM literature reviewed in Table 2, which seemed to be the case. Third, by broadening the DCM underpinnings to managerial literature, more insightful managerial implications were given. Finally, since this study is also written for practitioners, offering reading recommendations on managerial books for managers is relevant to help them implement DCM in their organizations.

Table 3. Key principles of DCM based on extant managerial literature.

	DEFINITION OF DCM	PRINCIPLE 1: INBOUND LOGIC	PRINCIPLE 2: PERSONALIZATION	PRINCIPLE 3: JOURNEY FACILITATION
Sheridan (2016); They Ask, You Answer: A Revolutionary Approach to Inbound Sales, Content Marketing, and Today's Digital Consumer	DCM is the act of teaching and problem-solving to earn buyer trust.	"Inbound marketing" is simply attracting (instead of repelling) customers.	Identify the challenges your customers face during the journey and answer them in a trustworthy way. Highlights the right tools to be in place for DCM to succeed.	Answering all the questions you have ever been asked by a prospect or customer at each stage of the customer journey.
Lahtinen, Pulkka, Karjaluoto, and Mero (2022); Digital Marketing (translated)	Digital marketing develops strategy-analysis-based value propositions and communicates them to chosen buyer personas in digital media. Gaining new customers and keeping current ones is the target.	Introduces an MRACE model that builds on attracting customers and converting them into leads; relies heavily on branding, DCM, and customer journeys.	The authors base buyer personas as building blocks for finding a competitive advantage for the marketing strategy. Targeted and personalized marketing is one of the three value-creation strategies.	The main idea is building a seamless purchase process, where the customer is directed toward a sale by answering all the questions they face with DCM and providing an easy way to contact the company if needed.
Godin (1999); Permission Marketing: Turning Strangers into Friends and Friends into Customers	Permission marketing is the privilege (not the right) to deliver anticipated, personal, and relevant messages to people who actually want to receive them.	Classic managerial book from the 1990s on the transformation from interruptive marketing to permission marketing.	Permission is not considered a one-way broadcast medium; the internet enables people to treat different people differently and demands that they figure out how to let their permission base choose what they hear and how.	Advises to voluntarily interest customers. It teaches something interesting and useful by carefully targeting customers. It makes customers want more, maintains dialogue, and ultimately changes the situation mutually.
Pulizzi (2015); Content Inc: How Entrepreneurs Use Content to Build Massive Audiences and Create Radically Successful Businesses	DCM is a strategic marketing approach focused on creating and distributing valuable, relevant, consistent content to attract and retain a clearly defined audience and drive profitable customer action.	Recommends perfecting the loyalty experience first, turning customers into evangelists, and then looking into their participation in the buyer's journey.	Builds on entrepreneurs' passion for and knowledge and understanding of the target audience but differentiates from competitors to create your own unique content.	Mentions that getting your Facebook fans to order your newsletter is essential so that you can financially benefit from that content later.
Halligan and Shah (2009); Inbound Marketing	Inbound marketing is about getting found online through search engines and social networking sites that billions of people use to find answers daily.	Refers to remarkable (unique and valuable) content as the exact opposite of paid advertising, where you get more visitors to your site by paying.	Defined more from the industry viewpoint to personalize your blog to fit your industry; mentions that most blogs fail because they start by selling the product or service in the blog.	Create a blog, turn a website into a hub for your industry, pull customers in with useful content, and hope that prospects find you the most thoughtful person in the industry on the topic and eventually buy from you.

Based on the review of managerial literature, there appears to be strong support for the fundamental principles of DCM. Yet, similar to an academic literature review, a holistic understanding of *key activities around DCM and how they can be successfully implemented in business markets* is missing.

Table 4. Overview of extant research for DCM.

STUDY	STUDY FOCUS AND KEY CONTRIBUTION	SHORTCOMINGS IN UNDERSTANDING HOW TO ENFORCE CUSTOMER-CENTRICITY IN DCM
Holliman and Rowley (2014)	Exploratory study based on 15 interviews with managers to define DCM and enhance understanding of the central decision-making questions associated with content marketing. Study defines DCM for the first time and highlights two key decision areas: 1) creating useful, relevant, compelling, and timely content for engaging customers and 2) sharing content targeted to customer needs so the content matches a buyer's position in their customer journey.	Study notes the need to create valuable content according to the customers' needs and target content sharing to the customer buying cycle. Study approaches these customer-centric goals through abstract-level principles but does not provide insights about the key activities needed to implement them.
Järvinen and Taiminen (2016)	Single case study based on nine interviews in one firm. Examines how content marketing can be combined with B2B selling processes with the help of marketing automation technology to achieve business benefits. Study demonstrates how marketing automation technology supports DCM to generate high-quality sales leads by combining behavioral targeting and content personalization along the customer purchasing stage.	Study illustrates marketing automation technology's role in personalizing content sharing to customers but provides limited insights into how a firm can systematically understand the informational needs of target customers. Lack of generalizable insights about the specific customer-centric DCM activities.
Wall and Spinuzzi (2018)	Exploratory study examines DCM content genre and media decisions based on nine practitioner interviews and a content analysis. Notes that DCM involves creating content in genres that readers find useful and illustrates how marketers should use content pieces collectively as genre ecologies designed to lead their readers to decisions on their purchasing journeys.	Study focuses on content publishing and devotes little attention to other aspects of DCM. Study highlights the need to create content based on audience needs but provides little insight on how to attain this challenging customer-centric goal.
Wang et al. (2019)	Study examines the effectiveness of in-person vs. digital events as a form of B2B DCM based on a 4-year event panel data from a service provider. Results confirm DCM's effectiveness as a key account lead performance, which is positively affected by the account's employees attending digital events and consuming digital content but not by in-person events. Study data also indicates that technology is key in assessing customers' content usage.	Study is delimited to digital events as a form of DCM and understanding their performance outcomes. Thus, the study does not address what the key DCM activities are or how a firm can do customer-centric DCM.
Taiminen and Ranaweera (2019)	Explanatory study (n=199) explores how B2B customers perceived the helpfulness of brand actions in DCM. Drives customer brand engagement and thus relationship value and brand trust. Explanatory study provides evidence of DCM's effectiveness by demonstrating that the perceived helpfulness of DCM newsletter content drives customer engagement and, thus, trusted brand relationships.	Study examines customer perceptions of email newsletter content, lacking insights into a broader set of DCM activities. While results demonstrate the importance of developing helpful content, the study does not provide information on how a firm can do this.

STUDY	STUDY FOCUS AND KEY CONTRIBUTION	SHORTCOMINGS IN UNDERSTANDING HOW TO ENFORCE CUSTOMER-CENTRICITY IN DCM
Hollebeek and Macky (2019)	Study conceptualizes B2C DCM based on a literature review and develops a conceptual framework outlining consumer DCM and its association with its key consumer-based antecedents and consequences. Study identifies functional, hedonic, and authenticity-based motives as antecedents for consumer DCM interactions and notes that cognitive, emotional, and behavioral customer engagement is a key outcome.	Study is delimited to the B2C context. Lacks information about the systematic set of activities needed to implement customer-centric DCM.

In summary, while the marketing literature offers general insights into the nature of DCM and its underlying principles, it provides no systematic explanation of how B2B marketers should operationalize inbound logic, personalization, and journey facilitation as core DCM activities. The review further indicates that more rigorous conceptualization is needed to properly link DCM to a relevant marketing theory. Chapter Three reviews three pieces of digital marketing literature, each of which relates closely to a customer-centric DCM principle and can help answer critical implementation questions regarding the customer journey, customer engagement, and marketing technology research to establish a solid conceptual basis for DCM in the business marketing context.

Although DCM also pertains to various other, broader marketing literature streams, such as market orientation (Jaworski and Kohli 1993), branding (Homburg, Klarmann, and Schmit 2010), or lead management (Sabnis et al. 2013), this study suggests that by combining the three digital marketing literatures—customer journey, customer engagement, and marketing technology—meaningful conceptual underpinnings for understanding the DCM as a customer-centric digital marketing approach are formed (Terho et al. 2022).

Combining these three theoretical lenses may provide more insights into customer-centric DCM principles, how they can manifest as concrete activities, and the intersections of these conceptual perspectives that indicate some guiding questions; these conceptual questions are later answered with a comprehensive activity-based conceptualization (Terho et al. 2022).

Amid the intersections between the conceptual lenses are conceptual questions (see Figure 4) that help frame the conceptualization:

CQ1: How does a technology-assisted understanding of customer journeys facilitate DCM?

CQ2: How can firms create engaging content that meets the informational needs of multifactor B2B customers along their customer journeys?

CQ3: How can firms engage customers by sharing timely, tailored content to the right audience with the help of technology?

Next, the three conceptual questions above will be explained further. As mentioned, the analysis of the DCM literature further indicates the relevance of three broad streams of research in conceptualizing DCM: customer engagement, customer journeys, and marketing technologies. The customer engagement literature resonates with DCM's inbound logic by advancing a customer-centric understanding of how sellers can foster the buyer's positive, cognitive, and emotional disposition toward the seller by offering compelling content (Brodie et al. 2019; Hollebeek and Macky 2019). This research emphasizes the increased engagement results in prolonged exposure and better responsiveness to the seller's content and offerings along the customer journey, facilitating (re)purchase, loyalty, and advocacy (Pansari and Kumar 2017). The digital marketing research echoes the focus on personalization by addressing the role of technologies in sharing personalized content with the customer (Chung, Wedel, and Rust 2016; Gupta, Leszkiewicz, Kumar, Bijmolt, and Potapov 2020; Kannan and Li 2017; Wedel and Kannan 2016). Finally, the customer journey literature aligns with the DCM focus on journey facilitation, offering a conceptual lens for understanding contemporary, non-linear buying behavior involving multiple digital and social touchpoints (see Lemon and Verhoef 2016; Steward, Narus, and Roehm 2018; Steward et al. 2019). In Figure 4, the intersection of these research domains affords a robust conceptual basis for theorizing 1) the role of marketing technologies in understanding customer journeys, 2) the role of the customer journey perspective on customer engagement, and 3) the role of marketing technologies in engaging customers. While previous studies have typically relied exclusively on one stream, the present research integrates all three perspectives to advance a more comprehensive conceptualization of DCM.

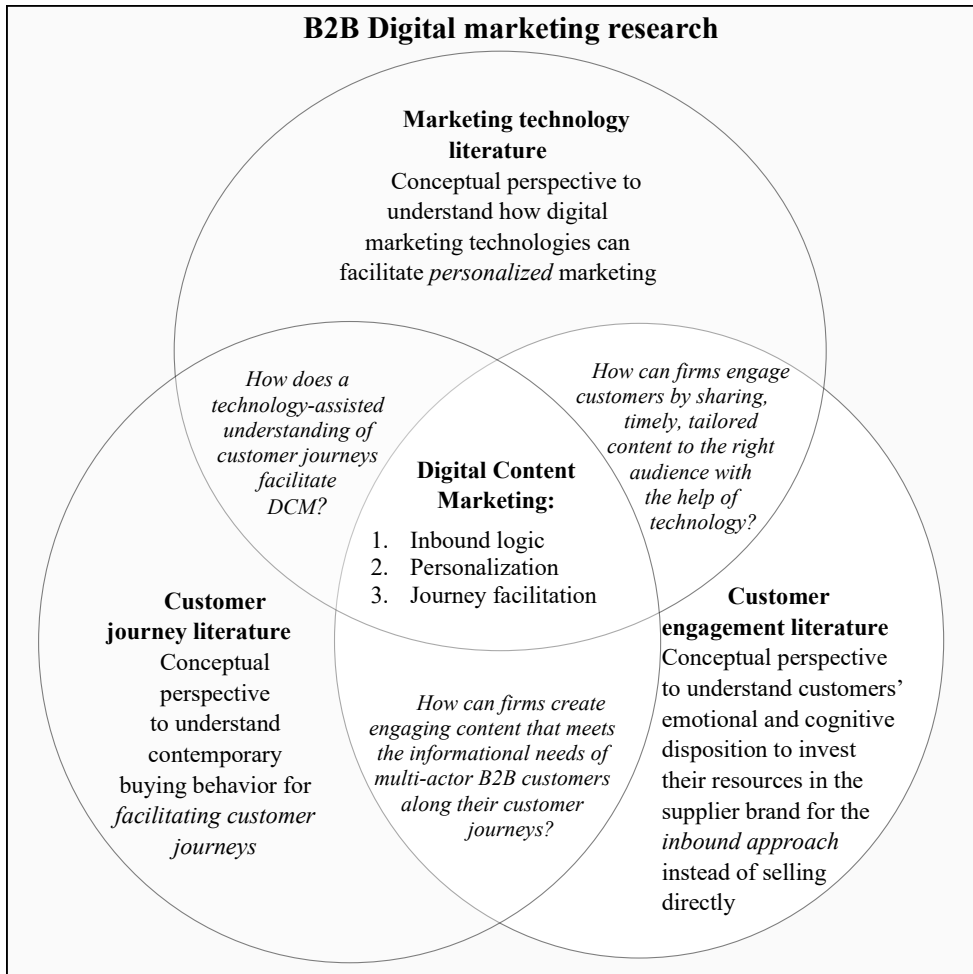


Figure 4. DCM principles and underlying literature streams (published in Terho et al. 2022).

Next, it is reviewed how DCM pertains to various other broader marketing literature streams, such as market orientation (Jaworski and Kohli 1993), branding (Homburg, Klarmann, and Schmit 2010), or sales literature and lead management (Sabnis et al. 2013), and why they were not included as conceptual lenses for DCM conceptualization in this study. Market orientation is built on three sets of activities: having multi-functional market intelligence collection capabilities looking into current and future customer needs, spearheading the intelligence around the organization, and responding to it organization-wide (Jaworski and Kohli 1990). Jaworski and Kohli's (1990) definition of market orientation, especially responsiveness, focuses on specific behaviors, thus facilitating operationalizing, which can pertain to DCM as its early literature roots. Similar to market orientation, branding also links to DCM. Brand awareness can provide an opportunity to

differentiate products or services and gain a competitive advantage, which B2B companies can achieve through technical consultants and sales representatives, professional and technical conferences, exhibitions, journals, or professional magazines (Homburg et al. 2010; Bendixen, Bukasa, and Abratt 2004; Terho et al. 2022). Therefore, branding literature is similar to responsiveness mentioned in market orientation literature, also in branding literature, marketing leaders are keen to analyze and understand buying centers to identify typical buyers and their purchasing backgrounds. These literature streams, market orientation tactics, and branding practices indicate several causes of and resemblance to B2B firms to implement DCM activities aiming to create brand awareness and support a seller's performance by reducing customers' information costs and perceived risk (Homburg et al. 2010; Terho et al. 2022). However, branding or market orientation alone seems a too-high level and broad approach targeting mass markets rather than individuals in a personalized way, thus seeming insufficient to contribute to this study's theoretical foundations.

Similarly to market orientation and branding, sales literature and lead management research could be alternative approaches toward DCM. These approaches could build on long-existing discussions between marketing and sales blaming each other for the sales leads' black hole, often resulting from poor follow-up on leads; as a solution, lead management research offers to focus on different forms of cooperation on an individual sales representative's abilities and the firm's specific sales and marketing processes (Sabnis et al. 2013; Terho et al. 2022). Building the theoretical foundations on this firm-centric approach for this attuned sales and marketing concept appears too distant from more customer-centric approaches to conceptualize the key activities for DCM and discuss the contingencies for DCM performance relationship, meaning the chosen theoretical lens should take a more customer-centric approach to the phenomenon.

By identifying the three previously reviewed customer-centric principles of DCM—inbound logic, personalization, and journey facilitation—combining these pieces of literature is a reasonable conclusion; customer journey, customer engagement, and marketing technology research provide a meaningful conceptual basis for understanding DCM as a customer-centric marketing approach. Several arguments support this claim: First, *customer journey* literature provides a conceptual perspective to understand contemporary buying behavior for *facilitating customer journeys*. Second, *customer engagement* literature helps companies understand customers' emotional and cognitive disposition to invest their resources in the supplier brand for an *inbound approach* instead of selling directly. Finally, marketing technology literature provides a conceptual lens through which to understand how digital marketing technologies can facilitate *personalized* marketing. Commonly, these three theoretical lenses all aim to further explore the phenomenon from the customer's perspective while remaining focused on the

marketing from the supplier firm's perspective. Next, the research continues to review these conceptual underpinnings for DCM in business markets in the following chapter (Terho et al. 2022, 297–298).

3 Conceptual Underpinnings of DCM in Business Markets

Chapter Three is dedicated to presenting the conceptual underpinnings of DCM in business markets. As Chapter Two focuses on digital marketing research, this chapter aims to answer RQ1: *What are the conceptual underpinnings of DCM in extant marketing literature?* This chapter starts with a review of the B2B customer journey literature and how it has evolved. Section 3.2 summarizes the customer engagement literature review; Section 3.3 reviews the marketing technology literature.

3.1 B2B Customer journey

The *customer journey* literature provides a conceptual perspective to understand contemporary buying behavior for *facilitating customer journeys* and is thus chosen as one of the conceptual underpinnings for DCM (Terho et al. 2022). So far, marketing research has widely underscored the importance of customer journeys in today's business (Lemon and Verhoef 2016). The "customer journeys" denote the combination of the multiple touchpoints the customer interacts with during their purchase process that spans over a period of time (Lemon and Verhoef 2016; Rawson, Duncan, and Jones 2013; Halvorsrud, Kvale, and Følstad 2016). The customer purchasing journey provides a concrete means to understanding contemporary buying behavior on a customer's terms by focusing closely on individual customers' path-to-purchase from the consideration phase to purchase and beyond (Edelman and Singer 2015; Anderl, Becker, Wangenheim, and Schumann 2016).

Next, the study will review how the customer journey concept builds on the traditional organizational buying behavior (OBB) models (see Webster 1965; Robinson et al. 1967; Sheth 1973; Choffray and Lilien 1978). The classic buying models focus on the stages of the buying process, from need recognition to information search and evaluation, purchase, and beyond, by considering various situations and the influence of broader actors and different members of the buying group (Steward, Narus, Roehm, and Ritz 2019). Yet, the customer journey concept

broadens the scope of buying models in two important ways. First, the journeys enable more profound customer-centricity by highlighting a close contextual understanding of customers' overall purchasing journeys (Rawson et al. 2013) and insights into what buyers try to accomplish when undertaking these journeys (Epp and Price 2011; Hamilton and Price 2019). Second, the journeys help to understand how digitalization and the associated proliferation of touchpoints change the traditional linear path-to-purchase into a much more complex journey (Srinivasan, Rutz, and Pauwels 2016) where empowered customers design their own journeys from search to purchase and beyond (Herhausen, Kleinlercher, Verhoef, Emrich, and Rudolph 2019).

Studies have provided several insights into the nature of journeys. First, the extant conceptualizations of purchasing journeys argue that holistic journeys become easier and more manageable by dividing them into prepurchase, purchase, and postpurchase stages (Lemon and Verhoef 2016). The stages include different customer behaviors. The prepurchase phase includes customer behavior related to need recognition, consideration, and search, whereas the purchase phase consists of choosing, ordering, and payment behavior; finally, the postpurchase phase includes consumption, usage, engagement, and further service request behavior (Lemon and Verhoef 2016; Rusthollkarhu, Toukola, Aarikka-Stenroos, and Mahlamäki 2022). Second, studies emphasize that customer journey touchpoints may differ from direct and indirect (Meyer and Schwager 2007) to brand-owned, partner-owned, customer-owned, and social or external touchpoints (Lemon and Verhoef 2016), or enter three distinct classes: communications, service and sales, and usage (Lemke, Clark, and Wilson 2011). The extant research has also shown that some journey touchpoints are more critical for certain outcomes than others (Meyer and Schwager 2007; Rawson et al. 2013) and that vendors typically have limited control over the touchpoints (Lemon and Verhoef 2016). Consumer research also notes that buyers can be constrained by resource scarcity, impacting purchasing journeys (Hamilton et al. 2019). The next sub-section reviews these insights in more detail, but first, the study will deep-dive into OBB and how it has evolved over the years toward the well-known customer journey concept today.

3.1.1 Evolving from the B2B customer decision process

Before reviewing the evolution of the customer decision process and OBB from the 1950s, looking at how the sales process has changed over the last decades is valuable. Content marketing in the B2B sector should be considered a service that provides added value for customers independently of the product sold—value that will be reciprocated in sales results (Wang et al. 2017). Studies show that sales are changing in several aspects: from a function to a process, from an isolated activity into an

integrated one, and to strategic rather than operational (Storbacka 2009). From the traditional sales process perspective, the classical seven steps reflected a selling orientation on the part of a firm, compared to the evolved selling process, which reflects more on customer orientation in that the focus is more on relationship selling. The evolved selling process aims to build, secure, and maintain a long-term relationship with valuable customers. This process assumes the salesperson within the firm enters the process, keeping the customer focused on executing each step, and that all the steps do not occur on each sales call but over time and non-sequentially (Moncrief and Marshall 2005). Traditional product-focused sales organizations are expected to evolve in several ways: first, by the enhanced use of technology that will reduce some traditional sales functions and face-to-face contact; second, important customers will experience improvements in the level of customer contact, leading to growth in customer-focused sales organizations, which can be considered an increase in global account management teams; and third, changes will appear in the selection, training, recruitment, and roles of salespeople (Sheth and Sharma 2008; Terho et al. 2022b). Some studies (see Viio and Grönroos 2015) also look into why the sales process is still mostly portrayed from the selling firm's perspective, focusing so little on buyers and their purchasing process. Viio and Grönroos (2015), through integrated theories and concepts from three research fields—relationship marketing, sales and sales management, and purchasing—by examining relationship orientation and sales process adaptation, discovering that the buyer and seller impact the sales process adaptation.

Reviewing how the customer decision process has evolved is also important to see the big picture. In the 1960s, the first initial theories in marketing began to rise and focus on discussions of customer decision processes and experience when buying products; these “integrated models” showed the buying process in which customers move from recognizing their need to purchase and then evaluate the purchased product (Lemon and Verhoef 2016). After the first integrated models, broader and more encompassing theories followed: the model of consumer behavior (Howard and Sheth 1969), the attention–interest–desire–action (AIDA) model (Lavidge and Steinand, and the model of OBB (Webster and Wind 1972). OBB by Webster and Wind (1972) was among the first to discuss the buying process of business customers and the critical role of the buying team. These theories are still influential and have strongly dominated multichannel research and path-to-purchase modeling, providing a foundation for much research in customer experience management (Lemon and Verhoef 2016). Further research has developed new models on top of the classical models and theories. Neslin et al. (2006) build on Howard and Sheth's (1969) model by suggesting a process from problem recognition to search to purchase to after-sales using multiple channels. Several recent theories and studies around customer experience are firmly built on the purchase journey (see

Pucinelli et al. 2009; Verhoef et al. 2009; Schmitt 2003). The purchase or marketing funnel strongly links to the AIDA model and is extremely popular in path-to-purchase models and customer experience management (Li and Kannan 2014). Section 3.1.3, examining the customer journey to understand the customer experience, discusses these models more in detail.

Next, the study reviews in more detail how the B2B buying process has evolved from the 1950s until today. Notably, similarities exist in the customer decision and B2B buying processes, which evolved during the same time period and built on some early theories. A recently acknowledged article by Steward, Narus, and Roehm (2019) was chosen as the framework to help review the B2B buying process models from 1956 to the present. Steward et al.'s (2019) article "From Transactions to Journeys and Beyond" highlights several high-impact publications under the transaction theme: Cyert et al. (1956) built the first conceptual model of the B2B buying process devised by scholars. Webster Jr. (1965), presented the first conceptual model of the B2B buying process that academics could use to isolate and rank order parameters—the uncontrollable factors and variables under managerial control—that are critical in B2B buying decisions and that practitioners could use to guide marketing and selling activities. Next, scholars argued that models should be developed to work with varying products, industries, environmental conditions, marketplaces, technologies, and timeframes; thus, Robinson et al. (1967) developed the BuyGrid Model, marking a significant shift in the research methodology from qualitative interviews and case studies to a large-sample survey data collection and quantitative methods (e.g., hypothesis testing and modeling) (Steward et al. 2019). This significant step was rather crucial for the digital marketing literature to mature to its current level, where top journals mainly publish quantitative research on the latest developments in digital marketing (see Wedel and Kannan 2016; Kumar, Bezawada, Rishika, Janakiraman, and Kannan 2016).

Whereas initial research studied the steps of the B2B buying process, the next wave of academic works shifted attention toward identifying the factors that affected the process, determining how they were interrelated, and assessing their impact. At this point, scholars considered task and non-task variables that influence organizational buying decisions (Steward et al. 2019). Webster Jr. and Wind (1972) proposed one of the first comprehensive buying process models (OBB) by grouping these variables into four categories: individual, social, organizational, and environmental. They also urged scholars to create comprehensive "integrated models" that captured the causal interrelationships among the legion of influencing variables. In the following decades, marketing scholars focused on the antecedent variables influencing the buying process while treating the transaction as an output or consequence (Steward et al. 2019).

The most favored themes among these integrated models were the buying center, membership in the buyer center, and roles within the buying decision process (see Johnston and Bonoma 1981; Berkowitz 1986; McQuiston 1989). For the first time, many integrated models of B2B buying behaviors were introduced from the B2B marketer's perspective (see Hill 1972; Sheth 1973). Sheth's (1973) model was the most remarkable, relying on behavioral sciences, claiming that purchasing decisions should be evaluated and projected based on the characteristics of those individuals participating in the process. While Choffray and Lilien (1978) modeled the impact of marketing mix elements on members of the customer's buying center, Cardozo (1983) directed his model at specific customer buying process decisions. The resulting multiplicative probability models predicted the likely customer response to a variety of B2B marketing and selling activities; based on these models, the scholars then recommended specific B2B marketing and selling strategies that would have the greatest positive impact on customers' purchase intentions, thus yielding repeat business (Steward et al. 2019).

Finally, in the 1980s, the modeling of the B2B buying process transformed from looking at single transactions from the customer perspective to focusing on the long-term, dyadic working relationships between customer and supplier firms. Major contributions from the 1980s were the integration model (Håkansson 1982), the integrated model of buying behavior and the buyer-seller communications network model (Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh 1987), and the risk continuum (Johnston and Lewin 1996). From the late 1980s until the early 1990s, the buying process conceptualizations merged into a broader concept of a "network." Scholars argued that any dyadic relationship between a customer firm and a supplier firm was comprised of and influenced by numerous relationships, not only among individuals within the two firms but with other third parties (e.g., second- and third-tier suppliers, intermediaries, consulting and advertising agencies, financial institutions, governments, and professional peers in other organizations), among many others, and grounded with two prominent publications: Axelsson and Easton (1992) and Håkansson and Snehota (1995) on networks (Steward et al. 2019).

Finally, the term customer journey is well-known, or, as Lemon and Verhoef (2016) define it, "the process a customer goes through, across all stages and touchpoints, which makes up the customer experience." Transactions can be found at the core of the customer journey, which also consists of elements of past buying process themes (e.g., situations, influences, relationships, and networks). Customer experience and engagement encapsulate critical aspects of the network and relationship themes, whereas community reflects the impact of research on networks. The customer journey conceptualizes a much more intricate and involved process by which a customer and supplier may incorporate all the experiential elements of the interactions and their flow over multiple time periods (Steward et al. 2019).

As reviewed above, within OBB's evolution from transactions up to the customer journey, the adequacy of traditional OBB models can easily be seen. Although they are increasingly questioned today, they are well-built inside the current theories. However, much customer journey research concerns consumer settings, while B2B research remains scant (Grewal and Sridhar 2021; Rusthollkarhu et al. 2022). Customer journeys are fundamentally different in the B2B context because the purchasing organizations' buying center involves numerous stakeholders with different roles and goals (Johnston and Bonoma 1981). Within a business market's complex buying, the value-in-use of the purchased offerings is not simply determined by the offerings' impact on the collective organizational goals, which are typically related to quantifiable monetary outcomes (Terho et al. 2018), but by the interrelated personal goals of individuals involved in using a solution, ranging from factor-related goals to job ease to uncertainty reduction, personal reputation, and social comfort (MacDonald, Kleinaltenkamp, and Wilson 2016). Since value is subjective, different parties in the buying center have varying perceptions of value in use (Gummesson 2013). Consultancies and marketers address this notion through the concept of buyer personas that are "a representation of an ideal customer based on market research and real data about your existing customers" (Kusnitz 2014). The buyer personas complement the B2B perspective on customer journeys by paying attention to the diverse goals of different types of actors involved in purchasing (Epp and Price 2011), which is further supported by the latest research on the social customer journey, indicating the B2B customer journey is social by definition, with the actors, their roles, and their relationships changing across the journey as it is co-created (Grewal and Sridhar 2021; Hamilton, Ferraro, Haws, and Mukhopadhyay 2021).

