# Online Marketing Strategies:
## How to combine digital media channels

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# Abstract

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**Background and problem**: The new information technology has empowered the consumer and in this shifting market power participation and interaction have become essential parts of value co-creation. Online marketing has become increasingly important in order for companies and marketers to respond to the consumer demand. In previous research the online marketing channels have been studied individually. Even though researchers mention the importance of viewing the digital media channels as an eco-system limited research has been done on how the channels interrelate and complement each other.

**Aim:** The aim of this thesis is to examine how digital media channels are used and combined. By studying the online marketing activities of three companies we wish to identify online strategies and understand the advantages as well as the disadvantages of these strategies.

**Method:** The study was carried out through a netnographic study, where the online activities of three companies were observed. The data analysis was conducted through a semi-automatic method where common themes were identified using the research questions as guidelines.

**Results:** The results of the study are presented in two parts. First, the function of each digital media channel used by the companies is described individually. Second, each company's combination of digital media channels is analysed and online strategies are defined.

**Conclusion:** In conclusion three strategies are identified, the Diversified Content Strategy, the Interactive Channel Strategy and the Multichannel Standardised Content Strategy. Each strategy comes with certain advantages as well as disadvantages. The findings indicate that there is little point in studying digital media channels individually since their function depends on how they are combined with other channels. The study also reveals that interactivity begins to spread to "less interactive" digital media channels, i.e. to other channels than social media, which originally was used for this reason in marketing. Practically, we hope that the results of the study will help companies, especially small to medium-size businesses with limited resources, by providing them with insights on how digital media channels are used and combined.

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# 1. Introduction

Digital media is taking a larger role in our daily lives and within marketing the interest for online interactivity is increasing. The new information technology is empowering the consumers and has contributed to a shift in market power, which is no longer in the hands of the firms or marketers (Pires, Stanton and Rita, 2006). With this shifting market, the consumer demand is changing and participation as well as interaction have become essential parts of value creation (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). This has been a contributing factor to the increased activity of co-creating marketing, produced in digital media channels (Hanna, Rohm and Crittenden, 2011). In order to create unique value for the empowered consumer the businesses need to understand their customers as well as the function of different digital media channels (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). Lesidrenska and Dicke (2012) describe a business' online activity as an eco-system, where each digital media channel interrelates with each other. Each channel has a unique purpose with certain advantages as well as disadvantages. It is therefore important for businesses to know how to combine different digital media channels in order to optimize their marketing (Lesidrenska and Dicke, 2012). By understanding how to communicate with consumers in digital media it is possible to create mutual benefits for both parties (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004)

Practically, in a jungle of individual digital marketing tools it becomes difficult for companies to find an efficient strategy for online marketing. Even though the new digital marketing tools are considered relatively cheap the tactics are time-consuming to learn and to effectively implement (Kietzmann et al, 2011).

There is extensive research to be found within the field of online marketing. The majority of studies focus on individual online channels such as social media, websites and e-mail marketing. In addition to research on individual channels there are some studies highlighting the importance of interactivity and word of mouth in online marketing. As mentioned, participation and interaction with the companies have become crucial for the consumers and this is one of the reasons for the dramatic development in interactive digital media, also called social media (Hanna, Rohm and Crittenden, 2011). Social media platforms have become an essential tool to increase costumer engagement and to build close customer relationships. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) discuss the opportunities of being present in social media and the importance not only to large multinational firms, but also to small and medium sized companies. Heinonen (2011) takes the research further and finds motivators of why consumers are using social media and what advantages the social media phenomenon comes with. Research has also been conducted on websites as a marketing tool and Buckling and Sismeiro (2009) believe that website traffic data misses key points of information in order to gain in-depth marketing analysis. However, other researchers suggest that businesses can use website traffic data to strengthen the long-term relationship with their customers (Pires, Staton and Rita, 2006). E-mail marketing is another online marketing tool commonly discussed in research. Pavlov, Melville and Plice (2008) consider e-mail as a complex marketing tool, but with opportunities of relatively high returns. Further, Strauss (2006) discusses common objectives in e-mail marketing aiming to build and maintain a close relationship with the customers. The changed market climate, with new marketing tools, has affected the traditional rules of word of mouth (WOM) and has an increased the phenomenon's role in (Breazeale, 2009).

Consequently, from previous research we know about digital media channels and their individual function. However, there is limited focus on how digital media channels interrelated and how they are combined, which leads us onto the aim of this study.

## 1.1 Aim

The aim of this thesis is to examine how digital media channels are combined in online marketing strategies. By studying the online marketing activities of three companies we wish to identify strategies used and understand the advantages as well as the disadvantages of these strategies.

## 1.2 Research questions

- How do companies use different digital media channels to communicate with consumers?
- How do companies combine these different digital media channels in an eco-system?
- What kind of strategies can be identified?

To fulfil the aim of our study we have chosen to look at the online marketing of three companies within the interior design industry: Åhléns, Lexington and Marimekko. Due to a high consumer demand these companies have well-developed online marketing and they are all using social media to a great extent. We find it relevant to study companies within the same industry in order to be able to compare different approaches and strategies.

