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Assessing the impact of marketing automation on customer engagement in B2B settings

Digitalisation and advancements in technology are fundamentally changing B2B relationships (Obal & Lancioni, 2013; Hofacker *et al.*, 2019). Supplier-buyer relationships are increasingly computer-mediated and dependent on technology (Obal & Lancioni, 2013; Pagani & Pardo, 2017), and an increasing number of touchpoints across various channels contributes to complexity in customer journeys (Cortez & Johnston, 2017). Moreover, the role of digital communications in influencing purchase decisions has increased, and organisations are increasingly utilising digital content marketing to drive engagement (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016; Hollebeek & Macky, 2019). Understanding the impact of technology, such as artificial intelligence, on marketing practices and customer experiences (across a wide spectrum of settings) is now a key research priority (MSI, 2022; Ostrom *et al.*, 2021). To contribute to this emerging area of work, this study focuses on marketing automation, a software tool used to automate marketing tasks including email marketing, web analytics, data integration and campaign management (Bagshaw, 2015; Buttle & Maklan, 2019).

The study aims to understand how marketing automation impacts customer engagement in B2B settings with a specific focus on the role of marketing automation in supporting an organisation's engagement marketing efforts. The research is qualitative and based on 29 in-depth phenomenological semi-structured interviews. The sample consists of both in-house digital marketers working with marketing automation in B2B organisations (14) and digital marketers working with marketing automation in digital marketing agencies (15) in both Finland and the UK. Participants were selected based on their expertise and experience of working with marketing automation and content marketing strategies in B2B settings. Interviews took place over Zoom and were an average of 76 minutes.

Findings centre around the following areas. Firstly, the data reveals promising insights into online pre-purchase engagement behaviours, and the role that marketing automation plays in facilitating these interactions. It seems that engagement is journey-dependent, manifesting in different ways at different stages of the customer journey and these instances can be effectively stimulated and captured using automation. Secondly, the data reveals insights to the role of marketing automation as a relationship-building tool, providing insights on its utilisation for nurturing B2B relationships throughout the customer journey. In particular, the use of marketing automation reduces the reliance on human relationships at earlier stages of the customer journey. Finally, early analysis suggests a growing link between marketing automation and personalisation at scale, challenging standard thinking in B2B regarding standardisation of automated services. Overall, embryonic findings suggest that automation can revolutionise B2B relationships and allow firms to stimulate engagement across the customer journey.

This study contributes to both engagement research and content marketing research, by a) enhancing understanding of engagement and content marketing in B2B settings, and b) identifying connections between engagement and marketing automation. While engagement is an often-mentioned goal of content marketing, few studies consider how it can be used to trigger engagement or address the role of technology in this process. This is also one of the first studies to consider the relationship between marketing automation and engagement.

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