Lemon and Verhoef (2016) discuss several managerial tools that have been developed to facilitate the organization's shift to customer-centricity: buyer personas and "jobs-to-be-done" (see Christensen, Cook, and Hall 2005). A buyer persona can be a semi-fictional representation of the firm's ideal customer based on market research and real data on existing customers (Kusnitz 2014). Using personas has evolved from user-centered design, where personas focus on a specific customer segment, to identifying key aspects of that segment's typical customer's needs and experiences (Adlin, Pruitt, Goodwin, Hynes, McGrane, Rosenstein, and Muller 2006). More recently, personas have also been increasingly used in brand management and customer experience design (Herskovitz and Crystal 2010). Another tool, "jobs-to-be-done" (Christensen, Cook, and Hall 2005), focuses on analyzing customers' life circumstances that may lead them to purchase a product by taking the customer's perspective. Lemon and Verhoef (2016) agree the preceding discussion and evolving tools demonstrate how customer-centricity has set the stage for a renewed focus on the customer experience. After understanding

OBB's history and evolution toward the customer journey as it is known today, it is time to look extensively at the customer journey concept. The next sub-section discusses the stages and touchpoints of the customer journey.

3.1.2 Customer journey stages and touchpoints

This sub-section seeks to build an understanding of the essence of the customer journey by making managing customer experience easier by looking at the conceptualization of journey phases. The journey stages can be presented in multiple ways, with many practitioner models extending the main two stages to include many steps and loyalty loops (Purmonen, Jaakkola, and Terho 2023); however, academics have identified three overall customer journey stages: prepurchase, purchase, and postpurchase (Lemon and Verhoef 2016), or pre-core, core, and post-core service encounters (Voorhees et al. 2017). The next paragraph recognizes Lemon and Verhoef's (2016) journey stages, which are widely agreed upon among scholars and are becoming a classic of their own; these stages will be reviewed in more detail.

Lemon and Verhoef's (2016) *prepurchase* phase is described as an immediate first stage of purchase, covering all aspects of the customer's interaction with the brand, category, and environment before a purchase transaction happens. Previous research in marketing has referred to prepurchase (e.g., behavior on need recognition, search, and consideration). Theoretical and practical approaches toward the exact behavior are included at each stage. The prepurchase stage could theoretically include the customer's entire experience before purchasing. However, this prepurchase stage often covers the customer's experience: from the beginning of recognizing their need, goal, or impulse to consider satisfying that need, goal, or impulse with a purchase (Lemon and Verhoef 2016).

Lemon and Verhoef's (2016) *purchase* phase encompasses all customer interactions with the brand and its environment during the purchase and is claimed by behaviors (e.g., choice, ordering, and payment). This stage has received attention among the marketing mix (see Kotler and Keller 2015), the environment and atmospherics, the servicescape (see Bitner 1990), and the service environment "clues" that influence the purchase decision (see Berry, Carbone, and Haeckel 2002). Lemon and Verhoef (2016) considered this purchase stage the most temporally compressed of the three. In consumer marketing research, much emphasis has been placed on the shopping experience with the myriad touchpoints and relevant concepts; conversely, future studies are endorsed from information overload concepts (e.g., choice overload, purchase confidence, and decision satisfaction), which might be relevant to consider because they may induce customers to stop searching and complete or defer the purchase (Lemon and Verhoef 2016).

Lemon and Verhoef's (2016) *postpurchase* phase consists of customer interactions with the brand and its environment, followed by the actual purchase, including certain behaviors (e.g., usage and consumption, corresponding postpurchase engagement, and service requests). The authors note that corresponding to the prepurchase stage, this stage could theoretically extend temporally from the purchase to the end of the customer's life; however, in practice, this stage covers aspects of the customer's experience after purchase that relate in some way to the brand or product, becoming a critical touchpoint. Lemon and Verhoef (2016) claim that previous research in this third stage has focused on the consumption experience (see Holbrook and Hirschman 1982), service recovery (see Kelley and Davis 1994), and the decision to return products (see Wood 2001), as well as repurchasing (see Bolton 1998), seeking variety (see McAlister and Pessemier 1982), and other nonpurchase behaviors such as employing word of mouth and other forms of customer engagement (see Van Doorn et al. 2010), specifically in the service-intensive context where the stages of service delivery and consumption are the main parts of the customer's overall process with the provider because realizing services often involves both parties (see Jaakkola and Terho 2021).

Lemon and Verhoef (2016) also remark on a recent addition to the customer decision process from the managerial research called the "loyalty loop" (Court et al. 2009), where a trigger might occur that leads to customer loyalty or begins a new process via a customer re-entering the prepurchase phase and considering alternatives. This approach extends the focus from purchase decision-making to long-term iterative processes rather than a linear process (Siebert, Gopaldas, Lindridge, and Simões 2020), thus suggesting firms take several actions: seek to understand the firm and the customer perspectives of the purchase journey and identify key aspects in each stage, begin identifying the specific elements or touchpoints that occur throughout the journey, and attempt to identify specific trigger points that lead customers to continue or discontinue in their purchase journey (Lemon & Verhoef 2016).

The customer journey comprises *different types of touchpoints*. Touchpoints can be defined in several ways. The primary definition considers them brand-owned, partner-owned, customer-owned, and external (Lemon and Verhoef 2016); communication-, service-, and usage-related (Lemke et al. 2011); or as episodes of direct or indirect contact with the brand or provider (Becker and Jaakkola 2020). Furthermore, Halvorsrud, Kvale, and Folstad (2016) identified four types of deviations during service delivery: occurrence of ad hoc touchpoints, irregularities in the sequence of logically connected touchpoints, occurrence of failures in touchpoints, and missing touchpoints.

To meticulously understand what is required from the B2B company to influence these touchpoints, the study will next review in more detail what Lemon and Verhoef

(2016) mean by the four types of touchpoints identified (brand-owned, partner-owned, customer-owned, and social or external) and how the customer might interact with each touchpoint category at each stage of the experience; the noteworthiness and resistance of each touchpoint category may differ at each stage depending on many factors (e.g., the characteristics of the product and service and the customer's own journey). However, the attribution models discussed more later in this study can help identify the most critical touchpoints at each stage for each customer. Once identified, firms must determine how key touchpoints can be influenced and which the firm controls; however, firms must deepen their understanding of those they control and those they do not (Lemon and Verhoef 2016).

This sub-section aimed to build an understanding of the stages and touchpoints of the customer journey. Next, the study will further explore how the customer journey can be used to manage the customer experience and what tools exist for mapping the customer journey.

3.1.3 Examining customer journey to understand customer experience

This sub-section examines the customer journey to understand the customer experience since DCM can bring an experience as its own, and the content can be considered an experience for the customer or prospect consuming it. The customer journey is the process a customer goes through across all stages and touchpoints with an organization, comprising the customer experience (Lemon and Verhoef 2016). Despite that some recent studies have dismissed the importance of examining the customer journey to understand the customer experience, mapping customer journeys from a firm perspective has long been a valuable tool for improving customer experiences and will likely remain so (Lemon and Verhoef 2016; Edelman and Singer 2015; Rawson et al. 2013; Bitner, Ostrom, and Morgan 2008).

The customer journey concept is widely adopted in practical service management and design (Rawson et al. 2013; Zomerdijk and Voss 2010). Service management and design literature describe the customer journey in multiple ways, covering the processual and experimental perspectives (Edvardsson et al. 2005) of service processes, addressed from the customer's perspective. The customer journey is described as the repeated interactions between a service provider and the customer (Meroni and Sangiorgi 2011) as an "engaging story" about the user's interaction with a service (Stickdorn and Schneider 2010) or as a walk "in the customer's shoes" (Holmlid and Evenson 2008). The customer journey approach has become essential in multiple ways. First, it is important for multiple well-recognized agencies in service management within their design processes and for their service designers to summarize customer research (Zomerdijk and Voss 2010; Segelström and Holmlid

2009). Second, it has become essential to involve customers in the strategy work and business model development (Norton and Pine 2013), being the key focus in managerial books on service design (see Miettinen and Koivisto 2009; Polaine et al. 2013; Stickdorn and Schneider 2010). Third, the customer journey is valuable for communication and strengthening stakeholder empathy with customers (Segelström, 2013) and can be used to manage and design public sector services (Parker and Heapy 2006) or in consumer markets for service innovation (Edelman and Singer 2015; Folstad and Kvale 2018).

Conversely, the customer experience is described as the customer's cognitive, affective, emotional, social, and physical responses to a company (Verhoef, Lemon, and Parasuraman 2009) and is shaped during the interactions between the customer and the service provider (Berry et al. 2002), which has led to various studies conducted around the drivers of customer experience. Today, the customer experience is considered a key competitive advantage among many service sectors (Meyer and Schwager 2007; Folstad and Kvale 2018).

Durmusoglu, McNally, and Chen (2022) claim that no matter how much the customer experience has evolved from consumer service management research, it offers important theoretical and practical insights for the business market environment. For example, previous findings on four touchpoint controllers from complex business markets (Witell et al. 2020) align well with the consumer market categories identified by Lemon and Verhoef (2016): the supplier (the focal firm), customers, partners, and actors from the wider ecosystem. Identifying touchpoints in business market settings is more complicated due to the larger buyer center and more individuals being involved in different customer journey phases. In business markets, salespeople often appear as the primary customer touchpoint. These specific sales-enacted touchpoints might include the salesperson asking the right questions to identify customer needs, selecting and modifying goods and services that work as a solution, providing customers with the necessary solution information, and maintaining continuous dialogue with customers after the solution is implemented (Panagopoulos, Rapp, and Ogilvie 2017; Durmusoglu et al. 2022).

3.1.4 Customer journey mapping

Another evolving tool around the customer journey that has been widely used is *journey mapping*. This sub-section will investigate customer journey mapping and its two key elements: journey visualization and information gathering from physical and digital customer journeys. Nonetheless, research calls for advances in customer journey mapping, moving it forward to more adaptive and customized mapping, which is done less from a strictly firm perspective and including more of the pre- and post-components of the customer journey (Lemon and Verhoef 2016; Voorhees

et al. 2017). As mentioned, many new technologies and platforms around digital marketing have altered customer journeys in multiple ways (Kannan and Li 2017; Court et al. 2009; Edelman and Singer 2015) and introduced many different channels through which consumers can interact with product and service providers, thus giving consumers considerable control in how they interact with providers (Hamilton and Price 2019), fostering the analysis of touchpoints across multiple channels instead of one so as not to lead researchers to incorrect conclusions (Li and Kannan 2014).

Since the tools are rather contemporary, it is relevant to review in more detail the two emerging customer journey approaches: customer journey mapping (i.e., the analysis of a service process [“as is”]) and customer journey proposition (i.e., the generative activities leading toward a possible service [“to be”]) (Folstad and Kvaal 2018). The next paragraph starts with insights on customer journey mapping from visualization, information gathering, and network management perspectives.

As mentioned, especially in the business markets, the purchasing journeys vary among the stakeholders and industries; therefore, developing segment-specific customer journey strategies is needed (Herhausen et al. 2019). In response to the increased complexity of customer journeys, the research has provided various tools for understanding and managing customer journeys (Lemon and Verhoef 2016). Customer journey mapping, proposition, service blueprinting (Bitner et al. 2008), and multilevel service design (Patricio, Fisk, Falcão, and Constantine 2011) have been presented as the main customer journey approaches. Customer journey mapping is a process of customer research, including data collection, analysis, and use of visualizations (Folstad and Kvaal 2018). Different approaches in customer journey mapping studies are based on whether they gather data from customers externally, internally, or both. For several studies (see Trischler and Zehrer 2012), the journey mapping data is solely based on data received from customer interviews and observation; to others (Clatworthy 2011), the data might be based on management expectations on customer experience, whereas studies that consider (Baranova et al. 2011; Zomerdijk and Voss 2010) internal and external data but lack the comparison of the findings often leads to a service performance gap (Bitner et al. 2010). There, service providers may fail to meet customers’ expectations due to a discrepancy between the intended service design and actual service delivery; this is where the customer journey proposition stands as a helpful tool in specifying the details of new services (Meroni and Sangiorgi 2011; Folstad and Kvale 2018).

However, this research stream focuses more on service development than marketing communications and sales activities to engage customers during customer journeys. Yet several major contributions are made to the customer journey research from the customer experience perspective: the characterization of the customer journey map; in this flow-type visualization, the visualizations are made in an

abstract or diagrammatic form and represent the unfolding of the service process across time (Diana et al. 2009) and the dominance of the smooth journey model, which was challenged; thus, an alternative “sticky journey model” was introduced to replace it. The smooth journey model advises firms to enroll customers into a “loyalty loop” of predictable experiences, whereas such predictable experiences were argued to offer customers convenience, ease, and satisfaction but risk losing attention in competitive markets. Hence, a “sticky journey model” was introduced, premised on the excitement of unpredictable experiences (e.g., CrossFit workouts, Pokémon Go walkabouts, and Tinder dating adventures), all including an “involvement spiral”—a roller coaster ride of thrilling and challenging experiences the previous journey model lacked (Siebert et al. 2020).

Next, the study will progress from the visualization to another key element of customer journey mapping: information-gathering from the physical and digital customer journey. An urgent need exists to go beyond the service blueprint type of methodology and transform the journey mapping in several ways. Mapping could become more data-based, adaptive, or personalized and deep-dive more into customer decision journeys to identify opportunities for intervention or influence, which could all be done with the help of new technologies (e.g., wi-fi-based location services or technology) that can identify potential anomalies in customer behavior by using customer self-journey mapping or having customers develop ideal customer journeys (Lemon and Verhoef 2016).

Next, this study will explore how firms can influence the customer journey in the digital and physical contexts. Smart technologies can be used to start conversations with customers in apps, chatbots, and platforms by collecting, analyzing, and transforming this data through systems of insights, which apply advanced analytics to examine business data and social feeds, exploit analytics, and harness insights that identify the best actions to take. Finally, through systems of insights, providers can better understand what their customers want, purchase, and use (Mele and Russo-Spena 2021).

In turn, gathering the information from the customer journey is insufficient without the proper tools to evaluate and organize the information in a structured way. The attribution modeling research allows firms to measure which touchpoints or interactions show how DCM contributes to sales and enables companies to better allocate their marketing resources among different media, channels, and devices (Anderl, Becker, von Wangenheim, and Schumann 2016; (Haan et al. 2016; Kannan, Reinartz, and Verhoef 2016; Li and Kannan 2014; Li, Kannan, Viswanathan, and Pani 2016). Customers face multiple touchpoints on their way toward a purchase. Attribution modeling focuses on estimating the incremental value of each touchpoint and the spillover effects across channels; thus, it can provide insights for allocating marketing investments and targeting customers across channels and devices (Kannan

et al. 2016). The composition and order of single touchpoints for customer responses have received much curiosity in previous research (see Kuehnl, Jozić, and Homburg 2019), including aspects such as understanding multichannel touchpoint effects for brand consideration (Baexendale et al. 2015), interdependencies of the traditional marketing mix, and online metrics for sales (Srinivasan, Rutz, and Pauwels 2016), and individual clickstream online conversion rates for purchase transactions (Anderl et al. 2016). However, these attribution or path-to-purchase models have typically focused on simple consumer purchases and are mainly developed in the online environment; more research is required on complex B2B purchases, the offline environment, how the distinct touchpoints simultaneously contribute to the customer experience at different phases of the customer journey, and the role of brand identity in the notion of channel integration, given the broad set of touchpoints and dynamic nature of the customer experience (Lemon and Verhoef 2016; Homburg, Jozic, and Kuehnl 2015; Verhoef, Kannan, and Inman 2015; Li and Kannan 2014).

Lately, B2B customer journey research has developed further with studies looking into the possibilities of implementing technologies such as artificial intelligence- (AI) related tools (see Davenport, Guha, Grewal, and Bressgott 2019; Rusthollkarhu et al. 2022). Yet, again, academic research falls behind practitioners who have widely adopted AI tools like ChatGPT (Chat Generative Pre-trained Transformer)—a free chatbot that generates text in response to a human-provided prompt—and other generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) in their professional lives (Peres, Schreier, Schweidel, and Sorescu 2023) and are increasingly applying those within their firms' DCM efforts. As part of their AI research within B2B customer journeys, Rusthollkarhu et al. (2022) proposed four customer journey management activities—analyze, design, engage, and guide—that conceptualize the necessary company actions in managing B2B customer journeys. Conversely, Davenport et al. (2019), in their research, questioned how firms allocate their advertising resources, where much advertising focuses on developing customer awareness and driving customers' information searches; thus, they propose whether these advertising dollars would be required, where firms may be able to better predict customers' preferences with the help of GenAI tools, and thus would not need to advertise as much, referring to a more DCM kind of approach. Section 3.3 on marketing technologies reviews AI-related technologies relevant to DCM.

However, little is known about how companies harness buyer personas to design idiosyncratic journeys for different participants of the purchasing unit. Hamilton et al. (2021) argue that firms must continue finding new ways to gather, analyze, and use information collected from online and peer-to-peer communications to develop useful metrics to understand the changing motivations, decision heuristics, and satisfaction assessments of customers; they highlight few promising studies: a text analysis tool to examine the sentiment of online reviews (Villarroel Ordenes et al.

2017) and the effectiveness of various storylines captured with reviews (Van Laer et al. 2019). In the networked economy, users also produce a lot of information for the network (Kumar 2015), and more attention is given to different stakeholders who influence the firm's customer journey (Chandler and Lusch 2015). These findings have broadened the view of customer journey research to a network perspective, which identifies a larger ecosystem where the customer experience occurs. This network perspective is also important for conceptualizing DCM to remember that engagement never happens only between the supplier firm and the customer, but many other stakeholders influence the customer journey. The following sub-section looks more into this relational context of the customer journey.

3.1.5 Relational context

Business exchange in B2B markets is typically characterized by a limited number of interconnected business actors and embedded in long-term buyer–seller relationships; customer journeys occur in an exchange context. The tensions and coincidences of these business relationships can affect the nature and course of B2B journeys. Any relationship decision is difficult to evaluate in isolation because one business relationship decision can often influence other connected relationships, where establishing relationships with some parties may even lead to disruptions of other relationships (Purmonen, Jaakkola, and Terho 2023; Gummerus 2013; Easton and Axelsson 1992; Håkansson 1982). Hence, customer journeys in business markets always happen in a relational context.

Taking a wider network perspective toward the customer journey acquires a lot of respect from various studies highlighting the potential for the customer to shift between different roles (Hamilton and Price 2019) and the dynamic characterizing of other stakeholders like employees or suppliers, partners, or external influences (Hollebeek, Kumar, Srivastava, and Clark 2023; Chandler and Lusch 2015). Thus, more research is needed around the *stakeholder journey*, meaning a stakeholder's trajectory of role-related touchpoints and activities enacted through stakeholder engagement that collectively shape the stakeholder experience with the firm (Terho et al. 2022), and more research is required on the *network perspective* that recognizes the roles of communities, experience networks, service delivery networks, collaborators, and the broader ecosystem (Hollebeek et al. 2023; Hamilton and Price 2019). However, the literature suggests when partner networks become more ubiquitous by choosing the appropriate governance model among participant-governed networks (the participants govern themselves—formally or informally), lead organization-governed networks (one partner or organization takes the lead and directs the network), and network administrative organizations (a separate organization is set up to administer the network), it is critical that the firm takes a

stronger role in the service delivery network to reduce uncertainty in delivering the customer experience; however, this action must be balanced against the increase in the costs and complexities associated with such an expanded role (Lemon and Verhoef 2016; Provan and Kenis 2007).

Although the customer journey concept is among the few concepts that really intersect between theory and practice, and the number of formulations evolves around the customer journey frameworks, this journey tends to take the perspective of individual consumers operating independently; however, recently is agreed that decisions involve some form of *traveling companion* because others influence a given customer's decision journey at the various stages while they are being influenced themselves (Hamilton and Price 2021). This traveling companion applies even more with journeys that include more than one decision-maker, which is often the case in complex business markets.

Also, individual and broader environment-related, situational, and contextual variables within the subjective nature of experiences influence customers' responses to various stimuli along the journey and their evaluative outcomes. Finally, the goals customer aims to reach throughout the journey illuminate the customer's processes of moving toward their goals, thus acknowledging they draw on multiple resources to accomplish them (Purmonen et al. 2023; Becker et al. 2020; Epp and Price 2011; Hamilton and Price 2019).

These reviews of previous research on OBB, the customer decision process, and the customer journey build a strong conceptual foundation for understanding contemporary buying behavior for facilitating customer journeys to frame and link the DCM conceptualization into extant marketing literature.

3.2 B2B Customer engagement

Customer engagement literature helps to understand customers' emotional and cognitive disposition to invest their resources in the supplier brand for an inbound approach instead of selling directly (Terho et al. 2022). In this section, the study reviews the evolution of engagement research with its different research streams and then links it to DCM conceptualization as one of the three conceptual underpinnings.

Within their respective book chapters, Jaakkola, Conduit, and Fehrer (2019) identified two literature streams evolving from the previous customer engagement research: the customer management stream and the service-dominant logic (S-D logic) informed service ecosystems stream. In addition to these two streams, the digital and social media revolution has strengthened the importance of digital customer engagement behavior, as customers become active coproducers of value or destroyers of value for firms (Beckers, Risselada, and Verhoef 2014; Van Doorn et al. 2010; Reinartz et al. 2010; Meire, Hewett, Ballings, Kumar, and Van den Poel

2019). This section will first review the definition and dimensions of customer engagement, discuss the beyond-the-purchase aspect of customer engagement, and then summarize the different research streams that evolved—management perspective, S-D logic, and digital engagement as part of the management perspective—and finally, link these to DCM as one of the conceptual foundations.

Recently, customer engagement has become a central concept in marketing research and is commonly considered a customer's elevated cognitive, emotional, and behavioral disposition toward brands or firms (Brodie, Hollebeek, Jurić, and Ilić 2011; Terho et al. 2022). Definitions for customer engagement vary, but they have mainly focused on attitudes, behaviors, value extraction, and customer attitudes and behavior that go beyond purchase (Lemon and Verhoef 2016). Customer engagement has been “a psychological state that occurs by interactive, cocreative customer experiences with a focal agent or object such as a brand, in focal service relationships” (Brodie et al. 2011, 260) or “the intensity of an individual's participation in and connection with an organization's offerings or organizational activities, which either the customer or the organization initiates” (Vivek, Beatty, and Morgan 2012, 133) aligned with the definition, “the customer's behavioral manifestation toward a brand or firm, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers” (Van Doorn et al. 2010, 247; Terho et al. 2022). By engagement, a firm can have direct (e.g., buying) or indirect contributions (e.g., social media influencing, feedback systems, or references) (Pansari and Kumar 2017). One common embodiment of engagement is word of mouth (Jaakkola and Alexander 2014; Beckers et al. 2017), which can be seen as using references from client firms toward prospects they are trying to influence (Kumar et al. 2013).

Marketing literature has so far mostly examined customer engagement in consumer markets, but recent research indicates that engagement is also highly relevant in B2B contexts (Kumar and Pansari 2016; Reinartz and Berkmann 2018; Jaakkola and Aarikka-Stenroos 2019; Kleinaltenkamp, Karpen, Plewa, Jaakkola, and Conduit 2019). This beyond-the-purchase approach of customer engagement links strongly with the inbound logic principle of DCM and supports the “selling without selling” approach. All the abovementioned definitions and elements of engagement primarily appear in the digital and physical contexts. Hence, the link between customer-centric DCM and customer engagement seems strong from the philosophical inbound logic perspective, where engagement is seen as strongly mutual and highly dependent on participation and the customer's motivation, meaning engagement does not happen if the customer is unwilling to participate. Comparing customer engagement definitions to a previous section's customer journey literature, where the main emphasis is more on managing the customer journey from the supplier firm's perspective, similarities can be found among one of

the engagement literature streams on managing the customer experience, explained later in this section.

The three customer engagement dimensions are cognition, emotional, and behavioral (Dessart, Veloutsou, and Morgan-Thomas 2015; Brodie et al. 2011). Cognition refers to the degree of absorption in or concentration on an engagement object, reflecting the degree of interest the actor has in interacting with it (Brodie et al. 2011; Vivek et al. 2014). Emotional relates to the feelings, enthusiasm, and dedication invoked by the engagement object (Brodie, Ilić, Jurić, and Hollebeek 2013; Vivek et al. 2014). Behavioral implies an actor's voluntary resource contributions while focused on the engagement object, although engagement may go beyond what is fundamental to the relationship and arise in interacting with the focal object or other actors (Jaakkola and Alexander 2014; Van Doorn et al. 2010; Kleinaltenkamp et al. 2019).

Several customer engagement antecedents have been identified by previous research, such as customer involvement (Vivek et al. 2012), trust (Bowden 2009), and participation (Brodie et al. 2013). Customer engagement has also been claimed to provide positive outcomes such as loyalty (Vivek et al. 2012), commitment (Brodie et al. 2013), and brand connection, as well as potentially unfavorable consequences for the supplier firm (Hollebeek and Chen 2014). A customer engagement scale with three comprising dimensions—conscious attention, enthusiastic participation, and social connection—was developed and validated (Vivek et al. 2014), followed by a conceptualization of consumer brand engagement as “a consumer's positively valenced brand-related cognitive, emotional, and behavioral activity during or related to focal consumer or brand interactions,” comprising cognitive processing, affection, and activation dimensions (Jaakkola et al. 2019; Hollebeek et al. 2014).

The conceptual foundations of customer engagement rely on marketing relationships and interactive service experience (Brodie, Hollebeek, Jurić, and Ilic 2011). As Jaakkola et al. (2019) observe, engagement research has recently developed into one of the most central concepts of contemporary marketing theory and practice (Pansari and Kumar 2016) and is on its way to an essential midrange theory for service-dominant logic (Vargo and Lusch 2017); the concept emerged from managerial practice and was quickly acknowledged as a key research priority in the marketing domain (Bowden 2009; Brodie et al. 2011). Jaakkola et al. (2022) also note that engagement is claimed to have significant managerial and academic bearing on how customers' expanding roles may contribute to firm–customer relationships (Kumar and Pansari 2016), customer brand connections (Brodie et al. 2013; Hollebeek et al. 2014), firm marketing functions (Harmeling et al. 2017), customer engagement value (Kumar, Petersen, and Leone 2010), and finally, value co-creation (Jaakkola and Alexander 2014; Storbacka et al. 2016).

Recent studies have also attempted to measure customer engagement (Brodie et al. 2013; Hollebeek, Glynn, and Brodie 2014) and examine how firms can benefit from customer engagement (Kumar and Pansari 2016), such as customer referral value and customer influence value (Kumar et al. 2010; Kumar et al. 2013). These customer engagement behaviors also have value extraction consequences, such as customer purchasing behavior, customer referral behavior, customer influencer behavior, and customer knowledge behavior (Kumar et al. 2010). Conversely, customer engagement occurs under a specific set of context-dependent conditions generating differing customer engagement levels and exists as a dynamic, iterative process within service relationships that co-create value (Brodie et al. 2011).

Overall, engaged customers are considered a more credible voice of a brand than a firm's own messaging. They not only help other customers and prospects, especially through social connections (Kumar 2010), by recognizing their needs but make others see how a brand can meet those needs, thus blurring the boundaries between a business's role and a customer's (Vivek et al. 2014), while somehow fostering the network perspective of relationships, which the next paragraph discusses more. For sales, establishing relationships with all relevant people from a customer's organization that is not purely based on their job titles is important since, in business markets, the buyer center employs many individuals with different roles and personal goals. By engaging through relevant content, client employees can be provided useful information by keeping them current on trends, helping them make better decisions, giving them ideas, providing advice, and prompting them to think differently about their business (Wang, Malthouse, Calder, and Uzunoglu 2019).

Recent developments suggest a need to broaden the conceptual domain of customer engagement not only from the focal subject of customers to a general actor-to-actor perspective but the firm–customer dyad to relationships among multiple actors in service ecosystems (Brodie et al. 2019). This development seems similar to that of customer journey literature in a more relational context. However, Hollebeek et al. (2016) elaborate on how customers invest operant and operand resources in customer–brand relationships, explicitly connecting those to S-D logic axioms. Customer engagement behaviors have been conceptualized as customers' diverse resource contributions toward the focal firm and other stakeholders (Jaakkola and Alexander 2014). Similarly, multiple recent publications have started broadening the concept of engagement to cover any actor in the service ecosystem (Chandler and Lusch 2015; Storbacka et al. 2016; Brodie et al. 2016; Jaakkola and Alexander 2014).

This section started by briefly summarizing the development and characterization of engagement research, pinpointing the different approaches to defining customer engagement, and introducing the different research streams that have evolved, which the next two sub-sections will review more closely. Sub-section 3.2.1 will cover the two research streams Jaakkola et al. (2019) identified in their

respective book chapters, sub-section 3.2.2 discusses digital engagement. Section 3.2 will close with a discussion to link customer engagement literature to DCM conceptualization, building strongly on the inbound logic principle.