To allow the reader a deeper understanding of the existing literature, the first part below will present qualitative research made on relevant digital media channels. The complexity of the online activities will be explained in order to understand the most relevant digital media channels. In order to answer the research questions and try to identify strategies the activity of the three companies' online marketing will be investigated through a netnographic study. However, some method modifications will be made in order to suit this study. The data will be collected through closely observing the companies' activities in the different digital channels and how their individual combinations. In conclusion distinct strategies will be discussed.

# 2. Online marketing: a literature review

*This chapter gives the reader an understanding of common online activities by reviewing past research within the field of online marketing. First, online marketing in general is defined. Followed by an explanation of the online word of mouth, since the phenomenon has a significant role in online marketing. Subsequently, the function of common online marketing tools such as websites, e-mails and social media are described.*

## 2.1 Introduction

The definition of E-marketing, Online Marketing or Internet Marketing varies among researchers. However, El-Gohary (2010) reviewed relevant research made within the field between the years 2003 and 2010 and defines E-marketing as follows: "E-marketing has a broader scope than internet marketing since Internet Marketing (IM) refers only to the Internet, World Wide Web, e-mails. While E-Marketing includes all of that plus all other E-Marketing tools like: Intranets, Extranets and mobile phones" (El-Gohary, 2010, p. 216). Internet Marketing is also known as Online marketing (Peltier, Drago and Schibrowsky, 2003).

According to Finnemann (2011) the definition of digital media is flexible. However, he mentions the basic characteristics as digitalised content that can be spread over the Internet or computer networks. The content can be in e.g. written format, interactive communication or videos. These channels used in online marketing can therefore be referred to as digital media channels.

## 2.2 Word of mouth goes viral

The power of word of mouth (WOM) is not a new understanding. Arndt (1967) defines the traditional WOM as an oral communication between a receiver and a communicator whom the receiver sees as non-commercial. The positive WOM that marketers or companies usually want to obtain has been proven to have a significant impact on the consumers' decision making (Richins, 1983). However, it is important to mention that research also has shown that negative word of mouth has an even bigger influence on the consumer (Richins, 1983).

As mentioned, the changed market climate has empowered the consumer and this has affected the traditional rules of WOM. Accordingly, Breazeale (2009) means that WOM has an increased role in a digital environment, where it's known as Word of Mouse or eWOM. The customers are gaining more power and when the digital channels spread the average consumer's ability to make their voice heard increases. Breazeale (2009) means that this change affects companies and marketers' attempt to control the WOM that figures online. Delivering the right content to the consumer then becomes essential for the companies to take advantage of the power in eWOM. Practically eWOM is known as for instance "like" or "share" and many researchers indicate that the eWOM is the key to successful online marketing (Hennig-Thurau et al, 2004; Campbell et al, 2011; José-Cabezudo and Camarero-Izquierdo, 2012). There are multiple ways of how to spread the eWOM online (social media, blogs, e-mail, viral etc.). Ellis-Chadwick and Doherty (2012) find interaction as one of the most effective tactics for spreading eWOM and together with Pavlov, Melville and Plice (2008) they believe viral message is one of the most effective interactive tools.

## 2.3 Websites as marketing tools

Regarding consumer behaviour on websites most research focuses on how a business can use their website to collect data about their customers. Among others, Pires, Staton and Rita (2006) confirm that businesses can use website traffic data to strengthen the long-term relationship with their customers through personalized marketing. However, to be able to generate this quality data the customer need to log in when entering the company website. Basic website traffic data is easy to obtain on a daily or weekly basis, and will provide information such as clickstream and average time spent on each window view. This type of information enables studies of how users navigate on websites and how they respond to the structure. However, as Buckling and Sismeiro (2009) state, website traffic data are often missing key points of information to get depth and quality in marketing analysis. For instance the data does not explain for what reason or what type of information the consumer was searching for initially.

## 2.4 E-mail marketing

Despite the complexity of effective e-mail marketing the tactic provides, according to Pavlov, Melville and Plice (2008), twice the return on investment compared to other online marketing activities. However, as mentioned, it is difficult for companies to succeed with their e-mail marketing. Strauss (2006) discusses two known common tactics used in e-mail marketing; Opt-In and Opt-Out. Opt-out is when a business is sending e-mails without the consumer's permission and are usually difficult to unsubscribe. The risk with using this kind of strategy is that the consumer registers the e-mail as "spam" (unsolicited e-mails), which will almost eliminate the chance to get through to the customer via e-mail again. Opt-In on the other hand is when the business asks for permission to send e-mail, and makes it easy for the consumer to unsubscribe. Strauss (2006) means that the Opt-in strategy is more appropriate when the company's goal is to build and maintain a close relationship with their customers. Ellis-Chadwick and Doherty (2012) present a list of recommendations for effective e-mail marketing. The main executional tactics are the length of the e-mail, the frequency of sending e-mails, content of subject line and amount of hyperlinks. The length and the frequency of the e-mail have to be ideal. If the e-mail arrives to the customer with too short intervals, irritations probably will appear, while too long intervals between the newsletters can result in a declining costumer interest. The content should be connected to communication objectives and the message should be simple and concrete. Preferably the message should contain naturally connected hyperlinks and promote interactivity to increase the involvement and engagement of the costumer.

