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**ROLE OF DIGITAL CONTENT MARKETING IN SOLO ENTREPRENEURS' PRE-  
PURCHASE PROCESS**

Master's Thesis in Marketing – 721430S

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<p>Abstract</p> <p>This Master's thesis studies the role of digital content in the pre-purchase stage of the online purchasing process experienced by solo entrepreneurs in the business context of creative industries. The main research question is defined as follows: "What is the role of digital content during the pre-purchase phase of online purchasing behavior of the solo entrepreneurs?". The aim of the study is to understand the solo entrepreneurs' perspective on how different types of digital content influences their purchasing behavior during need identification, information search, and evaluation of alternatives stages.</p> <p>The main theoretical framework comprises several models for purchasing process with justification in favor of the customer journey framework for studying solo entrepreneurs as well as literature. Additionally, key concepts from digital content marketing are utilized. These aspects are adapted and combined in a novel framework in order to expand the understanding of the phenomenon of purchasing process experienced by solo entrepreneurs and the role of digital content during that.</p> <p>The research method used in the study is based on a qualitative case study as an empirical method to study the phenomenon of interest focusing on 12 solo entrepreneurs. The data collection is conducted by organizing semi-structured interviews with real estate photographers that comply with the solo entrepreneurs' criteria. The interviewees are selected through a purposeful sampling approach in order to obtain empirical data from customers (solo entrepreneurs) activating in the United States. The thesis followed an abductive approach and thematic analysis throughout the research process.</p> <p>The findings from data analysis reveal that solo entrepreneurs' purchasing process is seemingly adopting a non-linear buying structure instead of the traditional B2B buying process. However, some variables that are usually characteristic of the B2B buying processes such as long-term commitment, quality, and profitability were identified by solo entrepreneurs as relevant during the buying process. The study contributes to the literature by providing empirical evidence concerning types of digital content influencing the pre-purchase stage but also highlights types of customer journeys experienced by solo entrepreneurs: considered and balanced journey linking it to their response to customer demand.</p> <p>Conclusions as well as managerial implications are provided suggesting to company to find ways to encourage the creation of UGC as it is perceived as more trustworthy than CGC by solo entrepreneurs but also to provide informational content during the pre-purchase stage. Lastly, the quality of the research is evaluated, limitations are presented and suggestions for future research are provided as well.</p>			
<p>Keywords</p> <p>digital content marketing, touch points, customer journey, solo entrepreneurs, online purchasing process, customer engagement</p>			
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## **1 INTRODUCTION**

This Master's thesis examines the role of DCM which stands for digital content marketing in pre purchase stage of solo entrepreneurs' online purchasing process. The case study focuses on photography professionals as a target customer segment and the way they purchase a SaaS solution for their business. The current chapter presents the research topic and the research gap of the study. Additionally, in this chapter the background and motivations for the topic will be explained along with the research questions and research plan. The methodology will be briefly outlined in order to shed light on the structure of the thesis as well as a summary of theoretical background and introduction of the case company.

Furthermore, this thesis aims to enrich the current literature with has limited correlative information available surrounding the online purchasing process of solo entrepreneurs. Additionally, it aims to discuss the impact of the digital content during the first stages of the online purchasing of solo entrepreneurs. The topic of the research is in consonance with the case company's objective to explore the role of digital content marketing during the pre-purchase stage of online purchasing process of their customers. The case company aims also to comprehend which channels and types of digital content are the most effective for attracting new customers. It is worth noting that the company is motivated to improve its customer journey in the pre-purchase stage for the real estate photographers' customer segment. In this thesis, the customer segment will be referred as "solo entrepreneurs", however in some parts of the literature they will be understood theoretically as "customers" due to the scarcity of studies on solo entrepreneurs. By understanding the customer journey, it can be illustrated several stages before the purchase stage, contributing to the thesis with a synopsis of the touchpoints and key channels in first phases of the journey to draw attention on what should be improved by the case company.

### **1.1 Background of the research topic**

The nature and impact of solo entrepreneurs is profoundly unexplored however regularly attracting attention among researchers and practitioners. Findings from previous studies provided recommendations and managerial implications that

encourage the entrepreneurs to seek “additional business opportunities” and “be more responsive to the actual needs of customers” (Westhead et al., 2005, p.128). However, not many studies explained the way solo entrepreneurs are looking for opportunities to grow their business or how do they identify the needs of their own customers and adapt to it. The current thesis focuses mainly on the solo entrepreneurs’ perspective and how digital content is helping during the pre-purchase phase. It is worth noting that the available literature is not providing any in-depth information on the purchasing process that solo entrepreneurs need to take to expand their business and better meet the expectations of their own clients. Limited correlative information is available surrounding the online purchasing process of solo entrepreneurs and digital content marketing. In response to calls for studies to specifically focus upon solo entrepreneurs, this paper builds on fresh evidence relating to their online purchasing behavior to suggest directions on what kind of digital content has the biggest impact during each step-in pre-purchase process.

From the perspective of scientific research, the framework from Ozmen et al., (2013) provides an initial basis than can be utilized for drawing the main themes for purchasing process model such as characteristics and needs assessments of the SMEs. The main difference is that the current thesis will not focus on the environmental stimuli but on the role of digital content marketing on purchasing process and will narrow down only to solo entrepreneurs and not SMEs in general.

However, from the practice perspective, this thesis focuses mainly on pre-purchase stage because purchase and post-purchase phases are mainly handled by sales and customer service teams while initial purchasing phases remain usually the responsibility of the marketing managers in case company.

It is imperative to briefly introduce the nature of the digital services that are purchased to highlight that solo entrepreneurs are not the end-users. In this study, B2B digital services are purchased by real estate photographers (solo entrepreneurs) from the case company with the intention to create a product with a resale value for their clients. Ozmen et al., (2013) stated that most studies focused on SMEs companies purchasing services in order to be end-users.



Thus, it becomes intriguing to study the purchasing behavior of the solo entrepreneurs who are heavily underrepresented in SME literature, in the context of purchasing services that allow creating a product and reselling it to own clients. Such a study is promising from both academicians and practitioners' perspectives to better understand the way solo entrepreneurs behave in pre-purchase when looking for a digital service in online environment.

The fact that the case company is in a continuous growth process means that time, financial and human resources should be utilized efficiently. A thesis oriented on understanding the online purchasing process of the case company's clients: real estate photographers (solo entrepreneurs) would help better plan and execute digital content marketing strategies. Thus, managerial need of this study is to understand the purchasing process and elucidate what type of content would engage solo entrepreneurs in the pre-purchase phase. Even though analysis tools such as Google Analytics provides a good overview on the sources that bring the most traffic to the website and customized segments allow the marketing team to check the users who clicked on the "sign-up" links, it doesn't permit to have the entire picture of the clients' purchasing process. Thus, in order to find out the "hidden" channels from analytics softwares it is needed to conduct a more in-depth analysis by studying their online purchasing behavior through a qualitative perspective. By identifying the right marketing channels and digital content that appeal to solo entrepreneurs, companies offering services to similar customer segments will avoid time and financial wastage.

## **1.2 Significance of the research topic and research gap**

According to Ellegaard (2009) marketing research on purchasing behavior in small companies is sparse, because researchers and practitioners preferred studying bigger enterprises with higher sales volumes. Pressey et al., (2009, p.223) notes as a conclusion for their research that there is "a real need for an improved understanding of the purchasing behavior and competence of SMEs particularly in terms of its informal nature".

Based on Pofeldt (2019) solo entrepreneurs were mostly ignored by academicians and economic development leaders regarding them as non-employer companies and their

role as contributors to national economies was diminished. Despite that, in United States U.S solo entrepreneurs account for 81% of all small businesses being responsible of 17% of all American employed workforce. Based on survey from Guidant Financial (2021) around twenty percent of small businesses from their study are solo enterprises, that are run solely by the self-employed owner without having any employees. Numerous surveys indicate that solo entrepreneurs is a timely and relevant topic however not many studies are available to further the understanding about this type of entrepreneurs both from theoretical and managerial standpoint – for this reason – the research on this topic is needed.

There are comprehensive studies from Gilmore (2011) that researched thoroughly the entrepreneurs in the UK and Australia however it is not advised to generalize that similar will apply exactly likewise for other cultures. Thus, the limited focus on small company and solo entrepreneurs purchasing in relevant literature draws the conclusion that there is a need develop more knowledge on the solo entrepreneur topic.

The survey from Guidant Financial (2021) notes that almost 50% of the small business owners intend to invest in 2021 in digital marketing and business services to grow their company and revenues despite the shortcomings from the pandemic. This optimistic outlook raises questions on how solo entrepreneurs will search for their business opportunity considering the multiple possibilities to expand the service offerings. This induces to investigate the way solo entrepreneurs purchase for their businesses and explore whether their purchasing process is theoretically and practically similar to B2B companies.

Ozmen et al., (2013) suggest that there are not many buying behavior models applicable for small and medium sized enterprises. Even though researchers consider small companies as encompassed to corporate sector, they disagree with applying corporate models to small companies because of variables such as “heavy-industry-based supply chain” and “procurement procedure domains”. However, no pertinent model is proposed to address those gaps.

Keyword research for terms such as “solo entrepreneurs” and “purchasing process” didn’t provide any significant literature to understand the phenomenon for

academicians and managers who are dealing with products/services aimed to solo entrepreneurs. This clearly indicates a scarcity in available literature to further study and comprehend the reality of solo entrepreneurs' purchasing process. Moreover, it becomes intriguing to examine the role of digital contents during the online purchasing process of other professionals who can be considered solo entrepreneurs broadly.

Studies from Holliman and Rowley (2014) and Hollebeek and Macky (2019) focused on digital content marketing concepts however there is a lack of studies highlighting the connection between DCM and online purchasing behavior. Hollebeek and Macky (2019) suggest that trust, relationships, and engagement are at the core of content marketing, however it doesn't explain completely how digital content impact the purchasing behavior. Even though there is general literature highlighting the B2C perspective of how digital content marketing is influencing consumers purchasing behavior, it is unequivocal that businesses are not impacted in the similar way as consumers. This scarcity and disparity in literature leads to a need to conduct similar research on B2B perspective. The research gap is especially distinguishable when it comes to lack of studies on the impact of digital content on purchasing behavior of the solo entrepreneurs.

The research gap can be derived as well from the study from Järvinen and Taiminen (2016) who suggested to future researchers to study how different content formats affect the online behaviors of specific customer profiles. In their study it was proposed for further studies to focus more on online behavioral data, but furtherly researchers could take different takes on how to generate new knowledge on purchasing processes and role of digital content marketing. Undeniably, this proves to be a field that needs further research because it might produce findings that point out the types of content that impact the most efficiently at each phase of the purchasing process.

The literature on customer engagement has to be extended as well especially when it comes to brand-generated content during different customer journey stages. Demmers et al., (2020) suggest that most common metrics in previous studies focused on likes, comments, and shares to measure the customer engagement for the branded content. However, the same researchers noted that such metrics are not necessarily transcribing

into significant business outcomes if they don't conduct directly to more conversions or larger sales volumes.

Furthermore, based on findings from older methodological studies from Wind and Thomas (1980) it can be derived that communication was way more relevant during the awareness stage while selling was more significant during later stages. It is interesting to see whether the digital era changed the order or importance of these aspects for awareness and later stages. The ambiguous nature of the finding invites the researchers to investigate better what kind of content and channels are truly impacting the buying process of a small single person-owned company.

### **1.3 Purpose of the study and research question**

The aim of this thesis is to examine and describe the impact of DCM on pre-purchase stage of online purchasing of solo entrepreneurs. In this thesis, there will be a special focus on how small businesses owned by solo entrepreneurs buying decisions are made during the initial stages of the purchasing process: need recognition, information search and evaluation of alternatives. This study intends to comprehend the role of digital content marketing in formation of buying decisions by examining the phenomenon from the standpoint of solo entrepreneurs during the pre-purchase stage. The topic even if previously unexplored can be framed thanks to groundwork from Ozmen et al., (2013) discussing first the characteristics of SME, needs assessments (why SMEs purchase?), and model assessments (characteristics of SMEs buying behaviors). Thus, precursory frameworks encourage to explore the novel focus of the thesis by utilizing some precedents helping to gain more background information about the purchasing process. However, instead of considering economic, demographic or political stimuli, the thesis will focus on the role of digital content marketing in purchasing process.

#### **Main research question of this study is:**

- What is the role of digital content during the pre-purchase phase of online purchasing behavior of the solo entrepreneurs?

To answer the main research question, it can be divided into two sub-questions:

Q1: What kind of online purchasing process solo entrepreneurs have?

Q2: What type of digital content create more engagement on their purchasing behavior?

The answer to the main research question is built by answering the first sub-question which aims to identify how solo entrepreneurs purchase and then by responding the second sub-question that helps to elucidate what kind of digital content engages them the most. The first sub-question addresses the need to expand the understanding on how solo entrepreneurs behave when purchasing digital services considering limited correlative literature. The last sub-question will decode some core elements of digital content and how it relates to engagement, trust in context of the B2B online purchasing process. Key dimensions are necessary for understanding how different types of digital content influence the way a solo entrepreneur makes a buying decision for own business.

In the main research question, there are 3 key terms: “Solo entrepreneurs” “Digital Content Marketing” and “pre-purchase”. In other words, it allows to study the extent to which DCM motivates solo entrepreneurs to trust and rely on digital content during pre-purchase stage. By linking these concepts, it is possible to study how DCM influences the online purchasing behavior of solo entrepreneurs during initial stages of purchasing process.

#### **1.4 Conceptual background**

In this section the key concepts that define the scope of the study are presented. First, the concept of B2B buying process is introduced in order to clarify the way businesses purchase, however differences between businesses and consumers are explained as well. Consequently, *solo entrepreneurs* concept is introduced however due to scarce literature, small business is included as well in order to have a more comprehensive perspective. Following that, the framework for customer journey is discussed and its selection can be justified due to the way it fits the focus of the study compared to B2B buying process. To summarize, customer journey implies a less hierarchical model compared to traditional models whereas emotional and behavioral drives are considered as well besides rational ones. This is explained by Wolny and

Charoensuksai (2014) along with the different typologies of customer journeys: impulsive, balanced and considered. After defining the three main stages of customer journey: pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase, it is mentioned that the thesis will only focus on first stage which consists of: need recognition, information search and evaluation of alternatives.

Next chapter introduces the broad meaning of digital content marketing and various classifications are provided to illustrate the diversity of the categories. First, *the user-generated content (UGC)* is defined by Huotari et al. (2015) as content generated and represented by the users while *company-generated content (CGC)* consists of content produced by employees to deliver the company message and its functionality. Later on, concepts like content marketing and inbound marketing are presented, but the phenomenon of Zero Moment of Truth (ZMOT) is what truly stands out and explains it as “search, check testimonials, price and comments” before purchase. Following that, distinction between one-way and two-way communication channels is highlighted, however the differentiation between main *paid, owned and earned media channels* by Chaffey (2015) is more relevant for this thesis. At the end, *customer engagement* concept is defined as behavioral responses towards a brand/company of the customers to various motivators. Furthermore, Bhargava & Ojha (2019) presented vividness, entertainment, novelty, interactivity and product feature description as factors impacting customer engagement.

## **1.5 Research approach**

In previous digital content related studies, quantitative method of research was preferred when studying concepts such as eWOM (Cummins et al, 2014). But for a more in-depth and comprehensive understanding of consumer behavior in an online environment, qualitative methods might be a better option (Rodriguez-Ardura et al. 2012). Indeed, for the current topic the focus is to understand the phenomenon in a comprehensive manner rather than numerically with precise numbers. For this reason, semi-structured interviews are considered to be the most applicable for studying in-depth phenomenon. Thus, because the current thesis is more about understanding the meaning of digital content in a purchasing process experienced by target customers, positivist approaches or prediction methods are not needed. Flexible design with open-

ended questions, purposeful sampling and phenomenon-oriented philosophy enquire for a qualitative method rather than quantitative method.

For the theoretical framework part, a review of the academic literature and other relevant materials about the purchasing process and digital content was conducted. Applicable concepts and theories were studied and selected for this study while creating own framework for building the foundation of the thesis.

Thus, crafting the theoretical background based on an explanation of the online purchasing process and role of DCM in the pre-purchase stage, helped to design the semi-structured interview framework. Hence, the structure of the interviews was built in order to acquire as much relevant data and case-specific information as possible in order to respond to the research questions of the study. As Yin (2011) recommends the most important questions in the interview are open-ended and more background questions are closed-ended questions because the aim is to have rich answers rather than single-word answers. The target customer segment was defined based on core customers of the case company, and the interviewees were to fit the criteria. Once the themes and questions for the interview questionnaire were finalized – selected interviewees were interrogated. Analysis generated empirical findings based on the recorded interviews allowing to gain relevant insights about the online purchasing process of the solo entrepreneurs and how it is influenced by digital content. The analysis part helps to generate conclusions on both theoretical and managerial level and also enables answering the research questions. At the end of the thesis, there is provided an evaluation of the thesis and proposal for further research.

## 1.6 Structure of the thesis

**Table 1 Outline of the thesis based on chapter headings**

1 INTRODUCTION	Research topic, research gap, research questions, case company introduction
2 PURCHASING PROCESS	Stages of B2B buying process, solo entrepreneurs, customer journey, touchpoints, brand building in small companies
3 DIGITAL CONTENT MARKETING	User generated and company-generated content, content marketing, inbound marketing, media channels, customer engagement on social media
4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	Qualitative case study, semi-structured interviews, data collection
5 ANALYSIS	Thematic analysis, Empirical findings
6 CONCLUSIONS	Answers to research questions, theoretical conclusions, managerial implications, evaluation of the study, limitations, recommendations for future research



The introduction chapter presents the background and the relevance of the research topic. The aim of the research was introduced as well as research questions and methods. Later on, briefly is introduced the digital business concept in order to comprehend better how Software as a Service companies operate. Digital services and revenue models are also highlighted.

The theoretical chapter is focused on purchasing process and specifically on stages of B2B buying process of solo entrepreneurs. Types of customer journeys, role of touchpoints and channels in the customer journey are also themes highlighted in this chapter to guide the reader and enable the understanding about the purchasing process of solo entrepreneurs and the related issues. Also, the B2B branding is briefly explained for small companies setting.

The digital content marketing section is covered more vastly. User generated and company-generated content are differentiated and explained. Concepts such as the content marketing, inbound marketing are presented as well. Moreover the section introduces typologies of media and communication channels and different types of inbound marketing. The end of the chapter discusses the phenomenon of customer engagement on social media focusing on its factors.

The chapter about research methodology presents the arguments behind the methodological choices. A summary of research methods is presented along with description of sampling method and analysis process.

The analysis chapter focuses on presenting the analyzed data based on thematic approach formed thanks to concepts from theoretical background. In this section, the comparison between theory and empirical data is presented in addition to relevant quotations from the interviews.

The last chapter aims to present answers to the research questions and elaborate theoretical and managerial contributions of the study. As part of the conclusion, there are exposed the limitations of the research as well as future directions for studies.

## **1.7 Delimitation**

The focus of the thesis is on the business-to-business setting and more specifically on a case company and its customers. In order to crystalize even better the boundaries, it is worthwhile to mention that only solo entrepreneurs are considered for the research. Hence, the companies with more than one employee (CEO) are not found in this study. During the theoretical background, the aim is to maintain the standpoint of solo entrepreneurs who are purchasing B2B services (digital products) and the stage considered for the study is pre-purchase only. It is worth noting that start-ups usually lack specific activities or even departments focused on marketing like in large corporations.

The study will focus mainly on US customers, excluding other countries where case company has customers. Among all Venture Oy's customers, real estate photographers are selected as main customer target, thus real estate agents and developers won't be considered.

## **1.8 Introduction of the case company**

The case company is an Oulu-based SME specialized in digital indoor spaces which provides real estate data and high-quality property visualizations. The target audience is mainly composed from real estate photographers, agents, broker, property managers, space planners etc.

Venture Oy has launched a smartphone application that can be used to scan the property interiors in 5-10 minutes and the result is a floor plan and comprehensive home report about property features. Venture Oy App has been launched in 2019 and it supports both iOS and Android devices. The company has produced over 951.000 floor plans up to March 2021.