3.2.1 Two customer engagement research streams

This sub-section starts by reviewing one customer engagement research stream explicitly interested in the managerial perspective of customer engagement. This managerial perspective of customer engagement is the closest to the philosophy in the customer journey literature, which is still mainly approached from the firm's perspective on how to manage a certain phenomenon. Jaakkola et al. (2019) argue that the managerial perspective stream views customer engagement as the next step of consumer loyalty (Kumar and Pansari 2016), leading to customer behaviors, which directly or indirectly contribute to firm marketing functions (Harmeling et al. 2016). According to Jaakkola et al. (2019), observations on studies conducted under this stream are that they don't draw on S-D logic or aim to explain broader ecosystem phenomena but are interested in psychological and behavioral manifestations of customer engagement in a firm's performance and the opportunities for firms to directly or indirectly influence and manage customer engagement (Pansari and Kumar 2016). For example, studies are looking into how customer engagement can be leveraged to achieve firms' marketing objectives, considering customers possess unique resources they can contribute to the firm's benefit (Harmeling et al. 2016). Jaakkola et al. (2019) also note that early research in this stream viewed engagement as a customer's voluntary behavior that goes beyond purchase but has a brand or firm focus (van Doorn et al. 2010).

Such developments have empowered customers to engage more with firms, positively or negatively (Lemon and Verhoef 2016). One common expression of engagement is word of mouth (Jaakkola and Alexander 2014; Beckers et al. 2017), which is also seen as using references from client firms when trying to influence prospects (Kumar et al. 2013). This "beyond purchase" behavioral dimension of customer engagement includes manifestations (e.g., co-creation, social influence through word of mouth, and customer referrals) (see Hoyer et al. 2010; Libai et al. 2010). Jaakkola et al. (2019) argue that much of the literature within this research stream focused on the behavioral manifestations of engagement from the perspective of how customers' actions (e.g., word of mouth) affect the firm and how firms should adapt their customer management practices responding to such activities (Kumar et al. 2010; Verhoef et al. 2010; Terho et al. 2022). Some publications focused more on engagement as a customer's psychological state, linking it to brand-related concepts (e.g., brand loyalty and commitment) (Bowden 2009; Hollebeek 2011; Jaakkola et al. 2018).

Next, this section will examine the second research stream that largely builds on service-dominant logic. It is widely accepted that customer engagement literature has its roots in marketing's service-dominant logic (S-D logic), which proposes that brand- or firm-related interactive experiences generate important engagement-related customer outcomes (Meire et al. 2019) and sees engagement as a midrange theory to understand value co-creation in service ecosystems (Vargo and Lusch 2017). Grönroos (2010) and Gummesson (1994) first explored this perspective of relationships and service management, although Vargo and Lusch's (2004) article provides a more formal expression of this perspective, which the authors term the S-D logic. A study that developed a set of propositions delineating customer engagement's conceptual scope (Brodie et al. 2011) was considered a milestone in this research stream's development (Jaakkola et al. 2019).

Before going further in this research stream, it is important to better understand the S-D logic, which will be reviewed next in more detail. Vargo and Lusch's (2008) ten foundational premises depict marketing relationships using the S-D logic. Four of these ten provide a conceptual foundation for developing the customer experience concept: The first premise highlights the interactive, cocreative nature of value creation between customers and the other actors within service relationships. The ninth premise implies the context of value creation within networks, which is justified as a service used in the S-D logic, and identifies the logic of interactivity. The tenth premise emphasizes the value of cocreation's highly experiential, inherently subjective, and contextual nature. Finally, the eighth premise highlights the transcending, relational nature of service; in this context, service is viewed to generate specific customer benefits through the cocreation value with other actors in specific service relationships through focal interactions and interactive experiences (Vargo and Lusch 2008).

3.2.2 Linking digital engagement to B2B content marketing

Digital engagement is one of the managerial perspectives of customer engagement. Meire et al. (2019) linked the two concepts of customer engagement with brand- or firm-related customer interactive experiences and the customer engagement theory framework (Pansari and Kumar 2017), further developing the framework by revealing the interactive role of such marketing efforts with those experiences and demonstrating their ability to influence the sentiment of customers' digital engagement. Digital engagement offers a theoretical perspective for understanding why B2B customers might be motivated to interact with a supplier's content (Hollebeek and Macky 2019; Taiminen and Ranaweera 2019; Wang et al. 2019) and aligns with the inbound logic, with a perspective on how sellers can earn customer attention by fostering their positive cognitive or emotional dispositions through

compelling content (Brodie et al. 2019; Hollebeek and Macky 2019; Hollebeek 2019). As Terho et al. (2022) observed, engagement research has predominantly addressed consumers; recent research has also highlighted its relevance in the business markets, acknowledging that people seek cognitive or emotional absorption and interactive experiences in consumer and business environments (see Aarikka-Stenroos and Jaakkola 2019; Kleinaltenkamp et al. 2019; Hollebeek 2019).

Engagement is widely considered the key goal of digital marketing (Steward et al. 2018); with the latest research, a fourth engagement dimension appears: “social” (Hollebeek et al. 2019; Vivek, Beatty, Dalela, and Morgan, 2014). From a supplier firm perspective, Edelman and Singer (2015) argue that companies can use new technologies, processes, and organizational structures to proactively lead rather than follow customers on their digital journeys. By making the journey a compelling, customized, and open-ended experience, firms can woo buyers, earn their loyalty, and gain a competitive advantage (e.g., by tracking buyers’ offline interactions, designing online content to coincide with customers’ experiences, and facing varied performance during events), enabling the modification of marketer-generated content to correspond to the event outcomes (Meire et al. 2019).

Instead of aiming directly for sales, the DCM focuses on influencing relevant actors’ engagement with the seller during their purchasing journey problem-solving process, involving collective and individual goals (Brodie, Fehrerer, Jaakkola, and Conduit 2019). However, most recent research broadens definitions of engagement toward “actors’ dispositions to invest resources in their interactions with the seller and other relevant actors in a service system.” DCM strongly builds on this approach to engaging buyers during their purchasing journey.

Studies have noted that the value of content may be in the form of utility so that the content educates and helps customers solve problems (Holliman and Rowley 2014; Järvinen and Taiminen 2016; Rahim and Clemens 2012; Taiminen and Ranaweera 2019; Wang et al. 2017) or is a source of entertainment so the content provides the audience with enjoyment and a pastime (Pulizzi 2012; Tellis et al. 2019). Yet, from the B2B buyers’ perspective, engagement during the purchasing journey should contribute to problem-solving. Higher engagement in social media information can further develop buyers’ expertise, making them more active in various types of social media content (Gustafson, Pomirleanu, John, Mariadoss, and Johnson 2019). Moreover, marketers can influence the sentiment of customers’ digital engagement beyond their performance during customers’ interactions; for unfavorable event outcomes, informational marketer-generated content can enhance customer sentiment (Meire et al. 2019), facilitating knowledge discovery, sharing, and interpretation.

Lately, a few more B2B engagement articles have contributed to the B2B engagement literature. A recent study on SME B2B firms’ engagement in LinkedIn provided three major contributions that well build on the DCM concept (Cortez and

Dastidar 2022). First, the study suggested a positive association between impressions and clicks, clicks and new followers, and new followers and impressions. Second, the study indicated that B2B firms should publish posts with a particular brand personality, stressing the dimensions of excitement, competence, and ruggedness. Finally, they suggested that firms should consider not only the brand personality of posts but the number of published posts per week due to the LinkedIn algorithm (Cortez and Dastidar 2022). Moreover, research on micro-failures (Sands, Campbell, Ferraro, and Plangger 2022) revealed the importance of high-level B2B customer engagement to ameliorate the adverse effects of BSB service micro-failures. These studies were among the first attempts to unpack how purchase engagement operates in the B2B context.

This section aimed to describe the dimensions of customer engagement, the three different research streams of customer engagement: the managerial perspective, S-D logic, and digital engagement as part of the managerial perspective. This section described the recent developments of these research streams, and finally, linked all these previous customer engagement discussions to DCM as one of the theoretical foundations strongly sympathizing the inbound logic principle of DCM.

3.3 B2B marketing technologies

Marketing technology literature gives a conceptual lens to understand how digital marketing technologies can facilitate personalized marketing (Terho et al. 2022). This section starts with a dialogue around the requirement to use DCM technologies and how marketing automation and CRM systems form the backbone for DCM, followed by a review of how artificial intelligence can support DCM efforts. The section ends by summarizing how technology allows the performance measurement and continuous experimentation of DCM.

Looking back, Kohli and Jaworski (1990) discussed the generation of market intelligence in the 1990s by sharing a quotation from the director of marketing in a high-tech industrial products company that illustrates the information collection and analysis activity as “A lot of marketing is information gathering.” Furthermore, the customer-focused marketing approach has provided a definitive direction, thus placing the discipline of marketing technologies at the crossroads of finance, accounting, technology, and operations (Kumar 2015). Kumar (2015) argues there are three factors: the technological progress of data management applications (e.g., SAP and Salesforce), the deeper level of insights gained, and the ease of formulation of marketing activities at the customer level, which triggered the expanded marketing focus to include an investment-based outlook.

DCM calls for proficiently using marketing technologies, although the literature rarely discusses their vital role explicitly. This need for discussing marketing technologies explicitly becomes more crucial today when AI tools are being developed

at the speed of light. Yet, when applied, AI technologies are changing how marketing strategy is done and implemented in firms. The literature on digital marketing technologies provides insights into how marketers can effectively understand and engage buyers during the increasingly complex and digital purchasing journeys. The marketing technology landscape has witnessed unprecedented development regarding sophistication and variety. According to Brinker (2022), the marketing technology landscape consists of over 9000 different tools and platforms that can support and advance marketing activities and processes; this marketing technology landscape continues to grow in double-digit numbers. The effective use of technology is a critical prerequisite in the ideal of DCM to engage customers at the right time on their purchasing journeys (Holliman and Rowley 2014; Wang et al. 2017).

Nevertheless, the extant research has paid scant attention to the technologies companies utilize for DCM, although more research is being conducted on this topic. The proliferation of marketing technologies makes listing all the technologies that may have relevance to DCM difficult; simply referring to them as “technology” understates the complexity marketers face when designing and implementing DCM. Therefore, in this section, this study provides an overview of the capabilities of key technologies (Table 5) that support DCM’s operationalization. In accordance with the framework in Figure 4, this study claims that effective customer journey modeling and customer engagement management tasks in that DCM require the use of technology.

Table 5. Required use of technologies for effective DCM.

TECHONOLOGY	USE CASE	OUTCOMES
Web analytics	Customer journey modeling: maps the behavior of individual customers.	Understands the underlying motivations driving distinctive behavioral patterns. Digital footprint of the interactions in a firm’s owned media space.
CRM software	The web analytic data above can be coupled with firms’ customer databases with a customer’s consent.	Tracks the behavior of specific customers over time. Provides actionable signals of the customer’s journey stage and typical points of interest.
Marketing automation	Automated personalization of content; personalized interaction when a customer performs a certain action.	Fosters the optimized delivery, optimization, and experimentation of interactive content that engages customers at an appropriate point of their purchasing journeys. Creates a smooth transition from one journey touchpoint to another.
Social listening	Tracks electronic word of mouth.	Enables a firm to respond to new trends faster than the competition.
AI-Empowered tools	Supports B2B firms in customer journey management in ways that augment human managers with the right timing or prospects.	Helps allocate scarce resources better to foster improved business outcomes.
Analytics software	Performance measurement and continuous experimentation.	Learns new insights into what types of content engage customers.

First, customer journey modeling necessitates that the firm can map the behavior of individual customers and understand their underlying motivations, which drive distinctive behavioral patterns. Customer behavior can be mapped by harnessing web analytics software that collects online clickstream data regarding the source of website traffic, navigation paths, and the behavior of visitors during their website or mobile app visits (Nakatani and Chuang 2011). Thus, web analytics allows a firm to obtain a digital footprint of the interactions occurring in the firm's owned media space.

Second, with a customer's consent, this data can be coupled with the firm's customer database, such as customer relationship management (CRM) software, allowing the firm to track the behavior of specific customers over time (Järvinen and Karjaluoto 2015; Malthouse et al. 2013). Combining web analytics and CRM data enables integrating online data with the customer's purchasing history and business interactions (e.g., customer service calls and sales meetings). The depth and quality of data naturally depend on the volume and variety of interactions between the firm and the customer and the firm's propensity to record them in the database. Furthermore, the data have always had biases and a lack of perception due to incomplete behavioral data, such as data on a customer's interactions with competitors and the lack of data on customers' underlying motivations to behave in a certain way (Heimbach, Kostyra, and Hinz 2015). Overall, the behavioral online data can provide actionable signals of the customer's journey stage and topical points of interest (e.g., detect customers actively searching for a specific solution), thus enabling firms to deliver content meeting the customer needs (Järvinen and Taiminen 2016).

Third, marketing automation exemplifies an IT tool that attracted attention in the B2B sector in the mid-2010s (Järvinen and Taiminen 2016), yet only a few studies mentioned marketing automation back then. A decade ago, a study with interviews of 72 executives and 30 B2B researchers was conducted, and the absence of mentions of marketing automation tools was explained by B2B companies not exploiting marketing automation tools to their fullest advantage, with marketing technology being a lack of insight for them. Marketing automation, which consists of tools similar to web analytics, took around ten years to become mainstream in B2B markets. Marketing automation helps companies in several ways, but the main logic behind it is that visitors to the web page must log in or leave contact information to access the content, thus activating the marketing automation software and initiating the customer's journey through the marketing and sales funnel (Järvinen and Taiminen 2016). Marketing automation and web analytics capitalize on similar techniques by tracking website visitors' online behaviors (e.g., navigation paths and page views) using cookies and IP addresses (Batra and Keller 2016). The difference between the tools relies on marketing automation employing advanced capabilities

for identifying individual customers and following their behaviors over extended periods (Järvinen and Taiminen 2016). Lately, the number of studies exploiting marketing automation tools has exploded enormously. Customer engagement management benefits from technologies fostering the optimized delivery, optimization, and experimentation of interactive content, which engages customers at the appropriate point of their purchasing journeys. The delivery of DCM is advanced, using technology that allows the automated personalization of the content a customer receives. Marketing automation software can be used to create rules for delivering DCM based on a customer's profile information, data from past interactions, and real-time data on a customer's current actions and context (e.g., physical or virtual location) (Heimbach et al. 2015). Thus, when a customer performs a certain action in a given context, the marketing automation software personalizes the interaction according to predefined rules its users set (Järvinen and Taiminen 2016). For example, when a potential B2B customer who has been identified as an IT manager is browsing a website, the website is personalized to show content designed to meet the informational needs of IT managers. Furthermore, marketing automation can be used to design a smooth transition from one journey touchpoint to another (Edelman and Singer 2015). For instance, if the customer shows interest in a particular solution, the customer is transferred to an immediate live chat conversation with a sales representative who can offer more detailed information or help with placing an order.

Fourth, besides modeling customer journeys, technology is vital in understanding future customer needs and innovating new customer journeys (Edelman and Singer 2015). Social listening is a powerful tool for tracking electronic word of mouth produced by current and potential customers, competitors, and industry experts (Hewett, Rand, Rust, and van Heerde 2016; Itani, Agnihotri, and Dingus 2017). By following social media discussions, the firm may be able to respond to new trends in customer behavior and transformations in the market faster than the competition (Kiron, Palmer, Phillips, and Berkman 2013; van den Driest et al. 2016). For example, a firm can innovate customer journeys that meet emerging customer needs and design content that resonates with those needs, which can be done with the customers. Fifth, emerging technologies (e.g., AI and GenAI tools like ChatGPT) and their use in marketing, specifically in DCM, cannot be excluded from this study to provide timely marketing research.

Technology has increased the number of opinions bearing on a customer's journey and begun providing a decision-support system wherein the customer and AI agent reach a final decision together; hence, firms must carefully consider their usage of AI technologies, attending specifically to the social implications (Hamilton et al. 2021). Mele and Russo-Spena (2021) argue that the mainstream view on customer journey literature focuses on using different touchpoints and does not

completely address the complexity of hyperconnectivity, storage in the cloud, the proliferation of digital sensors, augmented reality, and in-store activities; they suggest a new concept, “phygital,” to address the issues practitioners face when dealing with customers through many digital and physical channels. Yet, the concept still seems to be in its initial state within the academic research. New technologies (e.g., AI and robot-related tools) are assumed to provide opportunities to integrate better physical and virtual touchpoints through intelligent processes to improve customers’ experiences (Grewal and Roggeveen 2020) through important technological interdependencies (Grewal and Roggeveen 2020) and improving the transition to phygital systems (Mele and Russo-Spena 2021).

Thus, it seems inevitable that customer decision-making should evolve along with these technological and social changes (Hamilton et al. 2021). Acknowledging that marketing-related AI literature is scarce, Davenport et al. (2019) came up with two cautionary reasons: First, the short- to medium-term impacts of AI may be more limited than the popular press would suggest; second, they suggested AI would be more effective if it is deployed in ways that augment, rather than replace, human managers. The author of this dissertation disagrees with their first point since the recent developments with tools like ChatGPT have already proven that things are changing faster than expected. Through mapping over 150 tools under 16 marketing management tool categories, Rusthollkarhu et al. (2022) visualized (see Figure 5) how diverse AI-empowered tools can, in each activity type and throughout the whole journey, support B2B companies in customer journey management.

Rusthollkarhu et al.’s (2022) visualization claim that AI-empowered tools can help busy B2B firms allocate their scarce resources better (Figure 5). For example, CRM, marketing automation, and contacting and mass marketing tools also include AI functions that provide sales and marketing professionals suggestions on how and what time certain prospects or customers are best to be contacted in the prepurchase phase, which can help sales professionals allocate resources to the most promising prospects (Rusthollkarhu et al. 2022). However, a lack of research exists on how these AI-empowered tools influence overall DCM performance.

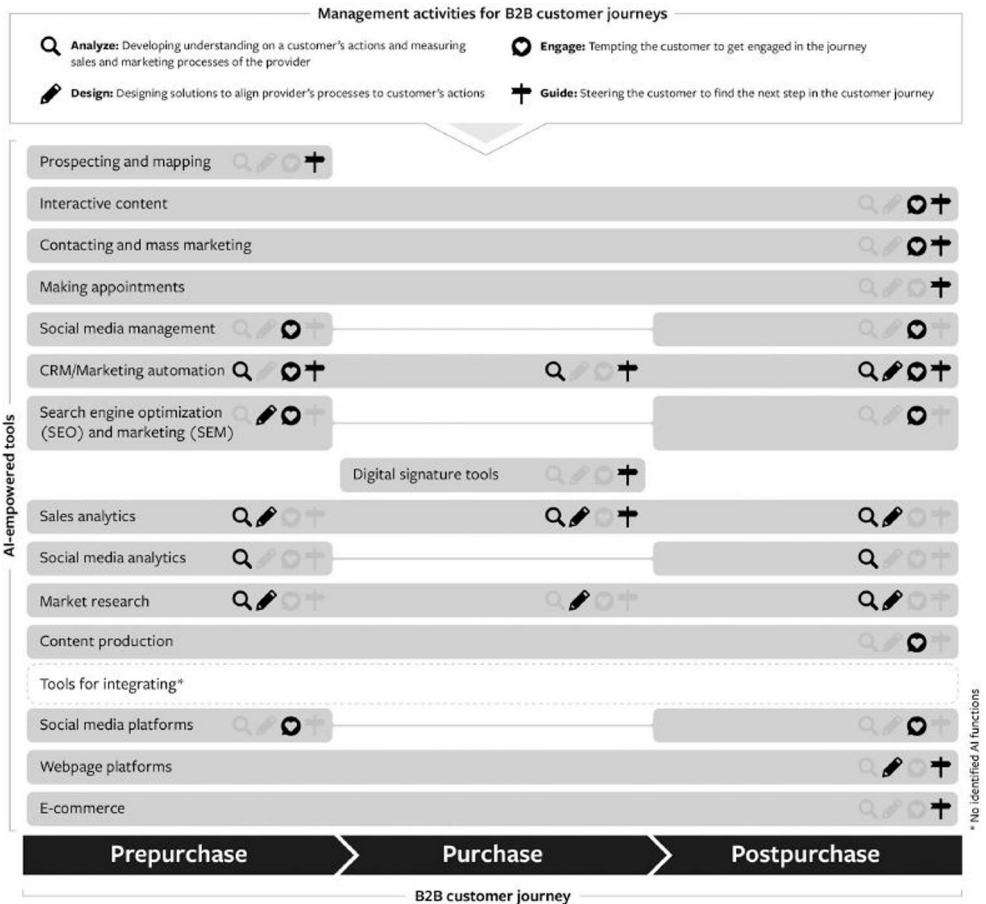


Figure 5. Managing the B2B customer journey with AI-empowered tools (Rusthollkarhu et al. 2022).

Finally, technology allows the performance measurement and continuous experimentation of DCM. It is straightforward to track customer responses to content via ‘engagement metrics’ (e.g., likes, comments, and shares) (Juntunen, Halme, Korsunova, and Rajala 2019); linking exposure to a digital piece of content with subsequent conversion outcomes (e.g., website visits and outcomes of the visits via web analytics) is also easy (Järvinen and Karjaluo 2015; Wilson 2010). When analytics software is combined with experimentation or a/b testing tools, the DCM provider can learn meaningful insights into what types of content lead to increased engagement behaviors (Hoban and Bucklin 2015; John et al. 2017; Voorveld, van Noort, Muntinga, and Bronner 2018). Since the cost of running online experiments is rather low, continuous experimentation is an actionable means of testing the performance of various content types and learning new insights into what types of content engage customers (Kohavi and Thomke 2017).

4 Research Design

Chapter Four will review the overall research design around this study. Section 4.1 discusses the philosophical underpinnings and qualitative research method, section 4.2 reviews the abductive research strategy with inductive research methods and the TIU approach applied in the study. Section 4.3 discusses empirical research design, and the following sections the data collection, management, analysis, and interpretation; the chapter will end with discussion on research ethics and limitations of the study.

4.1 Philosophical underpinnings and the qualitative research method

As all research projects have philosophical foundations, so does this research. While conducting social science research, scientific realism feels the closest for the researcher of this study since it argues toward fallibilistic realism, maintaining that *though the job of science is to develop genuine knowledge about the world, such knowledge will never be known with certainty* (Hunt and Hansen 2010). Observation is fallible and unlikely to reveal itself completely to lead to a full understanding of any social situation, especially since there can be no definitive criteria to judge the “truth” of a particular version; critical realism relies on the researcher to collect further data that helps distinguish among alternative explanations and on the community of researchers to debate them thoroughly (Easton 2010). In other words, for scientific realism, all of science’s knowledge claims are provisional and subject to revision based on future evidence. This critical realism stresses the importance of the continuing efforts of science to develop ever-better measured constructs, research procedures for empirical testing, and epistemological norms for developing scientific knowledge (Hunt and Hansen 2010).

Critical realism leads this study to choose the qualitative research method since prior research has scarcely discussed how DCM is conducted in business markets. By conducting in-depth interviews to uncover the rich knowledge of a marketer’s perceptions, opinions, and motivations, gaining a better understanding of the concept of DCM is possible. The qualitative method is great for addressing “how” questions rather than “how many” and for understanding the world from the perspective of

those studied for examining and articulating processes (Pratt 2009). TIU is employed as a research approach, and the study applies an abductive research strategy and inductive methods (e.g., empirically driven analysis).

One might wonder why qualitative research is chosen when studying digital marketing and whether it is easily measurable since it is digital and trackable. Qualitative research is often challenged and considered a second-best alternative, unscientific, and even feminine, and is by no means universally accepted as a legitimate science (Marschan-Piekkari and Welch 2004). Hence, in the 2020s, discussing when it is appropriate to use qualitative research methods seems important. The arguments for choosing qualitative research for this study align with Creswell and Poth (2018), who claim that researchers often choose to conduct qualitative research because a problem or issue needs to be explored and that exploration is needed to study a group and identify variables, which cannot be easily measured, or silenced voices that cannot be heard. Some arguments support exploring a problem rather than using predetermined information from previous research or relying on previous research results. Similarly, in this study, Creswell and Poth (2018) highlight that qualitative research shall be conducted when a complex, detailed understanding of an issue is needed and that the details can be only established by talking directly with people, going to their homes or workplaces, and allowing them to tell the stories unencumbered by what the researchers expect to find or have read from the literature. Creswell and Poth (2018) claim it is good to rely on qualitative methods to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships that often exist between a researcher and the participant in a study setting; this can be further deemphasized by allowing participants to collaborate directly by having them review the RQs, data analysis, and interpretation phases of research.

This section focused on explaining scientific realism as the researcher's philosophical underpinning, supporting the intention to conduct this study on qualitative methods. The reasons for choosing a qualitative research method precisely align with what was summarized above. First, with this research problem, there is a need to develop a theory to address gaps in the current knowledge. Second, there is a lack of fit between quantitative measures and the current problem. Finally, this study needs a complex, detailed understanding of the issue of DCM. All these claims support the decision to rely on qualitative research methods.

4.2 Abductive research strategy, inductive research tactic, and theories-in-use approach

Next, the abductive research strategy that consists of inductive research methods (e.g., coding and empirical data analysis) will be discussed in detail.

Coincident with the data gathering and after the initial stages of analysis, this study started cycling between emergent data, themes, concepts, dimensions, and the relevant literature—not only to see whether what was found has precedents but whether new concepts were discovered (Terho et al. 2022). The data structures (Figures 8, 9, 10, 11) presented in the findings show the activities, sub-activities, and their key components (Figure 8), as well as the propositions, sub-propositions, and their components (Figures 9, 10, 11) allowing to configure the data gathered into a sensible visual aid. These figures also provides a structural representation of how the components found from raw data progressed to sub-activities and sub-propositions and overall themes (activities and propositions)—a key component of demonstrating rigor in qualitative research (Pratt 2008; Tracy 2010; Gioia et al. 2013).

Deductive, inductive, and abductive research strategies have differences, but defining what they mean first is important. Arbnor and Bjerke (2009) claim that deductive often means the researcher goes from theory to empirical data, whereas inductive means the process goes the other way—from empirical data to theory. However, deduction and induction are often found to be too dimensional and unrealistic compared with how research is done in practice. Abduction starts from empirical data like induction but does not turn away theoretical knowledge and is, to that extent, closer to deduction (Arbnor and Bjerke 2009). An abductive approach is more than an interplay between inductive and deductive; it is fruitful if the researcher's objective is to discover new things (e.g., other variables and relationships) (Dubois and Gadde 2002).

In this study, abduction was chosen as an overall research strategy. This study was heavily practice-driven when these new concepts began rising from managerial books and the market. The first data collection round aligned with the above definition for abduction, starting from empirical data (e.g., data collection) and then returning to visit theoretical frameworks to find conceptual underpinnings around this new concept that was evolving, followed by this study's second data collection phase, which was more confirmative with its new observations and new cases and aligned closely with what was described above.

As this section mentioned, after the abductive research strategy was applied, some inductive methods were applied (e.g., in the first data analysis phase), where the empirical data was coded purely from the empirical findings gathered. After a framework was established, the theory knowledge was revisited, and the framework was adjusted to support its conceptual underpinnings. As characteristic of abductive research, the analysis of empirical data may very well be combined with, or preceded by, studies of existing theory in the literature—not as a mechanical application to single cases but as a source of inspiration to discover patterns for further explanations (Arbnor and Bjerke 2009), meaning the research process consists of alternations

between existing theory and empirical data, where both are seen in light of each other, whereas the coding of this study was heavily inductive. The researcher of this study fully agrees with the criticism directed at the purely deductive approach that precisely depends on theory and the influence on the sampling and operationalization of variables in the models being constructed but at the risk that the observations made will not fit the reality they are meant to describe (Arbnor and Bjerke 2009).

Pratt (2009) calls for another point not often well articulated in manuscripts—that one should be very clear about one’s “position in the field,” meaning the relationship between the researcher and the researched. The researcher of this study wants to be open and honest when pointing out her position in the field. Her relationship with several informants may have some history since some relationships are from personal business networks and the employment of two informant firms in this research. However, the researcher was not employed when the research interviews occurred, and other research team members conducted those two interviews during the second data collection phase to decrease the researcher’s involvement and previous employment position in the field to influence the informants or the interviews.

This section aimed to discuss the decisions made concerning the research strategies, approaches, and methods and then frame them with the research steps taken while explaining the researcher’s previous field positions that might have had some influence over this research. However, as noted, the research settings were handled to minimize any additional influence on the results of this study. Next, this section continues to deepen the discussion on the chosen research approaches by reviewing the chosen TIU approach.