Pavlov, Melville and Plice (2008) explain that the largest problem with e-mail marketing is that customer feel overwhelmed. Also, consumers receive large amounts of e-mails every day and will only select the most relevant ones. Therefore the structure of the content and topic of the e-mail become crucial (Ellis-Chadwick and Doherty, 2012).

## 2.5 Social Media and marketing

According to Hoffman and Fodor (2010), most companies focus on the traditional marketing objectives in social media, such as direct sales, direct cost reduction or increase in market share. These are the basic objectives for all profit-driven businesses and research has proven social media to generate real cost savings as well as improve the efficiency of market efforts.

However, Hoffman and Fodor (2010) mean, in the social media environment, marketers have unique opportunities to strengthen the intrinsic values of the customer and build a closer relationship. Social media is an effective marketing channel to handle and improve awareness, engagement and WOM. Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) as well as Heinonen (2011) also find that social media has a function to create a deeper understanding of the consumer needs. According to Hanna, Rohm and Crittenden (2011) social media has become an effective channel to respond to the new consumer demand of participation. Social media creates mutual benefits, where the activity allows companies to learn more about their customers at the same time as the consumers' requests become satisfied. Heinonen (2011) has identified motivators of why consumers are using social media. Her findings indicate that there is usually a combination of interaction, entertainment and information that motivates consumer to use social media. She writes: "not surprisingly, social connection and a need to communicate were mentioned repeatedly" (Heinonen, 2011, p. 359). Her study, as well as Prahalad and Ramaswamy's (2004), note that co-creation plays an important role in motivating the consumers to use social media, as it improves the customer experience. Sharing experience and knowledge with the company and other consumers, affects the consumers' decision making. Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) mention dialogue as a noticeable element in co-creation.

Hanna, Rohm and Crittenden (2011) continue to discuss co-creation and the increasingly active role of the consumers in co-creating the brand and marketing activities. In their study they came to the conclusion that social media has transformed the Internet from a channel of information, to a channel for influence. The dramatic growth of social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, made companies of all sizes view presence in social media as mandatory in their marketing strategy. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) also point out that social media is important not only to large multinational firms but also to small and medium sized companies, as well as non-profit organisations and governments. They also find that by using social media a company can reach the end-consumer at a relatively low cost and in a more efficient way than through traditional communication channels.

Viral marketing is one part of social media that distinctly departs from other social media channels because of its reliance on the word of mouth (Liu-Thompkins, 2012)."People share content because it moves them – and because they want to be the source of an idea with their network", says Robert Rose, strategist at the Content Marketing Institute (in McNeal, 2012, p.12). Rose means that this is why we tell stories in real life events as well. Accordingly, emotions are the most common trigger for consumers to share content. Liu-Thompkins (2012) also argues about the importance of the "seeding strategy" within viral media, which basically is the strategy of how to spread the viral message. The seeding strategy becomes crucial as the channel relies on eWOM. Given previous findings, where researchers state that the success of viral marketing depends on personality traits, demographics, usage characteristics and motivations (Hung-Chang et al, 2007; Trusov, Bodapati and Bucklin, 2010; Niederhoffer et al, 2007; Eccleston and Griseri, 2008), Liu-Thompkins identifies more concrete key elements of seeding strategy. Her results suggest, like Watts and Peretti (2007), that it is more likely to have a positive outcome of the viral message if more seeds are spread at the launch of the campaign. Although, when general quality of the message improves the need of a "big seed" strategy reduces.

## 2.6 Summary

This chapter reviewed relevant research of the common online marketing tools: website, e-mail and social media. As the aim of this research is to identify strategies of how to combine digital media channels it is important to understand the fundamental capacities of these channels. Reviewing past research within online marketing enables us to choose relevant companies to study and ask the right questions during the fieldwork. Next chapter explains how the study is performed in more detail.

# 3. A Netnographic Study

*In this chapter we discuss the method of netnography in relation to other methods and provide a motivation for our choice of method. We continue by describing the research design, selection of case companies, fieldwork and data analysis carried out. Finally we discuss the method in terms of quality and ethics.*

## 3.1 Introducing the netnographic method

Robert Kozinets (2002, 2010) defines and discusses netnography as an online marketing research technique. Netnography is an ethnographic methodology that is shaped after online social interaction and adapted to the study of online communication. Today consumers communicate and socialise online. Consumers have an online life with habits comparable to the activities they perform in real life. To be able to study and understand the consumers' new behaviour in the online environment the extension of ethnographic methodology, in form of netnographics, is needed. However, it is important to notice that the differences between the consumers' real life and their life online are decreasing every day.