### **1.8.1 Managerial need of the study**

The case company is a SaaS company and its main focus relies on providing value for real estate professionals through the digitization of properties. The business problem

of the case company can be exemplified with a descriptive example. After launching the scanning app and receiving significant investment, the team finally had the opportunity to utilize more resources for marketing operations. The main intention was to attract as many business clients (solo entrepreneurs and SMEs) from the United States that the usage of the product/app would become a standard in the real-estate market. The business reality that floor plans (case company's main product) are not present in every listing in the US, represents both opportunity and threat. From an optimistic perspective, it means a promiscuous and large market with numerous possible users. From a critical viewpoint, it denotes the fact that more resources should be invested in educating the target audience.

Consequently, massive investments on paid media such as advertisements and campaigns on a real estate website did not bring the expected result. This has been proved as a costly experiment, and for this reason identifying the correct digital channels and content that customers would prefer is a vital action. At the same time, the case company is not aware about the purchasing process of own customers and this makes it more difficult to engage with solo entrepreneurs at the right moment. Due to the nature of the case company, the findings will be useful not only to floor plan provider companies but to other SaaS companies as well. Hence, the proposal of this research aims to elucidate the most effective ways and channels to reach the target audience of solo entrepreneurs.

### 1.8.2 Digital services in a software as a service business model

Teece and Linden (2017) state that business models reflect the rationale of how a company creates and distributes value to consumers and how the revenue and costs are impacted by the business structure. Structurally, business models can be defined as a sum of value proposition, network, revenue sources and other key aspects (Bican and Brem, 2020).

Companies shift to digital models of business in order to improve productivity, reduce costs, increase automation etc. (Alamaki and Dirin, 2015; Waters, 2005). Customer experience has a great impact on the triumph of digital business and that's why users

need to be constantly involved in the co-creation process when there is a customer-driven attitude (Alamaki and Dirin, 2015).

The advancements in the software industry enabled a new business model called software as a service (SaaS) and it consists of delivering software applications from the vendor's datacenter to the customer. There are certain advantages of deploying software as a business compared to a traditional installed software business model and they refer to lower total cost of ownership, quicker speed of deployment and customization, increased reliability, lower costs for better security, optimized utilization of capacity, risk mitigation, it capability of the vendor and others (Waters, 2005).

Bican and Brem (2020) note that the digital aspect in a software as a service business model indicates the improved optimization of resources thanks to digital services and technologies. They summarize that digital business relies heavily on intangibility and its value proposition focuses on platform, content, and experience. It can also be highlighted that SaaS businesses have the possibility of limitless reusability of data due to the digital technologies and nature of the business.

### 1.8.3 Online revenue model in SaaS company

In order to understand the purchasing process of the customer from case company a brief description on the revenue model will be provided in following section. This is necessary to understand how solo entrepreneurs perceive the case company's offering. Some arguments and definitions from literature will be provided in order to comprehend better the empirical results.

For instance, case company enables a mix of free trial and pay-as-you go service as well as discounted monthly agreements for larger clients. In this thesis, the scope is reduced to solo entrepreneurs who do not qualify for monthly minimum orders, hence only freemium and pay as you go is relevant to explain for holistic understanding.

Freemium model represents a limited in time or features version of the service that is offered freely as a basic introduction to the software aiming to persuade the customer to upgrade to the full version of the service based on Dempsey and Kelliher (2018).

Fee for service model refers to charging the user for the amount of service they used, and it means a non-contractual agreement where the customer might be charged on a “pay-as-you-go” basis based on Dempsey and Kelliher (2018). They suggest that signing long term agreements with a part of customers could prevent the easy switch to competitors. Kittlaus and Clough (2008) consider that consumers in fact go for this model because they are looking for a good price for a service they will use sporadically. Thus, it can be assumed that this strategy will increase the chances of the business to appeal to smaller customers who are not financially well prepared to invest substantial amounts in the service.

## **2 ONLINE PURCHASING PROCESS**

Undoubtedly, the digital era is transforming the way businesses function and purchase. As opposed to previous decades, traditional marketing methods are in decline compared to emerging digital media and one of the greatest examples is the possibility to purchase online. Internet is regarded as an open, cost-effective and omnipresent network, which contributes to reducing or even eliminating geographic barriers and physical distance, as a platform to co-create value with customers, thanks to the capabilities of internet: interactivity, broad scope, persistence, speed and flexibility (Bhargava & Ojha, 2019, p.295). In this chapter, the main focus will be on explaining the comparisons between B2B and consumers' buying processes, definition of solo entrepreneurs, rationale of customer journey and types and role of touchpoints.

Since it is premature to claim that solo entrepreneurs purchase similarly as B2B business or consumers, both frameworks will be presented. Afterwards, the arguments and conclusions will be provided in favor of the theoretical model that resembles better the way solo entrepreneurs purchase. Sparse literature on solo entrepreneurs' purchasing process motivates to explore both traditional Business-to-Business buying processes as well as customer journey.

### **2.1 Introduction to Business-to-Business buying behavior**

Digital evolution of technologies transformed the business-to-business buying process substantially during the last decades. B2B buying behavior starts with the identification of the need and ends with purchase, highlighting a transactional approach. Older studies from Webster Jr. (1965) were focusing on buying process model and the importance of the buying center. After that, it was needed to adapt the theory on various services and marketplaces hence a new model was required in order to crystalize the buying process steps which was called the BuyGrid model (Robinson et al., 1967).

### 2.1.1 The organizational buying process

In the following, Webster's seminal model of B2B buying process is described, because it can be considered as one of the first models of the Business-to-Business buying processes. He explains it as a process composed of four stages: problem recognition, nomination of organizational responsibility, the search process and the choice process for selecting and evaluating the alternatives. Firstly, problem recognition or need-definition stage refers to the situation when the buyer identifies a problem that can be solved by purchasing a service or a product. A problem can be explained as a perceived disparity between the current and desired level of a goal achievement. Factors such as reducing the price, competition, managerial ambitions enhances the organizations' intention "to do more" and hence to consider a better solution for the existing problem (Webster, 1965).

The second stage denotes the nomination of organizational responsibility and it refers to the assignment of buying authority for the purchasing decision of a service or product. In this phase, it is important for the organization to ensure that there are no disagreements between the department that is purchasing service and the department that will be using the service. When it comes to the purchasing department, their representatives are concerned about the price, the performance of the vendor, how quickly it is delivered and other market related conditions (Webster, 1965).

The search process is considered the third stage of the buying process and it refers to two main functions: to collect and to analyze information. Thus, the list of suppliers should present the main details about the vendor and then there should be a list of alternatives. Goal definition and evaluation process is important for this stage because only after that the buyer can focus on identifying the product offerings. It is assumed that after gathering sufficient alternatives the search can be finalized, however a specific attention should be given to decision rules like policies, procedures etc (Webster, 1965).

The last stage consists of the choice process whereas the buyer is considering to pick one of the alternatives. To ensure a correct choice process there should be some steps such as qualifying the vendor, assessing how well the offerings match with the

specifications and comparing different alternatives. In order to qualify a vendor, the buyer needs to assess aspects like credit rating, financial power, business experience, size and quality. However, it is also important to compare the product offering with the specifications and there should be considered product features, price, delivery time, quantity and others. To end the process the buyer has to simply compare between all the alternatives and identify which one meets most or all the requirements and provides the highest value (Webster, 1965).

Later studies proposed new models considering differences between high technology and low technology, risks when choosing suppliers, online versus to real life purchasing, the complexity of the product, the role of buying decision etc. Nevertheless, they cannot explain entirely the solo entrepreneurs purchasing process. This encourages to search and compare between models that are not necessarily referring to B2B buying process with the aim to find common patterns with solo entrepreneurs buying process.

### 2.1.2 Differences between B2B and B2C Buying processes

For establishing the right framework for studying the buying process of the solo entrepreneurs it might be insightful to identify the main differences between buying process of businesses and consumers.

Pawlowski and Pastuszak (2017) clearly identified the differences between the way companies purchase compared to how individual consumers buy. Companies conduct significant amounts of research before purchasing the product/service, analyze technical aspects and costs, and concentrate on functionality. B2B companies tend to conduct an online research and create a list of suppliers before making a purchasing decision whereas the internet facilitates the purchasing process due to the diversity of payment methods. Hence, online purchasing has even more opportunities to grow in the future. Brown et al. (2007) noted that B2B markets differ from consumer markets when it comes to psychological aspects, product variables, marketing communications variables, and other contextual factors.



From a psychological perspective, it seems that risk avoidance is one of the main motivating factors during the industrial buying practice. The most recurring risks when it comes to organizational buying are related to performance and economic risks. The selection of brands seems to be impacted by the opinions of experts in the company in b2b setting compared to consumer setting where aspirational role models are the ones that motivate consumers. When it comes to product variables, companies communicate both intangible and tangible attributes in B2B buying (Brown et al. 2007).

Marketing communications variables are something that clearly distinguishes between B2B marketing from consumer type. Even though tools might be similar in both settings, when it comes to the content and mediums they obviously differentiate for B2B and consumer marketing. Some of the traditional B2B marketing tools were sales materials, PR, sales force, personal selling and technical content for communicating the value to potential customers. In B2B, advertising is utilized in order to reach customers that wouldn't be easily reached by sales personnel, with the aim to minimize the cost per sales. Brown et al. (2007) suggests that B2B companies should mainly focus on both highlighting the "strong, hard" functions of the product and emphasizing the "soft" personality while interacting with buyers.

When referring to contextual factors it is relevant to pay attention to the "novelty of the purchase", its complexity and the role of the purchase situation. McQuiston (1989, p. 69) explains the novelty of purchase as "the lack of experience of individuals in the organization with similar purchase situations" and refers to how buyers will perceive the risk during purchase. B2B significantly differs from consumer context, whereas the former refers to achieving a measurable goal in business context while the latter mainly concerns lifestyle related purchases. Contextually, buyers of B2B goods need to be informed about the benefits and be able to quantify them, however, consumer goods are more likely to elicit psychological associations (Brown et al. 2007).

Wind and Thomas (1980) summarize well that the purchasing situations vary in terms of low and high risk. However, they combine the factors in sets to explain what kind aspects impact the organizational buying behavior. Hence, the buying behavior can be impacted by the marketing mix of supplier's competitors, supplier's marketing

variables such as price, advertising, design, brand positioning but also by the influence of economic, technological, cultural, political trends.

### 2.1.3 Brand building and trust in B2B buying process

The role of the brand should also be considered in B2B decision-making in the purchasing process (Brown et al. 2007). Brand is described as “distinctive identity that differentiates a relevant, enduring, and credible promise of value associations with a product, service, or organization that indicates the source of that promise” (Ward et al. 1999, p.88).

Gagnon (2014) suggests that B2B businesses rely on proper positioning of the company in the eyes of the target audience and content marketing is seen as a way to convey that message of “being the best in the industry” for certain aspects. While high-end brands tend to position their brands as qualitative and very durable, the lower-priced services are more prone to highlight features such as “affordability” and “requisiteness”.

The level of associated risk is expected to be higher when it comes to high value and technically complex purchases (Brown et al. 2007), due to the fact that organizational profitability and productivity of the buyer will be influenced by the purchase (McQuiston, 1989). McQuiston (1989) concludes that experienced buyers tend to select a known brand based on the organizational memory. Hence, it becomes even more difficult for buyers to assess a product/service’ quality when the brand is unknown, leading to uncertainty concerning the decision-makers to determine whether the product will be value for money (Pawlowski & Pastuszak, 2017). For this reason, Brown et al. (2007) highlights that industrial companies tend to communicate the brand value beyond any product functionalities, thus referring even to logistics, customer service and policies of the company.

Based on the study from Brown et al. (2007) when a company successfully presents the brand in B2B context it might reduce four types of risks for the buyer. In organizational context, a company with a well-recognized brand will be perceived as less risky and the decision makers will be less likely to be scared of making the wrong

decision when selecting the respective company for B2B purchase. From the psychological perspective, a company can decrease the perceived risk of economic costs when the brand communicates the rational arguments through adjusting the emotional elements of motivation. When discussing the product context, the brand should communicate how the use of the product will improve their buyer's market position and achieve customer satisfaction. Lastly, from a marketing perspective it is important to mention how a company can avoid the perceived risk of difficulty by communicating a top-notch quality when approaching buyers' issues in a warm manner.

## **2.2 Solo entrepreneurs**

After clarifying some of the differences between consumers and businesses when it comes to purchasing, it is timely to present one of the main concepts of this study: solo entrepreneurs.

### **2.2.1 Definition of solo entrepreneurs**

First, the notion of entrepreneurs will be briefly introduced, then the self-employment dichotomy will be explained to understand the differences between solo entrepreneurs and self-employed professionals. Then self-employment scene will be clarified and later the main drivers behind sole proprietorship (solo entrepreneurs' business) will be pointed out.

Gilmore (2011) define entrepreneurs as individuals who are able to identify opportunities, use resources and expertise in order to create value in a productive and creative way.

In theory, self-employment refers to a broad range of entrepreneurship sweeping from beginner innovators to independent professionals, and from sole proprietary retailers to entrepreneurs with employees (de Vries et al., 2020).

Thus, self-employed individuals are divided in literature into two categories: self-employed solo entrepreneurs and self-employed individuals with employees

(Schummer 2019; de Vries et., 2020). For the thesis, the “solo entrepreneurs” concept will be discussed because it suits the primary focus of research. Solo entrepreneurs can be defined as professionals with specific skills/knowledge who are self-employed and independently perform entrepreneurial tasks without being employed by others or employing other individuals (de Vries et al., 2020).

In case of solo entrepreneurs, their businesses depend on them and their competence in order to produce a turnover which is slightly different when compared to self-employed business owners who have employees. According to Schummer (2019), the later case can function effectively even if the business owner is absent temporarily while for solo entrepreneurs there is a commitment and sole dependance on them in order to ensure the continuity of the business.

As suggested by van Stel et al. (2014), the main drivers of solo self-employment consist of basic material and social needs for initial levels of development and need of autonomy along with self-realization for more advanced levels. Schummer (2019) suggests that solo entrepreneurs have to identify what are the ways to achieve competence and autonomy while ensuring well-being and business success; at the same time the meaningfulness of the work should be also taken into consideration besides income opportunities. Additionally, Westhead et al. (2005) recommends to solo entrepreneurs to inspire from serial entrepreneurs and adopt more organizational routines towards innovation for instance to use unique marketing tactics or to seek ways to grow the business.

### 2.2.2 Small company purchasing process

In this section solo entrepreneur’s business process characteristics are explained, and especially in relation to purchasing, online purchasing and decision making. Due to sparse literature focusing on entrepreneurs, small company purchasing process will be utilized as well in order to understand solo entrepreneurs both as entrepreneurial professionals but also as small companies.

Gilmore (2011) suggests that most entrepreneurs are oriented on differentiating themselves from the competition and being innovative but mainly to respond to the

customer demand either from a “reactive, market-led, or opportunistic and profit driven” perspective (p.143). Sometimes the pursuit of the innovative ways to better appeal to own clients might convince the entrepreneurs to seek for services they can integrate into their package in order to provide added value to their customers.

Literature made it clear that small and medium sized enterprises purchase differently compared to larger companies (Skarpova and Grosova, 2015). Also, it was stated that SMEs are not miniature forms of big companies because they have recognizable groundings (Ozmen et al., 2013; Ellegaard, 2009).

Ellegaard (2009) stated that purchasing manner of the small companies is rather spontaneous and reactive when compared to their larger counterparts. Quality, customer service, delivery, receptivity and flexibility are the main aspects considered by small companies as important for maintaining their operations (Pressey et al., 2009; Ellegaard, 2009). Additionally, Ellegaard (2009) mentioned that small companies are loyal customers and seldom change suppliers due to their scarcity of resources but also due to fear to unpredictability associated with constantly changing suppliers.

The literature also briefly discusses about the way entrepreneurs start their purchasing journey. According to Gilmore (2011) initially entrepreneurs start providing a specific product/service and gradually gaining expertise, offer unique selling point or even utilize a special equipment in order to differentiate from the competition. Pricing is important for entrepreneurs due to the intention to maintain a cash flow and cover the costs but also produce a profit. And thus, profitability is relevant so is balance between cash flow and clients’ loyalty and for this reason, entrepreneurs aim to focus on value for money for their clients whereas quality of their service and customer service are key aspects. Hence, distribution and promotion also remain crucial in order to achieve clients’ expectations and deliver promised outcomes punctually and sometimes even to personalize and offer a more integrate package so that client stays loyal (Gilmore, 2011).

Small companies seek for direct contact with the selling company whereas the latter should adapt the sales strategy to everyday issues of the former. Selling companies must take into account that small companies’ buying decisions are impelled by

particular issues and the need for solution for those issues (Skarpova and Grosova, 2015).

Skarpova and Grosova (2015) suggest that business relationships rely on commitment and trust because the customer has faith that selling company will help solve one or multiple issues. Such mutually economically beneficial relationships strengthen productivity and effectiveness leading to long term satisfaction for both parties.

### **2.3 Customer journey**

In this passage, it will be justified why customer journey framework fits better the solo entrepreneurs purchasing process, later on five stages of consumer decision making process will be presented. Several interpretations on customer journey processes will be considered in order to distinguish between the stages while narrowing down to pre-purchase stage to correspond to the focus of the thesis.

For the current research even if traditional decision-making models offer the necessary initial framework, customer journeys might apply better due to certain reasons. Customer journey allows a non-linear structure and ensures including all touch points and channels, considering not only cognitive drivers but also emotional and behavioral drives. Thus, in customer journey the hierarchical order is not necessary as in traditional decision-making model (Wolny and Charoensuksai, 2014).

Wolny and Charoensuksai (2014) considers the five-stage decision making process of the consumers consisting of need recognition, information search, alternative evaluation, purchase and post-purchase – as an illustrative depiction of consumer buying stages on cognitive level. They also believe that this model applies well to “high involvement products” if problem solving phase is rather extended than short as in emotionally driven purchases (Wolny and Charoensuksai, 2014). If applying this on solo entrepreneurs as small business owners it can be assumed that they tend to buy rationally as well in order to ensure business growth. Even though the buying process of solo entrepreneurs is expected to be longer compared to emotional purchases, the exact structure of the process might deviate from case to case due to various aspects such as interactions, channels and responses (Wolny and Charoensuksai, 2014).

Wolny and Charoensuksai (2014) summarize customer journey as a process describing customer experience where several touchpoints define the way customers interact with a product, service or brand. Gao, Melero and Sese (2020) explain customer journey process through pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase stages. The pre-purchase stage includes all consumer interactions before the actual purchase: problem/need recognition, information search and evaluation of alternatives. Lemon and Verhoef (2016) explain that in theory, pre-purchase stage “could include the customer’s entire experience before purchase” (p.74). Thus, all process starting from need recognition to consideration of satisfying the need with a purchase is considered by Lemon and Verhoef (2016) as pre-purchase stage.

The purchase stage can be briefly introduced as the second stage when customers choose, order, and pay. Multiple touch points and choices, customers might have different outcome of satisfaction which will cause them to either complete or suspend the purchase (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). During this stage, consistency of pricing is extremely important during different channels in order to eliminate any confusion or even feeling of unfairness (Gao, Melero, and Sese, 2020).

Post-purchase stage refers mainly to usage, experience and consumption after the purchase. During this stage alternatives are not examined because the purchase was made, thus it is the phase that will determine the customer retention and repurchase intention. Customers are expected to form a more intense connection with the brand thanks to consumption and even share their positive or negative experience online with peers (Gao, Melero, and Sese, 2020). Moreover, Lemon and Verhoef (2016) suggest that during post-purchase stage, there are two main directions customers can take: repurchase and continuous engagement leading to customer loyalty or renewal of pre-purchase phase and alternatives seeking.

Wolny and Charoensuksai (2014) describe the process of ORCA model which stands for online behavior model of consumers based on buying stages and a non-linear compilation of touchpoints amid several stages of decision-making process. Wolny and Charoensuksai (2014) note that there is no mandatory chronological order for touchpoints in ORCA model and also that consumers can utilize several channels when searching for information.

### 2.3.1 Types of customer journeys

Even if literature rarely highlights the existence of different customer journeys and the typologies are not consistent across studies, for this particular thesis it is relevant to understand how journeys might differ in a real-life setting. The literature registers classifications of customer journey from Halvorsrud et al. (2016) and Wolny and Charoensuksai (2014).

Halvorsrud et al. (2016) identified distinction between planned and actual journeys, whereas former refers to the planned journey by the company for the customer while the latter is what customers actually experience. However, Wolny and Charoensuksai (2014) provide a more comprehensive trichotomy by differentiating between three types of customer journeys: impulsive, balanced and considered.