A recognized challenge exists in establishing better ways to align marketing practice and research (Troye and Howell 2004). Regarding how marketing research could gain better insight into marketing practice and vice versa, Wilson and Ghingold (1980) suggested that theories could be built from practice, using what they referred to as the “theories-in-use” approach, where the attempt is made to extract the theories practitioners use, meaning the TIU approach is a way to study the methods the marketing practitioner employs in trying to construct reliable and valid statements about the world. This approach goes well beyond the usual methods that academic investigators generally apply. As the research on DCM remains somewhat embryonic, a discovery-oriented TIU approach was used to conceptualize DCM. TIU is especially suitable in three research settings: when constructing organic marketing theories, especially about new and emerging phenomena; when extending extant perspectives and addressing ambiguities; and when guiding future empirical efforts (Zeithaml, Jaworski, Kohli, Tuli Ulaga, and Zaltman 2020; Terho et al. 2022). Three of the top ten articles in the *Journal of Marketing* are TIU articles, which have won major awards and established subfields of study within the

discipline, such as service quality (Panasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1985), market orientation (Kohli and Jaworski 1990), experiential consumption, customer solutions, and hybrid offerings (Zeithaml et al. 2020). However, few researchers seemingly apply the TIU approach to their research, and there are very few TIU articles. Novel, emerging phenomena (e.g., DCM) create a need to look into the practitioners' perspectives; with the help of TIU, it is possible to study stakeholders in marketing through one's mental model of how things work in their particular context and through TIU research to surface interesting (Zaltman, LeMasters, and Heffring 1984) novel theories and concepts that can advance marketing practice and scholarship (Zeithaml et al. 2020).

This section summarized the reasons for the chosen research strategy, method, and approach. The next section will progress to the research design theme and further explain why this study used the TIU approach.

4.3 Empirical research design

This section justifies why the TIU approach was preferred over other research approaches (Marschan-Piekkari and Welch 2004). When designing research, starting from the research purpose is good, in this case, on *conceptualizing (DCM) in B2B markets*, which can be seen as “building [a] new theory” (Zeithaml et al. 2020). The TIU approach was found relevant for the researcher to work closely and co-create relevant marketing knowledge with practitioners; that approach would enable the development of novel organic marketing theories (Zeithaml et al. 2020) and make the research abductive and inductive. Starting from empirical findings like induction but not turning away from theoretical knowledge like abductive and going back and forth create a conceptualization. Therefore, the TIU approach was more suitable for this research than other qualitative approaches like ethnography, which would be more useful when trying to understand a phenomenon's meaning or case study where one would probably work with a smaller number of participants but make more in-depth research on a limited number of cases, which could have been a possible road to take concerning the researcher's position in the field; however, TIU seemed a better overall approach when building a “new concept”.

Other qualitative approaches did not seem to hit the spot with the purpose of this research. For example, narrative research focuses purely on individual stories from the participants; phenomenology emphasizes the experiences of participants; or the intent of grounded theory study that moves beyond description and generates or discovers a theory, an explanation of something or an understanding the researcher develops while *memoing* becomes part of developing the theory when the researcher writes down ideas as data is collected and analyzed (Creswell and Poth 2018, 82–84). However, there seem to be similarities between the grounded theory and the

TIU approach. For example, the data collection and analysis processes are taken simultaneously and iteratively; the primary form of data collection is often interviewing, in which the researcher constantly compares data gleaned from participants with ideas about the emerging theory (Creswell and Poth 2018, 82–84). Also differing from the TIU approach is when the grounded theory process continues vacillating between the participants, gathering new interviews, and returning to the evolving theory to fill in gaps and elaborate on how it works. Both involve inductive procedures in data analysis, and procedures can be structured and follow a pattern of developing open categories, selecting one to be the focus of theory, and then detailing additional categories through axial coding to form a theoretical model; the intersection of categories becomes the theory (i.e., selective coding). This theory can be presented as a diagram, proposition, or discussion (Creswell and Poth 2018, 82–84).

Next, this section compares the TIU approach to ethnography and explains why TIU was chosen in this research. Ethnography targets social groups (Zeithaml et al. 2020) and looks for patterns of the group’s mental activities (e.g., their ideas and beliefs expressed through language) or material activities (e.g., how they behave within the group expressed through their actions and while the researcher observes them) (Creswell and Poth 2018, 90). Ethnography also often starts with a theory—a broad explanation of what they hope to find—which requires extensive fieldwork to determine how the culture works rather than building an in-depth understanding of a single case to explore an issue or problem. Since this study does not look into certain social groups or their culture(s), ethnography was considered an unsuitable approach for conducting this study (Creswell and Poth 2018, 90).

Conversely, the characteristics of a case study approach are that it usually begins with identifying a specific case, which will be described and analyzed. Case identification is bounded, meaning it can be defined within certain parameters like a specific place, time frame, or certain participants. Case studies intend to provide a detailed, in-depth data collection, wherein analysis cases are usually compared between one and another. Case studies can devise general lessons learned from studying the case; however, in this research, the goal was to come up with conceptualization, which required the involvement of more participants and diverse industries to come up with DCM’s key activities and their components that could be applied in various B2B firms and industries.

The research process also narrowed the options to rely on the TIU approach, excluding opportunities for mathematically derived implications or using data to find a phenomenon because that was not aligned with the research purpose of creating a holistic conceptualization; there was nothing to measure since the conceptualization was missing. Gathering data from multiple industries and companies was found to be better than relying only on a few case companies to build a proper

conceptualization of DCM in business markets; even if the case study approach had enabled more in-depth research in the sample organizations, it would have lacked the ability to build proper conceptualization and implications to use in several other industries.

The TIU approach has an essential requirement: The researcher should have a very strong interest in the RQs and issues, and good general knowledge related to them. This requirement was easy to fulfill with researchers' prior working experience from several marketing leader roles working closely with DCM strategy and activities in several companies in different industries. This TIU approach enabled the researcher to listen carefully to participants, ask probing questions, challenge participants when appropriate, and engage with participants in a flexible way, adapting the questions asked to the idiosyncratic knowledge of individual participants and the learnings from prior participants in the TIU study (Zeithaml et al. 2020).

As Figure 6 shows, this approach involved three phases. The literature review in the first phase helped develop a pre-understanding of commonly shared assumptions about the critical principles of DCM (see Tables 1, 2, 3). This review covered the academic (see Tables 1, 2) and managerial literature (see Table 3) on DCM. In the second phase, a research team was formed; by using inductive logic to explore DCM activities (data collection, round 1), the findings were set against the literature to substantiate and operationalize the DCM principles identified in extant research, drawing on ground-level insights from managers close to the phenomenon (Zeithaml et al. 2019; Challagalla et al. 2014). This procedure yielded a tentative conceptualization of key DCM activities and a framework of DCM effectiveness. The study's third phase employed a second, more structured data set to validate and refine that conceptualization; the developed propositions were plausible, informative, and aligned with the study objectives. Finally, the results were validated through further discussion with managers. Procedures for collecting and analyzing data are described below in more detail (Terho et al. 2022).

This section aims to give the reasoning behind the decision to choose the TIU approach over other research approaches as the research approach in conceptualizing DCM in business markets.

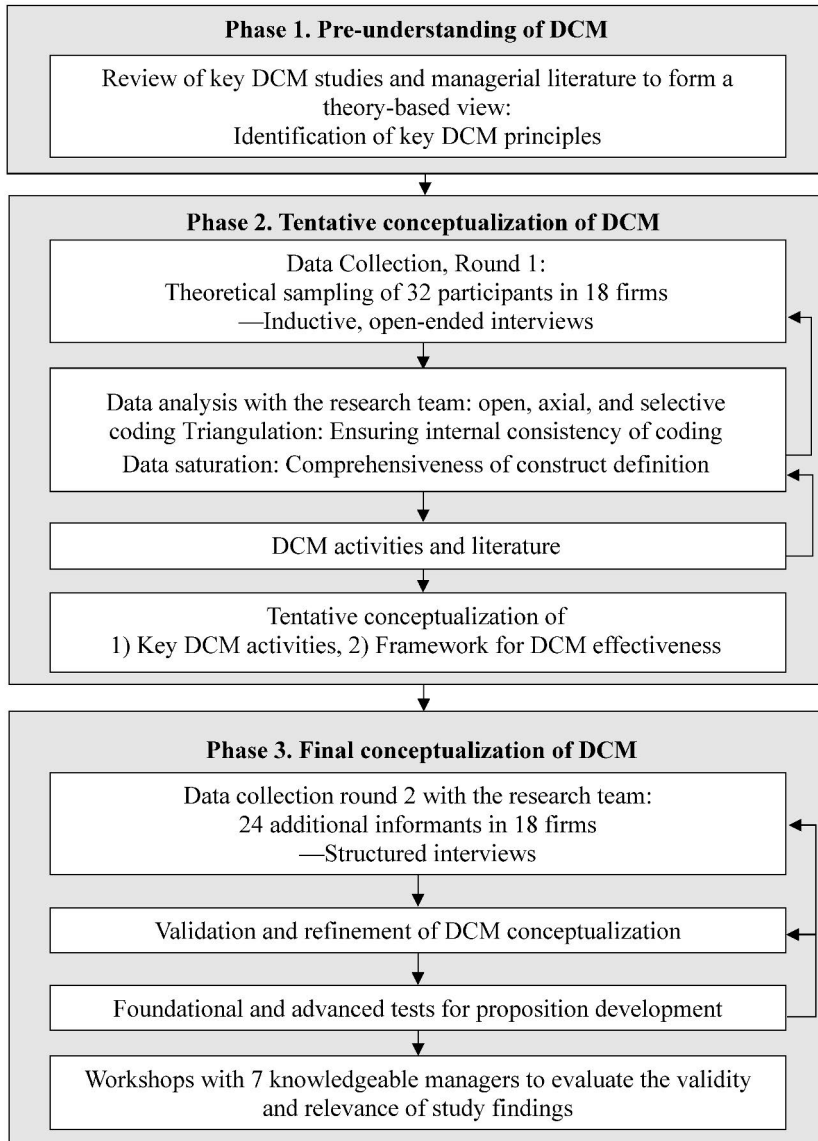


Figure 6. Research process adapted from Zeithaml et al. (2019) and Terho et al. (2022).

4.4 Data collection

After explaining the reasons behind the research decisions made so far, it is time to review the data collection process for this research. There were two rounds of data collection. In the first round, DCM activities were explored inductively from the perspective of practicing managers. Theoretical sampling was applied to select the interviewees based on the following two criteria: first, that interviewees work for

firms known to have invested heavily in DCM; second, that the interviewees have relevant knowledge and experience as evidenced by participating in DCM-related decision-making within the firm (Terho et al. 2022). Candidate firms were initially identified from industry reports and expert statements; the snowballing technique was used during the early interviews to identify other firms known to have invested heavily in DCM. Multiple participants were recruited to enhance the researchers' understanding of the diverse aspects of DCM (Riege 2003), including business segment leaders, marketing managers, specialists, and sales managers whose work was closely linked to DCM activities.

In the first round of data collection, 34 participants were interviewed from 18 firms across a range of industries (see Table 6) with an average of 13 years of relevant experience. The interview duration ranged from 30 to 95 minutes (60 on average). Open-ended questions and conversation themes allowed managers to discuss DCM-related ideas they considered important (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006, p. 125; Zeithaml et al. 2019). The interview guide was structured around the following themes: (1) the concept of DCM and key activities; (2) the scope of DCM regarding associated marketing concepts and technologies; (3) key outcomes of DCM; and (4) factors that facilitate or hinder DCM performance. The open-ended questions were phrased so the participants could verbally express themselves and speak on elements they felt were linked to the DCM concept. They were also asked about capabilities and changes and how they had organized themselves; they were kindly asked to describe, in more detail, the things they had already mentioned briefly. Following the recommended TIU approach, the interviewers had good practical knowledge of the research topic, and participants' views were solicited using managerial language (Zeithaml et al. 2019). The data from this second phase helped develop an initial conceptualization and a preliminary framework of outcomes and contingencies, making this second phase inductive (Terho et al. 2022).

Table 6. Sample characteristics (Terho et al. 2022).

Firm	Turnover M€	No. Employees	Industry	Interviewee job title	Industry exp. (years)	Intervie w length (min.)
Data collection - step 1.						
Firm 1	9100.0	2355	Energy	1 Marketing Director	17	55
				2 Sales Manager,	16	40
Firm 2	2000.0	3188	Industrial machinery	3 Marketing Director	13	85
				4 Digital Marketing Professional	3	60
				5 Sales Development Manager	15	35
Firm 3	783.5	1333	Telecommunication services	6 Head of Brand and Customer Marketing	20	55
				7 Head of Sales Excellence	10	50
Firm 4	556.3	5698	Circular economy and environmental services	8 Marketing Manager	12	45
				9 Sales Manager	5	30
Firm 5	182.0	340	Information and communication technology	10 Marketing Director, Western Europe	12	60
				11 Head of SMB segment business	20	30
Firm 6	103.8	403	Welding Equipment	12 Marketing & Communication Director	30	75
				13 Vice President, Sales	18	75
Firm 7	24.6	78	Industrial engineering	14 Marketing Development Manager	8	75
				15 Senior Vice President, Marketing	14	75
				16 Head of Marketing Communications	17	75
Firm 8	19.6	103	Heating, ventilation, and air conditioning	17 Marketing and IT manager	11	70
				18 Sales Manager	1	40
Firm 9	18.5	62	Food production solutions	19 Digital Program Manager	9	95
				20 CEO	17	95
Firm 10	11.8	139	Automotive software and services	21 Head of Marketing & Communications	14	85
				22 Head of Industry	16	85
Firm 11	11.5	50.0	Industrial engineering	23 Sales & Development Manager	31	30
Firm 12	9.5	73	Technology consulting	24 Head of B2B business	5	60
Firm 13	8.2	170	Business intelligence software	25 CEO	15	45
				26 Growth Marketing Manager	7	75
Firm 14	7.2	41	Management consulting	27 Marketing Director	14	70
				28 Sales Director	13	70
Firm 15	7.2	58	Recruitment and staffing services	29 Head of Marketing	9	50
				30 Sales Director	7	45
Firm 16	1.9	19	Marketing and communications	31 Lead Strategist	12	50
Firm 17	1.8	19	Marketing and communications	32 Founder, Head of International Business	9	50
Firm 18	1.2	11	Technology consulting	33 CEO	20	80
	1.2	11	Technology consulting	34 Growth Marketing Strategist	6	80
Data collection - step 2.						
Firm 19	3115.0	12300	Financial services	35 Content Strategy Lead	7	60
Firm 20	82.0	356	Telecommunication infrastructure	36 Vice President, Marketing	23	85
Firm 21	13.0	11	Marketing software	37 Chief Marketing Officer	11	60
				38 Head of Business Development	9	15
Firm 22	11.5	64	Business intelligence software	39 Head of Marketing	6	70
Firm 23	5.0	45	Technology consulting	40 Chief Strategy Officer	25.0	90
				41 Chief Commercial Officer	14.0	90
				42 Head of Marketing	12.0	90
Firm 24	3.9	17	Marketing software	43 Content Strategy Lead	7	60
Firm 25	2.6	34	Management consulting	44 Digital Experience Specialist	6	65
Firm 26	8300.0	20800	Information and communication technology	45 Digital Marketing Professional	12	65
Firm 27	50.0	400	Industrial digital services	47 Digital Marketing Professional	6	50
Firm 28	139.0	175	Marketing and communications	48 Content Strategist	7	135
Firm 29	3.0	20	Marketing and communications	49 Digital Marketing Professional	3	60
Firm 30	286.0	631	Automotive	50 Product Marketing Manager	12	60
Firm 31	0.2	8	Marketing and communications	51 Digital Marketing Professional	16	60
Firm 32	230.0	2500	Media and digital services	52 B2B Marketing Designer	3	60
	230.0	2500	Media and digital services	53 Marketing Manager	11	50
Firm 33	15.6	132	Enterprise resource planning software	54 Digital Marketing Professional	6	60
Firm 34	0.6	11	Marketing and communications	56 Growth Manager	8	60
Firm 35	2650.0	12300	Heating solutions	57 Digital Marketing Professional	19	60
Firm 36	0.3	4	Marketing and communications	58 Sisältöstrategi	5	60
N=36	736.5	1748.9		Total 58 interviewees	12	64

In the second round of data collection, the research team continued to conduct 24 additional interviews in 18 firms (see Table 6). These more structured interviews enabled the research team to validate and further refine the developed conceptualization of DCM (cf. Strauss and Corbin 1998). The interview guide for this phase was again designed to explore the nomological network of antecedent, performance outcomes, and related contingencies of DCM in greater depth. This section summarizes the data collection process for this study and explained in detail

the characteristics of informants and their respective industries to ensure a wide enough sample was gathered to formulate the DCM conceptualization and the nomological network for DCM and make it such that it could apply to various contexts and environments in different business markets.

4.5 Data management, analysis, and interpretation

This section defines the specific and systematic procedures the research team used to reduce the data and describes how data was stored and managed for every retrieval.

In qualitative research, specifically in the TIU approach, where knowledge is co-created, a constant iteration exists between data collection and analysis—another key feature in this research study. Separating a discussion on data collection from one on analysis is notably challenging, but to keep clarity in the method section, this section is structured so that it starts by discussing the data collection and then follows the analysis and interpretation processes (Marschan-Piekkari and Welch 2004).

In Phase 2 of the study (see Figure 6), the data analysis commenced with open coding (see Strauss and Corbin 1998) to identify the core activities of DCM. Researcher triangulation was employed to ensure consistency of coding; the researcher invited another researcher to analyze the interview transcripts line by line to identify emerging DCM activities, which were then labeled using descriptive codes (Strauss and Corbin 1998). A third researcher then screened the codes and worked with the research team to develop an initial plan for defining DCM and its dimensions through axial coding. During this step, an active search was conducted to find data items with different meanings, which logically belonged to a higher-order data element—for elements that systematically co-occur and those representing different facets of a broader concept (Zeithaml et al. 2019; Terho et al. 2022).

According to Gebhardt et al. (2019), a tentative account of DCM activities was set against the literature in the final stages of data analysis to ensure a more robust conceptualization (Eisenhardt 1989). When forming the second-order categories of activities for each DCM dimension, the three key principles identified from prior studies were considered (inbound logic, personalization, and journey facilitation; see Table 2). This iterative analysis process further enabled to identify the key literature streams underpinning DCM activities (customer journey, customer engagement, and digital marketing research; see Figure 4). Phase 2's outcome was a tentative conceptualization of DCM activities and a framework for assessing DCM effectiveness regarding outcomes and contingency factors (Terho et al. 2022).

In Phase 3 (see Figure 6), a structured analysis of the second data set was performed by setting the data against the tentative conceptualization to refine the

tentative conceptualization, ensuring the validity of the interpretations and further advancing the propositions regarding outcomes and contingency factors. Finally, for an external evaluation of the findings of this study, the results were presented to seven knowledgeable managers in a workshop, confirming the relevance of the study results.

This section summarized the procedures and process around the data analysis and interpretation the research team applied (please see Figure 6).

4.6 Ethical evaluation and limitations of the study

This section starts by concentrating on the ethical considerations and ends by discussing the study's limitations—a critical issue in qualitative research. Major ethical issues in this research are among known tensions within qualitative research (Marschan-Piekkari and Welch 2004) (e.g., fidelity, anonymity, confidentiality, openness of the participants, providing feedback to the organization, and getting clearance from the participants).

First, fidelity is the need for the researcher to build a close relationship with the researched versus the imperative to remain a relatively neutral observer. Returning to the chosen TIU approach requires close collaboration with the practitioners to co-create new theories, knowledge, and the researcher's genuine interest in the research topic (Zeithaml et al. 2020). Hence, remaining a neutral observer becomes obsolete. The need for the researcher to interact and interview with language familiar to the participant requires building trust and a close relationship with the participant, then advancing the practice of marketing if one speaks the same language as practitioners, which is much easier compared to a researcher introducing an entirely new glossary (Zeithaml et al. 2020). The ethical issue of a researcher's willingness to report the data as it is seen, which could conflict with the interpretation of the same data by the participant of the study (Marschan-Piekkari and Welch 2004, 519), was reduced by asking many confirmatory open-ended questions and approaching the conversation themes from different angles to paint the big picture on how and why they are operating DCM, as they explained they are.

Second, this study argues that anonymity was kept with high standards in this research among the research group. All participant names and their firm names were deleted from the transcriptions after they finished. If two people were interviewed, they were referred to as "A" and "B" in the transcript. The interviewee's job title and the industry the firm operated in were kept anonymous; anonymity was high since only several firms per industry were interviewed (see Table 7).

Confidentiality was another ethical issue considered when conducting this research. Confidentiality was highly requested by most of the participants since, in the interview, participants mentioned highly strategic issues (e.g., business success,

metrics), but failures or “lessons learned” could, in some cases, hurt the firm’s brand if discussed publicly or if confidential information on a competitive advantage would have been leaked. Yet, some participants were willing to answer by their own names, probably to gain good publicity for themselves or their firms. Nevertheless, anonymizing all participant information to keep the data management process universal and consistent was easier. Confidentiality was primarily discussed when scheduling the interview and again before the interview started when the researcher informed the participants about their right to privacy and the researcher’s responsibility to keep personal identifiers (e.g., the names of participants and companies) to herself. Managing confidentiality was straightforward in all the one-on-one interviews, where participants represented the same firm. When participants were invited to the workshop, they were informed of other participants representing other business organizations. At the beginning of the workshop, the participant was encouraged to reflect and give feedback on research implications and was verbally advised to keep the discussion in confidence among the workshop group to foster a more open discussion.

Next, the study shall discuss the ethical issues on the openness of the participants. Some interviews were conducted simultaneously by interviewing two persons from an organization. This double interviewing enabled openness, for example, if the second participant could add to or explain the topics the first participant raised in-depth. In some interviews, more openness was identified, for instance, in those cases where the marketing director and sales director were separately interviewed, which could raise challenges in their shared processes when the other person was not participating in the same discussion. People in the workshop were surprisingly and reasonably open to sharing feedback, openly discussing in-depth the research findings and challenges they faced in their organization around the research topic.

Qualitative research often aims to provide feedback to those organizations participating in the study. In this research, when the interview time was scheduled, the participants were promised they would receive the study outcomes when available. All participants received an executive summary of research findings after the workshop. Participants who were interviewed but did not attend the workshop also received the executive summary. Plenty of feedback was provided during the workshop when the workshop group evaluated the validity and relevance of the research findings.

Last, the issue of getting clearance from the informants is discussed. Obtaining participants’ informed consent for recording and using interview material is an ethical requirement in qualitative research before commencing a study (Terho et al. 2022). Verbal consent was given to record the interview before the interview started. The research relied on oral rather than written consent to smoothen the interview scheduling process and ultimately have fewer personal data to manage.

However, as things evolved over the years while conducting this research, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) was implemented on May 25, 2018. GDPR is the toughest privacy and security law in the world. Although the European Union (EU) drafted and passed it, it imposes obligations onto organizations anywhere if they target or collect data related to people in the European Union. Next, some potential data security issues are shortly reviewed following the GDPR implementation required by the authority in Finland. Concerning the personal data, the researcher argues that the only personal data collected in this research was the participants' first and last names, titles, company names, and contact information. All personal data and the audio files and transcriptions of the interviews are kept in a folder in a virtual server behind a firewall.

The data shared within the research group during the research (e.g., interview transcriptions) were anonymized. Thus, it was ensured that the main interviewer would be the only person with access to any confidential or identifiable information from the data collected. According to this study's data management plan, the anonymized interview data was used in the publication published in June 2022 and thus stored for as many as ten years from the start of the research project (until 2026). As respondents were promised to be provided with the research executive summary report upon completing the workshop, the personal data had to be stored until the promise was fulfilled. After the dissertation's approval, all data will be destroyed until the end of the dissertation's approval year. The researcher will ensure all kept data is anonymized and personal contact data is permanently deleted (Terho et al. 2022).

This section started by positioning this study's extensive ethical considerations, considering fidelity, anonymity, confidentiality, openness of the participants, providing feedback to the organization, getting clearance from the participants, and reflecting on the new GDPR the EU implemented while the research was conducted.

Next, this section will focus on evaluating the trustworthiness of this research through the widely agreed criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, transferability, and distinctiveness of the results (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Zeithaml et al. 2019). Multiple participants across different roles and functions were recruited (e.g., marketing, sales, general management) to enhance the *credibility* of the findings in the participating companies, strengthening the authenticity of company-specific findings (Riege 2003). A second data set validated key conclusions and interpretations, resulting in data saturation. The results were also linked to DCM research (Eisenhardt 1989). Finally, a workshop with practitioners was organized to evaluate the validity and managerial relevance of the study findings (Zeithaml et al. 2019). The one-hour workshop supported the study findings, as the study participants noted a strong fit between the conceptualization (see Figure 7) and their own DCM

practices; the moderators (See Figure 11) were relevant and aligned with their own practices or development needs.

A replication strategy was applied that contrasted the interpretations of multiple researchers to improve the *dependability* of the analysis. There was a high level of agreement regarding coding, and any inconsistencies were jointly discussed and resolved. For increased *confirmability*, the members of the research team compared their interpretations throughout (Lincoln and Guba 1985) and established a clear chain of evidence—from data to interpretation—by illustrating each key finding with a rich set of interview quotes. The *transferability* of the findings was enhanced by using a broad set of informants from diverse industries (see Table 7) and by confining the empirical setting to B2B contexts (Riege 2003). The research included respondents from 11 industries—from food production to telecommunications and from industrial production to a circular economy. By disclosing each respondent’s industry and job title, the reader can evaluate the findings in their proper context (see Table 7).

Table 7. Diverse set of industries present in the study.

INDUSTRY	COMPANIES	RESPONDENTS
Industrial (energy, machinery)	5	11
Information & marketing & communication	9	12
Telecommunication	2	3
Consulting	8	11
Software	4	7
Financial	1	1
Recruitment	1	2
Engineering	2	4
Food production	1	2
Circular economy	1	2
Automotive	2	3

Finally, to evaluate the *distinctiveness* of the results—meaning the level and depth to which the proposed activity-based conceptualization framework differs from existing theories, frameworks, and study results—the findings were set against research on the topic (Zeithaml et al. 2019). As research on DCM in B2B marketing previously lacked any activity-based or theoretically comprehensive conceptualization, the framework, with the nomological network from this study, makes a unique contribution to this area.

Like all studies, this study has several limitations. Many of this study's limitations indicate directions for further research, which Section 7.3 discusses in more detail. Next, the limitations are discussed and reviewed to understand from which perspectives this study could be improved.

While the qualitative efforts in this study targeted theory-building and through the collected data set, the study conceptualized DCM and its' key activities and developed propositions about the key antecedents, outcomes, and contingencies, forming a nomological network. Natural limitations are missing measurement scales for the construct, validation through large datasets, and empirical testing of the provided propositions. Scales of construct would have provided a more in-depth understanding and precision over the constructs and probably could have highlighted whether some constructs are more important than others; all the findings are presented equally because of the nature of the qualitative study design. As this study relied on a cross-sectional sample to gain a broad understanding of various firms' DCM activities, a natural limitation is understanding specific industries, contexts, or offerings in more detail. While the study looked at various industries and built a general conceptualization, some industry-specific constructs can be missed. Moreover, by building a general conceptualization based on numerous interviews from different firms, the number of interviews per firm was rather small and could lead to bias from the people interviewed; however, this was overcome by interviewing people from different functions (e.g., sales and marketing) to get different perspectives. The study design lacks any understanding of how the DCM process unfolds over time; also, the dynamics of the DCM activities and their interplay were not in the scope of this study. Notably, this study presents mostly the supplier firm's perspective on implementing DCM but lacks the customer's perspective and the sales representative's perspective on how valuable the DCM activities are on their level, although several salespersons were among the interviewees. The performance outcomes of DCM also lack an in-depth financial perspective to provide top management, which would have required using some quantitative methods to gather that information over time. Moreover, in the last months of conducting the study and finalizing this dissertation, the GenAI technologies were launched to a big audience; thus, they were studied and discussed limitedly in this dissertation, although it is noted that these GenAI technologies can thoroughly transform the marketing landscape.

Section 7.3 discusses some future research directions to overcome the limitations mentioned above.

5 Conceptualization of DCM in Business Markets²

As mentioned in the beginning, this study aimed *to conceptualize DCM in business markets and build an in-depth understanding of the nomological network surrounding the DCM construct*. Chapter Five discusses the conceptualization of DCM; Chapter Six discusses the empirical findings around the nomological network of DCM.

This study builds on comprehensive B2B digital marketing literature and the conceptual underpinnings of three literature streams: customer journey, customer engagement, and marketing technologies. The conceptualization this chapter discusses answers the second research question (RQ2):

RQ2: What are the key activities and components of DCM?