Kozinets (2002, 2010) continues to compare netnography to ethnography. Netnography is a naturalistic technique, just like ethnography. It uses information that is publicly available in online forums which means that netnography can be conducted in an unobtrusive manner compared to ethnography. Netnography is also less time consuming and resource intensive than traditional ethnography. However, this technique does not offer a richly textured, cultural understanding, but instead provides a structural one. Kozinets (2010) argues that a participative approach is what differentiates netnography from a simple gathering and coding of qualitative online data. However, other researchers have questioned the value of participation in netnography. Langer and Beckman (2005) argue that netnography allows the researcher to gain deeper understanding of consumers' opinions and motives in an unobtrusive and covert way. Others have adapted netnography, e.g. by performing a purely observational or passive netnography. Hewer and Brownlie (2007) for example conducted a netnography through non-participant observations in their exploratory study. They argue that netnography provides good access to web-based communication. Kozinets (2010) continues to discuss that by removing the participation entirely from netnography you also remove the possibility to experience the embedded cultural understanding. Subsequently, the researcher has to presume about the underlying cultural meanings since they are not fully understood.

Kozinets (2010) discusses when and how to combine ethnography and netnography. Netnography is an approach that is sometimes used as a stand-alone technique and sometimes as part of a larger study. When studying an online community, employing netnography as a stand-alone method can be justified. That means the study is conducted purely using data generated from online interactions (e.g. online observation and download).

Ethnographic studies can be performed through methods such as interviews, focus groups and surveys. However, as discussed by Kozinets (2010), these types of methods tend to be artificial and unnatural since the respondent needs to visualize certain circumstances to be able to respond to the questions. On the other hand, a naturalistic approach allows the possibility to identify the natural caused patterns. Instead of examining what companies and consumers say that they do online our study is of what they are actually doing. Therefore, the optimal method in order to answer the research questions of this study is a naturalistic method such a netnography. Since our study aims to identify the companies' structure and use of digital media channels we will use data from online interactions only. In addition to this we will take an observational approach, as we do not see a need for participation at this stage. We are only studying the companies' activities online and do not need to understand the underlying cultural meanings in order to answer our research questions.

Another method we considered before opting for netnography was qualitative interviews. Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) are discussing interviews as a qualitative research method that can provide us with information about what the underlying motivations are for a specific behaviour. Qualitative interviews provide us with information about what the respondents say they do and why, the respondents describe afterwards what they have done, or what they believe they will do in the future. As mentioned above we want to examine the companies' actual communication online, and are not interested in studying the underlying meanings of the activities. Therefore we chose not to use interviews as a research technique at this stage.

## 3.2 Research design

In order to fulfil the aim and answer the research questions we have chosen to study the online activities of three interior design companies. As mentioned above, these companies have well-developed online marketing. Also, we find it relevant to study companies within the same industry in order to compare different approaches. The criteria upon which these companies have been selected are presented below. To gather the required data we use a set of different data collection tools, which are discussed below under the Data collection section.

### 3.2.1 Selection of case companies

With the research questions in mind the three companies have been selected as case studies based on the criteria listed below:

- Relevance, they are related to our research focus and questions
- Online activity, they have recent and regular communications
- Interactivity, they have a flow of communications between participants
- Substantial, they have a critical mass of communication
- Data-rich, the amount of data possible to collect

(Kozinets, 2010)

#### *3.2.1.1 Case 1 – Åhléns*

Åhléns is one of the leading department stores in Sweden and a large share of the revenue is generated from their department of interior design. However, the largest department of consumer goods is women clothing. Åhléns is chosen as a case study since the company is present in the common digital media channels discussed in previous research. The company appears to be active online with regular communication in all channels. Åhléns also emphasises on interactivity in multiple channels and there is a flow of communication between the participants. Looking at the number of participants, in social media channels called followers, Åhléns has an amount of followers in-between the two other companies chosen for the study. Generally, the digital media channels appear to contain a large amount of data, which will facilitate the data collection process.

#### *3.2.1.2 Case 2 - Lexington*

Lexington is a Swedish interior and clothing company, known for their inspiration from the New England style. The company started with the idea to deliver complete concepts of home textiles. Over the years they have expanded their range of goods to home interior and clothing. Lexington is present in the relevant digital media channels we wish to study. They also appear to be active online, which will allow us to easily collect data. At first site, the company appears to focus on interactivity, as they are present in all social media channels. The amount of followers within the social media channels is relatively low compared to the other chosen companies, however this may create an interesting angle for our study.

#### *3.2.1.3 Case 3 – Marimekko*

Marimekko is a well-established Finnish textile and clothing company. Originally the company designed and manufactured high-quality interior decorations. They have developed their business and entered the clothing industry. Marimekko's is chosen for the study since the company appears to have a high level of online activity, focusing on interactivity in particular. The company is present in more digital media channels than both Åhléns and Lexington, therefore a great amount of data can be collected. Their amount of followers in the social media channels is relatively high, which gives us a substantial mass to study.

## 3.3 Data collection

Kozinets (2010) discusses three different kinds of netnographic data: archival data, elicited data and fieldnote data. In our study, archival data will be collected initially. Examples of this data are pictures, videos and direct-copied conversations from the companies' digital media channels. Second, netnographic fieldnote data will be collected. This type of data contains notes and reflections from the observation. The data collections will be conducted concurrently and will be coded together. Kozinets (2010) also discusses elicitation of netnographic data. The approaches to elicit netnographic data can be classified into two main strategies: communal interaction and interviews. Since information collected by these techniques are not of interest for this research, elicited netnographic data will not be applied.