In a considered journey, the pre-shopping state is more extended whereas customers are rather in information seeking stage when collecting relevant details from various sources: reviews, blogs, friends/celebrities/influencers (Wolny and Charoensuksai, 2014). This process is common during the pre-purchase stage however all information collected is eventually used when assessing options if a need will arise. During this stage, the Zero Moment of Truth is also impactful having a lasting effect on the purchase decision (Wolny and Charoensuksai, 2014).

Balanced journey is described as a customer journey influenced by a reference group such as friends, influencers and famous figures according to Wolny and Charoensuksai (2014). Gao, Melero and Sese (2020) summarize this phenomenon as impact of social influence, claiming that peers' "shared experience, knowledge, attitude, or behavior" shape the customers experience as well (p.23). Balanced journey is characterized by an extended search for information and evaluation however customer's motive to buy originates through emotional stimuli as described earlier. Yet, the decision to purchase is supported later on thanks to rational evaluation and checking information from different sources, platforms and channels (Wolny and Charoensuksai, 2014).



### 2.3.2 Role of touchpoints and channels in the customer journey

First, the definition of a touchpoint is introduced, then the distinction between categories of touchpoints is briefly explained as well as their role during customer journey. In literature, there is no consensus on typologies of customer journeys and therefore they are defined differently by scholars. Halvorsrud et al., (2016) consider that touchpoints are a series of correlated and successive touchpoints while Wolny and Charoensuksai (2014) believe that customer journey is simply a collection of touchpoints without any premeditated order. Despite contrasting perspectives, touchpoints are core elements in customer journeys in both above-mentioned cases.

Halvorsrud et al. (2016) introduce touchpoint as a precedent of communication between customer and company and it should be visible to the customer and designated in time. Lemon and Verhoef (2016) differentiate between four main categories of touch points during customer journey: brand-owned, partner-owned, customer-owned and social. The nature of the service influences the role of each touch point during customer journey stages, and they might vary in each stage. Brand-owned touch points refer to customer interactions that are controlled by the company ranging from website, advertising, referral programs to marketing mix elements such as product features, pricing, sales force, customer service. Partner-owned touch points are commonly created and managed by the company and partners such as marketing agency, referral program partners and others. Customer-owned touch points are customer actions that are not controlled by the company or partners but rather customers focusing on their needs. Even if individual consumption was the main focus for earlier customer buying models, nowadays co-creation with or independently from companies should be also taken into consideration. Social touch points are extremely important because customers tend to surround themselves with external touch points such as influences from peers, information sources, other clients' experiences and so on. This type of touch points might impact customers intentionally or not through all stages.

Demmers et al., (2020) state that product comparisons charts and pages are more likely to be visited during the pre-purchase stage and not after the consumption.

As suggested in literature, customers have a significant level of uncertainty about which alternatives to choose thus any brand-related information enriching the customer's understanding is welcomed (Gao, Melero, and Sese, 2020).

### **3 ROLE OF DIGITAL CONTENT MARKETING (DCM)**

This chapter initially introduces the role of digital content marketing, then differentiates between user-generated and company-generated content. Later on, the concepts such as content marketing and inbound marketing are described while the communication channels are separated by one-way communication and two-way communication. Consequently, three categories of media channels are presented being followed by highlighting five factors influencing customer engagement.

When discussing the DCM it is worthwhile to mention the transformation from the act of “selling” to “helping” customers through valuable content. (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019; Holliman & Rowley, 2014). It is especially relevant to notice the shift from one-way selling messages to inbound approach of marketing where customers are engaged with branded content (Holliman & Rowley, 2014).

Hollebeek and Macky (2019) summarizes that creating and preserving customer’s engagement, trust, and relationships are considered as the main purpose of DCM. Even though long term, purchases are important, trust and engagement should be prioritized and this is why promotion differs significantly from DCM.

#### **3.1 User-generated content and company-generated content**

During traditional marketing era, the audience had a rather passive role compared to nowadays when social media is enabling the audience to become an active party in content creation. Undeniably social media is facilitating the process for the audience, however the companies might perceive it as a loss of control (Huotari et al., 2015). Thus, the content created by the users/audience is called in literature “user-generated content (UGC).

UGC can be undisciplined and for this reason, managers should be aware that each user-generated piece of content uploaded online can have an everlasting impact on the reputation of the company (Huotari et al., 2015). The same researchers state that user-generated content is substantially different from company-generated content, because the former concerns hedonistic impressions while latter refers to functionality. User-

generated content might have significant drawbacks and impact the company's publicity if the online conversations will take a negative note and appear as top search engine results as stated in Huotari et al., (2015).

Company-generated content is the type of content that aims to promote the functional value of the product and it can be created by corporate and employee users. Corporate users symbolize the general voice of the company while the employee users symbolize the general voice of the company while the employee users are distinguishable have a human personality and tend to communicate in a personalized manner on social media (Huotari et al., 2015).

### **3.2 Content marketing**

Holliman & Rowley (2014) identified the lack of definitions for content marketing in the B2B setting and comprised several directions on how differently it can be interpreted in literature. From one perspective content marketing can be described as the creation of educational and useful content that aims to attract and preserve customers, however, from another side, it can refer to a crucial component in telling the brand story.

One of the objectives outlined by Gagnon (2014) for content marketing consist of finding ways to spawn measurable responses, generate leads influence, and motivate potential customers to engage with different marketing media. Another goal is to consolidate thought leadership to facilitate the lead development process, to transform leads into sales. This is possible by positioning the brand as a thought leader in its industry and thus the company needs to have unique and valuable knowledge to accomplish the potential customer's expectations and needs.

### **3.3 Inbound marketing**

In the "pull" mechanism era when customers are the ones to search for information and start a conversation, having good visibility is crucial for businesses. Search engines allow searching for specific keywords, thus optimization with relevant terms should be implemented across company services and products description as well as

in social media pages. Inbound marketing is especially fruitful in terms of reducing marketing waste according to Chaffey (2015). Hence, this type of marketing depends upon assiduous targeting and interaction through good quality content. Subsequently, it should attract prospective clients via entertaining and informational content found either on social media or blog posts.

Another important concept in customer's decision-making is explained by Google as ZMOT or Zero Moment of Truth. Hence, prior to purchasing a product, consumers experience ZMOT which consists of searching, reviewing testimonials, pricing, and comments on social media before making a purchasing decision (Chaffey, 2015).

Indeed, nowadays the internet seems to appear as an important marketplace for exchanging products and services, hence the access to sharing opinions about the service becomes available to many. This is a great opportunity for SMEs and start-up owners if the product is getting positive feedback, whereas brand love and word of mouth become important concepts. For instance, Godes & Silva (2012) have concluded in their research that more than 90% of the customers check the testimonials from previous consumers before purchasing any items from a selected company. They identified that a potential customer would analyze a minimum of four reviews before deciding to buy the product or service. Moreover, Leeflang (2014, p.2), denoted that unlimited access to information might determine users to easily move beyond the paid advertising from the company and to seek more user-generated content.

Digital marketing can be understood through the variety of tools and channels used by marketing professionals to initiate and cultivate relationships with consumers. In other words, channels and tools like the web, email, social media and mobile can allow professionals nowadays to perform techniques to influence purchase intention. (Chaffey, 2015).

### 3.3.1 Types of inbound marketing. Communication channels

Inbound marketing is called the most important digital marketing strategy by Patrutiubaltes (2016).

To reiterate the focus has shifted from attention to the product inside a company in a traditional marketing setting to the attention paid to the consumer. In the digital marketing case, it becomes crucial to prioritize the customer's needs while communicating efficiently in a way that leads to a purchase decision and brings loyalty to the brand. Many companies practice a so-called "golden rule" when crafting a marketing strategy, as the managers tend to believe that 80% should be content to inform and educate while only 20% focus on sales growth. Moreover, it is often mentioned that digital marketing contributes to the creation of the trust (Patruti-Baltes, 2016, p.61).

Inbound marketing is the main part of digital marketing because it allows open communication and direct interaction with the targeted customers. The special characteristic of online and inbound marketing is that consumers might become interested in companies' products while interacting with its tailored quality content. Hubspot defines it as the most effective method for businesses that operate online by arguing that this field concentrates on the creation of the content that brings organically customer's attention to their products (Patruti-Baltes, 2016, p.62).

Examples of channels are: blog posts, SEO actions, mail campaigns, video posts that become viral, and social media channels (Patruti-Baltes, 2016, p.62). Taiminen and Karjaluo, (2015) take it further and divides these channels into one-way communication channels and two-way communication channels. Former refers to channels that are highly controlled by the company and symbolize the center of the brand while the latter involve co-creating dialogue between customers and company.

#### *One-way communication channels*

Company's website, email newsletters, online directories and banner advertising are regarded by Taiminen and Karjaluo (2015) as one-way communication channels with high company control. Website is considered as the "home of the brand in the online environment" (Taiminen and Karjaluo, 2015, p.635). Search engine optimization is considered a one-way communication channel as well however Taiminen and Karjaluo (2015) note that they have low company control compared to previously mentioned channels.

E-mail newsletters are used as one-way communication channel represent used for marketing purposes to promote, share information, enhance relationships with the clients and lead them to website links according to Taiminen and Karjaluo (2015). Patruti-Baltes (2016, p.63) adds that a newsletter sent from a real person with an important role in the company is better viewed by receivers compared to automatic no-reply addresses. Titles of emails are also important as they might be decisive in terms of whether the receiver will open and read them. The content from the email should resonate with the customer persona, as in the contrary sense a poorly targeted content might lead to unsubscribing from the newsletter. Interestingly, despite the fact that Taiminen and Karjaluo (2015) consider the newsletters' nature as two-way communication, they recognize that email newsletters are actually more commonly used as a one-way channel.

Search engine optimization (SEO) is defined as a process that aims to optimize the website pages in a way that the search engines display them first when users search for specific keywords (Patruti-Baltes, 2016, p.64). The main purpose of the SEO is claimed to inform the individuals who are browsing search engines about the products and services available based on the selected keywords but it also has impact on company's website visibility (Taiminen and Karjaluo, 2015). Hence, despite SEO plays a significant role for the businesses in order to be discovered by the users organically according to Patruti-Baltes (2016), the potential of SEO is not fully understood by small and medium enterprises based on Taiminen and Karjaluo (2015). However, good SEO depends on the result of being indexed accordingly comes only when specific rules are respected, and the content is unique. (Patruti-Baltes, 2016, p.64).

### *Two-way communication channels*

Blogs created by company and own groups/communities are considered by Taiminen and Karjaluo (2015) as two-way communication channels with high company control while social media is regarded as two-way channel with low company control.

Blog posts are an effective form of inbound marketing and communication channel as it both creates an image/reputation about the expertise of the company and has the

capacity to either attract or lose clients (Patruti-Baltes, 2016, p.63) The crucial part is that writers of the blogs should have something meaningful to convey as stated in Taiminen and Karjaluo (2015) while the quality of content will determine whether it will enhance the level of trust or deteriorate the company's image (Patruti-Baltes, 2016, p.63). Taiminen and Karjaluo (2015) regard blogging as a form of a social media where the company has a substantially higher level of control due to the fact that blogs are component part of the website, but the comments allow a more interactive two-way format than a simple website page. Patruti-Baltes (2016, p.63) suggest SEO analysis as a recommended action to ensure that the posts are discovered by the target audience, however, it is vital that their needs are considered.

Social media posts are another way to effectively generate inbound marketing and communicate actively with the target audience. A study conducted by Fleishman-Hillard states that 79% of consumers admitted that they follow brands on social media channels in order to learn more about the company, as well as getting more insights about the products/services (Patruti-Baltes, 2016, p.65). It is imperative to mention the co-creation and customer relationship management importance over sales when it comes to social media. Engagement and brand awareness become more relevant parts of social media rather than sales pitches, thus authenticity and real dialogues are prioritized, however on long-term sales might be expected as well organically Taiminen and Karjaluo (2015).

Undeniably, social media is a good channel to help companies to build trust and reach their target audience with significantly lower costs (Leeflang, 2014). However, due to the fact that it is hard to evaluate the effectiveness of social media activities, many small and medium size companies are even ignoring social media as part of the main marketing machine because of added workload (Taiminen and Karjaluo, 2015). At the same time, long-term ignorance of this channel and the absence of responses to key customer questions originated in social media pages/forums might lead to negative consequences. Even if the company does not treat social media as a lead magnet, negative testimonials about the company's products/services from the "enraged customers" (not satisfied/against the product) could easily deteriorate the image of the company (Leeflang, 2014, p.6). Among the main social media channels, Taiminen and



Karjaluoto (2015) mention Facebook and Twitter as the most popular, LinkedIn as less prevalent and Pinterest with even less popularity.

On the other side, even if the company doesn't perceive social media as the main tool for lead generation, it is worthwhile to rethink the current marketing strategy because social media allows a deeper level of engagement with customers. In other words, it moves to a discussion about value-creation and WoM rather than solely a traffic source.

Leeflang (2014, p.6) defines good reputation as a crucial aspect in the B2B environment especially in a constantly changing digital era. He suggests that companies have to "take action" and start investing time and resources for good quality content targeting users from social media channels. In such a way, companies would have more leverage on the brand perception in the online environment especially when it comes to company mentions and reactions on different forums. For a substantial improvement Leeflang (2014) recommends appointing an official representative from the company to participate in the discussions and reply to the negative messages.

### **3.4 Main categories of media channels**

Historically technological advancements enabled consumers to be more open to different channels and platforms, besides the long-established advertisement channels such as TV and newspapers. Selection of the media channel became a relevant yet challenging task for marketing professionals, due to the multitude of arising digital opportunities. As summarized by Rashid (2014) one of the challenges faced by marketing managers is to identify which media channels are more effective and how do they compare based on that.

Chaffey (2015) divides channels into three main categories of media channels: paid media, earned media, and owned media. They differentiate and have own features and dynamics which are important to understand before choosing the corresponding digital marketing content strategies. By understanding the differences between channels managers will better comprehend the potential obstacles in enabling digital tools to access a bigger online audience.

The first category refers to paid media in both online and offline mediums, whereas the former represents “purchased media” for conversions, views, and reach via search, advertising, and affiliate marketing channel, the latter consists of traditional marketing channels such as TV, direct mail, and others (Chaffey, 2015).

The second category consists of earned media from publicity achieved through PR or from word-of-mouth (WoM) within social media channels and online communities. Influencers, bloggers, and ambassadors are relevant partners for developing earned media. Simultaneously, it can be perceived as an active discussion between customers and companies through offline and online methods (Chaffey, 2015). Moreover, Kotler et.al (2017b, p.12) suggests that the f-factor becomes more important as the consumers become more influenced by family, friends, followers than by traditional marketing campaigns. When consumers adopt peer-to-peer communication and ask for advice from other users rather than relying on advertised promises, trust shifts from a horizontal perspective to a vertical approach.

The third category represents the media that is owned by the company. While offline it may consist of promotional materials, in an online environment owned media can be anything that the company owns starting from email, mobile apps, websites, and blogs to social media accounts according to Chaffey (2015).

As identified by Rashid (2014, p.2) advertising professionals do not rely exclusively on one type of media but rather show a predilection for a combination of marketing opportunities, either traditional or digital. Thus, it is vital to conduct the media planning in a knowledgeable way to achieve integrated marketing communication (IMC).

Previous studies show that combinations of different media channels lead to higher numbers in reach and effectiveness compared to single media channels. At the same time, findings highlight an optimal level of effectiveness is accomplished with circa three to four media channels, while an even higher number of channels might have an unfavorable impact on the earnings. (Rashid, 2014, p.2).

Conducting research and selecting the right channels can help to prevent advertising wastage. Thus, analyzing the impact of each media channel upon the intent of purchase is vital as well as choosing the right strategies. (Rashid, 2014, p.3). Moreover, long term customer retention can be ensured if direct sales will be complemented with well “integrated communication channels with customers, such as e-mail, social media or virtual communities” according to Bhargava & Ojha (2019, p.299).

### **3.5 Customer Engagement on Social Media**

With the rise of social media and shift from broadcasting role of marketers to collaborative role, customers start to use social media not solely “to research products and services but also to engage with the companies they purchase from, as well as other consumers who may have valuable insights about these companies” (Bhargava & Ojha, 2019, p.295). Demmers et al., (2020) considers that brand-generated content with high potential of customer engagement is more likely to engage the customers and motivate them to like, share, or comment. If the content is highly engaging it will be reshared and even circulate through social media networks, hence capturing an extended audience.

Customer engagement is explained as an expression of behavior of customers for a company based on motivators such as references, WoM actions, mutual help among customers, writing testimonials and blogs, etc. Exchange of information is at the core of customer engagement but the emotional character between the customer and the company shouldn't be dismissed (Bhargava & Ojha, 2019). The affective and cognitive level is also acknowledged by Demmers et al., (2020) who summarize that behavioral manifestations and interactive nature are main features of consumer engagement which relies on mutual interactions with brand-generated content.

Customer engagement is influenced by several factors according to Bhargava & Ojha (2019): vividness, interactivity, product feature description, entertainment, and novelty.

Vividness can influence customer engagement through multimedia content due to its capability to appeal to customers' senses through a brand post. A high level of

vividness can increase the click-throughs and improve the customers' attitudes towards company's website (Bhargava & Ojha, 2019).

Interactivity refers to the extent of how two parties are interacting and how well their actions synchronize leading to effects such as: involvement, satisfaction, attitude and decision-making (Bhargava & Ojha, 2019). If a brand post has only text and no links or buttons to interact, then the level of interactivity can be classified as lower.

Product feature description posts refer to highlighting information concerning product launch dates and new features that might interest the product fans. Such posts will motivate the fans to interact and consume; the higher the level of interest the higher is the chance the fans will respond to such posts (Bhargava & Ojha, 2019).

Entertainment is considered an important part of customer engagement and for this reason it is advised to enrich the informational posts with elements of entertainment. Such improvement will lead to a more positive evaluation from users as well as motivate customers to visit the website one more time as compared to information lacking any entertainment aspects (Bhargava & Ojha, 2019).

Novelty of the content is also influential when it comes to customer engagement because it relies on unique messaging and exterior drivers to secure the attention of users. Customers find novel content as gratifying and interest provoking, hence customer engagement will increase when users will interact with unique posts (Bhargava & Ojha, 2019).

Bhargava & Ojha (2019) state that customer engagement "is believed to be directly and positively related to a number of relationship outcomes such as satisfaction, trust, affective commitment and loyalty" (p.301).

Studies from Demmers et al., (2020) summarize that digital content impacts social media networks differently depending on the phase of customer journey. The same researchers consider that several types of content impact engagement variously because "customers have different needs in consecutive stages of the customer journey over time" (p.54). Thus, user-generated content is considered as more influential

during the awareness stage while brand-generated content is regarded as more impactful during the consideration stage. For instance, informational brand-generated content is claimed to engage the customers more before the consumption while entertaining content would generate more engagement after the consumption phase.

Lastly, digital content marketing should not be merely perceived as a way of automating mechanisms by leveraging technologies. Understanding the power of user-generated and company-generated content, the differences between media and communication channels and the factors driving the customer engagement will lead to a shift towards value creation for both the customers and businesses. As a result, it might help the company gain or enhance its competitive advantage (Chaffey, 2015; Rashid, 2014).

### **3.6 Summary of theoretical framework**

In this section were discussed the terms digital content marketing and its sub-components and was reviewed literature on the online purchasing process phases of solo entrepreneurs. The usage of digital channels in SMEs is also an aspect that has been covered. The attempt is to explain the purchasing process from the perspective of the solo entrepreneur however the lack of specific literature on them makes it more exhaustive to generalize and motivates to refer to small business owner and SMEs literature.

The traditional organizational buying process provides the initial steps to imagine the buying process of an entrepreneur however it is not sufficient to fully explain how all buying stages flow for solo entrepreneurs. The theoretical framework presents both traditional organizational buying process and customer journey process to elucidate in later chapters whether solo entrepreneurs purchase more like traditional companies or like consumers. Thus, from Webster (1965) process four stages known as “problem recognition, nomination of organizational responsibility, the search process and the choice process for selecting and evaluating the alternatives” have common points with stages from customer journey excepting the nomination of organizational responsibility. Based on two different models, customer journey framework seems to be more appropriate for studying the purchasing process of the solo entrepreneurs.