The literature review also helped identify guiding conceptual questions for the conceptualization:

CQ1: How does a technology-assisted understanding of customer journeys facilitate DCM?

CQ2: How can firms create engaging content that meets the informational needs of multi-actor B2B customers along their customer journeys?

CQ3: How can firms engage customers by sharing timely, tailored content to the right audience with the help of technology?

The insights from the study's qualitative efforts indicate that DCM is a three-dimensional construct. The study defines DCM *as a digital marketing communication approach that generates intelligence about customer journeys, develops a synergistic content portfolio that facilitates problem-solving for key buyer personas at different journey stages, and engages customers by sharing content matched to their needs*. Each of these three aggregates activity dimensions by (1)

² Parts of this chapter (e.g., some citations) are published in Terho, Mero, Siutla, and Jaakkola (2022), which builds on this dissertation.

generating intelligence on customer journeys, (2) creating a portfolio of valuable content, and (3) engaging customers through content sharing, which comprises three sub-activities for each dimension, is conducted in parallel and continuously.

To answer RQ2—*What are the key activities and components of DCM?*—the three conceptual questions need to be answered first since they help frame the conceptualization of DCM. The first conceptual question (CQ1), *how does technology-assisted understanding of customer journeys facilitate DCM*, is answered in Section 5.1, where the first dimension of DCM is introduced as (1) generating intelligence on customer journeys, together with its' sub-activities, which form buyer personas by identifying key buyer center members and their core business problems, mapping customer journeys to understand key touchpoints and information needs of different personas at different journey stages, and analyzing customer engagement to assess the maturity stage of the purchasing process.

To answer the second conceptual question (CQ2), *how can firms create engaging content that meets the informational need of multi-actor B2B customers along their customer journeys*, the second dimension is discussed (creating a valuable content portfolio) in Section 5.2; the sub-activities include developing thought-provoking content that helps buyer personas frame their business problems, create content that supports personas' problem-solving at different stages of their journey, and craft synergistic content paths by linking individual content pieces for journey facilitation.

Finally, to answer the third conceptual question (CQ3), *how can firms engage customers by sharing timely, tailored content to the right audience with the help of technology*, Section 5.3 discusses the third (3) dimension of engaging customers through content sharing the sub-activities that consist of enhancing organic content visibility in digital channels used by buyer personas for information searching, the timely delivery of relevant content pieces tailored to buyer personas, and nudging customers forward on their journeys to generate conversions.

To ensure this conceptualization's comprehensiveness, the study draws on key DCM principles identified in prior literature (Table 2, vertical elements in Figure 7) to refine and specify the inductively derived DCM activities and confirm the construct's reach. When the three dimensions are discussed in more detail in the next section, the study also seeks to link them to research. The study drew on the key principles of DCM identified from the literature (see Table 2) to ensure the comprehensiveness of the proposed conceptualization when elaborating on the activities constituting each of the three dimensions (vertical elements in Figure 7). While the initial conceptualization was inductively derived, the key principles were used to refine and specify DCM activities and ensure the construct's reach. The dimensions of DCM are analyzed below, cross-checked with key principles (inbound logic, personalization, and journey facilitation), and then linked to the current body of research.

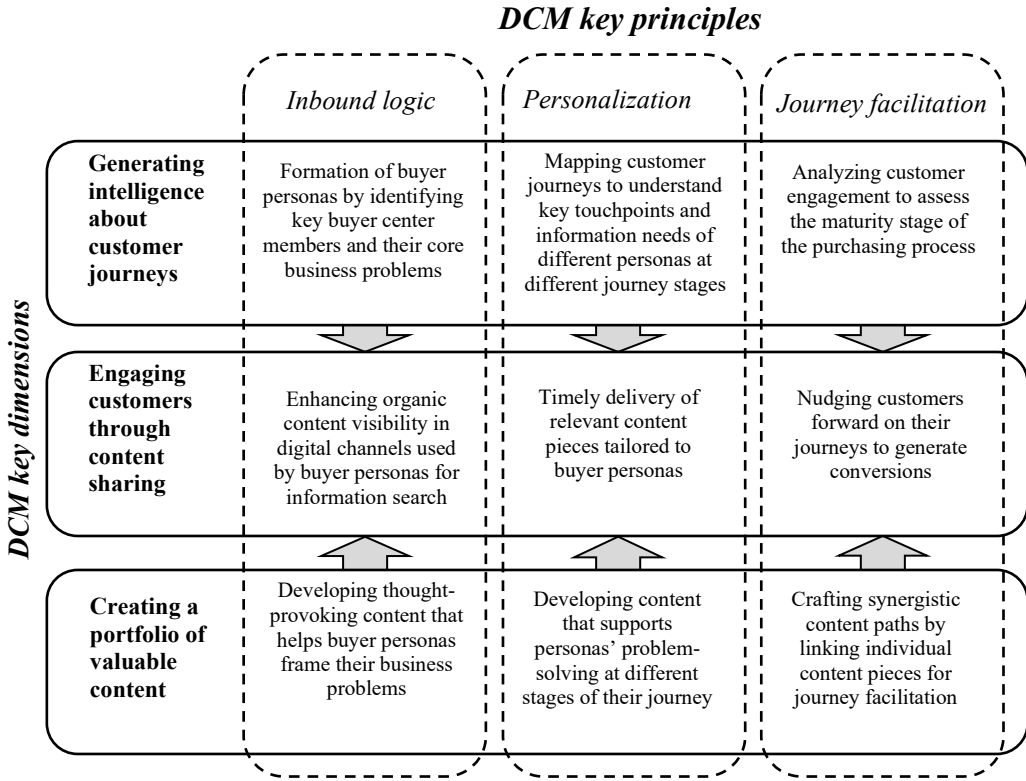


Figure 7. Activity-based conceptualization of B2B DCM (Terho et al. 2022).

5.1 Generating intelligence about customer journeys

This study’s empirical analysis identified three activities specific to the first key dimension of DCM—the *generation of customer journey intelligence*—which aligns well with the underlying principles of DCM (see Figure 4). The following explanations of these activities emphasize CQ1: *How does a technology-assisted understanding of customer journeys facilitate DCM?*

The first activity the managers highlighted was the *formation of buyer personas by identifying key buying center members and their core business problems*. This activity is the foundation for implementing the inbound logic principle because it helps marketers develop a fine-grained understanding of the kind of content needed to engage customers. The interviewees noted that a focus on customer needs at the organizational level is insufficient for DCM; instead, forming buyer personas focuses on understanding typical key buying center members and their core business problems, including business goals, motivations, and personal values, that

complement an understanding of the heterogeneous needs of different buying center members. Accordingly, buyer personas represent a “micro-level segmentation” approach (Lemon and Verhoef 2016, p. 73; Kusnitz 2014), reflecting the complex nature of B2B purchasing, which involves multiple buying center members with diverse goals, information needs, and value perceptions (Johnston and Bonoma 1981; Macdonald et al. 2016). The interviewees stressed the need for multiple methods and data sources in formulating high-quality buyer persona profiles, which aligns with the field findings from Kohli and Jaworski (1990), who suggest the generation of market intelligence is not and probably cannot be the exclusive responsibility of a marketing department; rather, market intelligence is generated collectively by individuals and departments throughout an organization.

The data sources required consisted of internal and external data sources. Key methods include interviews with customers, a business’s own frontline employees, and an analysis of customer data, which aligns with previous research on social CRM (customer relationship management) strategies (Li, Larimo, and Leonidou 2021), where firms analyzed traditional CRM data from customer encounters and social listening data that included customer opinions and experiences, as expressed through social media:

*We need to differentiate between the individual and the buying unit. In B2B, a single person never makes a purchase. It is relatively easy to determine the path-to-purchase of a single persona, but if I think about our customers, ten people, on average, participate in decision-making when selling something new or trying to acquire a new customer. We should be able to influence all of them, but the diversity of personas creates complexity. **Firm 12, Head of B2B Business***

*We take great care when identifying the target group [when forming the persona profiles]. We need to understand what they think about—their challenges, worries, problems, goals, and the tasks they aim to fulfill. **Firm 15, Head of Marketing***

When creating a buyer persona, we always use three types of data sources. We conduct internal interviews with frontline employees like sales, customer service, and marketing personnel because they have the best understanding of customer relationship stages and the questions that customers want to ask. We also conduct many external interviews with real customers and review open and closed customer-related data. Open data sources include [social media] groups and communities customers belong to. We monitor the topic and tone of conversations that relate to our product and services, and then we examine

*closed data from our CRM or customer research reports. **Firm 17, Founder, Head of International Business***

Second, interviewees said their firms systematically invested in *mapping customer journeys to understand key touchpoints and the information needs of different personas at different journey stages*. A clear understanding of the customer's end-to-end journey is a prerequisite for implementing the personalization principle, which requires tailored content creation to engage customers during purchase journeys that are increasingly non-linear and buyer-steered (Edelman and Singer 2015; Steward et al. 2019). The participating managers explained that customer journey mapping is a means of identifying the typical stages of the customer organization's buying process (Anderl et al. 2016; Bitner, Ostrom, and Morgan 2008; Rosenbaum, Otolara, and Ramírez 2017). In so doing, journey mapping identifies the key personas involved in each phase of buying, their typical touchpoints, and the type of content that meets their respective information needs at different stages of the journey. The data analysis indicated that journey mapping covers new customers' purchase paths and the postpurchase phase for current customers. In supporting customers during that postpurchase phase, firms typically seek to develop a close understanding of their information needs regarding product usage, maintenance, or performance improvements (Challagalla, Venkatesh, and Kohli 2009) and identify related opportunities for cross-selling, up-selling, and add-on sales.

*We have pinpointed critical touchpoints throughout the customer journey—for example, where customers have many questions or difficulties—and where it's vital to succeed to maintain the customer relationship. **Firm 3, Head of Brand and Customer Marketing***

*We have determined what happens at the customer's end throughout the customer journey by splitting the journey into 12 stages and mapping the different touchpoints—from social media, websites, and search engines, all the way to billing, contracts, and phone conversations—along with the role each touchpoint plays in the customer journey... We also need to be alert at all times so that we can talk about the right things at the right time as things happen in the market. **Firm 6, Marketing and Communication Director***

If our customer has 25 ships, all at different stages of the product lifecycle, they have various needs that include maintenance, upgrade, and replacement. We need to understand how we can communicate in a highly targeted way—not just

*to a given customer group but to a specific customer and to the people who operate a specific machine. **Firm 2, Sales Development Manager***

The third activity, *analyzing customer engagement to assess the maturity of the purchasing process*, resonates with the journey facilitation principle, which demands a clear view of the sequential nature of the path-to-purchase and an understanding of the customer's current position along that path (see Anderl et al. 2016). The interviewees' firms relied heavily on marketing automation and web analytics to track individual buyer personas' engagement over time with FGC in sequential touchpoints (e.g., clicks, video views, responses, and downloads) (Eigenraam et al. 2019). Data of this kind were used for real-time estimation of customers' purchase maturity, commonly called *lead scoring*. The breadth and depth of behavioral engagement were taken as a proxy of the current purchasing stage, meaning the more actively a specific customer's different buyer personas engaged with FGC, and the deeper the content consumed, the higher the lead score.

*What we measure all the time is how our various content pieces generate clicks and website visits or how well they generate leads. We use a lead score procedure based on certain criteria, such as guide downloads and webinar attendance. Our system displays the lead score at all times and alerts us when certain criteria are met. And, of course, we see what channel and campaign originally generated the lead. Then, we have an engagement dashboard that sums all this up at the customer account level; at the company level, it shows all the interactions that have occurred in digital channels by the identified persons. **Firm 23, Chief Commercial Officer***

*Sales and marketing have together created a lead-scoring model based on different types of conversion points. Whether a lead spends time browsing web pages containing in-depth product information or reading our blog texts are totally different things. So, we use lead scoring to score those behaviors differently [to monitor purchase maturity]. **Firm 3, Head of Brand and Customer Marketing***

We use lead scoring, of course, which is based on a number of positive and negative attributes. An example of a positive attribute is when a customer downloads an e-book; an example of a negative attribute is when a customer has not opened any email we sent for three months. Depending on the level of engagement, the lead score goes up or down. When it goes down, the customer remains in our database and receives some occasional content, but we do not transfer the customer to sales because the lead score is too low. Besides

engagement data that we collect via web analytics and marketing automation, we use CRM and open data from our lead scoring. It all boils down to understanding the customer's current context, which enables us to do the right things with the right customers in a timely manner. Firm 13, CEO

The first key activity of DCM, *generating customer journey intelligence*, consists of three sub-activities—formation of buyer personas, mapping the customer journey, and analyzing the customer engagement—and their seven components, as Figure 8 summarizes, along with the other dimensions of DCM.

5.2 Creating a portfolio of valuable content

The second key dimension of DCM identified in the data analysis concerns *creating a portfolio of valuable content* that builds on intelligence about customer journeys. This involves three further activities that reflect DCM principles (Figure 7) and answer CQ2: *How can firms create engaging content that meets the informational needs of multi-actor B2B customers along their customer journeys?*

First, managers highlighted the importance of *developing thought-provoking content that helps buyer personas frame their business problems*. Many interviewees explicitly stated they create content to assist customers in the specific areas of the firm's expertise. This type of content was often based on industry insights and cutting-edge knowledge but had no direct link to the firm's offering. Instead, the firms tried to earn the customer's attention by inviting them to think differently about an aspect of their business via valuable content, thereby "selling the problem" in the early stages of the customer journey, as one interviewee put it (Adamson, Dixon, and Toman 2012). Engagement research suggests that prompting customers' cognitive processing and emotional absorption triggers customer behaviors, such as investing time and effort in interacting with the content (Brodie et al. 2019; Hollebeek et al. 2014), thus realizing the inbound logic principle of DCM. The content was believed to bolster the firm's image as a visionary thought leader that is willing and able to help customers effectively deal with their business problems (Barry and Girona 2017).

It is very important to be forward-looking and to stay ahead of markets and customers to be able to create interesting content that customers don't already know. Developing a thought leadership position requires a certain kind of vision of where the markets are going. And this is linked to marketing processes so that you can continuously and quickly introduce interesting issues. Firm 2, Marketing Director

*The first thing we need to influence is the customer's mindset. We need the customer to realize that he/she has a problem and that the problem is so important that it has to be solved. The second task is to get the customer to commit to solving this problem. If these two things do not happen, there is no deal. **Firm 17, Founder, Head of International Business***

*The transformation of the car industry has been massive. Those companies are used to buying "iron components," such as wiper blades or nuts; now, they must learn to buy software, which requires a completely different approach. We need to train these customers by using inbound marketing. Buyers have perhaps heard some keywords they need to understand, and they are looking for this information online. We need to be there in the right places with relevant messages to increase our reputation as experts. [...] We need to create the image that we are a thought leader in Artificial Intelligence. **Firm 10, Head of Marketing and Communications***

Second, the interviewees stressed the importance of *developing content that supports personas' problem-solving at different stages of their journey*. This activity is the cornerstone of creating a valuable content portfolio and resonates with the personalization principle in ensuring the buyer persona's information needs are addressed throughout the customer journey (Holliman and Rowley 2014; Järvinen and Taiminen 2016). Content meeting the buyer persona's particular needs can trigger higher engagement, prolonged exposure, and increased responsiveness to the seller's content (Eigenraam et al. 2018; Hollebeek and Macky 2019). Specifically, firms used insights into buyer personas' business problems and needs to identify key issues that content should address at different stages of purchasing maturity. This approach enabled firms to strategically focus on generating the content of the core themes that served multiple buyer personas' problem-solving. That content would be sliced into tailored content pieces relevant to specific buyer personas—a systematic customer-centric approach thought to increase the effectiveness of content creation while supporting customer problem-solving at the level of the individual persona throughout the customer journey.

*On average, six people influence the purchasing decision, and this number is growing all the time. All these individuals must perceive the service or selling company as personally meaningful; in other words, the CEO thinks quite differently than the sales manager, CFO, HR manager, logistics manager, or some other business leader, and so on. All these people have their own challenges; if a company wants to serve the customer, it must have an answer for everyone. **Firm 18, CEO***

*We make sure that each piece of content belongs to a specific customer journey phase. For example, we have defined the types of content for approaching someone in the awareness phase, depending on their needs. You must carefully consider which phase of the journey the content is designed for and which specific buyer persona it is targeting. **Firm 15, Head of Marketing***

*In line with our content strategy, we produce content continuously for different phases of the customer journey. For the awareness phase, we produce industry-level insights that have no direct link to our product. When the customer proceeds to the consideration phase, we produce content related to customer interests and potential solutions to their problem. But content marketing goes beyond customer acquisition; when we have delivered the solution to the customer, we reinforce their feeling that they have made the right choice and help them make the most of their chosen solution. We continuously produce guidelines and support for service usage until new needs arise, which creates a new cycle in the journey. **Firm 3, Head of Brand and Customer Marketing***

Finally, interviewees noted that DCM should extend beyond creating personalized content to *craft synergistic content paths by linking individual content pieces for journey facilitation*. This confirms that DCM is used proactively to guide customers in the desired direction, as in the journey facilitation principle. Accordingly, research has highlighted the importance of designing streamlined customer journeys that keep the customer “hooked” and facilitate movement along the preferred path (Edelman and Singer 2015; Montoya-Wise et al. 2003). Interviewees contended that creating strategic content paths depends on planning the purpose of each content piece, understanding the logical relations among different pieces, and designing purposeful links that drive customers from one content item to another. To that end, firms incorporated calls to action, encouraging customers to navigate to further content related to the topic and moving them further along their journey.

*For instance, when we use a blog post designed for the awareness phase to attract people to our website, we must consider where the customer will be directed next so that the journey doesn't end there. We always need to have additional interesting content for the next step. It is important not to push customers to sales but to guide their journey forward. Planning these content paths is still in its infancy in many firms ... they may not have realized its importance. **Firm 16, Lead Strategist***

*We have created content paths so that, for example, when we see someone is not interested in our whitepaper and doesn't move forward along the path, she will be offered some other content. She will be directed to another content path that always ultimately aims at conversion, whether that means adopting our self-service product or meeting with our salespeople. **Firm 21, Chief Marketing Officer***

*Our content marketing sales funnel has specific conversion points. At the outset, we offer relatively light content that increases the customer's interest. As they go further into the funnel, our content gradually becomes heavier—for example, "a contracting guide"—that helps when someone is about to make the purchase decision. **Firm 4, Marketing Manager***

The second key activity of DCM, creating a portfolio of valuable content, consists of three sub-activities:—creating problem-framing content, creating problem-solving content, and crafting synergistic content paths—and their five components, as Figure 8 summarizes, along the other dimensions of DCM.

5.3 Engaging customers through content sharing

The third dimension of DCM is *engaging customers through content sharing*. Figure 8 shows that this dimension comprises three customer-facing activities that build on the back-end activities of generating customer journey intelligence (Dimension 1) and creating a portfolio of valuable content (Dimension 2). Simultaneously, the following discussion answers CQ3: *How can firms engage customers by sharing timely, tailored content to the right audience with the help of technology?*

The first of the three activities is *enhancing organic content visibility in digital channels used by buyer personas for information search*, which aligns with the DCM inbound principle of getting found by customers—that is, sharing FGC that buyer personas will likely find organically when seeking information about their business problems (Barry and Gironda 2018; Halligan and Shah 2014). The interviewees emphasized the role of search engines and social media as key channels for this organic content visibility. In particular, SEO was used to increase organic visibility by incorporating keywords used by buyer personas in their search queries (Berman and Katona 2013).

In addition to actively sharing content on corporate social media accounts, firms widely encouraged employees and other stakeholders to share FGC on their personal accounts. This finding aligns with findings from social selling research highlighting the importance of empowering employees as messengers to boost the firm's social media content visibility through their professional networks (see Agnihotri et al.

2016; Ancillai et al. 2019). These efforts combined helped firms get found in the digital environment by attracting attention to their content and pulling traffic to the firm's website, enabling them to identify leads and personalize content delivery.

*You need to get traffic from search engines and social media. I always say that the key pillars of inbound marketing are findability and attendance. Those are the two big things. Findability means that a potential buyer finds you when s/he is searching for information on any channel, be it Google, YouTube, Quora, etc. Attendance means you need to be present in those channels where customers have conversations and participate in them in ways that add value to them. **Firm 17, Founder, Head of International Business***

*When you think about the beginning of the inbound pipeline—where we identify the target group—we should also identify what kind of keywords they are using to search for information, and those keywords need to be strongly present on our website, in our blog content, and in the landing pages we've optimized; if we're doing webinars or other events, the titles should also include those words. **Firm 15, Head of Marketing***

*When all the salespersons and marketers start to do social selling, the personal networks and their coverage start to be huge. [...] It's not enough if only marketing pushes the message. People always trust people and follow individuals more than corporate accounts on social media, so it's really important that our salespeople are close to the customer and profile themselves as experts; I'm talking about a personal brand. They [employees] were instructed in the training on how to build their expertise on the web, where they find our firm and third-party content, and how they can share that content. I think that is important, especially in the early phases of the journey. **Firm 5, Marketing Director, Western Europe***

A second content-sharing activity is the *timely delivery of relevant content tailored to buyer personas*. By matching insights from customer journey intelligence to their content portfolio, firms can optimize the customer–content fit, which aligns with the personalization principle. Interviewees confirmed that firms rely heavily on technologies to deliver relevant and timely content to a certain persona at the customer organization through the appropriate channel (Gupta et al. 2020; Neslin et al. 2012). This delivery relies heavily on behavioral signals from engagement tracking (e.g., web page views, consumed content) that reveal buyer personas' current interests; for example, when engaging with content related to a specific business problem, customers might receive a whitepaper or invitation to a webinar

offering more detailed information about that topic. Marketing automation is crucial to enable firms to deliver personalized content to potential and current customers according to specific rules and triggers (Heimbach et al. 2015; Mero, Tarkiainen, and Tobon 2020). Each personalized touchpoint also accumulates new knowledge about customer preferences, leading to increasingly accurate content personalization over time.

We carefully consider what kinds of content we will deliver at different stages of the customer journey. And not just the stage but what kind of customer we are dealing with, which buyer profile she belongs to—we have defined those things.

Firm 8, Marketing and IT manager

To be able to target marketing activities based on customer behavior, your content must be personalized according to the customer journey stage. For example, when we redesigned our website, the content was tailored to reflect what you have previously downloaded and from which website you landed on. You will see different things on our site depending on whether you asked for a demo, are a customer, or none of those things. This [tailoring] depends on marketing automation, as it would be practically impossible to do these things without such a system. **Firm 13, Growth Marketing Manager**

We are able to deliver highly targeted communication because our marketing is fully linked to Sales Force [software]... A lead is inputted into the CRM system as a person associated with a certain company. Then, if that company already exists in our system, we can search for all the people who belong to it and distribute information specifically to them. As the buying process proceeds, we can deliver increasingly precise content to reinforce the message and support our sellers ...so whenever possible, we immediately broaden our targeted communication for all relevant people in the same organization. **Firm 6, Marketing and Communication Director**

The third and final key activity in this dimension is *nudging buyer personas forward on their journeys to generate conversions*. Interviewees emphasized that DCM content sharing must be designed to guide target customers toward concrete sales outcomes and conversions, echoing the journey facilitation principle. This finding resonates with studies stating that firms often aim to proactively lead (rather than follow) customer journeys (Edelman and Singer 2015; Mero et al. 2020). While this perspective is implicit in all content sharing, firms use automated content delivery schemes and call-to-action points for nudging purposes. Interviewees reported that content delivery schemes were strategically designed to monitor

specified content paths and were programmed to automatically send content to customers based on their purchase maturity or lead score. Rather than using an overt sales approach, the goal is to prompt customers to act and move forward on their journey by consuming content supporting their decision-making.

We try to build automated content paths ... We perform so-called micro-nurturing, where we consider what happens to this customer at this point and what the next touchpoint should be. We do not build personalized paths for all potential customers—only for our ideal customer profiles. Those are the ones we need to serve; for them, we build paths that are as personalized as possible.

Firm 22, Head of Marketing

For example, when you download our “Platform economy guide,” it triggers a marketing automation program that sends further content via email. We have three or four webinars related to the platform economy, designed as a series or path so that when you consume them one by one, your understanding gradually improves. Our goal is to educate the customer and thus facilitate purchasing decisions. **Firm 25, Digital Experience Specialist**

All the content we produce and share includes some form of redirection to our website. We have also added chat and other services so that the customer won't be left hanging around in the web environment but are guided forward on their journey. This is central to content marketing—getting a lot of traffic to the website, directing people forward, and being able to contact a physical person through certain touchpoints... We direct them actively toward this customer relationship. **Firm 9, Digital Program Manager**

The third key activity of DCM, engaging customers through content sharing, consists of three sub-activities—enhancing organic content visibility in digital channels, timely delivery of relevant content pieces, and nudging buyer personas forward on their journeys—and their seven components, as Figure 8 summarized, along with other dimensions of DCM.

Chapter Five aims to answer RQ2 and present the activity-based conceptualization of DCM with its three key dimensions: generating intelligence of customer journeys, creating a portfolio of valuable content, and engaging customers through content sharing. The conceptualizations provide managers with a practical tool for implementing DCM by describing all its nine sub-activities. Moreover, the conceptualization framework consists of the three DCM principles: inbound logic, personalization, and journey facilitation.

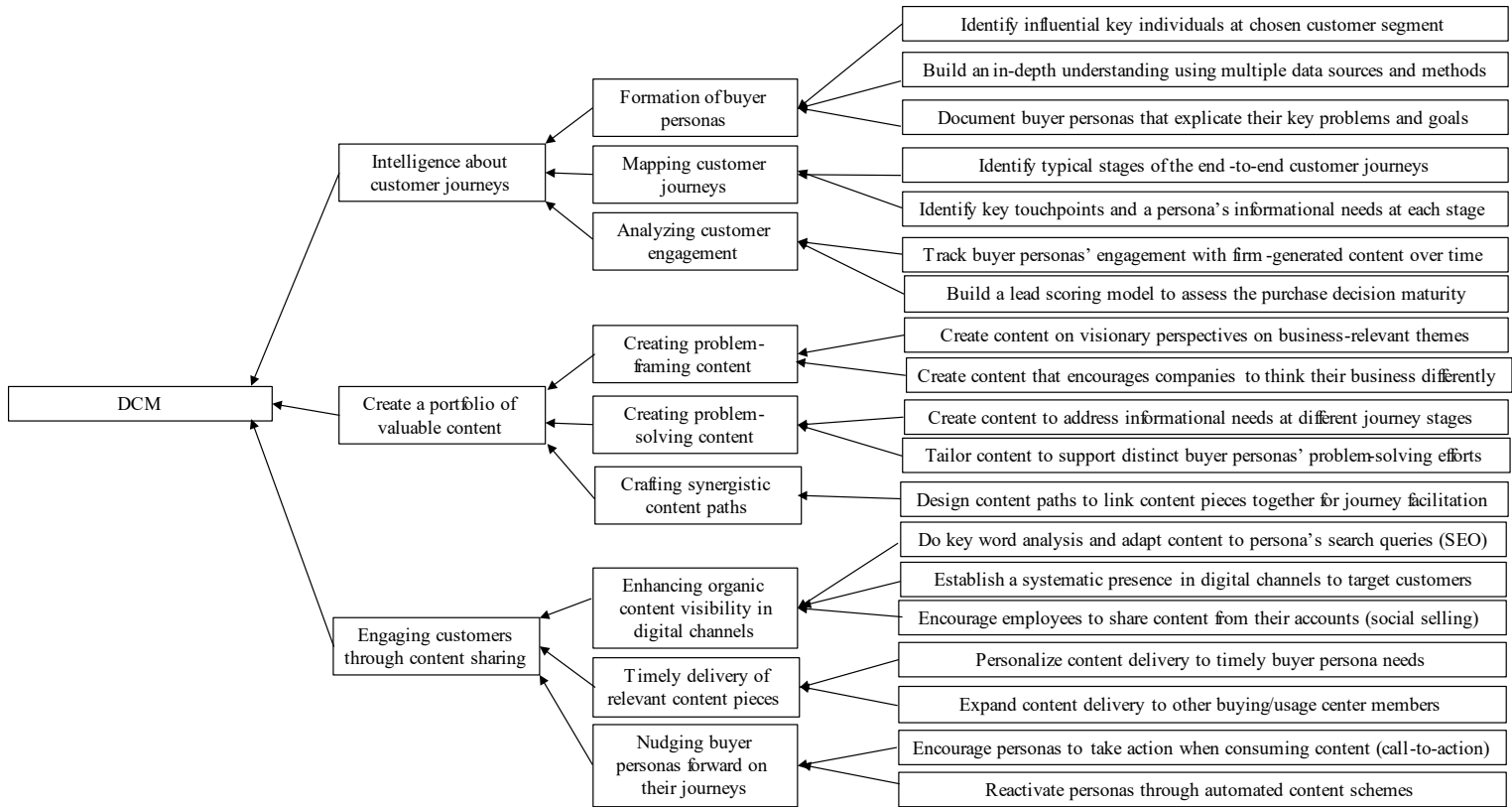


Figure 8. Details of activity-based conceptualization of B2B DCM.