As discussed by Kozinets (2010), if pure netnographics had been chosen for this research, interaction and participation in the online community would have been needed to generate reliable data. However, we have conducted an analysis of online content through non-participant observations as discussed by Hewer and Brownlie (2007).

## 3.4 Fieldwork

The fieldwork was carried out through non-participant observations of the three companies' online communication. The initial observations of approximately ten hours per company, a total of 30 hours of observation, took place between 25$^{th}$ of March and 30$^{th}$ of April 2013. In addition to this, complementary observations of approximately two hours per company took place between 1$^{st}$ of May and 16$^{th}$ of May 2013. Websites and newsletters were only possible to study from the starting date and forward, while the companies' activity in the social media channels was observed from the beginning of 2010.

The large amounts of data available in the different channels made it important to limit the data collection in accordance with the aim and research questions of the study. The research questions helped us with the first delimitation:

- How do companies use different digital media channels to communicate with consumers?
- How do companies combine these different digital media channels in an eco-system?
- What kind of strategies can be identified?

In order to further facilitate the fieldwork and define what to look for we focused on the below questions:

1. What digital media channels are the company using?
2. What is the typical content within the digital media channels?
3. What is the company trying to communicate through the different channels?
4. Is the communication within the channels consistent?
5. Can we notice any difference in the content within a channel over time?
6. Are the companies interacting with the customer, and if so, how?
7. What is the interaction between the channels?

With these questions in mind we gathered fieldnotes in three categories. First, fieldnotes were collected through a descriptive perspective, explaining what was seen. These notes contained our own impressions, screenshots of pictures, videos, online conversations, e-mails, links and other content. Second, the observations were related back to previous research, reflecting over reasons for specific content in a certain channel. Last, we also tried to write down difficulties of the method. Since the observations were completed online all the fieldnotes were written electronically in a Microsoft Word document. The material produced consisted of approximately 150 pages of computer-based fieldnotes.

The data was easy to access and obtain since the online activity of the companies is public information and readily available to study. The only issue that can be mentioned was the sheer magnitude of data available, which made it important to limit the data collection in accordance with the questions above. The data collection went according to plan and the material produced enabled us to move onto the next stage, the data analysis.

## 3.5 Data Analysis

Initially, we used a semi-automatic method to code the data collected. The search and find function in Microsoft Word was used in order to simplify the coding and pick up on re-occurring patterns in the fieldnotes (Hahn, 2008). Subsequently, in order to structure and analyse the data further we printed the material to be able to gain a good overview. The material was coded manually by looking through the prints and identifying relevant text, pictures, colours etc. (Kozinets, 2010). Subsequently, using the research questions as guidelines, common themes were identified. When developing the themes we related the data back to previous literature to confirm already existing patterns, as well as the appearance of new themes.

## 3.6 Quality of the research

When conducting a qualitative study it is important to ensure its quality and trustworthiness. However, according to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008), the classic criteria of good-quality research were originally developed to evaluate quantitative research and therefore they do not necessarily apply to qualitative research. Unlike quantitative research methods, where it is possible to measure the quality through credibility and reliability, Seale (1999) states how the measurement of quality in qualitative research is more difficult. Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) discuss four variables of how to look at common issues regarding trustworthiness; dependability, transferability, credibility and conformability.

According to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) dependability means that the reader should be able to follow the research process, the process should be logical, traceable and documented. Transferability is about showing parallels with previous research; it is not about replication but more about connection with other research. In this study we have tried to fulfil the criteria of dependability and transferability during the creation and execution of the project. Dependability is taken into consideration when continuously informing the reader about the process of the research project. With regard to transferability the introduction contains an explanation of the aim for this study connected to previous research conducted. We also discuss previous research in the analysis and highlighting relevant connections.

Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) discusses the concept of credibility which measures whether the researcher is familiar with the subject and how the researcher's previous understanding of the topic has influenced the analysis of the data. Would another researcher have interpreted the material differently? The aspect of credibility is critical in this study since our previous knowledge of online marketing and digital media channels is limited. Since we are also performing netnography as a method for the first time it may affect the quality of the data collection and analysis. However, due to the limited knowledge of the subject we do not believe that our preconceived views have influenced the analysis considerably. The last concept, conformability, is about making the findings and interpretations easy to understand by others. As Bergman and Coxon (2005) mention, it is important that the data collected is linked to the research question otherwise it is difficult to analyse the data in order to reach the aim. We have increased the conformability by trying to link the analysis to the data in a clear and structured way.