The theoretical framework defines the solo entrepreneur as a self-employed business owner without employees (Schummer, 2019; van Stel et al., 2014). Solo entrepreneur is explained differently from self-employed companies with more than one employee (CEO) through the continuity of the business depending on commitment and dependance of the entrepreneur (Schummer, 2019). van Stel et al. (2014) explains the main drivers for self-employment: basic material and social needs for initial levels of development and need of autonomy along with self-realization for more advanced levels. Even if entrepreneurs consider profitability as imperative, a balance between positive cash flow and clients' loyalty is more appreciated thus quality of their service and customer service become key aspects (Gilmore, 2011).

The literature points out the spontaneous and reactive nature of the small companies when compared to bigger companies. Main criterias that are appreciated by small companies for their operations range from quality, customer service, delivery, receptivity and flexibility (Pressey et al., 2009; Ellegaard, 2009). Additionally, Ellegaard (2009) notes the fear to unpredictability to change suppliers and the scarcity of resources.

Trust and engagement are described as component parts of Digital Content Marketing (Hollebeek and Macky, 2019). Reducing marketing waste is regarded as possible outcome when unlocking the potential of the inbound marketing and Chaffey (2015) claims that good quality content has a great role in that process.

Zero Moment of Truth (ZMOT) is an extremely important concept for understanding the decision making of customers because it explains the way customers search for information, read testimonials, comments before making purchasing decision (Chaffey, 2015). Word of Mouth is another concept that strongly relates with the ZMOT especially considering the fact that 9 in 10 customers check testimonials from previous clients before making the purchasing action (Godes and Silva, 2012). At the same time, it is clearly defined in literature that user-generated content.

The categorization of media channels is relevant for understanding the main differences between paid media, earned media and owned media (Chaffey, 2015). However media channels can also be classified in terms of one-way communication

tools and two-way communication tools, additionally, high or low control is also crucial for understanding the differences (Taiminen and Karjaluo, 2015).

Customer engagement is another concept important for understanding the behavior of the customers based on motivators. Bhargava & Ojha (2019) state that customer engagement is influenced by following factors: vividness, interactivity, product feature description, entertainment and novelty.

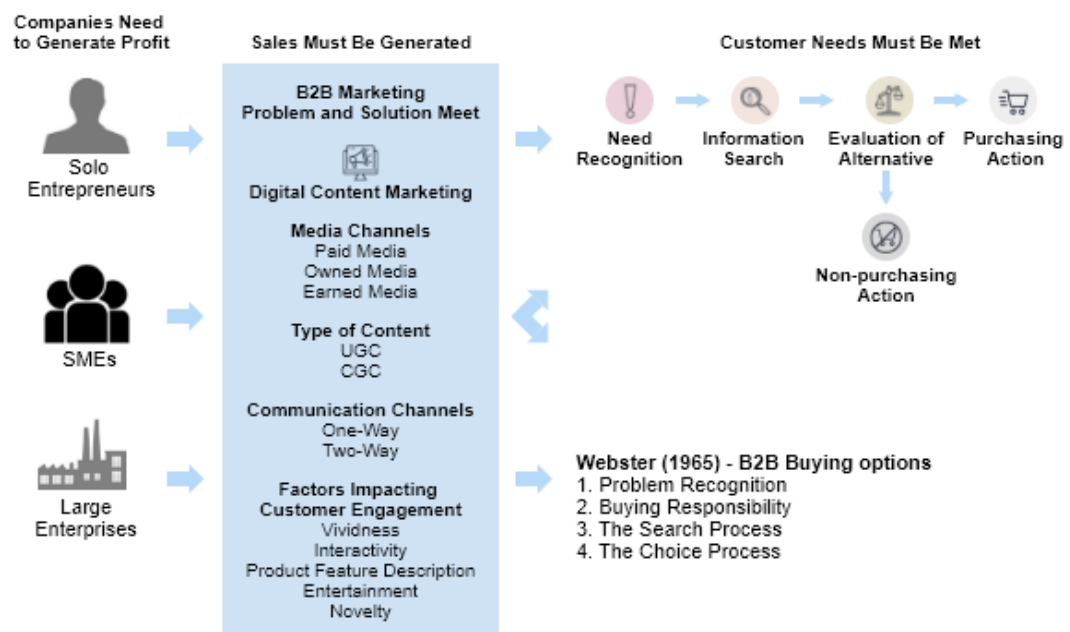


Figure 1 Theoretical framework summary

## 4 METHODOLOGY

### 4.1 Research philosophy and approach

Considering research philosophy is crucial when it comes to studying phenomena in order to generate new knowledge. During each step of the research different assumptions are needed in order to create a research design, interpret, and analyze the data (Perecman & Curran, 2006). As suggested by Saunders et al (2009), The research paradigm comes first because its aim is to improve the researcher's understanding of the philosophy whereas choice of the methods comes secondary (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Ontologically, it is worthwhile to distinguish between objectivism and subjectivism. Even though both aspects focus on the nature of reality, the former concerns the view that social entities exist independently from social actors while the latter refers to the view that phenomena depend on perceptions and actions of social actors.

This thesis is based on subjectivism as the case of customers is mainly studied in order to understand subjective realities, or the motives, actions, and intentions of individuals. This, in contrast with the objectivist approach which holds reality as independent of individual observation, and is therefore measured independent of the observer. While objectivism is often considered to bear results with scientific rigor, it excludes subjective interpretation by design in order to achieve precision, accuracy, and reliability (McKerchar, 2008). The relativistic approach allows the researcher to study the many subjective realities that exist on a given research topic. The interpretive nature of the relativist approach includes the human social understanding of how individuals understand, or view, phenomena which is more suitable in the customer research context (Greener, 2008).

Furthermore, the research logic within these philosophical paradigms must also be considered. The literature distinguishes between three main logical approaches: deduction, induction, and abduction (Järvensivu and Törnroos, 2010). Positivism is often based on deductive approach while the interpretivism has to do more with induction, however these are not rigid rules. Deductive approach aims to test a theory and hypothesis, explain casual relationships and produce generalization. Inductive



approach aims to provide deeper understanding of the context through qualitative data with less importance on generalizations according to Saunders et al (2009)

Even though the deductive approach is rigorous, and would allow for quicker data collection, it excludes the subjective reality of individuals. While induction includes these individual viewpoints, and produces new theoretical frameworks, the third logical approach of abduction is more suitable for this research as it includes empirical material, theories, and the observation and interpretation of subjective realities (Peirce, 1903). Specifically, the case study method is used abductively in this research as case studies focus on the synergy between a “phenomenon and its context is best understood through in-depth case studies” (Dubois & Gadde, 2002, p.554).

## **4.2 Research methodology**

In this commissioned Master’s thesis, the role of the practitioner-researcher affords a study and comprehension of the research context better due to an existing understanding of the background. However, there is a risk of researcher bias that might lead to ignoring relevant issues, an aspect highlighted by Saunders et al (2009). Yin (2011) suggests conducting a careful literature review before choosing and constructing a method in order to polish the initial considerations about the topic. A more selective approach allows the researcher to select the method and source of data easier.

This thesis focuses on a qualitative case study and its empirical research relies on selecting the target group and organizing semi-structured interviews with the target customers.

Case studies are one method, of many, that attempt to formulate a hypothesis via examination and observation of phenomena in a real-world context. Unlike the experimental approach, which involves a control and one or more directly manipulated variables, case studies are used to collect information in situations where experimentation is not possible, where tight controls that eliminate many contextual factors would render the results impractical, and where descriptive results are needed to generate theories and concepts about specific subject matter in a social context

(Levy, 2008). The power of case studies to formulate new theories is in their exploratory investigation, descriptive generalizability, derived from the intense study of one, or a small set, of specific topics (Gerring, 2004). In the context of business, case studies are used to explore business-to-business relationships, business networks, and understanding markets (Järvensivu and Törnroos, 2010).

Due to the nature of the case company, the findings will be useful not only to floor plan provider companies but also to SaaS companies. The proposal of this research aims to elucidate the most effective ways, and channels, to reach the target audience when it comes to targeting smaller companies. The key concepts of research questions are based on a theoretical framework of findings related to solo entrepreneurs' buying process and DCM marketing.

Qualitative methods are used as methodology during the study of this topic. This choice can be justified through comparing the purpose, scope, and goals of qualitative and quantitative methods of research. Quantitative research attempts to predict and generalize the findings of a topic with a high degree of statistical reliability, whereas qualitative research focuses on the study and understanding of certain phenomena (Coll & Chapman, 2000). The focus of this research is to understand the topic holistically, in a social context, and include the subjective interpretations of the participants of the study. As such, in-depth exploration is needed in order to appropriately represent the various viewpoints of the individuals in this study (Creswell, 2013).

Obtaining in-depth knowledge about a topic is difficult through the limitations and strict boundaries of quantitative research. The qualitative approach, if used in conjunction with abductive logic, has specific characteristics that match the needs of this study through descriptive reporting, including social context, and investigating a variety of perspectives that can reveal multiple facets and interpretations of the phenomena (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Qualitative research is well suited for relativistic research, where an objective reality is not assumed, and where multiple perspectives are a necessity in the process of exploration (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). As such, observations may lead to emergent

factors that require further investigation and inquiry. While qualitative research allows for investigative expansion, the rigid requirements of quantitative research prevent the researcher from studying outside the bounds of the intended design and scope of the study (Coll & Chapman, 2000).

Initially only the primary questions were defined without finalizing the data collection strategies and as Hoepfl (1997) suggests it is acceptable in qualitative research to plan the strategies and progress after data collection has started. However, gradually the research strategies were crystalized based on incoming data. Increasingly, research strategies began to take clear form, turning into a research design based on the concepts from the theoretical framework. Questions such as what data is the most valuable became progressively more important in order to support the aim of the research and elucidate the relevant meanings.

The theoretical sensitivity allows crafting a pertinent research design that aims to resolve some managerial issues because of the background literature, professional work experience in the field, and personal experience with interviewing customers. These aspects are highlighted by Yin (2011) as being important for the researcher to unlock a so-called naturalistic inquiry to gather information from several perspectives simultaneously.

### **4.3 Data collection**

The research design started with the focus and delimitation of the study whereas some parts of the audience will be excluded for the research purposes. Therefore, the study focuses on solo entrepreneurs because they represent a larger audience of the case company. This choice of the small companies (solo entrepreneurs) can be justified as well with the fact that finding bigger enterprise cases is usually a sales team task, thus research-oriented perspective can make an impact on the marketing viewpoint of the case company. As Hoepfl (1997) suggests it is crucial that the research paradigm aligns with the research focus, thus it is important to make the delimitation. All in all, the current research will study mainly the qualified solo entrepreneurs to ensure that the study respects the focus of this thesis: “the impact of digital content on solo entrepreneurs online purchasing behavior”.

The decision to collect data from a specific audience located in a specific area is relevant for the crystallization of the research design followed by crafting potential successive steps (Hoepfl, 1997). Hence, the selection of the target group relies on identifying the individuals who are familiar with digital content concepts but also who are active/qualified customers of the service.

#### 4.3.1 Sampling

The target customers for this study are business-oriented real estate photographers, even if the size of their company consists of one employee who is also the owner. Since their business relies on repetition a long-term business relationship is expected rather than a single transaction partnership. Thus, the customers need to trust the service in order to commit, because a 10% error might lead to losing the customer if expected service level is unmet.

The sample consists of self-employed real estate photographers that provide floor plans as part of their business. More precisely, only qualified new users of the Certified Photographer program were considered for the target group. The geographical area was limited to North America, and specifically to the United States because it is the country that holds Venture Oy's biggest portion of customer base. Thanks to integrations and tools used by the company such as Slack, Zapier, Intercom, and others it is possible to select only the qualified customers.

These companies are not selected randomly but, from a rational perspective, are based on their qualities so they fit the small business definition. Thus, this research will use a purposeful sampling. This type of sampling is considered as one of the most prevalent in qualitative research and it aims to accumulate rich amounts of information and study the phenomenon deeply (Patton, 2002). This type of sampling allows the researcher to include information-rich cases that can willingly participate and express their opinions in order to better assist with relevant research (Bernard, 2002), which will efficiently utilize the accessible resources (Etikan, 2016). The purposive sampling is especially suitable for a small sample whereas cases that are selected are information-rich and insightful for selected topic of research (Saunders et al, 2009; Yin, 2011). The accepted photographer profiles are contacted via email with an

invitation to participate in an interview. A follow-up email is enacted for individuals who didn't reply.

Generally, it is recommended to conduct 10-15 interviews for studying such a topic however according to Hoepfl (1997, p.50) "there are no strict criteria for sample size". In fact, Yin (2013, argues that a case study has no sample. The total number of the interviews for the current study is 12 interviews. Twelve interviews provide sufficient data and a range of different responses needed to cover various aspects of the studied phenomenon.

#### 4.3.2 Data collection technique: Semi-structured interviews

Yin (2011) suggests that data is a collection of tiny particles or entities that result from experiments, observation, recorded events etc.

Data collection techniques differ between each other in terms of the way the data is collected: quantitatively or qualitatively. Former focuses on numbers and usually is based on questionnaires while the latter might concern words and visual content and might deploy interviews (Saunders et al, 2009). Yin (2011) notes that in the qualitative data collection process, the researcher is the main instrument to collect data which can be in the form of words, numbers, observations, images and so on, while in quantitative the researcher has a role to read mainly and can use a tool for that.

For the following study qualitative data collection is deployed in order to gain more understanding of the phenomenon through interviews with newly signed and qualified customers. The current topic is not studied quantitatively by using surveys or questionnaires, because the aim of the thesis is to investigate the phenomenon by enabling customers to recall how they have found the service. Hence, qualitative method is preferred also because it allows us to attain depth rather than breadth of understanding (Etikan, 2016). Interview benefit is that the questions can be adapted to the respondent.

Saunders et al (2009) states three main types of interview categories: structured; semi-structured and unstructured.

The interviews in this study are semi-structured of medium and long duration based on how elaborative the interviewees' responses were formulated. Semi-structured style of interview is based on a list with specific questions to be covered, however their order may vary depending on how the interview flows. As Saunders et al (2009) suggests, semi-structured interviews can help to explain key themes, but its flexible format allows to have a set of factual questions as well as questions that aim to explore the less known aspects. Key themes for the interview are generated from concepts from literature, personal experience on the selected topic, discussion with co-workers and discussion with students. Questions are formulated in a way that is accessible to the interviewee's language and understanding whereas complex concepts are avoided just as Saunders et al (2009) recommends.

Due to the intention to have deeper responses Google Meet Video/Audio call interviews are preferred instead of email/written responses that do not allow comprehensive responses from the interviewees.

Data collection was conducted via video call through Google Meet and implied automatic transcription from extension features integrated with Google Meet to record the meeting. Such method is preferred because video calls take less time for the interviewee, while providing much longer answers, and possibility to ask for immediate elaborations. Even though the interview and transcription time takes longer compared to the quantitative method, the qualitative method to interview customers elicits more valuable results because of the freedom of interviewee to express autonomous thoughts and experiences.

Moreover, in order to facilitate the interview process and compensate for possible errors from transcription of the interviews based on the extension, the interviews were also registered with a voice recorder from the phone. Writing notes are considered by Saunders et al (2009) a crucial part of the recording data and in order to highlight relevant discussed topics, a combination between notes and recordings allows to have a broader data from the interviews aiming to include all important details. Based on the permission from the interviewees, the audio tape recordings were transcribed in written format on the same day after each interview to ensure a more complex

description of details. The text was reviewed carefully and further analyzed in order to approach the findings stage of the research.

One of the techniques to ensure trustworthiness is selecting the newest users who applied and were accepted in the certified photographer program during 23rd November 2020 until 20th January 2021. This exclusion criteria is applied to make sure that the selected interviewees will remember better how they ended up on Venture Oy website. Also, because this is the audience, we are the most interested in - early/late majority not the early adopters. The thesis excludes the pre-interview time when it concerned contacting and motivating the interviewees to participate, hence no recordings were made in the pre-interview stage. In other words, the table shows only the duration for the during interview time.

**Table 2. Details of the interview participants**

Interviewee	Location	Age	Gender	Years of experience (real estate photography)	Interview date	Duration of the interview (h min)
C1	Seattle (US)	58	F	5 years	17.12.2020	1:15:12
C2	Atlanta (US)	76	M	11 years	24.12.2020	1:04:46
C3	Pennsylvania (US)	66	M	15 years	24.12.2020	1:49:30
C4	Florida (US)	58	M	2 years	31.12.2020	1:09:38
C5	North Carolina (US)	49	M	5 years	31.12.2020	48:45
C6	Maryland (US)	64	M	2 years	06.01.2021	1:15:38
C7	New York (US)	28	M	2 years	08.01.2021	51:47
C8	Seattle (US)	40	M	1 year	11.01.2021	52:36
C9	Michigan (US)	37	M	3 years	13.01.2021	57:54
C10	Massachusetts (US)	29	M	5 years	14.01.2021	47:06
C11	Kentucky (US)	20	M	1 year	15.01.2021	33:37
C12	Florida (US)	74	M	6 years	21.01.2021	22:45

#### 4.4 Interview themes and questions

First, close-ended questions were asked to identify the background of the solo entrepreneurs through details such as age, location, years of experience in the field, and educational background. Immediately after identifying the background details, open-ended questions are enquired to understand the customers' behavior online. Thus, the initial questions tried to elucidate the reasons for using social networks as well as the most commonly used social media channels and digital channels usage.

After background check questions were enquired, questions were asked to determine how the online purchasing process of the solo entrepreneurs develops from start to finish. This lead to identifying the differentiation between balanced and considered customer journeys. Later on, questions were asked separately to understand each of the pre-purchase stages. First, questions aimed to diagnose what triggers need recognition for solo entrepreneurs. As a result, it helped to distinguish between customer-driven orientation and business growth orientation.

Questions concerning the second stage intended to clarify which channels solo entrepreneurs used during the information search stage, moreover it helped to pinpoint the most frequently used search terms by interviewees. For the evaluation of alternatives stage, questions were directed to recognize the criterias solo entrepreneurs use to evaluate the legitimacy of the solution. Moreover, additional questions were asked to diagnosticate the misunderstandings interviewees have about the product/service before free trial.

The next set of questions was used to explore the role of digital content during different stages of online purchasing decision: First to understand the attitudes towards digital content during the awareness stage, then to see what kind of content solo entrepreneurs want to see during information search and then how they perceive digital content during the consideration stage.



## 4.5 Data analysis

After conducting the interviews and transcribing the recordings into written format, this study has gathered 12 interview transcripts. In order to interpret and analyze the data, it is worthwhile to explain the data analysis process.

The analysis process was based on studies from Braun and Clarke (2006) consisting of familiarization with the data and transcription of verbal data; initial codes generation, looking up for themes, review of the themes, themes definition, writing the report. Similarly as Braun and Clarke (2006) study suggests the data analysis was facilitated thanks to the familiarization with the data after transcribing the video tapes and verifying the notes. The first list with potential codes were generated based on the initial comprehension from reading the transcripts.

However, due to closer reading and repetitive study of the raw data - a more crystalized list with codes was created thanks to organizing the data in groups. Braun and Clarke (2006) denotes that it is normal that coded data are different from units of analysis, and it is also considered acceptable to code for more themes. They also noted that that data can be coded automatically with softwares as well as manually for example by highlighting with colored markers the common patterns to delimitate certain segments of data. For the current thesis manual method of analysis was chosen. In the following stage of the analysis process, thinking about relationships between codes, themes and even sub-themes is expected. Then, after reviewing each theme and observing a logical pattern then follows an analysis of how accurately each theme represents the data set until the themes are completely refined. Defining the themes and explaining clearly each theme is more than just paraphrasing the data, Braun and Clarke (2006) suggests explaining why a particular theme is relevant for the study.

Analysis of the data relies on an abductive approach which means that the main topics are generated from the data. Thus, the data is organized and divided into reasonable units, summarized, then patterns are identified and after valuable information is detected the findings are revealed as stated in Bogdan and Biklen (1982) and Hoepfl, (1997). For the data analysis it was required to manage larger quantities of data

consisting of interview transcripts and notes. For the technical part the information was sorted manually.

Coding is done by grouping concepts into descriptive categories in order to gain more understanding of the phenomenon while categorization based on main themes was conducted to define divisions. This study does not use open coding and axial coding here. The categories were revised and re-examined in order to fit the main research question.