6 Nomological Network of DCM

Chapter Six answers RQ3 on *what antecedents, performance outcomes, and related contingencies of DCM can be identified* by introducing the nomological network of DCM. The nomological network covers the antecedents, performance outcomes, and associated contingencies of DCM, all reviewed in detail by summarizing the key DCM antecedent on content strategy and organizational readiness toward DCM. After that, the chapter discusses how the empirical data supports the three key performance outcomes—sales performance, brand performance, and customer relationship performance—already identified by previous research. The chapter will finish by reviewing the contingencies (e.g., marketing organization-related and organizational moderators) that boost or weaken the DCM performance.

Since the link between DCM and firm performance has already been proposed in earlier research, more focus is put on explaining the identified antecedents and related contingencies that moderate the performance relationship in this study. However, the performance outcomes are also reviewed with the support of empirical data from this study. Building on Zeithaml et al.'s (2020) guidelines, this study empirically derives a series of propositions related to the antecedents and contingencies of DCM performance, focusing on novel factors specific to DCM and subject to managerial control (Terho et al. 2022).

6.1 Antecedents for DCM

More insight is needed on the antecedents that would strengthen or weaken the firm's ability to drive the adoption of DCM to understand the drivers needed for a B2B firm to implement DCM. The interviewees stated that several drivers are needed to implement DCM. Figure 9 summarizes all these propositions.

Marketers claimed that a holistic *content strategy* (**P1**) is required to begin with DCM. Within the first sub-proposition of *organizational marketing communication processes* (**P1a**), systematic DCM planning, creation, and delivery capabilities are needed. Conversely, firm-wide DCM-related tools must be available, and processes must be built around using those tools. The organization needs to create a firm-wide strategic understanding of DCM, and persistence is needed to get results.

*In the very beginning, it [DCM] requires a lot of strategic thinking to gain the big picture. It requires a lot of planning capabilities to plan what is required next year, and many plans for next year are already locked in. It requires a massive amount of content creation capabilities to think inside the customer's head, have empathy skills, and show genuine interest toward the customer. **Firm 15, Head of Marketing***

*Systematic planning is important, and, of course, this long-term persistence since the results don't show off immediately; you have to be very [persistent]... it requires a lot of explanations to some people that this [DCM] has now emerged, but this might take some time. Some results can have an immediate effect, but that is not always the case. **Firm 19, Content Strategy Lead***

*Since our corporation is so big, all these models come from our headquarters in the United States, where they have been heavily investing in marketing automation. We are internally talking about marketing automation programs as global engagement programs, which include nurturing. There are numerous [nurturing programs]... I don't even know how many we have, as they are implemented by product lines and themes, for example, around digital transformation, which is a cross-product theme. If you think about it product-wise, there are many different ones [] we use to gain customers' attention. At the beginning of the customer journey, we want to be engaging, as they are already at the awareness stage. **Firm 5, Marketing Director, Western Europe***

The marketers also highlighted the differences between social media channels and language barriers when entering new countries, which may become barriers if handled improperly. When operating in the international context, localizing content needs to be extensively thought through and be part of the content strategy.

*The challenge is that if you are operating in international markets, you need to make decisions on localizations and languages, making this [content delivery] more complex. Suddenly, we have a lot of different languages, and our market situation is very different in different markets. In some markets like Finland and Sweden, where we have been for a long time and won a lot of awards, we are well-known, but in other markets, where we have only been around for a year... in English, Norwegian, or Dutch content...we are still in this start-up phase. **Firm 13, CEO***

The one [social network] that works in Europe does not work in China. In China, we have WeChat; none of my Korean clients are on LinkedIn, and Japan is better here [being on LinkedIn] than others... Something that many people believe is that LinkedIn is a global platform, but it is not. WeChat is the place to be; our

*management is there [in WeChat] and in KakaoTalk because otherwise, you don't exist. You need to follow that market where you want to be. Traditional inbound marketing is not enough. **Firm 10, Head of Industry***

In addition to the above findings around *organizational marketing communications processes (P1a)*, *top management support (P1b)* and *alignment with overall business strategy and objectives (P1c)* are crucial for DCM implementation. Interviewees state that many times, it is the CEO who needs to support the organizational alignment needed for DCM and set the priority over other competitive priorities. Hence, DCM should align with other firm strategies and goals to form coherence with resource allocation, budget spending, and overall prioritization.

*If we start with what has had to change, it is the overall operating philosophy in this company... that we have started to believe this could work. In practice, it means giving consent from the leadership level—that this is a strategic priority. We have been brave enough to take the move, delegate resources for this, delegate people and money... and understand that this does not bring a return in investment from week 1...that is the baseline. **Firm 3, Head of Brand and Customer Marketing***

*It starts from our business leaders and management where there is marketing and sales and other functions... and this is the hardest part [in DCM] even for a company our size, I can imagine how hard it is for a company with 5000 employees—that you need to get everyone on board and work toward the same direction, and if someone is going into the wrong direction, at least the theme and the timing changes... it starts from leading the management group; [if] sales says this is a marketing issue and they are not interested, you must ask why. There is no point in doing this if someone is not interested. Then, we need to sit around the same table and come up with a shared annual plan, where we drive the themes, marketing, sales, and leadership, and everyone who is engaging with stakeholders needs to breathe the same thing. Tools don't make a difference; they just support. The CEO is the one who is responsible in the end, and then we do it [DCM] together when we know the themes. The brand journalist has a big role, but sticking to the plan needs to be detailed; a high-level plan is not enough. **Firm 9, CEO***

*We have a strategic approach to this [DCM], so what we have is a marketing communication strategy and a digital strategy, which is part of it; these strategies are not separate. In my opinion, you need to have a strategic approach; you need to answer those questions and assumptions defined in the overall business strategy. **Firm 6, Marketing & Communication Director***

Everything starts with the strategy fit. It [DCM] needs to be attached to business strategy... It can't be an independent activity. That is so crucial; it is not just an independent activity but part of the whole. Firm 19, Content Strategy Lead

Thus, with the above findings, the study proposes **P1**: *Content strategy* is an antecedent for DCM implementation. Figure 9 summarizes the first proposition for DCM antecedent with its three sub-propositions—*organizational marketing communication processes (P1a)*, *top management support (P1b)*, and *DCM being part of the overall business strategy and objectives (P1c)*—in addition to their seven components.

Another antecedent this study discovered from the interviewees is the *organizational readiness toward DCM (P2)*. The first sub-proposition, *the C-level strategic DCM competence (P2a)*, is aligned with previous literature on limited resources and marketing-related skills as a barrier in digital marketing adoption (Shetkute and Dibb 2022; Bocconcelli et al. 2018; Karjaluoto and Huhtamaki 2010; Quinton et al. 2018; Taiminen and Karjaluoto 2015). This component heavily refers to CXO-level strategic competence on DCM that is required to create the alignment of business and marketing strategies and goals, aligning sales and marketing processes, and the ability to argue for budget requirements to change the operational structure (e.g., the other antecedents and moderators mentioned) as needed to efficiently implement DCM. In other words, *C-level strategic DCM competence* is required to build the organization structure and processes and setting the goals so the organization can operate toward those goals that this CXO-level person set. This proposition differs from the earlier mentioned *top management support (P1b)*, which can often mean the CEO's support, who still might lack the substance competence on DCM.

In my opinion, the challenges in content marketing are human resources; everyone wants to do it, but there are very few talented individuals out there.

Firm 13, CEO

It [the change] has required new people in our organization. If you lack the understanding of what it means and what you should do and you are without those capabilities, it does not work out. We have brought in some new people in our marketing where it is seen that the resistance to change is the biggest in the sales organization, where we often rely on the very traditional way of operating.

Firm 6, Vice President, Sales

You need someone who drives these things and has enough... management buy-in. You need someone who believes in it and gives authorization that this is what we should do; so many times, the CEO would be the best for the whole leadership team. Firm 12, Head of B2B Business

The second sub-proposition under *organizational readiness toward implementing DCM (P2)* is *informatic systems connectivity (P2b)*. Many interviews stated the emerging need to change the current the CRM system to support the connectivity to marketing automation software. This can be a major time and resource barrier for a company looking to implement DCM and sometimes delay parts of the DCM implementation project for several years. The IT department should apply a philosophy of being an enabler rather than a barrier for business requirements; it should ensure processes are in place to connect different information systems, change legacy systems to more modern ones, and devote resources for agile adoption of new evolving technologies.

*Often, marketing makes it [the purchasing decision] half by themselves so that IT purchases are made by someone other than the IT function. What I often see at the business unit level is that marketing tries to make these decisions and hide them from IT because IT is often a global function. Marketing tries to make these secret purchases and new URLs, so they get to implement content more quickly than trying to get changes under the corporate URL. This is a weird approach: that an organization wants results and to work for itself; the IT function is seen as a barrier to development, and, of course, I understand IT is struggling to drive these developments. **Firm 12, Head of B2B Business***

*What comes as a surprise to many in [DCM] is the number of integrations needed to other business systems so that you get the whole thing working smoothly. Our CRM system could not be integrated into any marketing automation software, so two years ago, when we started to build Salesforce and marketing automation, we made a huge specification project for Salesforce, where we included the marketing automation partner and our sales. **Firm 6, Marketing & Communication Director***

*In practice, we changed our CRM so that we could get it to support the marketing visibility to our salespeople... an integration possibility was added. **Firm 3, Head of Brand and Customer Marketing***

*...[if] you want to do your home-based activities... should be organized first. It is not just a tactical exercise that someone writes something online. If you want to take the customer all the way to ordering from the website, you need to review your contract system. We do not have a lot of resources; this needs attention from different organizational levels. **Firm 10, Head of Industry***

Third, under *organizational readiness toward implementing DCM (P2)* is the *depth of customer-centricity vs product-centricity (P2c)*. Meanwhile, customer-

centricity is seen as a strengthening driver, while the depth of product-centricity is seen as a weakening driver for DCM implementation. Several respondents from more traditional industries stated they needed to undergo a massive philosophical transformation toward a more customer-centric company culture before implementing DCM. This third component is more of a philosophical antecedent, described as the depth of customer-centricity compared to product-centricity. Developing a customer-centric organization was described by interviewees by whether they discuss their firm's issues (e.g., product features or customers' issues like benefits and value-in-use) and how the whole company operates toward a more "outside-in" concept (Bruhn and Schnebelen 2017; Quach et al. 2020) where everything is viewed through the customer's perspective; thus, this proposition is seen as a driver for implementing DCM.

*This [DCM] is a corporate-wide operating approach, not just a marketing activity in some direction; it is really how the whole organization works and serves the customer. **Firm 15, Sales Director***

*In practice, it is about whether you talk about your own stuff or your customers'. Bringing value is very hard to execute if the culture, operating model, and everything do not support it. **Firm 9, CEO***

*We wanted to change ourselves from a product concept to a marketing concept firm. [Having a] marketing concept firm or philosophy means that everything is viewed from inside the customer's perspective, whether it is product development, communication, business development, or sales talks. So, we started to change towards a company where instead of discussing product features, we talk about benefits and value-in-use... **Firm 6, Marketing & Communication Director***

*In marketing, we do not think we are the experts of our systems; instead, we try to think from the customer perspective: to whom are we in contact, what are they looking for, and what messages should we create for them. The customer has been the core of our marketing plan, and then we rely on our partners to help us with the right tools and concepts. **Firm 2, Marketing Director***

Thus, with all the above findings, the study proposes **P2: Organizational readiness toward implementing DCM** is an antecedent for DCM implementation with its three sub-propositions—*C-level DCM competence (P2a)*, *informatic systems connectivity (P2b)*, and *the depth of customer-centricity versus product-centricity (P2c)*; Figure 9 summarizes their nine components.

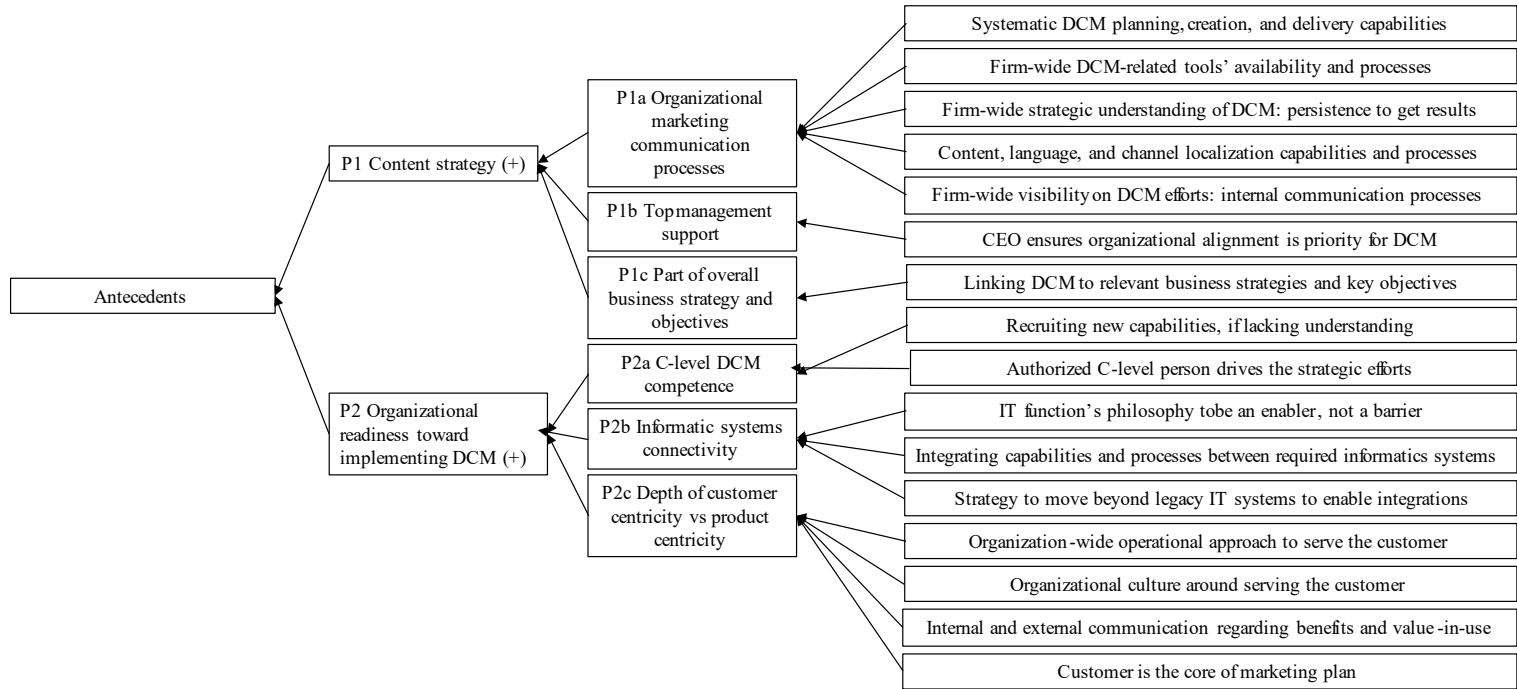


Figure 9. Antecedents for DCM.

6.2 Performance outcomes of DCM

This chapter aims to describe how DCM affects the firm's performance. Although the assertion that marketing activities create financial value is well accepted, marketing practitioners have historically found it difficult to measure and communicate to other functional executives and top management the value created by investments in marketing activity (Srivastava et al. 1998).

Well-aligned with the extant research, the interview participants encountered consistent assertions that DCM positively relates to firm performance. Specifically, broad evidence was found for positive relationships between DCM and sales performance (see Vieira et al. 2019; Wang et al. 2019), customer relationship performance (see Taiminen and Ranaweera 2019), and brand performance (see Hollebeek and Macky 2019), as Figure 10 illustrates (Terho et al. 2022).

The first performance outcome is that *DCM positively affects sales performance (P3)*. Interviewees referred to improved sales performance as the key outcome of DCM, aligning with previous evidence that DCM increases sales performance by attracting new customers and increasing the volume and quality of sales leads (Vieira et al. 2019; Wang et al. 2019). According to this study's empirical data, the participating firms had increased sales funnel effectiveness by *generating more sales leads from new and existing clients*. Interviewees also stressed that these higher lead volumes did not undermine lead quality; instead, DCM activities were seen to *produce high-quality inbound leads* with shorter sales cycles and a higher proportion of sales opportunities. Interviewees also noted that DCM is easier to measure and optimize than traditional marketing approaches. In this way, DCM increased customer acquisition, reduced lead acquisition costs, increased sales revenue from new and existing customers, and led to overall *increases in marketing and sales productivity*.

Of course, the most important outcome [of DCM] is the impact on revenues. The euros—that's the key measure... [...] It [DCM] improves the hit rate. Last year, for example, we increased marketing productivity by 80% compared to the previous year, and that is based on what we have been able to attribute to marketing activities—sales deals that would not have happened without marketing. Firm 22, Head of Marketing

We were previously a sales-driven company; salespeople called customers, one of 30 calls went through, and we got some appointments. The workload was horrible, and customers didn't want to talk to salespeople because they felt they knew nothing. Now, we rely on content marketing, which has enabled us to remove the entire sales layer. Now, customers come to us through the content; they have already read something and want to know more. When our experts

*meet them, they can immediately bring value to that encounter. And when we can add value from the beginning and the customer already has an initial idea, the hit rate and sales are much higher than in the vendor-driven model. **Firm 23, Head of Marketing***

*Content marketing has also enabled us to reduce costs. Consider an industry fair, for example ... At a good event, we can perhaps identify about 300 people. Going through that list, we find maybe ten people we didn't know before who have business potential. And finding those ten costs around 50,000 euros. If we rolled out a DCM campaign to find 5–10 new people, it would cost us 3,000 euros. **Firm 20, Vice President, Marketing***

The second performance outcome states that *DCM positively affects customer relationship performance (P4)*. This performance outcome highlights the relational perspective of DCM and aligns with the recent results outlining that the value of the content generated is due to content sophistication that can engender deeper relational engagement (Ho et al. 2020). The interviewees suggest that DCM efforts can assist in *further developing emerging business relationships* (Rapp and Panagopoulos 2012), deepen the relationship to *cocreate products between the supplier firm and the customer* (Keeling et al. 2019), and lead to some *customers becoming strong advocates* and providing referrals or other forms of “beyond purchasing” activities, which well aligns with previous research (Jaakkola et al. 2019; Hoyer et al. 2010; Kumar et al. 2010; Kumar et al. 2013).

*When you create and share content that interests and helps customers in different situations, their commitment increases. It deepens customer relationships. **Firm 19, Content Strategy Lead***

*... Yet the content improves that [salesperson's] credibility. It also helps when you have content that you have some kind of natural way to get in touch with the customer.... Instead of contacting a customer about whether they had time to review your offer, if the customer hasn't done it... instead, you can contact them and let them know about an interesting thing [DCM] and that you remember they were interested in this and, by the way, did you have a chance to look at what I sent... if you are not relevant to the other person, you won't be listened to... The benefit [to formulating a new relationship] comes from having something [content] to offer... it is the content that helps. **Firm 22, Head of Business Development***

*It [DCM] has provided new solutions for us. We have also created some content that we talked about... rephrased the problems customers are having and told how we see them. But at that time, we did not have solutions [for the customers]. And in practice, when you get such a big echo from customers... everyone was interested, so actually, the solution was done after the content was delivered. In that sense, it [DCM] has influenced the research and development of products, creating the products and the business itself. **Firm 20, Vice President, Marketing***

*When the project is ongoing or has ended, we use NPS [net promoter score] to measure how [many] loyal customers we have been able to gain... within the measures; we can see which customers are loyal...[are] new net promoters. **Firm 10, Head of Marketing and Communications***

The third performance outcome is that *DCM positively affects brand performance (P5)*. The study's data also indicate that DCM has a significant positive impact on brand performance, supporting earlier findings regarding DCM's potential to create brand awareness and *build a firm's status as a thought leader* (see Hollebeek and Macky 2019; Holliman and Rowley 2014). This also aligns with Taiminen and Ranaweera (2019), who reported a positive relationship between digital content sharing and brand trust. In a similar vein, interviewees stressed that DCM is not just about creating awareness but helps many of the case companies cost-effectively position themselves as trusted thought leaders in their markets and *build competitive advantage*. With the help of stronger brand recognition, it is also easier for B2B salespeople to reach out to prospective customers and get them to listen to what they have to say.

*We have kept up with our biggest competitors and even overtaken many of them—a great achievement for a company our size, as our competitors are firms like X and Y [large globally known companies] that have massive marketing resources. We are perceived as equal opinion leaders, and that is a really big thing. We get invited to talk at conferences because we have interesting things to discuss. **Firm 20, Vice President, Marketing***

*The main consequence [of DCM] is sales revenue. However, part of the performance derives from the longer-term brand impact. I think the brand is like a lubricant or oil—a machine may operate without it, but when you get everything right, things work so much more smoothly. A strong brand clearly boosts sales. **Firm 23, Chief Commercial Officer***

*With active and determined content production, we can create brand awareness and an image of know-how, which is very important. We are a very small player in comparison [to competitors]—we don't have the branding resources to put 100,000 euros into a campaign just like that. We have invested a lot of effort in content creation, which increases brand awareness so people know what we do. That's important. **Firm 25, Digital Experience Specialist***

Figure 10 summarizes the three propositions for performance outcomes that create positive effects—*sales performance (P3)*, *customer relationship performance (P4)*, and *brand performance (P5)*—with eight sub-propositions and 15 components. This section reviewed the DCM performance outcomes. Next, the study will review the moderators that boost or weaken the DCM performance.

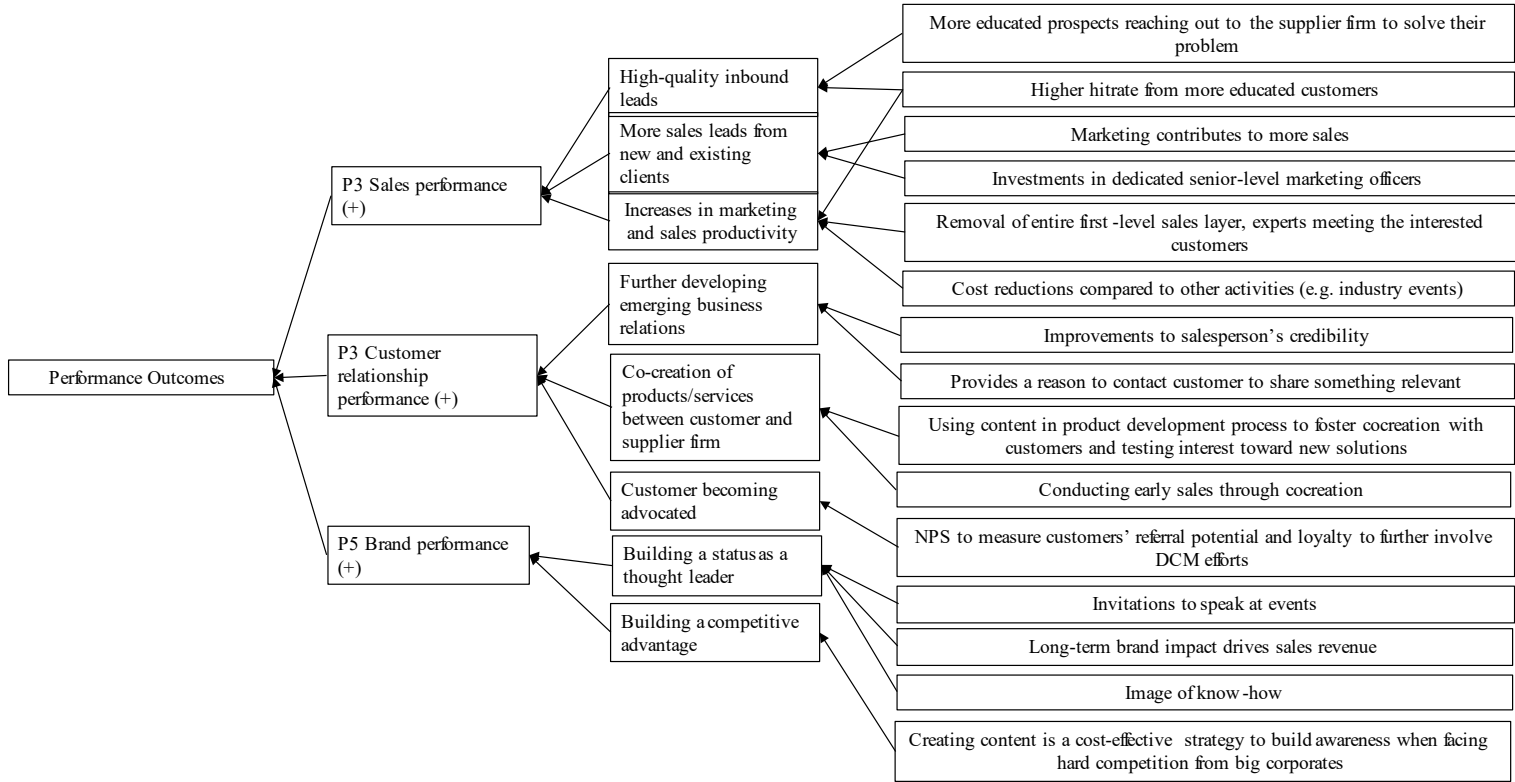


Figure 10. Performance outcomes of DCM.

6.3 Marketing unit related moderators of DCM³

Despite the view that the marketing department concept is obsolete and must be replaced by some other way of organizing the marketing function (Grönroos 1994), this study identified some moderators of the marketing unit that seem to relate to a firm's DCM performance. Figure 11 summarizes all seven propositions (P6–P12).

The empirical data indicates that even if DCM can be executed according to a detailed plan, with fixed goals, resources, and rigid schedules, an agile approach can be beneficial, such that the activities adopted are subject to continuous change in response to the market environment. Several interviewees noted *content marketing agility* (P6) as an effective means of strengthening the performance effects of DCM. Aligning with recent conceptual research (Kalaignanam et al. 2021), content marketing agility was found to involve speed and iteration. *Speed-related agility* refers to the capacity to adapt DCM activities to significant market developments (e.g., COVID-19) and latent industry trends more quickly than competitors. This faster adaptation of content marketing to market changes should help ensure the firm effectively differentiates itself via content that is timely to customers, which should boost the performance of DCM. This agility requires numerous preparations from the marketing organization to become capable of operating quickly in unexpected circumstances. Furthermore, continuous adjustments to content based on the target audiences' behavioral responses allow the firm to optimize DCM performance. Such *iteration-related agility* can leverage digital analytics to attain data-driven insights (Gupta et al. 2020; Mero, Leinonen, Makkonen, and Karjaluo 2022) and turn them into experiments (Thomke 2020) that can test ways to improve customer response and optimize performance. Often, this kind of agility requires the marketers to constantly question their choices according to the content and consider their efforts as ideas that need to be tested quickly to get some real facts and data around them.

Yes, it's still possible to stand out from the competition with content marketing today, but it requires keeping ahead of the market and competitors at all times. We must be able to react quickly to market changes by adapting content production plans flexibly. For example, last spring, when the COVID lockdown began, our company launched the [name] guide many weeks ahead of a competitor. This guide gained really strong popularity among the target audience, requiring us to make intense spurts in content production whenever needed, with the help of the best available experts. Firm 23, Head of Marketing

³ Parts of this section (e.g., some citations) are similar to Terho, Mero, Siutla, and Jaakkola (2022), which builds on this dissertation.

*I have to admit that we do very similar marketing compared to our competitors, but the way we strive to stand out content-wise is by reacting really quickly, or faster than our competitors so that we are always ahead of others. For example, this decarbonization thing: No one else in the marine industry has been emphasizing it; now, some competitors are starting to catch on. ... The essential thing is to get our content out fast for every target group in a controlled way, so thought leadership is how we stand out. **Firm 2, Marketing Director***

*As there is a lot of available data these days, we can optimize our activities. We try to be a data-driven marketing unit to ensure we have the right content at the right time. When we see that a piece of content is not gaining traction, we replace or edit it or try other things to improve conversions. We do a lot of optimizations, especially in the early phase of the funnel. **Firm 5, Marketing Director, Western Europe***

*The analytics side is particularly important. We have to measure everything we do—like tracking how people navigate our site and content, which pages work and which do not, which buttons work and which do not—by modifying them and finding what works and what doesn't. On the one hand, DCM is about developing the big picture; on the other hand, it includes super granular iterations, such as testing which headline works better: "Download a tool here" or "Click here to learn the secrets of leadership skills." **Firm 14, Marketing Director***

Thus, **P6: Content marketing agility** strengthens the relationship between DCM and performance.