## 3.7 Research Ethics

Kozinets (2002) discusses ethics in netnography as one of the most important differences from traditional ethnography. In ethnography and other traditional methods the respondents are often aware that they are being studied, whereas netnography uses information that might not have been intended for them. However, online there is a debate about private vs. public space and whether informed consent is required or not. Kozinets (2002) is determined that consent is required to study an online community and to use the material collected within. He believes there is a real risk to future research if researchers are studying online communities "undercover". Langer and Beckman (2005) are questioning the research ethics recommended by Kozinets and are critical towards some of the characteristics of netnography as a method. They suggest that the ethical guidelines presented by Kozinets are far too rigorous and that they should be revised, in their current form they are endangering the unobtrusiveness of online studies. They argue that netnography is an appropriate methodology for research of sensitive subjects and that the covert study of public online communication is both legitimate and ethical. Hewer and Brownlie (2007) used non-participant observations in their study in order to reach the desired results, although they were aware of the ethical implications this may have. To overcome the ethical issues they opted to delete the personal details of the respondents in order to protect their anonymity.

In this study we are not interested in studying online communities or posts by individual persons. Since we are not specifically learning about what the individual is saying or doing, but rather how the company is communicating, the issue of ethics becomes less apparent. We believe that the online communication of companies can be seen as public information and that their websites and social media networks are considered public sites. In the rare case where we use citations of online postings we have blurred the name of the individual in order to protect their anonymity.

# 4. Digital Media Channels and Online Marketing Strategies

*The results and analysis of the study are presented in two phases. First, the function of the online activities used by the companies studied is described, presented by digital media channel. Social media are divided into specific channels depending on function. Second, each company is analysed individually, trying to identify a specific strategy employed by the company. With this approach the reader can initially understand the use of different digital media channels and consequently be able to see strategies of how the companies combine channels.*

## 4.1 The online activities

### 4.1.1 The Website as an Identity maker and source of information

The websites of the three case companies studied all reflect the identity of the company. When accessing the websites you instantly feel a sense of recognition of the brand and even without sight of the company name you know that the website belongs to the specific company. The websites also serve a main function as information channel for the consumers. Websites are an easy way to reach out to a large number of consumers with basic and practical information about the company. Information such as contact details, product collection, store locator and other typical organisational information can be found on all websites studied. The websites also function as a platform for other digital media channels. By referring to other media channels the company enables a higher level of customer engagement and participation (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004).

The Åhléns website is colourful and has a seasonal feeling to it. It is dynamic and has news and products displayed one the first page. The overall impression of the website is appealing, it appeals to your *"must have needs"*. It is easy to understand the structure of the website and to find information regarding other channels where the company is present. The other online channels, which the company refers to through their website, are Facebook, YouTube and Instagram. Currently the company also encourages consumer interaction through promoting competitions in other digital media channels.


**Figure 1.** *Åhléns website 2013-04-02*

On the first page, the company also focuses on their customer loyalty club, the "Åhléns Klubb". Even when the consumer is invited to read their seasonal inspiration guide there is a reference to the loyalty club. The company's goal with the website appears to be to deliver information to the customer of how they can interact with the company at different levels. They give the customer the possibility to look at the product assortment, where they refer to stores where specific products can be bought. The company also invites the consumer to engage in the company by referring them to interactive online channels. The only other channels that the company actively promotes, is Instagram where they encourage the customer to participate in a competition and the newsletter where they ask the customer to sign up in order to take part of offers (see figure 1).

Similar to Åhléns, Lexington communicates the identity of the company on their website (see Quote from fieldnotes below).

*" When accessing the website you instantly feel a longing for summer, the sea, salty baths and the East Hampton lifestyle. The website has an international feeling to it, but the American New England identity is very strong".*

The website is seasonal and shows the latest collection. The first page only promotes different product groups via links to the collection. Unlike Åhléns and Marimekko, the company does not promote any other digital media channels by actively asking the customer to take action and participate in other channels. Even though the company does refer to other channels, it does not seem to be one of the main purposes of the website information. The main goal with the website appears to be to emphasise on communicating the identity of the company and create a desire for the "Lexington lifestyle". For instance the company sells two volumes of a book called "Lexington Living" (see figure 2).