At the beginning the online behavior of the solo entrepreneurs is analyzed through identifying the reasons for using social networks and enumerating the main digital channels used by interviewees. The second part of analysis groups the concepts in order to analyze thematically the solo entrepreneurs' purchasing process phenomenon based on differences between consumers and business buying, typologies of journeys and responses to customer demand.

The third part centralizes around digital content marketing by grouping data based on touch points during need recognition as in Lemon and Verhoef (2016): brand-owned; partner-owned; customer-owned and external. Several types of content are also categorized based on factors summarized by Bhargava & Ojha (2019) as having impact on customer engagement during the consideration stage. Main criterias for evaluating alternatives in the pre-purchase stage are also categorized and compared to previous research. Thematic analysis is applied during the entire data analysis in order to facilitate obtaining empirical findings that will help to answer the main research question.

	<b>Behavior during pre-purchase stages</b>	<b>General attitudes towards content</b>
<b>Customer-driven orientation or business growth orientation</b>	Need recognition / Identification stage	Attitude towards digital content during awareness stage
<b>Channels and search terms</b>	Information Search stage	Content desired by customers during search
<b>Criteria to evaluate the product and its legitimacy; misunderstandings</b>	Evaluation of alternatives stage	Attitude towards digital content during consideration stage

**Figure 2. Thematic analysis based on behaviors and attitudes of solo entrepreneurs during pre-purchase stages**

Reliability is important during the data collection and analysis process as it denotes the extent to which the deployed techniques will produce consistent results. To support this Saunders et al (2009) suggests thinking whether “similar observations” will be “reached by other observers” and whether the research will achieve transparency when working with raw data. Hence, to ensure more reliability it is recommended to reduce the observer error and bias or participant error or bias. Observers might face error by asking questions from different perspectives to generate answers and it might be reduced when a stronger structure of the interview plan is established. Meanwhile, the participant could be biased to reply in a specific way just because they think they are expected to say certain ideas. Similar bias could be faced when interpreting the data.

Validity focuses on determining whether there is a causal relationship between variables Saunders et al (2009). However, it is crucial to note that validity is not restricted only to the findings of the study, but also to the correctness of a description, conclusion, meaning and other important parts of the study (Yin, 2011). In order to avoid issues with validity, Yin (2011) suggests involving a longer time when conducting the field part in order to gain a more profound understanding and observe patterns during interviews, to gain rich data which allows variety and more purposeful details, to ask feedback from the interviewees to reduce misunderstandings; to compare the results between different situations and events..

## 5 FINDINGS

In this section, the collected data by using semi-structured interviews and the empirical results are analyzed. The choice of method on how to analyze the data was discussed in the previous chapter.

Theoretical concepts help to draw the main sub-chapters and the link between them in findings as illustrated in Figure 4 Summary of analysis themes. Even though research questions helped to organize findings in the report, this chapter is structured thematically. Quotes from respondents display the data in a wide format highlighting the diversity in informants' opinions, focusing on main commonalities and differences between them. In order to understand the phenomenon holistically, different views from respondents are summarized and presented in Figure 3 illustrating how the main themes of the analysis flow in order to respond to main research question and sub-questions.

Subsequently, after empirical data analysis key findings will complement the theoretical background. In the end of this chapter, summary of findings from the study will be presented.

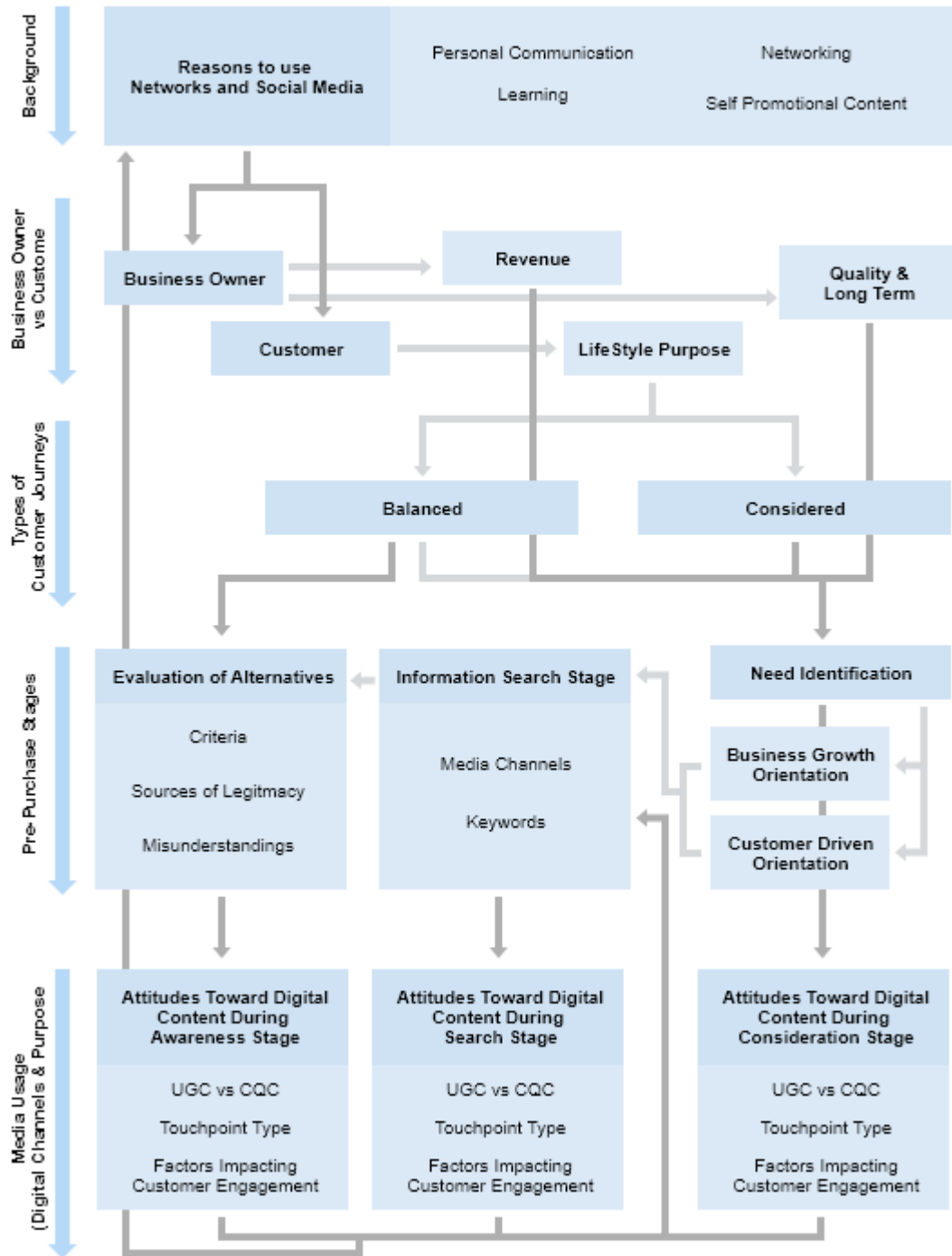


Figure 3 Summary of analysis themes

## 5.1 Solo entrepreneurs' behavior online

Before diving into solo entrepreneurs' purchasing process and role of digital content during pre-purchase stage, it is vital to find out first how do the interviewees behave online. That's why initially the reasons for using social media are presented to find out common patterns about how active are solo entrepreneurs on social media and what are the main reasons to use social networks. Then, the findings show the main social media platforms and also digital channels used by solo entrepreneurs.

### 5.1.1 Reasons for using social networks

Most of the interviewees described themselves as not very social media or tech savvy however having the responsibility to have at least some sort of social media presence if not for entertainment but at least for presenting their business online. Main highlighted aspects by respondents varied from personal communication to self-promotional content for business:

*“Not so much time. I know it's important but I don't use FB (like I should) but I have FB page; I created google my business page; but my business pages are incomplete. Not a technical person or super experienced with digital marketing; eager to learn” (C1)*

*“Very little; photography fb page; - personal communication; as a real estate agent I was using scheduling tools to post on social media” (C6)*

Some described themselves as inspired to use social media or even being somewhat active not just self-promotional for business. Social media is mainly viewed as a place to learn about competitors, customers and showcasing own services. Interestingly, interviewees who are more social media savvy highlighted the networking part as a core to their social media activity:

*“Personal: I'm very active on FB; 2 professional pages: active there; active on groups; other photography groups; also music groups; IG: professional business real estate photography followed by salespeople from real estate - to showcase my services; LinkedIn - 2 pages interacting with customers” (C3)*

*“Searching for inspiration; post sharing own content; self-promotion, marketing; connecting with colleagues, community outreach”(C7)*

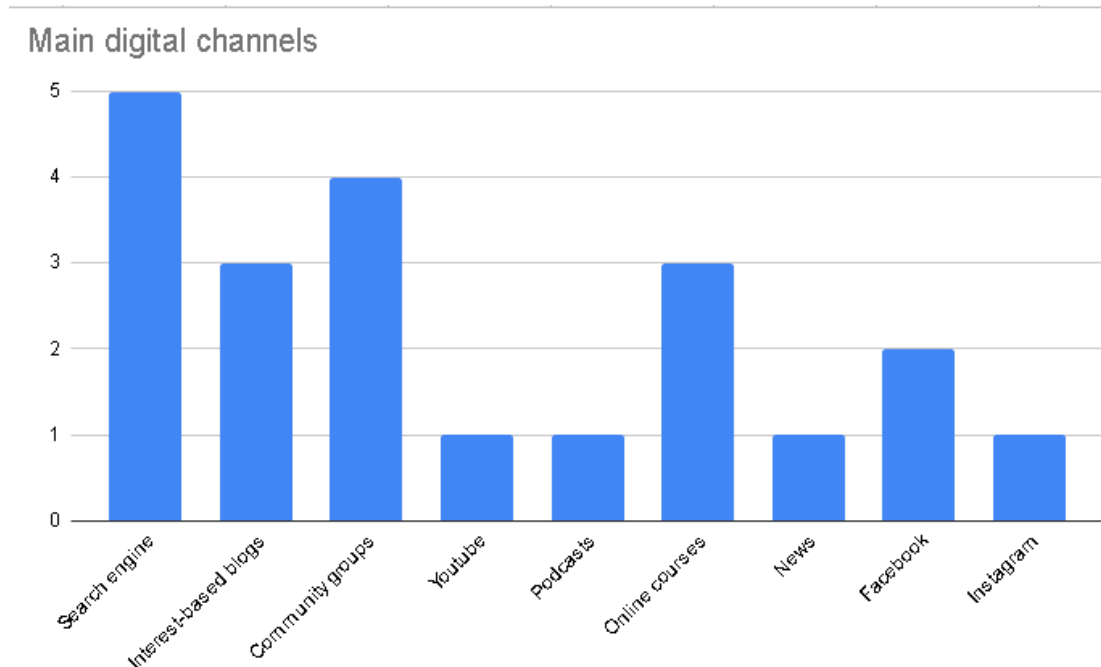
*“A lot of time to learn about competition, pricing, quality; friends and family engagement”(C8)*

Despite the fact that not all interviewees are active social media users, the answers still suggest that social media is a good medium where companies can reach their target customers with low costs especially considering that they use these platforms also for business activity. Leeflang (2014) suggests that even if social media is not the primary lead generation tool for a company, it is still important to consider it for overall marketing strategy since it permits a deeper level of engagement with users.

#### 5.1.2 Social media platform usage

The responses show that Facebook is the main social media channel that customers use for personal and professional causes. Some of the users even mentioned that interest-oriented groups on Facebook about real estate photography where the source where they found out about Venture Oy. Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn seem like social media channels with less popularity among the interviewees. Even though YouTube was mentioned only once by an interviewee, in following questions it appears more often. This happens to the fact that users don't perceive YouTube as a social media channel.

### 5.1.3 Main digital channels



**Figure 4. Main digital channels used by solo entrepreneurs**

It can be observed that the main digital channels are represented by search engines such as Google, interest-based blogs like PFRE, community groups on Facebook for real estate photography, YouTube tutorials, podcasts, online courses for real estate photography, Facebook and Instagram.

In conclusion, the case company should conduct media planning in a wise manner in order to obtain a so-called integrated marketing communication (IMC).

The above answers show how diverse are the users when it comes to usage of media channels and for this reason selecting the most relevant channels is crucial to increase the reach and efficiency (Rashid, 2014). In order to achieve a level of efficiency it is recommended to opt for 3-4 media channels and as the Rashid (2014) study suggests choosing adequate channels can help obviate advertising waste.



## 5.2 Online purchasing process of the solo entrepreneurs

After getting a glimpse of the interviewees' behavior online, the questions aimed to elucidate what kind of online purchasing process solo entrepreneurs have. Based on data, there are two main distinctions between customer journeys of solo entrepreneurs: considered and balanced. Impulsive journey was not identified in any of the 12 interviewed cases because it is more common for consumers rather than businesses. For need recognition stage it was relevant to identify correctly whether the response to customer demand was reactive and market-led or opportunistic and profit-driven. Also, it is highlighted how solo entrepreneurs become aware of the solution and what channels and keywords they use during information search stage. Then, the evaluation of alternatives stage highlighting criteria to evaluate the product and its legitimacy as well as possible misunderstandings are presented to mark the last phase in pre-purchase process. Lastly in this section, findings reveal how solo entrepreneurs perceive the differences between purchasing as a business owner when compared to buying as an individual.

To begin with, the online purchasing process is not similar to all interviewees however some patterns can be outlined. When the decision to search for a digital service is determined by a requirement from the interviewees' customers, they seem to search services by introducing keywords via search engines/social media/app store, checking offerings, reading reviews, downloading the app, comparing the app with the promised features. If the app works well then, the user stays loyal to the service, if not searches for alternatives and the cycle starts again. Such journeys are described by Wolny and Charoensuksai (2014) as considered journey due to a longer pre-shopping stage and presence of ZMOT phenomenon:

*“I was creating floor plans by hand; it was too complicated and taking too much time; it wasn't effective; I had to take measurements myself; a lot of work needed; I went online to search options; a lot of them were free but they were not great; I searched on app store myself and I downloaded Venture Oy; measurements matched; inexpensive” (C7)*

*“Prior I was making floor plans for my clients manually; laser measuring everything by myself. Pandemic made clients interested in virtual tours; now we see relaxing related to the pandemic; so virtual tours are not that requested*

*but floor plans are still important; I began investigating how to do floor plans by different vendors; I searched on different groups on Facebook; PFRE blog. I was checking, quality; turnaround time; cost structure; I started testing them” (C9)*

However, the interviewees who found out the service through interest-based groups on social media platforms or via acquaintances tend to research directly the company website rather than typing keywords to find different alternatives. Additionally, they watch YouTube tutorials to check whether the service seems as easy as explained in the groups, compare how the service is used by different photographers (competition), assess the pricing and download. In case the experience with the service is good, customers will use it often. Such type of journey is described as balanced journey by Wolny and Charoensuksai (2014) because f-factor triggers customer’s intention to purchase however it becomes less impulsive once more information is gathered:

*“I learn about the product from other people talking. Then I’ll research about it through google search. Sometimes will use YouTube tutorials; how other photographers use the same software; how much it costs, and if the price brings value then I’ll try it on. Download it and if I like it after trying it I’ll use it more often” (C4)*

*“I signed up for a photography course; I heard from Eli Jones about Venture Oy; I went to Venture Oy website; I checked the pricing and decided to try; it is very easy.” (C11)*

Some examples are outliers since they are not similar to the previous two categories. One of them shows that it takes more than awareness before a customer will decide to use a service, even if being exposed to the service - the prospect will be interested in using it only after being inquired by the client to start providing the service (floor plans). In such a situation, seeing the initially advertised service on podcasts now also on interest-based Facebook groups (real estate photography groups) makes the customer consider the service and hence search for it on Google and download. This user had to be exposed 3 times to the brand/service before considering using it:

*“Digital: no experience - googling using keywords, youtube tutorials, pick 2-3 most popular and check their ratings; watch the videos; make a decision if it’s an adobe product or I’ll choose another vendor; subscribe and begin learning; Venture Oy: podcasts with Rich Baum advertised (I didn’t do anything until a realtor asked me); do you do floor plans with measurements? No, but I’ll*

*research it; because he asked; but I remembered because I saw it on Facebook groups; then I searched on google; I found Venture Oy; downloaded; uploaded; etc; 3 times exposed. results impressed” (C3).*

Another example shows that it can start as a considered journey from an intentional point of view where the prospect searches by keywords finds a solution that in the end doesn't satisfy him and then thanks to acquaintance learns about Venture Oy (word of mouth) in offline medium not due to digital channels. This example shows how the journey started as considered however when the cycle restarted (due to dissatisfaction with first choice) – the journey becomes balanced because acquaintances serve as f-factor (Wolny and Charoensuksai, 2014). Illustration of such case:

*“I searched online terms: easy floor plan; quick floor plan; simple floor plan real estate - I found magicplan from online but I didn't like because it required me to tap on each corner of the room and it was lousy - I heard about team who were doing floor plans; if I wanted to grow the business - I would like to change the name to grow the business. Then from a friend I heard about the solution; I went online and I searched it online and it didn't take a long time.” (C6)*

**Table 3 Journey experienced by solo entrepreneurs. Considered journey**

Type of journey	Journey experienced by solo entrepreneurs	Need recognition method
Considered journey	Once the providers who have the needed product/service were identified, the policies about process payment, security are studied. What is the ework/return policy? Is there support available, and what type? What is the promised turnaround time? After answering these questions there is intention to purchase. Found Venture Oy from Google search.	Independent research
	Independent research from salespeople may start with the website; reading reviews; 90% buying from a preferred website. 2nd choice – amazon.	Independent research
	Before creating floor plans by hand ineffectively; it was too complicated and taking too much time; need to take measurements and a lot of. Used online medium to search options; a lot of them were free but they were not great; Searched on app store myself and downloaded Venture Oy; measurements matched; inexpensive.	Independent research
	Prior creating floor plans for clients manually by independent laser measuring. Pandemic made clients interested in virtual tours; but due to relaxing restrictions virtual tours are not that requested but	Independent research

	<p>floor plans are still important. Began investigating how to do floor plans by different vendors; Searched on different groups on Facebook; PFRE blog. Checking quality; turnaround time; cost structure. Started testing them.</p> <p>Went to specific websites from the company that are selling products. Product reviews lead to specific products.</p>	Independent research
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**Table 4 Journey experienced by solo entrepreneurs. Balanced journey**

Theme	Journey experienced by solo entrepreneurs	Need recognition method
Balanced journey	Learn about the product from other people talking. Research about it via google search; YouTube tutorials; how other photographers use the same software; how much it costs, and if the price brings value. Downloaded and tried it.	F-factor
	Starts with a need elicited after seeing something on a blog. Went to the company's website; checked how it will help; Check the reviews. After, look at comparison products. Revisit if satisfied the offer. The purchasing decision not immediate but after 24-48 hours.	F-factor
	Asked friends who are photographers what they use for real estate. Started researching what other people use. Read reviews; got information; videos. Ultimately heard about the solution on FB group.	F-factor
	Took a real estate photography course from Eli Jones; the instructor was telling about how he was doing floor plans. Found it on FB.	F-factor
	Signed up for a photography course. Heard from Eli Jones about Venture Oy; Went to company website and checked the pricing and decided to try; it is very easy.	F-factor

### 5.2.1 Need recognition stage

First of all, customers have to understand they have a problem/need before looking for a solution and this section will elucidate how do solo entrepreneurs realize they need a floor plan service. The data analysis indicates that there are two main directions that

determine the need for a floor plan service among solo entrepreneurs: customer-driven orientation and business growth orientation.