The interviewees stressed that *content championing competence (P7)*—the marketing unit's ability to coordinate content production from its creation to sharing across the organization—is vital to DCM effectiveness. This *content championing competence (P7)* specific moderator differs from the *C-level DCM competence (P2b)* mentioned earlier by being purely marketing unit-related and more operational; this moderator is usually lower in the organization hierarchy and executes on a content piece level. Credible DCM requires constant inputs from various and typically busy firm internal experts, customers, and external industry opinion leaders, getting this input is a highly challenging task. Similarly, without a highly systematic approach to developing, packaging, curating, and growing the firm's content portfolio, DCM can too easily become an isolated and dispersed marketing tactic rather than an integrated and impactful approach to strategic marketing communication. All this requires strong content championing competence in marketing. The best practice firms had invested in dedicated content champions,

typically senior-level marketing officers with sufficient power to involve various experts in DCM as needed. Their primary job involved planning upcoming content creation themes and timing in collaboration with different business units and curating the content portfolio (see Järvinen and Taiminen, 2016). In some cases, these content champions also acted as role models in writing blog posts or conducting social selling activities on social channels. These champions usually work closely with the stakeholders to create the core of the relevant content piece; afterward, they iterate it further to match different personas and their information needs along the customer journey. Champions were typically assisted by a dedicated content marketing team that adapted raw content to suit specific buyer personas and media characteristics in an organized way.

*In many companies, content marketing is like a separate function or process that has no connection to anything else. However, I don't think we can produce effective content that serves our customers and prospects if we don't get salespeople's input about what customers really need, what they want to hear about, and what kinds of questions they ask. We also need input from our various experts regarding which issues to write about... This requires collaboration across the entire organization, especially in the B2B sector, which deals with complex issues. It can never be marketing alone; it must be a collective effort, as the knowledge resides with our experts... We have two people in marketing who coordinate content production so that it happens systematically. They ensure its distribution, optimization, and targeting to a specific audience, and so on, but all this depends on organization-wide team play. **Firm 25, Digital Experience Specialist***

*Typically, I collect the information myself [from different parts of the organization] and package it. The result might be a 10- to 15-page whitepaper that you could call "master content." Then, our team or a corporate marketing team starts slicing the content into smaller pieces that can be converted into LinkedIn posts or something similar. This enables us to offer short content packages that can be consumed in a minute, and there is always a link to the master content. **Firm 20, Vice President, Marketing***

*We have one dedicated person to whom all content is delivered from across our corporation and its different units, and she is responsible for pacing content delivery. We use HubSpot as a marketing automation tool; she feeds the content into the system, makes sure the keywords are in order, and shares it on our channels. So, one person is kind of an editor-in-chief [for content]. **Firm 15, Head of Marketing***

This study proposes **P7: Content championing competence** strengthens the relationship between DCM and performance.

According to this study's informants, digital advertising and DCM can support each other, whereas prior studies strongly suggest that DCM is a substitute for advertising (Holliman and Rowley 2014; Hollebeek and Macky 2019). Yet, as the interviewees note, achieving organic visibility without complementary investments in paid media (e.g., search engine marketing, social media advertising, and display advertising) is difficult. This view aligns with the notion of “echoverse feedback loops” through which various elements of a digital marketing strategy boost one another's performance effects (Hewett et al. 2016; Kumar et al. 2016; Vieira et al. 2019). However, the paid media investments need to be highly targeted to specific audiences to strengthen the performance effects. *Targeted digital advertising (P8)* can boost the performance of DCM by improving the findability of content in competitive market environments, characterized by an abundance of content. Many interviewees claimed that paid advertising was helpful to reach new people at the targeted buyer person profile and nudge personas already in the funnel on their customer journey with the right timing of the content (e.g., appearing in a Google search), conducted farther along in the customer journey.

We need to attract attention, especially on Facebook—to make it easy for people to find us. We also need to use advertising to ensure people actually find valuable content that targets them. In my opinion, advertising is strongly linked to inbound marketing. It is just not the kind of advertising we are used to; it supports content marketing, and we need it when we cannot attract people through organic media. Firm 18, CEO

The role of advertising has grown in importance. We cannot just expect people to find content we distribute on different channels; we need to consider the distribution strategy—what and to whom we advertise, on which channels, and so on ... social media channels like Facebook have continuously limited the organic visibility of firms' content, and it [content] is useless to us without visibility. Visibility must be sought with money. Firm 16, Lead Strategist

Organic is definitely our number one channel—SEO and everything we just talked about. However, our second-most important channel is paid. We have another team member in marketing who drives all our page traffic, so we complement each other really nicely. If we publish a new blog post, he will create a Google ad, Facebook ads, Twitter ads, and Instagram ads that kind of funnel into that new blog post—that's one way we get found. Firm 24, Content Strategy Lead

Accordingly, the study proposes **P8: Targeted digital advertising** strengthens the relationship between DCM and performance. Figure 11 summarizes all the market organization-related propositions.

6.4 Organizational moderators of DCM⁴

After reviewing the marketing organization-related propositions (**P6–P8**) that boost or weaken the DCM performance, it is time to move on to organizational moderators (**P9–P12**) of DC, which will be discussed in this chapter. Figure 11 summarizes all these propositions.

Most of the firms rely on external partners to perform at least some DCM-related tasks, but the effects of these partnerships appear mixed. The interviewees emphasize how *outsourcing the technical implementation* of DCM activities can often foster DCM performance. Such supportive partnerships can complement a firm’s resources and capabilities (e.g., providing expertise related to the latest technologies, tools, and analytical methods) or help conduct routine or repetitive tasks more cost-efficiently (e.g., content editing and visualization of content). This outsourcing can increase the number of DCM efforts conducted and extend the ability to cover more DCM dimensions, which may be difficult with limited in-house resources. Conversely, *the outsourcing of strategic design* of core DCM activities can weaken DCM performance effects, specifically because customer-centric DCM requires an in-depth knowledge of focal customers, offerings, and the industry; outsourcing key DCM activities creates the risk that external partners that lack these critical competencies will dilute DCM performance effects (Quélin and Duhamel 2003). Some interviewees also mentioned that when outsourcing the strategic design of DCM, it was often done due to a specific campaign or project, and thus lacked the long-term aspect of DCM and made the measurement of DCM efforts difficult in such a short period.

Marketing has become much more technical, so you need to understand all these systems, which has proved difficult. We have looked for partners so we don’t have to master all the coding, programming, and other skills like that. We use partnerships because we don’t have the resources to write everything, take pictures, and edit videos—we need external help. The key benefit of doing this is that, as the software, platforms, and apps develop continuously, we don’t have

⁴ Parts of this section (e.g., some citations) are similar to Terho, Mero, Siutla, and Jaakkola (2022), which builds on this dissertation.

*to be experts in all those things. We can focus, instead, on the actual planning and the goals we want to achieve. **Firm 2, Marketing Director***

*Content marketing doesn't just work by purchasing generic content from partners. The firm's internal engine should work to feed the content. The content must reflect the substance [expertise], so it cannot be outsourced by just ordering some articles from somewhere. They [articles] may play a complementary role in some cases, but the organization itself must "get their hands dirty." **Firm 16, Lead Strategist***

*Our biggest issue with our content marketing agency was that they don't work in [our company]. They are not our employees, so they don't know the ins and outs of our product or customer base as well as we do. So, I think actually working for the company is a huge differentiator in creating great content—really knowing what the customer wants and how to deliver that. So, we don't work with the content marketing agency anymore, and our numbers have pretty much doubled every month since we stopped working with them. **Firm 24, Content Strategy Lead***

This study thus offers the following proposition **P9**: *Outsourcing (a) the technical implementation of DCM activities strengthens, whereas (b) the strategic design of DCM activities weakens* the relationship between DCM and performance.

Marketing research has long recognized the conflicts between marketing and sales units (Kotler, Rackham, and Krishnaswamy 2006), including evidence that marketing-generated leads regularly fall into a “sales-lead blackhole” because they are not processed by the sales unit (Sabnis et al. 2013). Many interviewees noted that while DCM can overcome this problem by closing the gap between marketing and sales operations, this does not happen automatically and requires constant collaboration to bring these two functions closer. Effective DCM requires the careful “end-to-end” *alignment of the marketing and sales lead management process (P10)* based on clearly defined roles and responsibilities, shared goals and metrics, and close collaboration between marketing and sales units. This kind of horizontal communication of market intelligence is one form of intelligence dissemination within an organization (Kohli and Jaworski 1990) and can truly be achieved when the communication happens both ways with the same vocabulary. Interviewees stated they needed to start the alignment by giving mutual definitions to different forms of leads.

In my opinion, the most important thing is that someone always takes responsibility. It's actually pretty rare that companies have an inside sales, sales

*development, or similar function to mediate between marketing and sales and ensure leads don't fall into the black hole... I know many firms define the phases of the sales lead process in different ways, such as marketing-qualified leads and sales-qualified leads. That's good, as these things should be defined. But if people in different units are not talking the same language, and if roles and responsibilities are unclear, the process just doesn't work. **Firm 17, Founder, Head of International Business***

*Collaborating with marketing is essential to my work, and we have tightened that collaboration over the last couple of years. Although marketing and sales are still separate functions in our organization, we have begun setting joint goals and are confident this will produce good results. I collaborate with marketing people at least weekly, if not daily. **Firm 3, Head of Sales Excellence***

*If all this happens in silos, our efforts will be wasted. We do content marketing by combining marketing and sales to achieve specified goals. Inbound marketing nurtures customers on their journey and thus supports sales and business goals. In this way, we can develop sales in a more customer-oriented way and provide better service to customers on the purchasing path. **Firm 7, Marketing Development Manager***

In turn, the study proposes **P10: The alignment of the marketing-sales lead-management process** strengthens the relationship between DCM and performance.

Next, brands' competitive position may also affect DCM outcomes; thus, performance effects are likely stronger for challenger *brands with weaker competitive positioning* (corporate and product brands) than those with established market positions. Brand awareness can support a seller's performance by reducing customers' information costs and perceived risk (Homburg et al. 2010), such that strong brands enter customers' consideration lists more readily. However, DCM offers a cost-effective approach to boosting organic brand visibility and awareness for market challengers. Interviewees stressed this specifically in conditions where a challenger brand went against a much bigger, well-established corporation with bigger marketing muscles. Although DCM should have a positive relationship with performance for various types of brands, this study proposes that it offers even greater potential to boost performance for challenger brands relative to established brands with strong positions.

For example, consider product X [software name], which is not as well-known as competing products. If we fail to be present in the initial phases when the customer starts to explore potential alternatives, it will be hard for us to become

*a credible option at the later stages of buying, where the customer's thinking has already evolved, and they are familiar with the competitors' offerings. Here, DCM is of prime importance... For our product Y [software name], which is widely used in this market, creating awareness is not so important, whereas our cloud service Z [name] has strong competitors who have been in this market much longer and, thereby, have an advantage. In the latter case, DCM is central to raising awareness and making it a real option when a customer explores potential alternatives. **Firm 5, Marketing Director, Western Europe***

*But when the brand is strong enough, the added value of content becomes lower [compared to a weaker brand] in relation to a baseline performance that would be achieved without investments in this [content marketing] campaign. **Firm 28, Content Strategist***

*We are a small player [relative to competitors] and lack the branding resources that would help us buy customers' attention. We cannot invest 100,000 euros into a campaign like big companies... One important key factor that has enabled us to get on the customers' consideration list is that we have regularly produced content and systematically invested in certain keywords... We started to systematically create content related to [name] theme and strengthen our position for chosen Google search terms, which has succeeded reasonably well. **Firm 25, Digital Experience Specialist***

The next proposition is **P11**: The positive relationship between DCM and performance is stronger for *brands with weaker competitive positions*.

Finally, the interviews implicate that the firm's ability to *harness networks for social influencers* (**P12**) greatly influences the contemporary customer journey. In the 1980s, Gummesson (1987) coined the term part-time marketers for employees who do not do marketing full-time but maintain an enormous impact on the customer's decision-making process. These part-time marketers could be extended to cover other than what employees (e.g., customers and prospects or other stakeholders) do. This is an additional finding to "firm-generated" content, where firms actively share their content on corporate social media accounts and widely encourage employees and other stakeholders to share FGC on their personal accounts, aligning with findings from social selling research highlighting the importance of empowering employees as messengers to boost the firm's social media content visibility through their professional networks (Agnihotri et al. 2016; Ancillai et al. 2019). However, this earlier discussed "firm-generated" content does not consider social influencers, who, instead of sharing "firm-generated" content, create and share their own authentic content that interests their network or enter as an

independent content creator to create content for a firm's platforms as a visiting blog writer or webinar host and share that content to their own network.

However, Hamilton et al. (2021) highlight some differences in the nature of social influence, which can be normative or informational; its attempt may be intended or unintended, whereby the consumer is specifically targeted or an incidental recipient of persuasive information from social others; it may be direct, with the social other being in physical or virtual proximity to the customer, or indirect, operating through third parties; it may even be implicit in that the focal customer perceives it without any intention to influence on the part of the social other. The rise in email lists, online industry forums, and participation in professional social networks facilitated by technologies like LinkedIn means that social influences are increasingly as likely to affect business decision-making as consumer decision-making (Hamilton et al. 2021).

From the empirical data of this study, three types of social influencers were identified and discussed multiple times by the interviewees: internal employees, external prospects/customers, and other external stakeholders. This finding aligns well with Grewal and Sridhar (2021), who demarcate social influences in B2B markets into those within buyer-firm stakeholders, those within seller-firm stakeholders, and those reflecting relationships between buyer stakeholders and seller stakeholders.

First, numerous interviewees mentioned the *internal employees as social influencers*. The internal social influencers are mainly employees of the firm who voluntarily use their own social media channels and self-generated content to engage and influence potential customers on their customer journey or other stakeholders who might become influencers themselves. However, the interviewees stress that this endeavor often requires dedication and persistence from the employees to familiarize themselves with producing content, use social media channels, and then participate in the engagement online. The interviews also highlighted—from the firm's perspective—the importance of training, motivating, and helping staff members become social influencers.

*What is very important, in my opinion, is to find spokespersons and train them. It is not enough that we just create these messages and content if we don't have the people who are able to have the conversations and act on our behalf—in a face-to-face context and on social media. They [spokespeople] can be topic-related experts, from sales support of product functions and even to colleagues from the leadership team. **Firm 2, Marketing Director***

Good learning from that training [social selling] was that no matter how good of a subject matter expert you are, if you don't show it on social media, some

*other, worse expert will take the space with their message, even if their competence was not that good; however, if the person is present and active on social media and gives a good impression, he gets contacted more than the quiet one, who does not show up anywhere. That is social media's power; you must be present. We are so happy we have already gained results from it; we have received meeting requests as inbound... we have a few very big social media personas, for example, who get contact requests through social media... "Hi, I know you know a lot about these CRM issues. Could you please tell us more?" Many times, those conversations lead to sales. Our people profile themselves as subject matter experts for specific topics so that people we don't know before contact them and let them know that they know what they are talking about. **Firm 5, Marketing Director, Western Europe***

*We had this kind of thought leadership training here. We have harnessed several of these thought leaders and trained them... We have explained to them [chosen employees] that [name] we need you with us since you have been with us for the last 25 years doing your job, going around the world for all the relevant industry conferences, etc. You have a strong network of people who are all somehow associated with welding. We need your help so we can spread our message to the world. We have handpicked those individuals we believe are super valuable, trained them, and set up their LinkedIn and Twitter accounts, which they did not have. We have bought tools, such as Smart Share, through which sharing is made easy. We train them constantly. This is our small group of thought leaders. There are our salespeople and our business managers. Everyone we have been able to identify has a role here... **Firm 6, Marketing & Communication Director***

*We have had this [development project] in active use for three years now without business sales and their support organization. Our management is involved there as well as experts from the product functions. We encourage them to activate their own networks and utilize them in social media. Some salespeople are more active than others, and some see the value that can be gained through social media, but not everyone sees or will change their mind. However, this has started well, and new Twitter accounts have been actively set up. LinkedIn is perhaps the most convenient channel for many salespeople: the conversations they have there, and the [LinkedIn] contacts they have, but content marketing supports this [development project] by providing the content to share there. We also have the tools to support content sharing and to follow and activate it. **Firm 10, Vice President, Marketing***

Second, the interviewees mentioned *customer or prospect social influencers*. Often, customers are willing to build professional thought leadership and a personal brand and are thus open to collaborating with the supplier firm in different forms of social influencing (e.g., creating relevant professional content, becoming a reference for the supplier firm, or inviting their colleagues to consume content they might find relevant).

A very special group for us is our customers in general. They do inbound work for us as well. If we are creating a reference article or video or something else, we don't do them ourselves; we always let the customer talk, as you can never see our people in them [reference videos]. **Firm 6, Marketing & Communication Director**

We have taken communication close to customers. We have made customers our content creators. For example, we did this Christmas calendar for our B2B customers, where they [the customers] created all the content. We offered a channel where they could tell and got them committed to us. They told other professional kitchens what happens elsewhere; we were just the platform that enabled this. We got a lot of traffic, but they felt this was their own “doing.” **Firm 9, Digital Program Manager**

We have huge share buttons and systems, which we hope encourage them [the customers] to share our content. If they [the customers] are attending our webinar or something else, we also ask them to recommend it by email, for example, “Hi, it's nice that you signed up. Please ask your colleague to join as well!” We try to activate them [the customers] all the time so we would not need to be the voice, but the more potential customers drive traffic [to our channels], the better for us, **Firm 15, Head of Marketing**

Third, the *external social influencers*—typically any kind of external stakeholder or industry expert involved in DCM efforts—were discussed. Interviewees mentioned that these external stakeholders might have their own motivations to participate in content efforts with the supplier firm. Some say industry experts are expected to appear in different forums and are among the popular participants in an industry webinar or as guest blog writers. The external stakeholders also have a chance to reach a new audience through the supplier firm. These collaborations might also allow new companies to enter different industry recommendation lists on suppliers for certain categories that are maintained and updated through those influencers. For example, a brand mentioned in a book written by an influencer is an objective well aligned with a brand's DCM performance outcomes.

*We try to engage a huge number of different kinds of people, different groups... we have professors, we have bloggers, different kinds of things; we have world skills winners, [those] who have welded, who do things for us in their own arenas... if you want your content marketing to be efficient, you need to be able to identify different groups of people or individuals, who can, in their own network, work the way we, as a company, gain from them, **Firm 6, Marketing & Communication Director***

*Customers and others from your own network [are in social media]. I am very active on LinkedIn, so there, I can find, for example, if a person has a blog on a topic that interests us and our customers. I might reach out and ask if they would like to write us a similar kind of blog post. This is very manual at the moment and can take some time, but this is how we get the best content; as a bonus, if somebody visits us [our blog or webinar], it gets that person to share that content with their own network. **Firm 22, Head of Marketing***

*We try to make all engagement possible. As mentioned, we invite other [external] experts to participate in our content creation; that kind of engagement is like influence marketing, where we try to identify who has the power of speech on remote work. For example, we took a person who wrote a book on remote working and remote leadership and asked him to participate in our content creation—whether he would be interested in writing a visiting blog post and coming as a webinar visitor to speak about this topic. So, we offered him a channel to show his professional skills, and he wanted not so much to help us but raise his status as an expert, so we provided one channel for him to do that. **Firm 15, Head of Marketing***

Finally, the last organizational moderator proposition is **P12**: The ability to harness networks for social influencers strengthens the relationship between DCM and the firm's performance. These social influencers can be internal employees, external customers, prospects, or other stakeholders. Figure 11 summarizes the marketing organization and organizational moderator propositions.

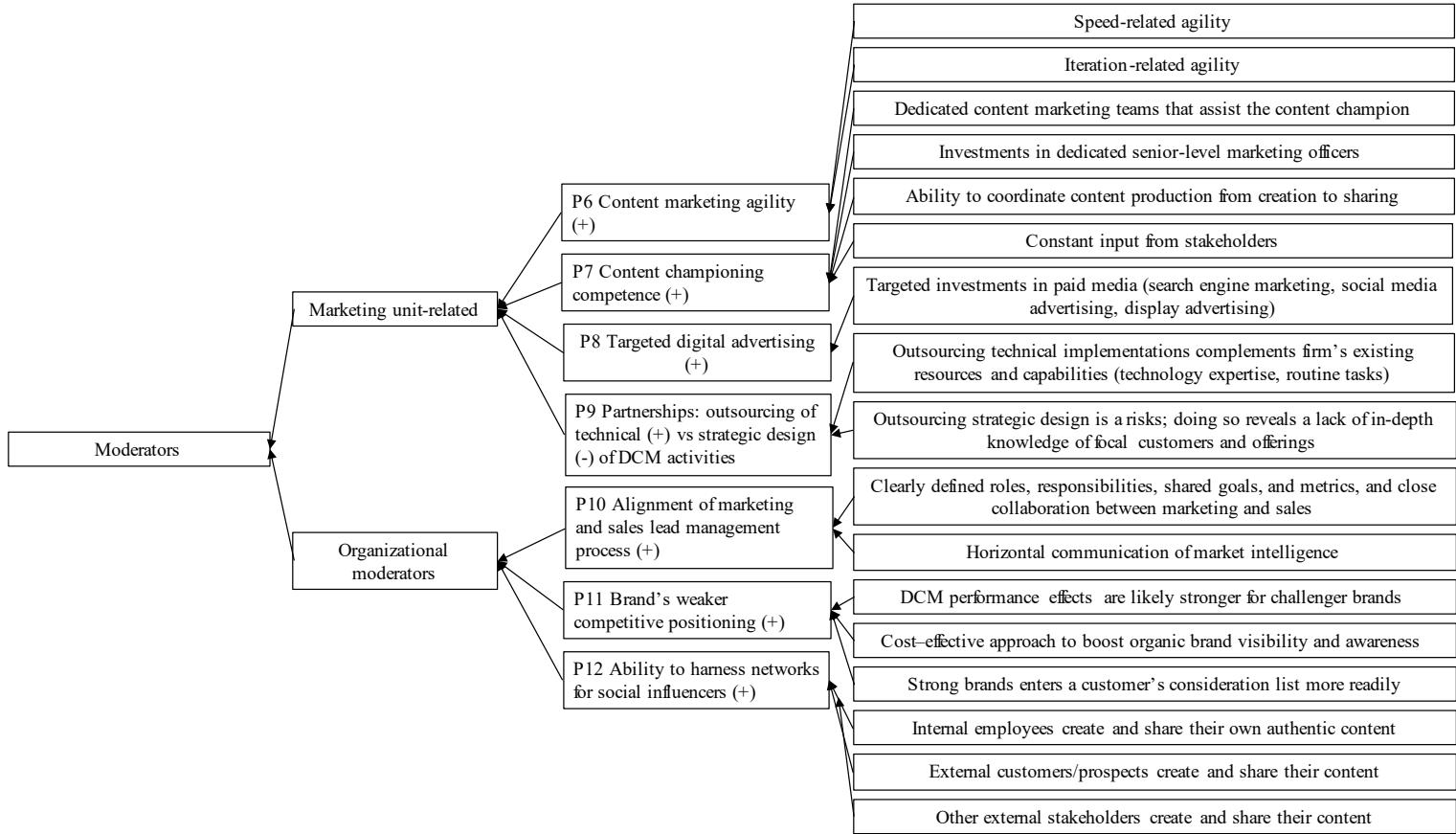


Figure 11. Marketing unit-related and organizational moderators.

Finally, to summarize the nomological network of DCM and answer the third research question (RQ3)—*What antecedents, performance outcomes, and related contingencies of DCM can be identified?*—the study presents the nomological network in Figure 12 for DCM consisting of propositions for antecedents (**P1–P2**) explained in Section 6.1, followed by the propositions for performance outcomes (**P3–P5**), which Section 6.2 explains. This continues to moderators specific to the marketing unit (**P6–P8**) in Section 6.3 and the moderators for the broader organization (**P9–P12**) in Section 6.4.

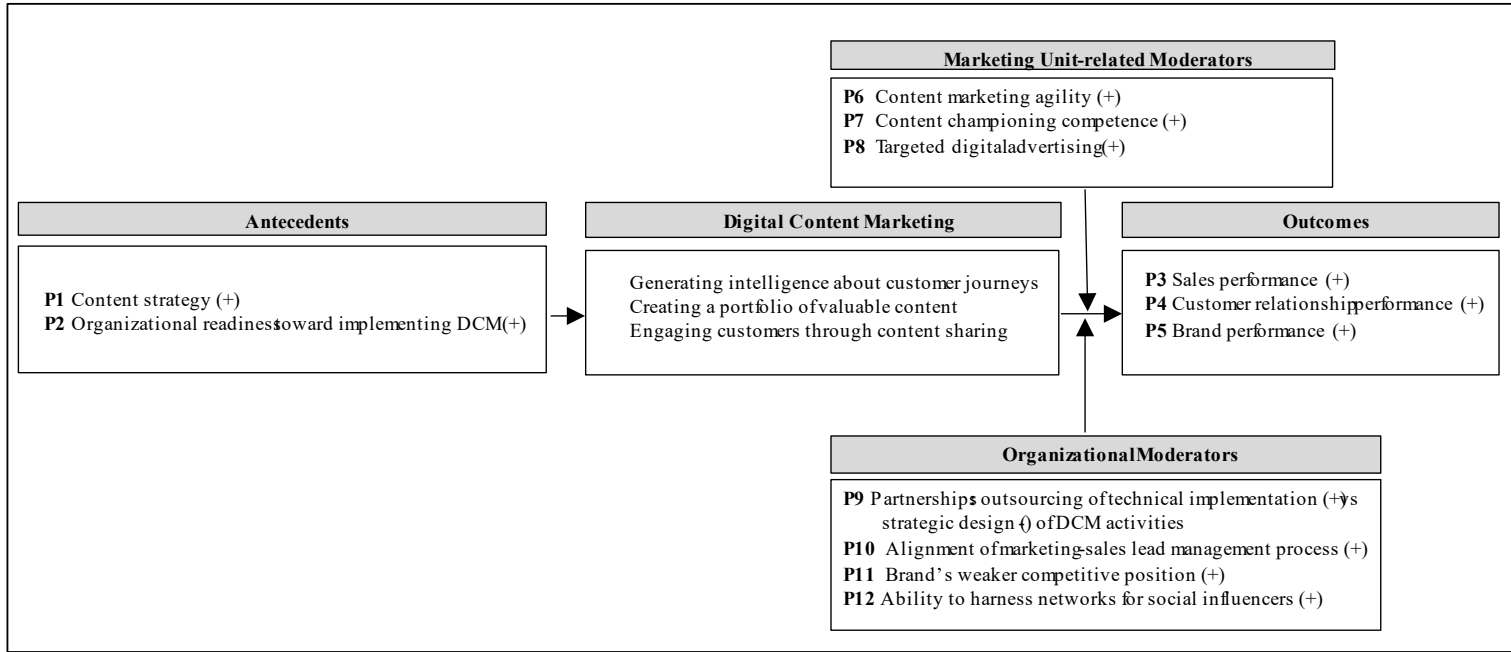


Figure 12. Nomological network for DCM (adapted from Terho et al. 2022).

7 Discussion

7.1 Theoretical contributions⁵

This chapter starts by discussing the three theoretical contributions Table 8 summarizes, then continues discussing the managerial implications; the study's limitations and some future study directions will close the chapter. Table 8 lists the three study contributions, then reverts to the review of the extant research relevant to the study contribution, highlights the current knowledge gap, phrases the RQs relevant to the contribution, and finally argues how this study's outcomes addressed the knowledge gap.

⁵ Parts of this chapter are published in Terho, Mero, Siutla, and Jaakkola (2022), which builds on this dissertation.

Table 8. Theoretical contributions.