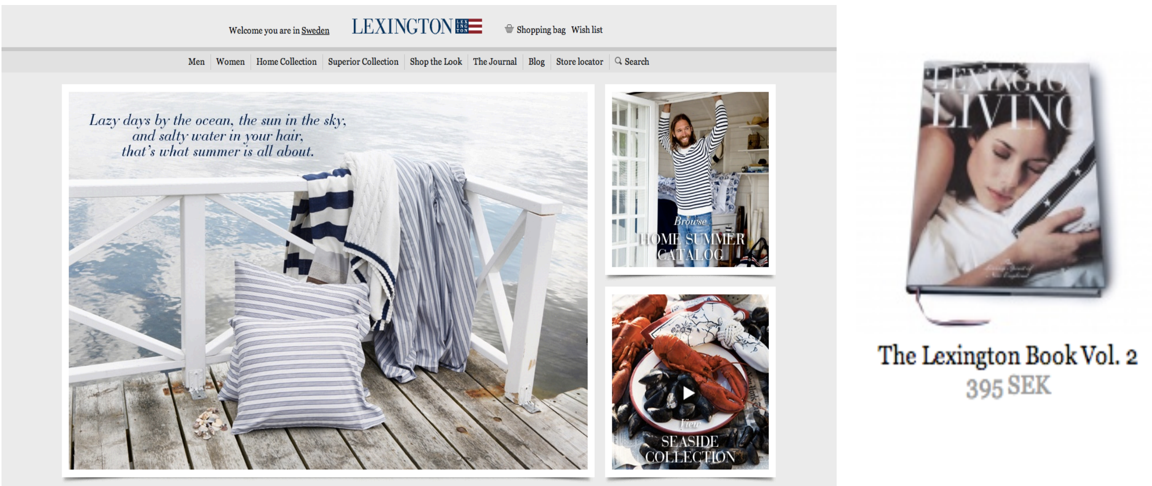


**Figure 2.** *"Lexington way of living" – Website 2013-04-03*

The company website also has a links to a blog, however the blog seems to have been discontinued. The latest post was in October 2012 and it was referring to the company's Facebook page for the latest news. Lexington is linking to Facebook, Twitter and Vimeo, however they do not have a link to Instagram on the website. A reason for this might be that their Instagram account is owned and used by the owner of the company (will be explained further below in the Instagram section).

The Marimekko website is colourful and stylish. It truly communicates the brand Marimekko through their well-known colourful patterns and their fun personality (see figure 3). The website feels different from the other two companies in a new thinking way with its sharp colours and fun structure (see Quote from fieldnotes below).

*"Everything seems to be news and summer! Something is happening; pictures keep changing and revolving, more news, more colours! Sunny… I feel like shopping!"*

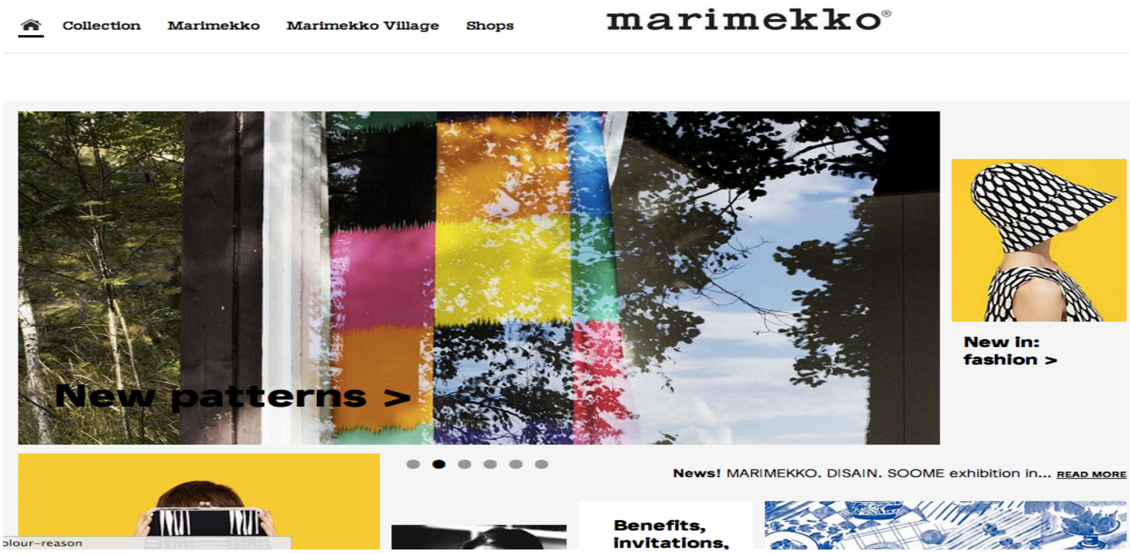


**Figure 3.** *Marimekko Website 2013-04-13*

Unlike Lexington, the company actively asks the customers to take action, for instance "join Marimekko Village", which is their loyalty club. Marimekko Village provides the customer with newsletters as well as inspirational photos through active blogging. By asking the consumer to join Marimekko Village the customer can log in when entering their website. This way the company can use web site traffic data to strengthen the long-term relationship with the customer through personalized marketing (Pires, Staton and Rita, 2006). The website also links to Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Pinterest.

Overall, the Åhléns and Marimekko websites feel more active than Lexington's website. They offer different levels of engagement opportunities and promote the customer to take action through competitions and offers in other digital media channels. In comparison, the Lexington website tends to feel flat. By mostly providing product information the website is less interactive and less dynamic. Another overall observation is that all websites are seasonal, which makes them feel up to date. As mentioned not all websites have a sense of interactivity or even activity but due to the seasonality they may feel dynamic in a way.

In conclusion, websites appear to be a way to communicate the identity of the company, show new products and refer to other digital media channels. It is often the consumer's first point of contact with the company and a good opportunity for the company to provide the consumer with basic and practical information about the company and its products. However, as discussed by Buckling and Sismeiro (2009), website traffic data often lack key points of information and do not provide an in-depth analysis of the consumer and what they are looking for. This may be the reason why all the companies of our research link to social media on the first page of their websites and why some of the companies are strongly promoting the other channels. Social media has a better ability to understand the consumers at a deeper level according to Heinonen (2011) as well as Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004), which perhaps is the reason why the three companies studied use the social media channels.