Some of the interviewees responded that it was a customer-driven need or in other words the service was requested by their clients. It can be described as well as an external stimuli or as a customer-centric approach towards purchasing services. Such approach can be described as reactive and market-led based on literature:

*“One of the companies required floor plans and it was a nightmare because it was difficult to create with planup (competitor). I was working on it during the night and it was difficult, I had to find a solution for having in tool kits something that works and don't take 10 h to do. Venture Oy was magically easy to use” (C1)*

*“Real estate agents expected floor plans; making sure I have services that they need. I wanted to provide more services rather than simply photography” (C8)*

Others saw the potential in offering floor plan service as a way to expand their real estate photography business offering in order to keep up with the competition. Their need appeared due to a business-growth orientation or as theory suggests “profit-driven” and “opportunistic” response to customer demand:

*“I didn't feel that I needed it; from the discussion of Facebook; anything that is value-added is good for explore and to make some extra dollars; no higher-end client asked me, but I was thinking that a floor plan could be something extra especially during covid anything digitally could be useful - complementary floor plan to 6 best clients (C2)”*

*“I've created a business plan for 2021; I realized it would be helpful to expand the services I offer and the floor plan was a natural choice” (C12)*

**Table 5 Solo entrepreneurs responses based on customer demand**

Theme	Challenge	Type of response to customer demand
Customer demand	Companies required floor plans and it was difficult to create with previous option. Need to find a functionable solution to have in tool kits.	Reactive, market-led
	Before realtor asked, gained interest after hearing about it at a podcast. Wanted to make the package more attractive for realtors; to add more services	Reactive, market-led, opportunistic

besides photo as part of portfolio during covid. Heard about Venture Oy from groups in discussions. When realtor asked such a service - the result was good (quality) and expectations were achieved.

A lot of realtors talked about it. From additional research, found Venture Oy (from google). Hearing from realtors that floor plan will be appreciated a valued-added to business.

Reactive, market-led, opportunistic

Some agents required interactive floor plans. Solo entrepreneur wanted a tool in toolkit – to have an opportunity to upsell. Searched online through many alternatives for something easy without a sketch.

Reactive, market-led, opportunistic, profit-driven

Real estate agents expected floor plans thus ensuring to have needed services. Intention to provide more services rather than simply photography.

Reactive, market-led, opportunistic

Discussion on Facebook lead to idea of a value-added service that is worth exploring and earning extra dollars. No higher-end client asked however floor plan was perceived as something extra during covid - complementary floor plan to 6 best clients.

Opportunistic, profit-driven

Real estate photography groups determined to understand the need for a solution that could be helpful with a feasible cost. Calculating the profit that can be made from offering the service. Time is reduced and potential to maximize profits.

Opportunistic, profit-driven

While doing more real estate photography to keep up with the competition the need I to offer more than just photography arises

Opportunistic

Need for an efficient, non-manual way in a high-quality manner. Understanding of the market based on competition offering the service.

Opportunistic, market-led

Competitors offer floor plans. Perceiving it as a potential addition to be more competitive to offer more.

Opportunistic

Competition (photographers) offer it as an add-on.

Opportunistic

After creating a business plan for 2021 realization of the need to expand the services.

Opportunistic, profit-driven

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### 5.2.2 Awareness of the business opportunity

Thus, interviewees can be also categorized into two groups, first category referring to situations when clients requested floor plans as service from photographers while the second category is represented by photographers who realized the opportunity thanks to studying the market and competition. The category of situation when the customer requested the floor plan can be explained as a market pull whereas when the business decided to provide solution can be understood as market push.

Thus, photographers who were enquired by their clients share a similar story. As suggested in literature the customers identify a problem that can be solved by purchasing a service in order to reduce the disparity between the current and desired level of a goal achievement. This situation can be described as a market pull:

*“Agents enquired to offer floor plans so I decided to take the opportunity”  
(C6)*

*“brokers asked me what I offer and I said photography; but then they asked if I offered floor plans and I realized this is something that I need so I took the opportunity” (C7)*

However, there were photographers who initiated this floor plan service thanks to competition analysis:

*“Opportunity saw on facebook; I’m actually a traditional photographer and don’t do matterport 360; most of my clients never asked for a matterport tour; I’m responsive to what my clients ask for; I don’t do video I outsource; floor plans are so simple and easy; clients seem pleased, nice value-added” (C2)*

*“From photography real estate Facebook groups who used it and were satisfied with the Venture Oy solution. Most were offering it as part of the package” (C4)*

Additionally, it can be noted that some interviewees place significant importance on Facebook groups (based on interest - photography) when considering a business opportunity or solution for the business problem. In summary, the findings showcase a direct connection to theory because the responses from interviewees indicated similar factors as Webster (1965): reducing the price, competition, managerial ambitions “to

do more” and look for a better solution for the existing problem. However, reducing the price only concerns the interviewees who provided a similar service before because for others it’s almost a novelty and mainly an aspiration to do and earn more from added service.

The answers from interviewees also suggest a distinction between solo entrepreneurs who discover the solution through product and solo entrepreneurs who identify the business problem/opportunity first and search for solution later. There is a deviance in responses from the interviewees while most of them said first was a business problem for the rest of them it was the product that they discovered initially.

While few respondents noted that they first found the product before or instead of business problems, most of the interviewees said that they first found the business problem. Here are the main reasons why not offering floor plans was seen as a problem:

*“Business problem and I had to find a way to do it later - a tool” (C8)*

*“Business problem, seeing that competitors were doing but I wasn't offering; I was looking for a service that didn't require a ton to cost” (C10)*

The price and the performance are the main aspects interviewees seem to be the most concerned about when identifying the business problem. Additionally, delivery time is an aspect that might be relevant for this stage however it is not yet suggested when being asked.

### 5.2.3 Information Search stage

#### *Channels used during information search stage*

For most of the times, respondents said that Google was the place to search the floor plan service however there were some interviewees who noted that they search on App Store, Facebook groups or other vendor lists. Even though Google is the most prevalent source to begin the search, some used Google to search a floor plan service while others were targeting Venture Oy solutions due to being exposed to the solution



on other channels such as Facebook groups, podcasts, blogs. Thus, the latter have chosen to open Venture Oy website from the very beginning without the need to look for generic solutions by typing organic search on Google indicating a considerate level of brand awareness.

This finding comes in hand with the statement from Chaffey (2015) who considers that companies should optimize their websites with relevant keywords for search engines, across company services and social media pages - because a large number of customers discover the service through “pull mechanism”. In other words, because the customers tend to search for information, companies should ensure that all their digital channels are discoverable by potential customers to maximize chances to be found by their main target audience.

#### *Most frequently used search terms during information search stage*

Venture Oy was typed as a keyword by 3 of the interviewees, while the rest and the majority of the sample used keywords such as “easy” and “easiest” for “floor plan” keyword highlighting that ease of use is a desired feature for the solution. “Quick” was mentioned once indicating that speed is another feature that some solution seekers look for.

Floor plan creator/maker, floor plan solution/options/services and floor plan software were predominantly used by interviewees when looking for a floor plan solution. Some searched more precise comparative information based on a competitor “Matterport comparison” or even more tutorial/how-to type of question: “how to create a digital floor plan”.

#### 5.2.4 Evaluation of alternatives stage

This section identifies the main criterias solo entrepreneurs use in order to evaluate the product/service but also the criterias that help to evaluate the legitimacy of the solution before purchasing the service.

Some of the criterias used by solo entrepreneurs when evaluating the product are related to end product; some are related to use of product etc. Even though adjectives suggesting **price** were not mentioned by interviewees when they were searching for a solution by google or other search tools, it becomes an important aspect to consider when evaluating a product. Another feature that is relevant in the evaluation stage of the product but was not mentioned in the search process is “**having or not measurements** on a floor plan” as well as **quality** which was not mentioned at all in the previous section for keywords. **Turnaround time** and **accuracy** are other relevant factors that were not mentioned in the search stage of the product however these two are often suggested as criterias to evaluate a product.

According to literature this stage refers to the choice process when the buyer is considering choosing one of the alternatives. Thus, the main criterias used to evaluate the product are congruent to criterias mentioned in the theoretical framework and more precisely product features, price, delivery time, quantity and quality. Due to the fact that interviewees are representatives from small businesses specifications like credit rating, financial power, business experience and size are not that primordial when qualifying a vendor. Hence, it can be summarized that lack of these mandatory specifications for small business buying processes denote that smaller enterprises can take risks when choosing a vendor while big companies have more rigorous selection.

#### **Criteria to evaluate the legitimacy of the solution (before purchasing the service)**

Due to the nature of the service, Venture Oy clients have the chance to use the first scan for free. And even if it might seem that most clients would judge the legitimacy of the solution based on the trial - this is not true for all respondents. Some clients would do various actions in order to save time before deciding to try even a free trial. It looks seemingly popular to ask feedback and recommendations from other like-minded individuals offline or online:

*“Asking feedback from colleagues from the same industry (more important than on company’s website) safer decision” (C4)*

*“Ask other photographers online and offline; ask in photography groups” (C6)*

For some users reading reviews (user-generated content) or tutorial videos (company-generated content; user-generated content) in advance of using free trial seems reasonable:

*“Checked videos of how it works; read reviews” (C11)*

*“The more features the better; I checked the reviews on App Store; I check the release notes” (C7)*

Another category of users relied on referrals and research based on company testimonials (user-generated content presented on company’s website):

*“Matterport recommend Venture Oy; Aryeo tool also recommended” (C8)*

*“I was reinforced by the course I took; watching a professional who runs a business not just by himself but with many employees; that build confidence in me - then it might be value-added” (C10)*

*“I checked individual companies websites; feedback about these products online; checking people that were using the products and what did they say about it “(C9)*

### **Misunderstandings about the product/service before free trial**

While most of the interviewees do not have any misunderstandings about the product, some still experience confusion about the app. Such misunderstandings might prevent the new users from trying the app, hence it is advised to address them:

*“At the beginning the website is too soft on info; it could have a better video showing a human scanning (for younger maybe simplicity works better but for older human being scanning would be better) tutorial on first page” (C3)*

*“Not sure how to do with certain situations; patio, entry; the website described well but some aspects about additional spaces were missing. Feedback on individual scans would be helpful” (C4)*

*“At first I didn’t know about the customization and SVG (it was not clear in the app that I can customize)” (C7)*

### 5.2.5 Differences between purchasing as a business owner when compared to buying as an individual

The interviewees separated into two categories when being asked about how their business owner purchasing behavior differs from individual purchasing. While some of the respondents noted that the behavior is similar for B2B and B2C without significant differences, others clarified some aspects that are more prevalent in B2B than B2C.

Interviewees highlight that their solo entrepreneur purchasing behavior is based on needs (rational perspective) while their consumer behavior is based on wants (emotional perspective):

*“Biggest difference: need as a business owner and want as an individual” (C2)*

*“Before full-time I was buying cool lens to feel better; but then as a business owner I have all materials and I’m careful with what I buy business decisions; personal decisions as individual are not that rational necessarily” (C3)*

Another important aspect that differentiates the business owner from consumer is that purchasing as a business owner is the ability to monetize by integrating and offering a service, something that is not necessarily present in individual buying. These citations relate back to the distinction highlighted earlier in literature between achieving a goal in business context and lifestyle-oriented purchases in consumer context:

*“Pretty much the same; For business - it should make more money compared to individual - where it can be for leisure; I buy a lot online” (C4)*

*“It is the same, as a business-person, I think about where I can make more money by offering something my clients want. As a small company it's the same thing compared to if I had a big company.” (C6)*

*“As a business owner I want to make sure that everything I invest will produce a ROI for me; products that will make me more money; I like that it’s a pay per scan for Venture Oy; I wouldn’t offer at all if it was subscription” (C10)*

The collected data indicates that quality and long-term usage are also valid aspects when purchasing for a business angle rather than personal want:

*“As a business owner I look for a permanent solution. I prefer longevity; I like to commit” (C7)*

*“I’m willing to spend more as a business owner; it’s more about service I like to support; pricing isn’t everything; quality is more important” (C8)*

*“It’s similar for me because I purchase it; I want to make sure it’s high quality; reliable; consistent; core thing is I promise to deliver to my clients” (C9)*

**Table 6 Differences perceived by solo entrepreneurs while purchasing as business owner vs consumer**

Theme	Difference Business vs Consumer	Reason to purchase
Purchasing process	Biggest difference: need as a business owner and want as an individual	Need vs want
	Before business, buying products to feel better. As a business owner being careful with the business decisions). Personal decisions as individual are not necessarily rational	Rationality vs emotions
	Business decision should make more money compared to individual (leisure). As business-person focusing on making more money by offering what clients want. As a small company it's not comparable to big company.	Business goal vs lifestyle purchase Business goal, profit-oriented
	As a business owner ensuring to invest so it produces a ROI; products that will make more money.	Business goal, profit-oriented
	As a business owner look for a permanent solution. Longevity is preferred. Tendency to commit.	Business goal, long-term orientation
	Willingness to spend more as a business owner. More about service less about pricing because quality is more important.	Business goal, quality
	Similar process. Aspects like high quality; reliability; consistency; are core elements for delivering clients	Business goal, quality
	By helping business long term; clients success long term is important	Business goal, long-term orientation

### 5.3 Role of digital content during initial stages of online purchasing decision

#### 5.3.1 Touch points during awareness stage

##### *Touch points during awareness stage*

This section presents types of digital content in form of touch points that makes customers aware of solutions for their problem.

Word of mouth and recommendations on online communities from industry experts/peers seem to have an impactful role on how some users become aware of new solutions for their problem. Thus, the discussions on interest-based Facebook groups or other interest-based platforms generating eWom can be identified in literature as earned media according to Chaffey (2015). The following examples from respondents clearly identify as social (external) and customer-owned touchpoints as described in Lemon and Verhoef (2016):

*“Recommendations from people from the industry that I respect; if they are legitimate; Facebook groups and podcasts - eliminates my need to search for alternatives; from their experiences; YouTube videos - drone tutorial; suggestions from Facebook groups; influencers” (C3)*

*“I would be looking for other professionals in the field who provide recommendations for a service; established individuals with businesses who recommend a product” (C10)*

These answers suggest the impact of f-factor on customers who were more influenced by individuals such as friends, followers or other insightful segments than by traditional marketing campaigns. Hence, the awareness stage is the time when peer-to-peer communication and seeking advice from other clients is activated for some customers who choose to not depend only on advertised promises. Online communities where most the respondents' discussions happen can be regarded additionally as a two-way communication channel as stated in Taiminen and Karjaluoto (2015). Chaffey (2015) considers earned media category as a constant discussion between customers and companies. At the same time, recommendations from peers and clients'

testimonials are clearly fitting the social (external) touchpoints category explained by Lemon and Verhoef (2016).

Instant posts on social media seem to be relevant for some of the interviewees when it comes to learning about new solutions. Here the novelty aspect and interactivity highlighted by Bhargava & Ojha (2019) become relevant for customer engagement driving the interest and attention of the users towards the product through unique messaging and content. Here might apply both brand-owned and partner-owned touchpoints according to Lemon and Verhoef (2016) because such instant posts have the aim to advertise and promote a product:

*“Instant content post that comes into conversation about something; out of curiosity will do research about it; - so much information” (C2)*

*“Videos, commercials, live. New platform - clubhouse conversations” (C5)*

*“Facebook, Instagram ads; YouTube, reddit, posts on Facebook helped me to find offshore photo editing so I could spend more shooting rather than editing” (C8)*

Video commercials, instant posts and ads can be classified as paid and owned media according to Chaffey (2015). They can be considered as well partner-owned and brand-owned touchpoints during customer journey (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016).

Educational resources of the content can be clearly regarded to owned media of the company based on Chaffey (2015) as well as brand-owned touchpoints as described by Lemon and Verhoef (2016):

*“Youtube for learning how to use something; good to be a match between user and company video” (C4)*

*“Examples give your client this and make them happy to provide your clients with a good experience from a floor plan; quick easy information how I can make” (C6)*

*“I found most of the stuff through educational resources; for example techniques; equipment; anything that can make me more efficient in business” (C9)*

Content that is considered educational and claimed to make aware some of the interviewees about the solution - is actually part of media owned by the company, besides blogs, website and social media pages.

Individual research about solutions based on problem via search engines seems like a method to find out about new products for some of the interviewees, additionally, product reviews in blog format are also important. This category might refer to partner-owned touch points as well as external touch points whereas in former case the company might have partnered to be part of the list while in the latter a blog writer could independently include the product in the list:

*“Google blogs; tutorials; look for reviews; digital photography review” (C1)*

*“Research on internet top ten products/ top ten reviews; if it seems new and not many reviews” (C7)*

**Table 7 Touchpoints experienced by solo entrepreneurs during awareness stage**

Theme	Solo entrepreneurs' experiences	Types of touch points
Touchpoints	Legitimate recommendations from respected people from the industry. Facebook groups and podcasts - eliminates the need to search for alternatives based on experiences; YouTube videos - drone tutorial; suggestions from Facebook groups; influencers.	Customer; external (UGC)
	Looking for other professionals in the field for recommendations for a service; established individuals with businesses who recommend a product	Customer; external (UGC)
	Instant content post that comes into conversation about something; out of curiosity will do research about it; - so much information.	Brand-owned; customer
	Videos, commercials, live. New platform - clubhouse conversations	Brand-owned; eternal
	Facebook, Instagram ads; YouTube, reddit, posts on Facebook helped to find offshore photo editing.	Brand owned
	Youtube for learning how to use something; good to be a match between user and company video	Brand owned; external
Examples to give client make them happy. Providing clients with a good experience from a floor plan; quick easy information.	Customer, brand-owned	



Educational resources; for example techniques; equipment; anything that can make me more efficient in business	Brand-owned; partner-owned
Google blogs; tutorials; look for reviews; digital photography review	Brand-owned, external
Research on internet top ten products/ top ten reviews; if it seems new and not many reviews	Brand-owned; partner-owned; external

### 5.3.2 Content desired by customers while searching for a solution

User-generated content such as authentic testimonials that highlight feedback from users on the website seem to be relevant for customers when searching for a solution. Thus, external and customer touch points are extremely important during information stage of the online purchasing process:

*“Relevant content - pricing; this is how you do it; users’ feedback (testimonials) is important” (C4)*

*“I’m looking at quality; references; who their clients are; check how those services were used” (C8)*

*“testimonials from qualified professionals; to be shown above in google results but also other websites linking to Venture Oy site would make me more confident that the product is good” (C10)*

However, at the same time how-to videos and overview videos highlighting the product variables features are expected by some users on the website when searching for a solution. Such content can be both company-generated or user-generated because the aim is to learn as much as possible about the solution:

*“Streamlined floor plan service; see how easy it is. Tutorial how to use from the first step to last this is what we can do for you” (C6)*

*“Video overview intro that highlights the features on the actual phone; screen video; demo video” (C7)*

*“Probably the most important is having a video on the landing page - the most effective; video scanning the home and then tips” (C9)*

Based on collected data, relevant suggestions to users' problems, product benefits, and ease of search are valuable for some users. Hence, company-generated content is perceived as valuable if it respects certain requirements. In addition to that, spam, sales type of content, and pushy ads seem to repulse some of the interviewees:

*“relevant suggestion to my problem; I don't like spam; Facebook ads experience with other negative products” (C3)*

*“I liked to see something in action and not a sales pitch; seeing benefits without being sold; I like tips” (C5)*

*“Links directly taking me to the solution rather than unnecessary information and advertising” (C12)*

It can be noticed that users when looking for a solution experienced the so-called Zero Moment of Truth (ZMOT) described by Chaffrey (2015). The above answers from interviewees demonstrate that customers tend to search, check testimonials and pricing, read comments from peers on social media and blogs which signify the presence of ZMOT before the purchasing decision.

### 5.3.3 Digital content and factors influencing engagement during consideration stage

This section presents different types of content that makes customers consider certain solutions for their problem. Findings are presented and categorized based on several factors that impact the engagement during consideration stage: product feature description, interactivity, vividness, entertainment, and novelty.

For the consideration stage the most relevant types of content for the thesis' interviewees seem to differentiate in value-added and problem-solving purposes.

Based on the conducted interviews, it is found that video tutorials are the most impactful type of digital content for the majority of interviewed customers during the consideration stage. Product feature description seems to be the factor impacting the engagement of the following solo entrepreneurs the most during consideration stage. Solo entrepreneurs want to see videos and examples of product results when considering the solution:

*“Website with different sources; tutorials (video); Images at the beginning how floor plans look like; might be video.” (C3).*

*“video with features well explained; customer service live chat (reassuring for me); especially when the price is higher I’ll be hesitant if I can’t get in touch” (C7).*

*“Images at the beginning how floor plans look like; might be video.” (C3).*

Clear and impactful value-oriented content is considered important by a considerable part of the interviewees and the content should focus on highlighting features. Thus, product feature description factor can expand to variables such as price, turnaround time and value-added service:

*“What the solution can do (how the result looks; it’s great to see how it works); floor plans not necessarily a solution for problem but a value added to offer to clients.” (C2)*

*“Show value - better, faster, fair price, turnaround time. No-brainer” (C4)*

Reviews from authentic sources and real customers are relevant for the customers in consideration stage in order to build legitimacy as highlighted in Godes & Silva (2012) study. Thus, UGC is perceived as more impactful for building legitimacy before purchasing compared to CGC:

*“Tutorials; reviews that are impartial from 3rd parties” (C1)*

*“Seeing businesses; free trial allows to create a portfolio piece and the client’s opinion allows to me to make a decision” (C10)*

Factors such as interactivity and vividness are also impacting solo entrepreneurs’ engagement when considering a solution:

*“Video content is one of the most compelling; catchy, fun, maybe something with catchy music, tune” (C5)*

*“Something that makes a lasting impression wow effect (C8)”*

In summary, creating educational and useful content indeed helps to attract customers as highlighted by Holliman & Rowley (2014) which can be brand-owned touchpoints during pre-purchase stages of customer journey. Product feature description is the factor that impacts the engagement of the solo entrepreneurs during consideration stage the most however interactivity is highlighted as well as being important.