STUDY CONTRIBUTIONS	EXTANT RESEARCH	KNOWLEDGE GAP	RESEARCH QUESTION	HOW THIS STUDY ADDRESSES THE RQ
Positioning DCM relative to B2B marketing literature	Definition of DCM relies heavily on creating and sharing valuable content. Engagement is another important outcome of DCM. Descriptions of the basic attributes of valuable content: (Hollebeek and Macky 2019; Holliman and Rowley 2014; Wall and Spinuzzi 2018).	Earlier explorative studies have often lacked a clear theoretical positioning (Holliman and Rowley 2014; Järvinen and Taiminen 2016) or relied on a single conceptual perspective. New knowledge is needed about how marketers can address the complexity of multi-actor customer journeys in B2B markets (Witell et al. 2020).	RQ1: What are the conceptual underpinnings of DCM in extant marketing literature?	Creating conceptual depth of DCM research by positioning DCM within three pieces of marketing literature on customer engagement, customer journey, and marketing technologies. Clarifying this developing research domain by highlighting the largely ignored generation of customer journey intelligence, which is pivotal for success. Shedding light on the firm's creation of content portfolios that encourage movement along the customer journey. Adds to the engagement literature by highlighting the combined efforts to enhance organic content visibility in digital channels, delivers personalized content to buyer personas with marketing technologies, and actively nudges buyers forward on their journeys. Needs to combine these because DCM key activities lie in the intersection.
Activity-based conceptualization of DCM	Customer-centric alternative to promotional or company-centric marketing communications (Holliman and Rowley 2014), scattered notions of aspects like DCM-related organizational processes or specific content tactics (Järvinen and Taiminen 2016; Wang et al. 2019). Creation and delivery of content as a starting point of a concept (Holliman and Rowley 2014).	No studies have provided a systematic DCM conceptualization that would outline the comprehensive set of activities for putting its customer-centric principles into practice; neither study has considered how firms gain insight into what is valuable information for various decision-makers.	RQ2: What are the key activities and components of DCM?	By proposing a conceptualization based on 56 interviews with 36 B2B firms of DCM in business markets, including three key DCM activities: generating intelligence about customer journeys, creating a portfolio of valuable content, and engaging customers through content sharing. Their sub-activities and components create an actionable framework for implementing and structuring digital marketing-related operations. This conceptualization is untied to any specific technologies but enables implementing technologies when they evolve.
Nomological network of DCM	Positive outcomes of DCM include increased sales, improved customer relationships, and improved brand performance. None explores the entire nomological network of DCM performance (Järvinen and Taiminen 2016; Taiminen and Ranaweera 2019; Hollebeek and Macky 2019).	We know no research that explores the antecedents, performance outcomes, and related contingencies of DCM performance, yet understanding what factors boost or weaken DCM performance is important.	RQ3: What antecedents, performance outcomes, and related contingencies of DCM can be identified?	Testable propositions on antecedents (content strategy and organizational readiness toward implementing DCM) of DCM implementation and marketing unit (content marketing agility, content championing competence, and targeted digital advertising) and organizational moderators (partnerships, marketing-sales process alignment, brand's competitive positioning, and social influencers) of DCM performance, which boost or weaken the relationship of DCM performance, and, finally, the performance outcomes of a firm's DCM efforts.

The first contribution of this dissertation is the positioning of DCM relative to the prior B2B marketing literature. The first theoretical contribution answers **RQ1**: *What are the conceptual underpinnings of DCM in extant marketing literature?* As RQ1 was more theoretical, this contribution brings theoretical clarity and depth to DCM. Previous research identifies customer engagement as an important outcome of DCM; however, this study shows how customer engagement can be fostered by combined efforts to enhance organic content visibility in digital channels, deliver personalized content to buyer personas with marketing technologies, and actively nudge buyers forward on their journeys. Earlier studies on DCM have been explorative and often lacked a clear theoretical positioning (Holliman and Rowley 2014; Järvinen and Taiminen 2016) or relied on a single conceptual perspective (Hollebeek and Macky 2016; Vieira et al. 2019). This study advances the conceptual depth of DCM research by positioning DCM within three pieces of marketing literature by identifying the customer journey (e.g., Steward et al. 2019), customer engagement (Kleinaltenkamp et al. 2019), and pieces of marketing technology literature (Wedel and Kannan 2016) as relevant conceptual underpinnings of DCM that inform different aspects of it. This study's contributions demonstrate the need to combine these conceptual lenses for studying DCM because its key activities lie at the intersections of these three literature streams (see Figure 4) within these three conceptual questions, which further helped us in conceptualizing DCM and its' key activities as a response for **RQ2**.

CQ1: How does a technology-assisted understanding of customer journeys facilitate DCM?

CQ2: How can firms create engaging content that meets the informational needs of multi-actor B2B customers along their customer journeys?

CQ3: How can firms engage customers by sharing timely, tailored content to the right audience with the help of technology?

Customer journey intelligence can be effectively understood by combining customer journey and marketing technology perspectives, whereas content creation can be understood through the combination of customer journey and engagement literature, and content sharing by combining marketing technology and engagement literature. Articulating the conceptual connections between these marketing literature streams strengthens the efforts to theorize regarding DCM and provides conceptual clarity for future content marketing research.

The second theoretical contribution of this dissertation is the conceptualization of DCM (Figure 7) in business markets, addressed with three key dimensions and nine sub-activities that offer an actionable framework for implementing DCM in different B2B firms. This second theoretical contribution also answers **RQ2**: *What are the key activities and components of DCM?* To answer this question, the study

proposes an activity-based conceptualization of DCM in business markets based on an extensive, qualitative TIU study in which 58 interviews were conducted with representatives of 36 B2B firms that have invested in DCM (Zeithaml et al. 2020). The resulting conceptualization advances DCM research that acknowledges that reaping benefits from DCM requires a customer-centric approach (Holliman and Rowley 2014; Järvinen and Taiminen 2016) but lacks a systematic and comprehensive conceptualization specifying how those customer-centric ideals should be operationalized as concrete activities. Operationalizing as concrete activities is central for market orientation and the overall marketing concept. Kohli and Jaworski (1990) defined market orientation as an organization-wide generation, dissemination, and responsiveness to market intelligence, which addresses the concerns of Barksdale and Darden (1971) by focusing on specific activities rather than philosophical notions, facilitating the marketing concept's operationalization.

The knowledge gap Chapter One describes is addressed by specifying three key DCM activities: generating intelligence about customer journeys, creating a portfolio of valuable content, and engaging customers through content sharing. This study provides rich insights into the nature of these activities by specifying their sub-activities and components, which, together, offer an actionable framework for implementing DCM in a customer-centric manner in business markets and provide a guiding frame for structuring related digital marketing operations (Shah et al. 2006; Sheth, Sisodia, and Sharma 2000; van den Driest et al. 2016). With the help of these components of sub-activities, it is easier to understand the implementation of sub-activities and the requirements to effectively conduct them by considering different factors related to each sub-activity. The conceptualization is not tied to any specific technology but offers a stable framework for supporting strategic DCM activities by integrating technologies as they evolve.

This conceptualization advances the theoretical understanding of DCM as a strategic communication approach (Holliman and Rowley 2014) in multiple ways. This study extends the DCM definitions that focus only on creating and sharing valuable content to engage customers (see Table 1) by highlighting the need for customer journey intelligence generation as its starting point. This journey intelligence dimension represents a part of DCM that is largely ignored but pivotal to its successful execution as a customer-centric approach. The results pertaining to customer journey intelligence generation provide new knowledge about how marketers can address the complexity of multi-actor customer journeys in B2B markets by combining buyer persona insights, customer journey mapping, and content engagement tracking. This contribution allows marketers to conceive B2B customer journeys comprised of amalgams of actors representing various roles, functions, and hierarchical levels (Grewal and Sridhar 2021; Hamilton et al. 2021; Steward et al. 2019; Witell et al. 2020). Thus, this study's results shed new light on

how supplier firms can not only consider the individual buying and usage center members' problems and goals (c.f. Johnston and Bonoma 1981; Huber and Kleinaltenkamp 2020; Macdonald et al. 2016) but influence the intertwined journeys of various actors in the customer firms through orchestrated content delivery to these actors (Witell et al. 2020; Zolkiewski et al. 2017). This study's findings also nuance the extant understanding of creating valuable content in B2B markets. Building on descriptions of the basic attributes of valuable content being relevant, compelling, helpful, informational, and timely (Hollebeek and Macky 2019; Holliman and Rowley 2014; Wall and Spinuzzi 2018), this study shows how firms can achieve such qualities by creating portfolios of content that encourage movement along the customer journey by helping buyer personas frame and solve their business problems based on synergistic content paths.

The conceptualization also highlights the emerging role of new marketing technologies and, in a sense, gives a higher-level context for implementing different evolving technologies required for DCM, especially in generating intelligence on customer journeys and engaging customers through content sharing. First, the sub-activities like *forming buyer personas by identifying key buying center members and their core business problems* require technologies that enable the data gathering from internal and external data sources (Kumar 2015). Similarly, *mapping customer journeys to understand key touchpoints and the information needs of different personas at different journey stages* were technologies also required for mapping and visualizing these touchpoints and are highly relevant in *analyzing customer engagement to assess the maturity of the purchasing process*, which is a very demanding task without the proper technologies. Conversely, many technologies can *enhance organic content visibility in digital channels used by buyer personas for information search* and the *timely delivery of relevant content pieces tailored to buyer personas*; conducting these efforts automatically requires technology to match the intelligence generated from customer journeys with the firm's content portfolio, which supports Rustholkarhu et al.'s (2022) view when they claim that CRM/marketing automation, contacting, and mass marketing tools also include AI functions that provide sales and marketing professionals suggestions on how and what time certain prospects/customers are best to be contacted. Moreover, the sub-activity of *nudging customers forward on their journeys to generate conversions* requires firms to invest in similar technologies to conduct this activity. Finally, with the latest technology developments concerning GenAI and the dimension of *creating a portfolio of valuable content* and all its sub-activities can now be produced with the help of GenAI tools like ChatGPT if prompting the tool is done properly, based on the generated intelligence about customer journeys. Although DCM and GenAI are quickly developing areas of interest, the author of this dissertation claims that

experts and human-led content creation will still be relevant to differ from the competition with new ideas, innovations, and creativity.

This study's third theoretical contribution is extending the knowledge of the antecedents, performance outcomes, and the marketing unit and organizational-related contingencies of DCM. The third contribution answers **RQ3: *What antecedents, performance outcomes, and related contingencies of DCM can be identified?*** The study answers the question by presenting the nomological network of DCM (Figure 12). To the best of author's knowledge, this study is the first to explore the circumstances affecting the performance outcomes of DCM. By identifying the antecedents for implementing DCM—the *content strategy (P1)* and *organizational readiness toward implementing DCM (P2)*—this study is among the first to set the operating circumstances supporting DCM's implementation. The first antecedent, *content strategy (P1)*, highlights the importance of organization-wide marketing communication processes and that DCM needs to align with other business strategies and objectives and thus cannot be treated as an independent marketing strategy. As the data in this study showed, if DCM is treated as an isolated marketing tactic, getting the required commitment from the broader organization to get the desired outcomes is difficult. Regarding the personalization requirements of content, it really helps if an organization's fundamental processes are set up to facilitate the potential needs for translations, localizations, and picking the proper channels. The international environment makes this extremely complex and time-consuming if processes are not set up correctly. The whole DCM effort needs to be part of the overall business strategy and objectives. If the firm has multiple business lines, prioritizing DCM efforts around a business priority might appear valuable. The objectives within DCM should also align with overall business objectives, for example, whether the focus is on acquiring new business for certain business lines or maintaining and growing the key customer accounts. Misalignment between DCM efforts and business strategies may cause difficulties in overcoming the other propositions for effective DCM performance, such as *informatics system connectivity (P2b)* or *alignment of marketing and sales lead management process (P10)*, which require extensive resources—budget and human resource wise.

The antecedent of *organizational readiness toward implementing DCM (P2)* includes the *C-level DCM competence (P2a)*, *information system connectivity (P2b)*, and the *depth of customer-centricity compared to product-centricity (P2c)* as a starting point for implementing customer-centric DCM. Drawing these lines between strategic marketing, marketing concepts, and information systems provides new knowledge on linking these differing research streams and interesting future research implications to study these further. The *C-level DCM competence (P2a)* is required to enhance the human resource efforts to recruit the correct capabilities required for

DCM and drive those strategic DCM-related changes necessary for effective implementation.

Regarding marketing unit contingencies, *content marketing agility* (P6) was a key factor that helped firms meet customers' rapidly changing informational needs and differentiate themselves in content-heavy environments, boosting their DCM performance. Similarly, the findings suggest that DCM requires strong *content-championing competence* (P7) to ensure the needed contributions of various internal and external experts in the firm and the integration of DCM into other marketing actions. The study findings also challenge the notion that DCM can provide a substitute for outbound communications (Hollebeek and Macky 2019; Holliman and Rowley 2014) because, as shown, *targeted digital advertising* (P8) complements the organic visibility of content. This relates to the early discussions of push and pull concepts at the beginning of this study; somehow, the results outline that DCM lies close to the pull marketing theory but needs those targeted push marketing methods to effectively drive positive performance outcomes.

Concerning organizational propositions (P8-P12), this study claims that *outsourcing the technical aspects of DCM implementation* can boost DCM's performance, but core, *DCM design-related activity outsourcing will likely weaken its performance* (P9). This finding responds quite directly to Vieira et al.'s (2019) call for research into whether *self-generated content marketing is more effective than when outsourced to an external agency* by pinpointing the activities that strengthen the performance and those that weaken it. The findings also indicate that the *close alignment of marketing and sales lead management processes* (P10) is important for reaping the full benefits of DCM. This takes novel steps on proposing the concrete activity steps to implement, answering the long-lasting discussions between sales and marketing collaboration. The study suggests that firms can optimize their DCM investments by focusing on *brands with weaker competitive* (P11) positions because, for such brands, DCM provides a cost-effective means of differentiating themselves from market leaders. This might well become a sound strategy for prioritizing the DCM efforts in those companies' business lines that can benefit the most from them.

Finally, by revealing that the firm's *ability to harness networks for social influencers* (P12)—whether internal employees or external prospects, customers, or other stakeholders—strengthens the DCM performance, this study participates in the recent discussions on social influencers (see Mero et al. 2023; Vanninen et al. 2023) in business markets and provides more understanding in this new phenomenon arising in B2B markets. Concerning the performance outcomes, the study findings are well-aligned with previous research and provide further evidence that a firm's DCM efforts can help increase *sales performance* (P3), *customer relationship performance* (P4), and *brand performance* (P5).

7.2 Managerial contributions⁶

The B2B DCM scene has seen dramatic developments in recent years. Not long ago, creating and sharing digital content was a point of differentiation in business markets, and attracting an audience to almost any type of content was relatively easy for a B2B firm. Contemporary buyers lack the time and motivation to consume content unless it helps them achieve buying-related goals or solve their business problems. Thus, customer-centricity is necessary for contemporary DCM. However, management and firm experts struggle with limited time and resources, and remaining abreast of the skills and capabilities required for effective DCM is difficult. Also, the marketing technology landscape supporting DCM's implementation is more complex than ever; the number of MarTech solutions has skyrocketed from about 150 technologies in 2011 to over 9,000 in 2022 (Brinker 2022) and continue developing in ways difficult to forecast. GenAI tools are on their way to transform how companies conduct DCM (Peres et al. 2023) and this development, again, requires a new set of capabilities and fresh philosophies when being adopted. In the high-pressure and speedy environment of B2B marketing, customer-centricity is easily forgotten when quick fixes and ways of getting to assigned targets are prioritized. Most importantly, this demarcates the responsibility of the firm's marketing strategy and objectives for the C-level personnel responsible for the profit and loss (P&L) and not for the recently hired digital marketing specialist.

This study's results offer concrete managerial guidance for developing and implementing strategic DCM activities in a customer-centric way:

- Strategic perspective on this new marketing approach
 - Unchanging aspects of DCM
 - Latest digital tools and tactics applied in different activities along DCM
- Three key dimensions for guiding customer-centric DCM
 - Customer journey intelligence
 - Creation of a valuable content portfolio
 - Engaging through content sharing
- Antecedent, marketing unit, and organizational factors that boost the performance outcomes of customer-centric DCM

⁶ Parts of this section are similar to Terho, Mero, Siutla, and Jaakkola (2022), which builds on this dissertation.

- Content strategy
- Organizational readiness toward DCM
- Marketing agility
- Content championing
- Outsourcing strategy
- Marketing-sales alignment
- DCM efforts on brands with relatively weak competitive positioning
- Sales, customer relationship, and brand performance outcomes of DCM

The findings offer a strategic perspective on this marketing approach by capturing DCM's fundamental and unchanging aspects while accommodating the latest digital tools and tactics (see Figure 7). This conceptualization can already be questioned with the latest technology developments concerning the evolving GenAI tools, yet this conceptualization remains pertinent to provide the strategic framework around the concept of DCM and its effective implementation, suggesting not to outsource the core design of DCM, even to such partners like GenAI tools, but to keep the strategic design as an in-house competence. This study suggests three key dimensions for guiding customer-centric DCM. First, customer journey intelligence generation is the foundation of DCM, so managers should begin by constructing buyer personas based on internal and external data, using technology to map the broader customer journeys, and tracking customer engagement at different journey stages. This generation of customer journey intelligence seems to be the most forgotten step when firms begin their DCM efforts and start producing blogs on product-related topics they find relevant. This is also quite a time-consuming step and one worth visiting on occasion, as one C-level marketing director mentioned after hearing the study results the researcher presented in a workshop. Second, creating a valuable content portfolio should ensure that content helps buyer personas frame their business problems, support their problem-solving throughout the customer journey, and facilitate moving forward on their journeys via synergistic content paths. As the dimensions state, it is not just a few pieces of content but a comprehensive portfolio that needs to be created and thus requires numerous resources to build and develop a valuable content portfolio. Third, customers can be engaged through content sharing by investing in an organic presence on relevant channels, personalizing content delivery for recognized customers based on marketing technology, and nudging customers forward on their journeys to proactively generate conversions. This third dimension describes the actual

customer-facing “doing,” but without delivering well on this last dimension, all the work done during the first two dimensions falls short, and the efforts put into understanding the customer and creating the content are wasted. Saving or cutting the budget on this third dimension is like cutting back on the sales force going out there to meet the customer.

This study also presents the nomological network of DCM by identifying antecedents, marketing unit factors, and broader organizational factors (see Figure 12) that boost the performance outcomes of customer-centric DCM. First, this study emphasizes that strategic priority should be given to start implementing DCM efforts. Firms should employ a content strategy that covers organizational marketing communication processes. Firms operating in an international context require tons of investments in content localization, and having those resources and processes in place softens DCM’s implementation in concrete matters. Resources and processes are required for systematic DCM planning, creation, and delivery. DCM-related tools need to be in place, and the organization needs to understand what they are willing to get out of their DCM efforts and that getting those results takes time. In many cases, the CEO needs to step in and prioritize DCM to ensure an organization-wide alignment exists to implement DCM. Finally, DCM needs to be part of the overall business strategy and objectives and be built into the relevant strategies like product development, recruitment, and IT strategies to perform effectively.

The second antecedent is built around the capabilities required from the organization willing to implement DCM. If the company lacks the relevant C-level understanding of DCM, it is hard to build the organization and partner network required for effective DCM, not only due to its budget and resource requirements but to drive the essential change programs needed to become customer-centric and have the connected informatic systems available. The IT department should be an enabler rather than a barrier, as is often the case in some companies. IT strategies should cover priorities, including the availability of information systems of high connectivity to other systems (e.g., CRM) that connect to marketing automation technologies and agility in adapting new technologies when they emerge. DCM requires company-level operational capabilities, which are conducted with high customer-centricity compared to traditional product-oriented philosophies. If the firm willing to implement DCM is still in its infancy with digital developments and mainly communicates around product features, a major change in the operational philosophy will be required to even start implementing DCM. These two antecedents are often roadblocks for implementing DCM in a certain firm, and they shall be overcome before firms can effectively conduct DCM. However, becoming customer-centric and changing legacy IT systems to modern ones is possible when the right people drive these changes.

Among marketing unit factors, it was found that DCM performance can be enhanced by marketing agility, adapting DCM efforts quickly to latent changes in the industry, and optimizing content creation and delivery through iterative, data-driven experimentation. Again, these small things can become game changers in competitive markets, especially when a smaller company or business competes against giants. Furthermore, DCM benefits from a systematic content-championing approach to developing, packaging, curating, and growing a firm's content portfolio. This content champion can be seen as a key role with highly scarce capabilities of succeeding in internal and external engagement and being highly structural and strict with his/her working habits and what comes to gained intelligence on customer journeys and applying that to individual content pieces. It requires the ability to keep numerous projects ongoing simultaneously and close collaboration with different internal and external content teams. Also, when combined with targeted digital advertising, DCM efforts are likelier to attain high visibility, even in content-rich environments—when digital marketing specialists jump in and do their magic with the right content and buyer personas. These specialists are highly capable of using the latest technologies and prompting the right channels to deliver the content in a timely manner to the right people.

Concerning organizational factors, outsourcing some DCM routines and technicalities is often beneficial, but managers should avoid outsourcing the strategic design of DCM activities. This avoidance of outsourcing the strategic design is often hard when starting DCM and when in-house competence is low. However, a better strategy seems to be focusing on recruiting the right talent rather than relying on external partners to conduct and deploy your customer-centric marketing communication strategies. DCM also requires strong investments in marketing-sales alignment to ensure the careful “end-to-end” alignment of lead management processes. In practice, this can mean that sales and marketing leaders should be able to closely collaborate all the way from defining the different forms of leads to the commonly shared objectives, goals, and metrics. Managers should target DCM efforts on brands with relatively weak competitive positions because, for these brands, DCM provides a cost-effective means of differentiating themselves from market leaders. This prioritization based on brand's competitive positioning becomes crucial in corporate business settings where many operating businesses and product lines are within one company but have very scarce, shared marketing resources. Yet, investing the DCM effort in those challenger business lines seems better if they are also strategic priorities.

Conversely, managers should involve social influencers, whether internal employees or external prospects, customers, or other stakeholders, with their DCM efforts to boost the positive relationship between DCM efforts and performance outcomes. Social influencers are still relatively new in business markets. First,

agencies concentrating on B2B social influencers have just emerged in recent years, and there is still much to learn, practice, and academic research-wise.

Sales performance, customer relationship performance, and brand performance outcomes of DCM seem constant among firms applying DCM efforts effectively. Yet, every firm requires its own metrics to closely follow this performance outcome and their development over time.

Finally, marketing technologies are probably one of the conceptual underpinnings of DCM: developing with the most speed (AI-related tools like ChatGPT), thus making it challenging for the conceptualization to frame how marketing technologies can help firms' DCM efforts going forward since what is technologically possible today is very different after a year or two. However, this research aims to consider that technology can help all aspects of DCM going forward. However, the core strategic design of DCM should still be driven strongly by humans with the help of the available technology. ChatGPT is a great example of recent developments widely adopted by marketers around the world and used to help them in all parts of their DCM efforts. AI did not exist as it does today when this research started, nor did the extent of social media. The question remains: What is left for the marketer to do going forward, and what kind of capabilities should marketing organizations foster to attract? At least today, marketers still need to prompt the AI tools correctly, which probably makes the difference in who succeeds with AI-assisted DCM and who does not. Hence, the recent developments with new AI tools does not take the credit of this study to conceptualize the customer-centric DCM by understanding its key principles and conceptual foundations. As an outcome, it provides these AI-assisted marketers with the activities relevant to DCM so they know how to best apply AI and other technologies. However, a marketer who does not take advantage of these new AI-tools will probably fall behind those who will.

7.3 Future research directions

Some limitations of this study indicate directions for further research. First, the qualitative efforts in this study targeted theory-building. The collected dataset enabled conceptualizing DCM and developing propositions about the key antecedents, outcomes, and contingencies forming a nomological network. The natural next steps would be developing measurement scales for the construct, validating it using large datasets, and empirically testing the propositions.

Second, this study relied on a cross-sectional sample to gain a broad understanding of various firms' DCM activities. Continued research might study specific industries and offerings to illuminate DCM's role and effectiveness in certain contexts to discover potential differences among industries or contexts. The

most interesting proposition to test in that context could be the organizational moderator *brand's weaker competitive positioning (P11)* as strengthening the relationship between DCM and the firm's performance.

Third, this study design prevents any insights into how the DCM process unfolds over time, so applying processual research methods to investigate the temporal aspects of DCM, including the dynamics of DCM activities and their interplay, would be useful.

Fourth, using the study's conceptualization of DCM as a strategic marketing communication approach driven by the marketing function, researchers might want to explore how DCM affects the dynamics between marketing and sales, such as the role of DCM in a broader selling ecosystem (Hartmann, Wieland, and Vargo 2018), or for sales enablement, such that it might support salespeople's ability to enter valuable dialogues with buyers (Peterson et al. 2020).

Fifth, an interesting perspective could be for research gauging the customer's perspective on DCM, including how potential purchasers use the provided content and how the nature of their purchasing journey informs these uses of seller-generated content (Terho et al. 2022).

Sixth, future research on DCM outcomes would be interesting from a financial perspective since top management constantly requires marketing to deliver on its ultimate purpose of helping enhance shareholder returns (Day and Fahey 1988).

Seventh, more research is needed on emerging GenAI technologies that transform the firms' actual operational DCM efforts and the capabilities required in future marketing organizations.

Finally, B2B companies should start addressing the issue of sustainability in their DCM efforts. Sustainability raises the question of whether this generation can leave future generations with the same or a larger basket of resources than what we have now (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987). Using up more of our resource endowments and leaving future generations with less would be easy for this generation, which would be unconscionable (Kotler 2011). Therefore, more research is needed on this intersection of corporate social responsibility and DCM. A lot of marketing research exists in the B2C context. Increasing numbers of people will prefer to buy from companies that care (Kotler 2011), and the same seems to be identified in the B2B context (Levy 2010). Companies need to add an environmental dimension to their profile since they do not want to appear indifferent to larger economic, social, and political concerns (Kotler 2011) since word of mouth and other forms of customer engagement (Van Doorn et al. 2010) is becoming a growing force in shaping customer decisions. Empowered customers are emailing, blogging, and tweeting to their friends and acquaintances good or bad things about a company (Kotler 2011); therefore, companies can be seen as increasingly swimming in a highly transparent fishbowl (Levy 2010; Kotler 2011). Consumers are willing to buy

more environmentally friendly offerings if the price is the same (Kotler 2011). Evidence also shows that some customers, whether B2C or B2B, are willing to pay more for not taking the risk of dealing with a company doing shady things (Levy 2010; Kotler 2011). B2B marketers could identify their customers' buyer persona's social class and motivation for green consumption and use this in their DCM efforts, so why not use this in press releases (Nickerson, Lowe, Pattabhiramaiah, and Sorescu 2022) to create valuable content around the problems buyers are looking to get solved? This notion is well-aligned with previous findings that B2B managers should analyze the CSR orientation of their customer base because the principle of "socially responsible purchasing" is growing (Carter and Jennings 2004; Homburg et al. 2013). Levy (2010) highlights that some companies are making sustainability practices a requirement for their suppliers. Hence, B2B firms may have to get into the program for the sake of their partners. The researcher proposes the following future RQs: How should firms consider CSR issues in their DCM efforts? How could CSR issues be integrated into a firm's marketing strategy and activities? How can marketers drive their firm's CSR issues?

This dissertation presented DCM's conceptual framework and nomological network of DCM in business markets. These novel concepts provide a strategic perspective on this fresh marketing approach by capturing the fundamental and unchanging aspects of DCM while accommodating the latest digital tools and tactics with concrete managerial guidance for developing and implementing strategic DCM activities in a customer-centric way in business markets (Terho et al. 2022). However, more research is needed on the different dimensions and contexts of DCM in business markets.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. The author's (Lotta Siutla) individual contribution.

RESEARCH METHOD AND DATA COLLECTION	LITERATURE REVIEW	DATA ANALYSIS, RESULTS, AND WRITING	
<p>The author was responsible for the research design and the first data collection round of 34 interviews from 18 B2B firms. The research team conducted the second data collection round of 24 additional interviews in 18 firms.</p>	<p>The author was responsible for the literature reviews in this dissertation. The research team condensed and clarified the review for the Terho et al. (2022) article in IMM.</p>	Part (chapter) of manuscript	Contribution
		<p>2. B2B Digital Marketing research Elements of B2B digital marketing Extant DCM literature in business markets</p>	<p>The author largely wrote Sections 2.2 and built on the article, i.e., on co-authored text affected by the review comments of the IMM article.</p>
		<p>3. Conceptual underpinnings of DCM B2B customer journey, B2B customer engagement and B2B marketing technologies</p>	<p>The author largely wrote Sections 3.4 and built on the article, i.e., on co-authored text affected by the review comments of the IMM article.</p>
		<p>5. Conceptualization of DCM in business markets</p>	<p>The author had a central role in primary data analysis and writing the key results. Part of the analysis was done with the research team. Part of the analysis was affected by the review comments of the IMM article.</p>
		<p>6. Nomological network of DCM</p>	
		<p>Antecedents for DCM</p>	<p>The author was fully responsible for the data analysis, results, and findings.</p>
		<p>Performance outcomes of DCM</p>	<p>The author had a central role in the data analysis and results concerning the performance outcomes.</p>
		<p>Marketing unit-related moderators of DCM</p>	<p>The author had a central role in data analysis; some parts of the analysis were done with the research team, which was affected by the review comments of the IMM article.</p>
<p>Organizational moderators of DCM</p>	<p>The author had a central role in data analysis; some parts of the analysis and results were fully the author's work, whereas others were done with the research team, which was affected by the review comments of the IMM article.</p>		



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