**Table 8 Factors influencing customer engagement during consideration stage**

Theme	Content	Factors influencing customer engagement
Factors	Tutorials; reviews that are impartial from 3rd parties	Product feature description
	What the solution can do (how the result looks; how it works); floor plans not necessarily a solution for problem but a value added to offer to clients	Product feature description; novelty
	Website with different sources; tutorials (video); Images at the beginning how floor plans look like; might be video;	Product feature description
	Show value - better, faster, fair price, turnaround time. No-brainer	Product feature description
	video content is one of the most compelling; catchy, fun, maybe something with catchy music, tune	Interactivity, entertainment
	content needs to be clear, why to buy, what the solution will solve, why this solution is the best. Price	Product feature description
	video with features well explained; customer service live chat to reassure especially when the price is higher	Product feature description
	Something that makes a lasting impression wow effect	Interactivity, Vividness
	Video with features	Product feature description
	seeing businesses; free trial allows to create a portfolio piece and the client's opinion allows to me to make a decision	interactivity
person advertising; cost of it	product feature description	

### *Attitude towards digital contents in general*

In this passage there will be highlighted the most important elements of digital content according to solo entrepreneurs. Blog posts and video contents will be reviewed in a more detailed manner in order to produce managerial contributions for the case company.

### *Blog*

Despite the fact that many interviewees noted the lack of interest in reading blogs due to short attention span, some of them mentioned blogs that they consider worthwhile.

The data reveals that the length of the blog is preferred to be short while the content should be concise, and the topic should be relevant:

*“I don’t read many - topic is important; I prefer not long blogs because of short attention span” (C3)*

*“I don’t want to read a bunch of text; something short and concise; I prefer to listen and watch more than read” (C10)*

*“don't read; brief to the point how to; photography and photography software; real estate photography” (C12)*

The main topics that the interviewees prefer focus on growing real estate photography business and it can be noted that the headers and title is relevant in order to catch the interviewee’s attention:

*“Has to catch my attention with the header showing a benefit upfront; first 2-3 paragraphs; title. Images are important. Types: something that will help me grow as a photographer; what happens in the real estate world; learn about services” (C5)*

*“I read blogs; when the copy starts with the problems and the solutions; ways to stand out from competition; focused on one particular thing; concise and well formatted; to the point; taking to the process of problem solving” (C9)*

Also, a significant part of the interviewees claim to be interested in reviews of solutions, equipment and software. This part is interested to learn new techniques and are willing to read whether the specific topic is helping them to become a more talented photographer:

*“Book report/productivity-based business development; interviews with photographers not only about floor plans; not just sales but helpful educational” (C1)*

*“Way to show/learn all the services, claims and offerings that are worth clients selection; expanded version of review. Suggestion: Show scans” (C4)*

*“I read blogs when I research equipment; techniques; I like good content; current articles; how relevant” (C8)*

Thus, even if blog posts are considered as impactful due to the capacity to create a reputation about the know-how of the company and attract users it also has the risk of losing clients. The latter happens when the quality of blog content is low and based on answers from interviewees the users who don't read blogs prevail. Thus, even if writing blog content and optimizing it for SEO has a good impact on website ranking on search engines it is crucial to consider the needs of the target audience and make sure the content is high quality and will not decay the company's image as explained by Patruti-Baltes (2016, p.63).

### *Video*

How-to videos, demos with features and educational tutorials seem to be the most popular among the interviewees' preferences. Additionally, it can be noted that a significant part of interviewees prefers videos that are showing real people rather than animations or motion graphics and preferably the individuals in the videos are real estate photographers or trusted industry/company experts. The optimal length of a tutorial video is estimated to 8-10 minutes and the tone should be either informational or engaging:

*“visual things are the most important for me as a photo/videographer; how much time it takes; if it’s a tutorial video - 8-10 minutes is optimal (C3)*

*“title, capture screen (thumbnail); first lines of youtube; content fun or engaging, types: videos with product reviews; informative; how-to, behind the scenes (C5)*

*“demo video; people talking about the product; feature highlights” (C7)*

### *Factors determining customers to try a competitor product/service*

This paragraph indicates what kind of digital contents would affect solo entrepreneurs to change their mind and choose a product/service from a competitor. The questions were asked in a way that interviewees imagined what kind of factors and contents they would have to be exposed to in order to try a competitor instead of the case company. The findings from such imaginary gameplay aim to identify hidden motives that could not be elucidated otherwise. In result, it will help the case company to concentrate on the areas of their marketing channels that lacked significant information.

A common pattern among interviewees is the claim of preferring long-term partnerships rather than constant need to try other alternatives, however better price, turnaround time, capture time might motivate some of them to switch if the quality will remain the same or better:

*“That another product solves the problem quicker, cheaper or other advantage; tend to not change products very often (loyal); lots of alternatives try to convince - not easy task to convince to another product. Most of sales pitches are marketing. talent is required” (C2)*

*“Features outlined more clearly; better pricing marketed; better picture in general however seeing the discount on the first page helped me to choose Venture Oy” (C7)*

*“I guess demonstrating increase of quality - consisting quality the same level of service ease of use; and being for free will make me change (for example: Zillow); turnaround time longer would be a dealbreaker to go for a competitor” (C10)*

Some other features that would increase the desire for a product change are offering 3d views dollhouse or a freemium model as competitor Zillow offers. The most convincing pieces of content that would catch the interviewees attention to check another product range from video content with compelling story with better offer, better reviews for competitors, clear explanation of features and pricing:

*“3d views dollhouse with the same quality and price as Venture Oy might change my mind and try a competitor; difficult to change my mind if I like the service I use if the quality and service is good; loyal customer - long term relationship; faster service because of commitment” (C3).*

### *Attitude towards company-generated content from case company*

This section aims to present findings on how solo entrepreneurs perceive the company-generated content by highlighting the most impactful content according to the interviewees. The data provides an honest overview of the current brand-owned touch points of the case company. Such assessment will guide the case company on what kind of managerial improvements are needed and what kind of content is already rewarding.

The findings of the data suggest that the most useful pieces of content from company-generated content are how-to video tutorials, clear website and exceptional customer service:

*“Videos tutorials very useful. I was convinced I could use the product; I like the atmosphere of the website; easy to understand” (C1)*

*“Service is exceptional; respond quickly; product is fantastic; ability to make changes. Company makes the customer feel important” (C3)*

Suggestions for the company from customers range from focusing on highlighting the difference between pricing plans, creating a more detailed walkthrough and customization.

*“Most part Venture Oy information is useful; but no example is provided so I had to revisit more times; biggest failure - 2 methods - become a certified photographer or pay as you go 10 dollars more; think what’s the catch; to*



*make more clear before signing up but once signed up info becomes available; steps of how to scan missing from first page” (C2)*

*“I watched some of the videos I think there is more that could help like a walkthrough with more details; more info that really shows people how easy it is. Suggestion: Different type of homes and different types of experience; showing the upload part more clear” (C5)*

Additionally, one of the interviewees highlighted the importance of the user-generated content as being more significant than company-generated content:

*“I didn’t feel I consume much of Venture Oy’ email; I don’t read long email campaigns; for my experience I find the reviews and content created neutral 3rd type people is more useful and credible for me than content created by the company. I don’t consume a lot of content from the company which created unless it’s something educational because the service is pretty intuitive” (C10)*

If considering Chaffrey (2015) statement it can be mentioned that the case company has a good inbound marketing strategy because its efforts to target and interact through good quality content had fruitful results. Educational and informational content available on website and blog are the most relevant for the current sample of respondents, and the only impactful social media channels are represented by Facebook user group and page and YouTube company tutorials.

#### *Content perceived as the most useful for a photographer (in general):*

Most of the interviewees mentioned that YouTube tutorials is the most useful content for them as a photographer, however the categories for the tutorials differentiated. While some of them preferred videos showing equipment and product reviews others seem to like how-to tutorials or videos that teach new techniques that are valuable in real estate photography.

How-to video tutorials from reputable sources are appreciated by interviewees ranging from how to use an equipment or software to how to acquire new skills in real estate photography:

*“Tutorials on YouTube from photographers I respect. Testing for my license, videos on how to use drone as photography.” (C3)*

*“If I learn to pass a test for photographer then I’ll watch a video tutorial; Video tutorials - are very helpful; details needed for garage, patio; video tutorials on how to be a videographer; how to use a drone; maybe camera lighting could be” (C4)*

At the same time, some interviewees mentioned that business angle of growing real estate photography venture is also useful content for them:

*“ways to scale business; how to increase business to full time” (C10)*

One of the interviewees also considers written blogs as useful for their business. Additionally, Instagram seems like a useful channel for content:

*“Relative short videos I prefer for tutorials; for this reason, I prefer IG because it keeps everything relatively short. Informative blogs are also appreciated. I prefer to post rather than consume” (C5)*

Instagram content has also inspirational value, however its sales perspective is not appreciated by one of the respondents:

*“Inspirational content - successful content created by other people inspires me to do something new; Instagram is good for inspiration and art but I don’t like its sales perspective” (C7)*

*Content that would be appreciated by customers on long-term:*

Despite age differences among interviewees several common patterns can be identified when it comes to content preferences.

Revenue growth related content such as how to sell floor plan service tips and statistics related to the product and how does it benefit real estate sales of interviewees’ clients were requested repeatedly by the interviewees:

*“Content with statistics (how many pictures are good for listings; real estate listing what it requires. Info about houses that are going to sell quicker. Study about price range of house - optimal nr of pictures maybe 28? Prices drop or up? (C2)*

*“More tips how to sell to real estate agents; statistics to push it to clients; marketing materials that I can use with real estate agents” (C5)*

Sharing content and experiences from other users is relevant for most of the interviewees because it helps them to understand how other customers utilize the service and profit from it:

*“statistics would be helpful; feedback from clients that found it good (NPS maybe). Not just a testimonial on floor plans but a full picture of how others grow profit by adding floor plans” (C4)*

*“examples of how customers highlight the customizability; pictures of how clients customize their floor plans in different colors; practical applicable data on features we offer” (C7)*

It can be noticed that during the interview when being asked about what kind of content would be appreciated, customers recalled either frustrations or good examples from indirect competitors of the case company. The match between current offering and presentation on website is important as well as more active knowledge-based content from company would be appreciated:

*“I don’t get spam every day from Venture Oy which I appreciate; biggest frustration from Matterport (competitor) is that videos are old and info from website is not updated; the website and content should match the reality and the interface of the tool” (C8)*

*“I like from iGuide (competitor) that they do weekly webinar; random Q/A and somebody will answer; how to use their platform to build the business and how to market to clients; how to be more effective in leveraging it to grow your revenue; knowledge based” (C9)*

It seems that Gagnon (2014) was right when stating that a company can determine customers to engage with different media by positioning the brand as a thought leader in its industry. Knowledge-based content the company can provide is in fact valuable for helping customers achieve their own expectations and needs.

#### 5.4 Summary of empirical results

The current study concentrates on comprehending how digital contents are impacting solo entrepreneurs' online purchasing behavior and specifically pre-purchase process. Based on the theoretical framework and findings it can be stated that the purchasing process for the small businesses is extremely similar to the consumers, however some elements from the B2B buying process are preserved. Answers suggest that solo entrepreneurs' buying behavior is closer to consumer buying behavior (customer journey) than to the traditional Business to Business buying behavior with slight exceptions. For instance, variables such as "profit orientation" and "long term relationship" are exemptions that resemble more the characteristics from B2B buying process rather than the way consumers buy. Thus, it seems that solo entrepreneurs purchase similarly to consumers rather than companies, however the differences between individual and solo entrepreneur refer to willingness to pay.

The results also indicate that there are solo entrepreneurs who utilized a "market push" approach which translates to proposing a service to their own customers rather than being requested. Interviewees who enabled a "market push" strategy were also the solo entrepreneurs who found about the business opportunity from f-factor through a balanced journey while those who adopted "market pull" approach were asked by their own clients to provide a floor plan service and had to research on search engines the viable options through a considered journey. Findings suggest that several types of digital content create a positive impact on online purchasing behavior of the solo entrepreneurs. During each stage of the buying process, digital content is seemingly impacting solo entrepreneurs' decisions differently.

In the awareness stage, the role of the digital content is relatively informational since solo entrepreneurs find out about new or existing services through different facets of digital content marketing. During the consideration stage, content that implies trust and authenticity impacts solo entrepreneurs and determines them to consider a specific solution and to approach later stages of the purchasing process just as explained as Zero Moment of Truth by Chaffey (2015). User-generated content is extremely important in these stages because it is the moment when the customer compares the company generated content to user generated content in order to find the medium truth.

During the purchasing process, the customers might be exposed and engage with different types of digital content in order to find out about innovative methods to solve their problems. But similar content will have different impact across different customers depending on their preferred “learning process”. While some are visual learners and explanatory videos solve that need, for some auditive ways of learning are the most impactful hence podcasts are preferred for such customers, at the same time others might find sounds too intrusive and prefer a written format of information. Thus, it is crucial for a company to understand the differences between preferences of customers.

While most of the interviewed solo-entrepreneurs displayed preferences for video format, it is incorrect to generalize that video content is the only effective method to reach new customers. For different stages different types of digital content impact the customers to move further on the purchasing funnel.

Thanks to the power of video content for clients such as self-employed photographers - YouTube becomes one of the main social media platforms that helps them improve themselves as professionals and learn new techniques, however Facebook is significantly important as well due to the capacity to group and connect like-minded individuals with similar interests. Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Pinterest are less prevalent in supporting the day-to-day business life of the customers, however they play a small role as well for perpetuating the brand image of some businesses. As expected, search engines are more impactful compared to social media channels when it comes to seeking solutions for customers problems. Thus, high positions in ranking are potentially more relevant for a SaaS than active social media presence due to the nature of the information search process.

Hence, even if the interviewed qualified customers denoted a lack of interest to read blogs, the importance of high positions in search engines suggests that blogs indirectly might help a SaaS to get discovered by a customer who is searching for a solution. In other words, blogs could be not the best way to keep customers interested but can be a great lead generation tool for information-seekers and customers-to-be without even mentioning the great impact on SEO if a blog performs well. Contrary to the study from Patrutiu-Baltes (2016) our findings illustrate that blog posts are not necessarily

the most effective form of inbound marketing; however, the results validated the theory that quality of content will impact the level of trust of the customers. To sum up, a greatly written article with a high traffic and conversion rate has an impact on the website position in Google or any other search engine, thus writing blogs should be continued even if the customers do not receive any direct benefit from company writing blogs.

Thus, for a SaaS providing pay-as-you-go service to clients, activity of writing blogs should be directed to attracting new clients rather than providing monthly information for existing customers. In order to follow this idea, Patruti-Baltes (2016) suggests that search engine optimization should come hand in hand with blog posts in order to be discovered by the target audience considering their needs. All in all, a good blog is described in the qualitative research as a meaningful and concise piece of content with an appealing title, headings, themes that should have subject-related visuals to keep the reader “entertained” and in “the right mood”. It can be added that since video format of the content is so appreciated among customers of this service, topic-related videos can be included in the blog as well to support the story and convey better the message of the article. Additionally, companies might consider the f-factor to develop a vertical approach of building trust as mentioned by Kotler et.al (2017b) by inviting reputable professionals as content creators to provide more value to the readers as well as to gain credibility and visibility. That in combination with providing high quality service and stability might enhance the brand loyalty of the customers.

Customer journey has a great importance and needs careful consideration from the company because an effective assessment of each stage helps better with identifying the problems and needs of the customers, determining the company to creatively anticipate and help the customer. Based on the results it can be confirmed that several types of customer journey can take place depending on the trigger. The empirical results show that balanced journey can happen when f-factor (family, friends, famous people) determine customer’s intention to purchase but for other customers, considered journey is the way their purchasing starts. The data showed that interviewees who were requested to provide these services began an extended search and approached a considered journey while those who saw business opportunity from f-factor – adopted a balanced journey. These types of journeys were described by

Wolny and Charoensuksai (2014) and the evidence confirms the theoretical distinction between considered and balanced journeys.

Digital content at the beginning of the purchasing process serves a significant role to direct message to potential consumers' minds when it comes to recognizing needs. Storytelling, video format of content and price marketing are impactful at this stage due to their ability to create a need that potentially didn't exist previously. Furthermore, visuals capable of creating interest are necessary in this phase to motivate the customers to be eager to learn more about the product but also as Holliman & Rowley (2014) suggest they can help to tell the story of the brand.

The information search stage when customers search is important and should be clearly paved to ensure the customer has rich information during each facet of browsing. It can be that users search on a specific channel/platform or that proposed solution is random while consuming content online, content is king becomes true during this step because it can shift the mindset and motivate the customer to seek more information. This is the moment when the company can differentiate themselves through thought leadership, because as Gagnon (2014) suggests it will enable the company to turn leads into sales by aiming to achieve the customer's expectations. This type of content not only show the uniqueness of the know-how and positions the brand as an expert in the industry but also help the lead development process.

Evaluation of alternatives is an important stage in decision making whereas customers have to select between different products depending on pricing, product or features. If the product is single then the customer adopts a pricing-oriented strategy, thus, having to select afterwards between various vendors. During the same stage, testimonials and reviews from earlier clients available on a particular website, blog, forum or company page will motivate the customer to conduct an analysis on competitors. This in turn will help the customer to reduce the list of choices and get closer to the final purchasing decision. During evaluation of alternatives stage, digital contents have the potential to determine the customers to change their mind for purchasing decision and opt for a competitor instead. It is an especially sensitive phase where the customers might lose interest because it is the time when potential customers are browsing more deeply on various non-company websites to find out more about the experiences of others. For

this reason the company should monitor the negative and positive testimonials about the company's products/services from both the "enraged customers" and fans (Leeflang, 2014, p.6).

The purchase intention stage is significantly affected by the quality, pricing and positive feedback from previous customers as stated in theory by Chaffey (2015). The accessibility of information and ease of use on website help the customers proceed with the last purchasing stage, this is the stage when the company's website should highlight the reliability and credibility of the service.

The post-purchase behavior is not necessarily the end of the journey for the customers but more as a offering feedback phase when the company can learn about what parts of the service are good and which should be improved. During this stage, it is possible to create a long-term relationship with devoted clients. Feedback shared by customers after purchasing the product/service represents a valuable piece of information for future clients, which in a way represents user-generated content that motivates newer customers to choose a service in earlier stages of the journey.



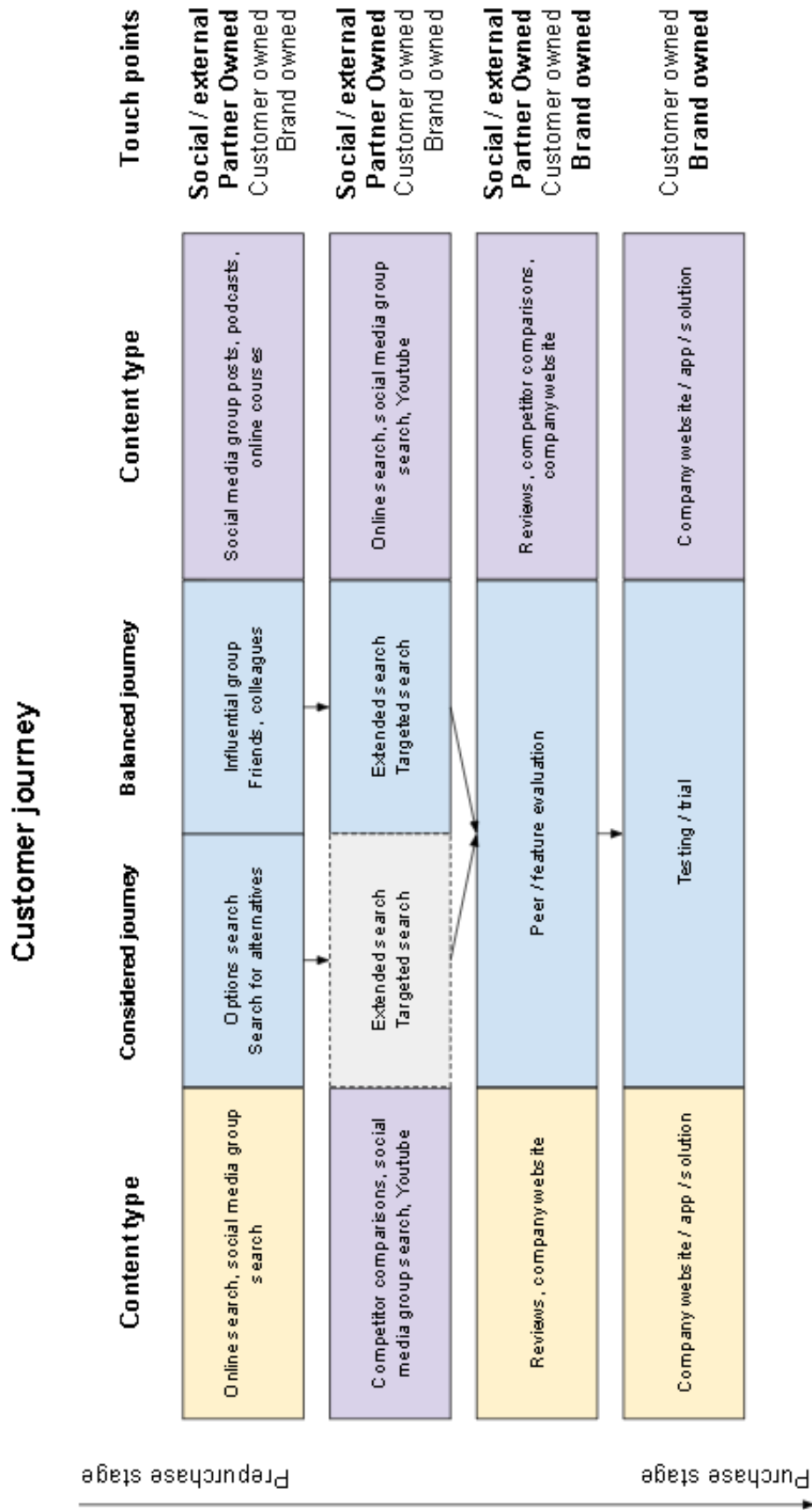


Figure 5 Adaptation from Process model for customer journey (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016; Wolny and Charoensuksai, 2014)

## **6 CONCLUSION**

This chapter starts with a presentation of the answers to the research questions. Afterwards, the following section elaborates on how the findings relate to the theoretical framework. Later on, managerial implications are discussed. At the end, the limitations of this study are presented as well as suggestions for future research.

### **6.1 Answers to the research questions**

The aim of the study was to strengthen understanding of digital content marketing and its impact on B2B online purchasing behavior. The study enhanced the understanding of what is the role of digital contents in the decision-making process of self-employed business owners specialized in real estate photography. Moreover, this study clarified how the experience and the environment correlate with each other from the solo entrepreneur's point of view. This thesis furthered the knowledge of the influence of different types of digital contents and examined how the online purchasing process is impacted during initial phases of decision making.

One of the sub-questions was: "What kind of online purchasing process solo entrepreneurs (real estate photographers) have?". Based on the analysis of empirical data, all the main components and characteristics of B2B online purchasing process were identifiable. However, it was found that the purchasing process of solo entrepreneurs is profoundly more similar to the customer's purchasing process with slight mentionable differences. The online purchasing process for B2B customers is similar to the purchasing process for B2C when it comes to decision-making phases and their order, but variables such as "profit orientation" and "long term relationship" are significantly more important when buying as a business owner compared to buying as a consumer. Therefore, this study validates the assumption that online purchasing process can be similar to consumers' buying process when a company is a single person owned enterprise. However, the purchasing process of the solo entrepreneurs can be considered a hybrid form between the way consumers purchase and B2B because it contains elements from both in different situations.

Based on the empirical results it can be observed that the trigger of problem recognition might lead to two different scenarios: solo entrepreneurs who were requested by their customers to provide a floor plan service have experienced a considered journey while solo entrepreneurs who were introduced to such service through f-factor adopted a balanced journey. It can be assumed that solo entrepreneurs who are enquired by their customers to provide a service – adopt a market pull strategy and considered journey while searching on search engines options while the solo entrepreneurs who discover the business opportunity thanks to external touchpoints – adopt a market push strategy and balanced journey.

To sum up, the stages of the buying process from solo entrepreneurs fit better the customer journey process while adopting rational reasons for willingness to pay when purchasing prevalent for B2B.

For the sub-question “What type of digital content(s) create more engagement/impact on purchasing behavior?” the answer will vary based on the stage of customer journey. User generated content (reviews, testimonials) is perceived as more relevant than company-generated content during initial stages of customer journey, especially during awareness stage while company-generated/brand-generated content is more impactful during consideration stage. The same insights were described in Demmers et al., (2020). The research has proven that informative content is more relevant during the pre-purchase stages of customer journey than entertaining content which proves the theory of Demmers et.al. (2020).

The main research question “What is the role of digital content during the pre-purchase phase of online purchasing behavior of the solo entrepreneurs?” aimed to elaborate on how different types of digital content influence B2B customers to purchase online. The results of the research suggest that digital content plays an important role in the clients’ purchasing behavior especially when it comes to the first stages. When clients experience the so called “need recognition” phase, digital content has the role to determine them to understand their problems and needs with the help of informational and innovative content that generates interest. Relevant contents that draw discussions on social media, educational videos highlighting innovative products that help solving business problems and recommendations from other reputable experts are the types of

contents playing the biggest role for solo entrepreneurs during first phase. After clients realize their need and want to solve their problem, the phase of information search starts for the desired product/service. The current study reveals that the clients search for the services mainly through search engines or even social media to learn more and familiarize better with the solutions for their problems. During information search stage, clients tend to discover either a new brand or a service from a brand they already know. Videos and visual contents illustrating the functions of the product/service along with testimonials make a difference during this phase. When it comes to evaluating phase, clients decide based on pricing, quality, time of delivery and functionality. During this phase, contents showcasing clearly the results from the service but also how-to tutorials and reviews are extremely important as they help towards selecting the product/service that matches expectations of the clients in the best way.

Because good strategy for company content is not enough there should be implemented some ways to monitor and manage user-generated content in a way that benefits both the company and the users.

After answering to the sub-questions preceding the main research question it can be reiterated that digital content has a significant impact on solo entrepreneurs' decisions to purchase however it should be taken into consideration that customer journeys differ slightly based on contextual factors explained below.

As explained in the literature review, first stages of the customer journey might determine the course of the journey and the typology. Need recognition phase provided insights about how purchasing process will somewhat differ from one customer to another. Thus, after analyzing the results it can be noted that problem recognition is experienced by solo entrepreneurs based on two different scenarios: customer-driven or business-growth intention to purchase. It can be concluded that solo entrepreneurs who are enquired by their customers to provide a service – adopt a market pull strategy and considered journey while searching on search engines options and are exposed to informational content from company-owned touch points as well as external or partner. At the same time, solo entrepreneurs who discover the business opportunity thanks to f-factor will face external touchpoints first and then company-owned touch points – they will also follow a market push strategy and balanced journey.

In conclusion, solo entrepreneurs purchase slightly more similar to the way consumers buy compared to traditional B2B buying process models. The response to customer demand will determine the solo entrepreneurs' pre-purchase behavior leading to two scenarios: considered or balanced journey. Depending on the type of customer journey, touch points influencing solo entrepreneurs' purchasing process might differ especially during need recognition and information search stages. Peer-to-peer communication is relevant for solo entrepreneurs who demonstrate a more collaborative approach rather than fierce competition associated with big companies. This not only places solo entrepreneurs closer to consumer buying but also confirm the impact of user-generated content and earned media during pre-purchase stage.

## **6.2 Theoretical Contributions**

The current thesis may generate dialogue between different research fields and lead to multidisciplinary studies. Emergence of this theme suggests that online purchasing process of solo entrepreneurs is not a simplistic and fixed process due to the fact that each entrepreneur purchases differently. The outcomes of the study correspond to previous findings from Gilmore (2011) that affirmed differentiation from the competition of entrepreneurs relies in innovative approaches and answering to the customer demand from a "reactive and market-led, or opportunistic and profit driven" perspective. Thus, the theoretical contribution expands the understanding and highlights that solo entrepreneurs are approaching customer demand through one of the four perspectives just like their entrepreneur counterparts. The solo entrepreneurs' online purchasing process is impacted by different aspects during each phase of decision-making and digital content has the potential to increase the chance of the brand to be selected during first stages. The study contributes to the literature by opening discussion about how differently solo entrepreneurs purchase and initiates hypotheses that while for some it might take one exposure with digital content, for others – they need to be exposed for a longer time to content and more frequently, ideally on different channels.

This study helps to shed light on some uncertainties and questions on whether solo entrepreneurs behave like consumers or like B2B companies. Interesting outcome of the research is that solo entrepreneurs are purchasing similar are purchasing to

consumers. Previous studies noted quality, customer service, delivery, receptivity and flexibility as key aspects for maintaining small companies' operations (Pressey et al., 2009; Ellegaard, 2009) but the outcomes of this research identified good pricing and turnaround time as well. Insightful remark is how all interviewees identified the similarities between their purchasing behavior as a consumer and business owner, whereas some differences were brought up such as long-term commitment, quality and profitability as being important for solo entrepreneurs purchasing, variables that are not relevant for consumers. Even if such theories are not present in literature, this research's findings suggests that solo entrepreneurs might have a hybrid form of purchasing process because it borrows elements from both customer journey and B2B buying process.

All stages commonly known for customer journey in pre purchase stage were identified in this study as similar to the way consumers purchase.

Moreover, the study confirmed the classification between balanced and considered journeys which were initially explained by Wolny and Charoensuksai (2014). If the same classification is applied on solo entrepreneurs' buying decisions, it was found out that considered and balanced journeys are more common than impulsive customer journeys. This finding suggests that impulsive journeys are inherently more practicable for consumers rather than small companies or solo entrepreneurs. The study builds continuity to theories from Wolny and Charoensuksai (2014) that were based initially on cosmetics shopping. In this way, the thesis not only validated the differentiation between different types of customer journeys but also expanded it to purchase of B2B services by solo entrepreneurs.

But additionally, there were links to concepts such as business opportunity or customer demand, because the former indicated the balanced journey while the latter was connected to considered journey. These links are only assumed, thus more research would be required in order to approve or reject this theory.

It was validated that solo entrepreneurs can independently discern between three different types of media without them to be mentioned at all. This inclines to the idea, that the interviewed customers understand the differences between owned, earned and

paid media and some are perceived as more valorous compared to others. They are “consumed” at different phases of decision making in purchasing process: paid media is significantly more important during first phases, earned media is especially relevant during evaluation of alternatives but also might be the source of discovery for the client, then owned media is prevalent during most stages. If earned media or owned media has a great traction and SEO then they can make impact during all initial customer journey stages.

### **6.3 Managerial implications**

This thesis provides management suggestions and perspectives about how companies can improve their customers' online purchasing process by offering insightful digital contents at each phase of decision-making. It is aimed by the researcher that companies can use the findings and implications of this research to conceptualize and comprehend how they can utilize digital contents to support the purchasing process of their customers, augment customer understanding and promote trustworthy image.

First, it is vital for managers to identify what are the most important digital channels used by their target audience. Afterwards, the company representatives should examine and prove whether specific channels and content favors their audience, and if so to continue develop the contents on those channels.

The study gives direction to the company to consider paid media to ensure new or potentially interested leads will consider the service. Hence, the fact that most of the solo entrepreneurs are using social media allows the company to reach them through paid advertising such as retargeting marketing.

Companies should understand their target audiences' routines and examine whether their users consume the digital content for utilitarian or for hedonic purposes. By comprehending the customers perspective, the companies will be able to better plan what kind of content is truly helping their customers with the business or whether it has a motivational/inspiring role.

Moreover, companies should consider the power of user-generated content on customers' decisions when looking for a solution as UGC is perceived as more trustworthy than CGC. Thus, the companies should think about strategies that allow prospective and current clients to communicate their preferences and feedback, this way companies will obtain more genuine testimonials that will not only help to improve their marketing standpoint but will also present more reliable information to potential customers.

The managers should remember that entertainment-related content will have more impact on customer engagement during the post-consumption stage while informational content will be relevant during the pre-consumption stage as stated by Demmers et.al. (2020). Thus, content aiming to engage the customers during initial stages of the journey should provide informational value to customers, however for later stages of the journey it is suggested to add more entertainment value to the content.

Ultimately, social media communities should be taken into consideration since solo entrepreneurs tend to seek connecting with like-minded professionals via groups. All in all, WoM is relevant since it offers authentic information based on numerous customer experiences with the product. Managers should remember that negative testimonials from not satisfied customers about the company's products/services could quickly damage the image of the company as stated in Leeflang (2014, p.6), but also that similarly positive reviews can enhance the image. Thus, it is recommended to the companies to track, monitor and respond to both positive and negative comments in order to increase the level of engagement with the customers but also to keep a balanced public image in the eyes of potential clients. Hence, the company will benefit from increased trust among target audience without investing high amounts just by focusing customer service and marketing efforts on owned and earned media platforms that contribute to value-creation.

#### **6.4 Evaluation of the Study**

The study can be evaluated from three perspectives: generalizability, reliability, and validity.



If the conclusions of the study could be generalized based on the target sample to all other customers, then the research would achieve generalizability. However, the aim of the qualitative research is to rather provide an in-depth explanation than simply generalizing the results of the study (Carminati, 2018). The findings of this thesis are based on targeted samples and the findings are not necessarily generalizable to all categories of consumers. Hence the results of the study are based on a particular industry, real estate photography, however it's difficult to expect similar results for other industries and for this reason, findings cannot be generalized on a broad level.

When it comes to the reliability of study it can be evaluated if the research would spawn consistent results if organized repeatedly by later researchers as stated by Saunders et al (2009). The sample of this study is composed of real estate photographers who own a business and live in the same country. The repeatability of the research could be observed whether the same study conducted with other sample sets would generate similar results. But it is uncertain whether similar results would be achieved if the study would be cross-cultural including more countries and for this reason the reliability of the research is unclear.

Validity is another way to evaluate the study and it indicates the accuracy of research and truthful representations of realities that participants experience and communicate in a social context. The current study respected well-grounded collection data, analysis and interpretation of data methods in a practical setting as suggested by Yin (2011) that it should be. The thesis is based on theoretical framework concepts, analysis and empirical findings whereas the review and authentic responses of the interviewees allowed to conclude and summarize outcomes. Since, the thesis has justified its aim to study the phenomenon profoundly, it can be stated that the research is valid.

## **6.5 Limitations of the Study**

The findings of this study should be interpreted carefully as well as limitations are stated in regards to the overview of literature, methodology, empirical data collection and analysis of results. The research topic is rather broad and extensive, and the study does not deepen each facet of the decision-making process creating a possible limitation. One limitation is the variety of online purchasing processes and the

difficulty to select and generalize about one specific process to represent the purchasing process of the customers of the case company. This complicates defining the purchasing process that attributes to the reality for most customers. Additionally, in regards to the solo entrepreneurs as customers in the scope of the purchasing process models, there are no exact models to follow in the literature.

Furthermore, limitations also refer to research methods especially for data collection and analysis of results. Both data collection and analysis are prone to human error and misinterpretations, taking into consideration that data analysis was conducted manually without any advanced level of research practice. Even though transcribing the information after data collection is not a difficult task, summarizing and interpreting individuals' experiences into a set of valid and reliable findings is a laborious work. Online setting of conducting the interviews is not necessarily a reason why there should be major errors when interviewing the customers however there are risks as well. For the sample variance, the data collection was restricted to only one geographical area: the United States, comprising different states and regions within the country in order to keep diversity. The group is rather homogeneous with only one female interviewee as the majority interviewees customers were males but it is in accordance to the statistics of the case company users, which has more male users in general. However, the findings of this research are based on a target pre-selected population and cannot be generalized to all customers because the attitudes, preferences, behavior and psychological factors vary.

Undeniably, all interviewees represent self-employed business owners who are utilizing services from the case company. Even though all of them have business experience and understand the buying process from a more practical perspective, the theoretical gap might be perceivable because of different educational backgrounds. For this reason, it is difficult to ensure that all interviewees completely comprehended the meaning of the technical terms or even more accessible keywords, because each individual might understand and interpret a phenomenon differently. For this reason, elaborations on theoretical subjects are rather impractical, but general views based on personal experiences are more realistic in this context.

This study has limitations which in turn represent good starting points and even opportunities for future research. As the gathered data had a rather homogenous target group in terms of gender the future study could focus on the difference for the other gender. A very diverse range of generations is also a possible opportunity to select one specific age range and detect if there are common patterns. More recommendations for future research are presented in the next section.

## **6.6 Recommendations for Future Research**

Based on the limitations mentioned earlier, one promising direction for future research is to examine how the online purchasing process differs for customers belonging to different demographic groups in terms of age and gender. Thus, more balanced aged groups could be selected for comparisons and more balanced gender groups to represent equally females and males in a solo entrepreneurs' study.

A recommendation for further research revolves around studying the differences between the online purchasing process of small companies and bigger enterprises, as well as differences between companies and consumers.

Current study focuses on pre-purchase stage of the customer journey of solo entrepreneurs; thus, it enquires for a study to be conducted as well for the post-purchase stage as well in order to identify the similarities and differences between customer expectations for the content. As the study aimed to verify whether the empirical findings from qualitative research match the theory about the purchasing behavior process during initial stages similarly this topic could be researched for later stages of purchasing process. Likewise, future studies could focus on what marketing or other company related activities have a positive impact on after signup stage (later stages after purchase in customer journey).

Another direction for further research is to investigate whether marketing or sales departments can identify which area of their business has the biggest drop of points are? For instance, when there is a drop from 130 orders to 50 or in general no order at all. Also, interesting direction for research is when the customers sign up on website and don't make any order.

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## APPENDIX

### Appendix 1 Interview questions

Background: Age, gender, location, years of experience in real estate photography; self-employed, company size, educational background

#### Digital content

- How do you spend your time on social media? What social media platform do you use?
- What kind of paid ads/promoted content do you see on online channels? (not brands you follow on social media)
- What kind of digital channels/platforms do you normally use? (websites, blogs, news sites, social media platform)
- What kind of content do you find the most useful for you as a photographer?

#### Online purchasing

- What is your online purchasing process? How do you start and how does it evolve until the final purchasing decision?
- How did you realize that you need a floor plan service?
- How did you become aware of the business problem / opportunity?
- Which one you found out first: The product or business problem?
- When you realized that you need a service like this where did you search for it?
- What search terms did/would you use to search for a floor plan solution?
- What are your criterias to evaluate a product?
- What else do you do before determining to purchase a product?
- How do you verify the legitimacy of the solution?
- Did you have any misunderstandings about the product?
- Did you offer floor plans prior to Venture Oy?
- If yes, why did you search for an alternative solution?

- What factors help you to take decision for purchasing online?
- How does your behavior differ when purchasing as a business owner/employee when comparing to buying as individual? (difference b2b and b2c)

### **Digital content and online purchasing**

- How digital content helps you to discover new product, even you are not aware of the product?
- What kind of content makes you aware about certain solutions for your problem?
- What would you like to see when searching for a solution?
- What kind of content makes you consider certain solutions for your problem?
- What are the important elements of digital content? And / or, how should a content creator present digital contents in order to get your attention?

Blog

Video content

Product reviews

- What other digital services do you use besides Venture Oy (services that you use digitally)?
- How digital contents affect you to change your mind for purchasing decision? (e.g. changing the product to another one)
- What is the positive and/or negative side of purchasing a product online only depending on online contents?
- Do you find the digital contents from Venture Oy as useful?
- What kind of content would you like to see more?
- How do you find the educational webinars in general?