#### 4.1.2 Reminding the consumer that you exist – the role of the newsletter

The companies studied use e-mail marketing as a way of reminding their customers that they exist. By offering the consumers access to news, inspiration and special offers they create a sense of belonging and also an incentive for the consumer to shop. As discussed by Ellis-Chadwick and Doherty (2012) the length and frequency of the e-mail is of utter importance and there is fine line between reminding the consumer that the company exists and annoying them. The companies of the research have all opted for a short format of newsletters, which enables the consumer to gain a quick overview and determine whether or not the content interests them. The companies appear to embrace an opt-in strategy as discussed by Strauss (2006), which is a good alternative in order to avoid being classified as spam.

Åhléns and Lexington have an option at the bottom of the first page of their websites where the customer can sign up for their newsletter. However, Åhléns is also specifically promoting to sign up for the newsletter (see figure 1). In the case of Marimekko you sign up for the newsletter when you join their loyalty club. This process might seem cumbersome to the consumer but one reason that company has chosen this option may be that it enables them to gather a lot of important information about the consumer, such as age, geographic location etc. As mentioned, this type of information is difficult to gather otherwise. Using an opt-in strategy, where customers sign up for the newsletter rather than receiving unsolicited e-mails, Strauss (2006) finds most effective as the risk of getting categorized as spam decreases. The opt-in strategy seems to be used by all three companies studied.

When signing up for the Åhléns newsletter you receive an e-mail with information regarding how often you will receive the newsletter and what it will contain (see figure 4). Ellis-Chadwick and Doherty (2012) highlight the importance of the length and frequency of newsletters in e-mail marketing, which Åhléns seems to have taken in consideration. By providing this information in the welcoming e-mail the customer knows what to expect and can therefore choose themselves if it is suitable for them. If they decide that it is, the likelihood of them actually reading the e-mail increases. The Åhléns newsletter contains the latest news, product offers as well as it promotes other channels, such as a competition on Instagram (see figure 1). Åhléns also encourages you to join their loyalty club in order to receive more offers and discounts.

The Lexington newsletter is easy to follow with large pictures and headlines; it does not contain too much information. The main content of the first two newsletters received was news and inspiration. On the first one there was discreet link to a campaign, but the newsletters did not feel interactive. As in their website, they did not invite the consumer to take action. However, the last newsletter received during the time of data collection gives the consumer an incentive for shopping through offers suitable for the season (see figure 5).

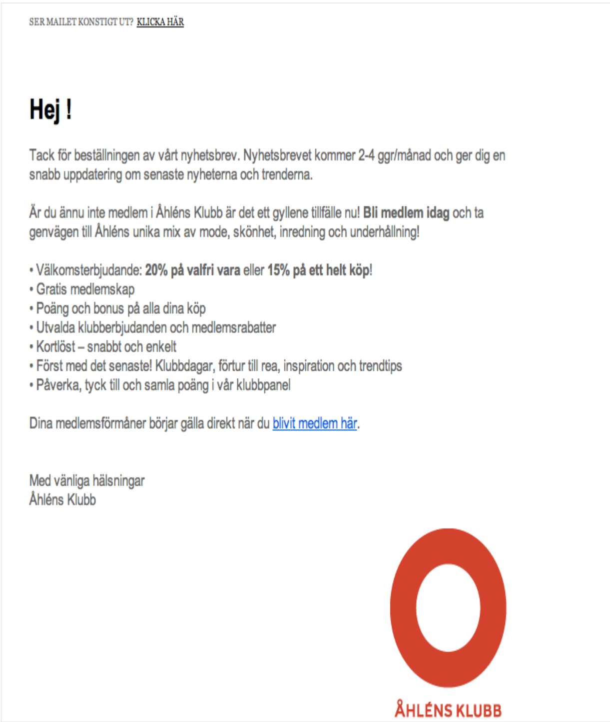



**Figure 4.** *Åhléns - first e-mail*

**Figure 5.** *Lexington newsletter 2013-04-29*

The Marimekko newsletter has the same format as the website, which creates continuity and recognition for the customer. It has a very simple structure and it is easy to understand the overall message. The main purpose of the newsletter appears to be to promote new products where links refers to their websites' collection page. Together with links to the interactive channels, the newsletter also contains a link to their blog in Marimekko Village. Notable is that the second newsletter received for this study was in Finnish without any option to translate, even though you signed up as international customer. As mentioned earlier, the customer signs up for the Marimekko newsletter by joining their loyalty club, Marimekko Village. When joining the club the customer receives an e-mail saying: "Hello friend – welcome to Marimekko". The use of the word "friend" creates a sense of belonging and makes you feel welcome in the company (see figure 6).


**Figure 6.** *Screen shot Marimekko Village 2013-04-19*

All three companies studied have some similarities regarding how they design their newsletter. First, all newsletters link the content to the company website where more product information can be found and where the products in some cases can be bought. Second, they also put focus on links to interactive channels. However, Lexington and Marimekko only have linked symbols at the bottom of their e-mail whereas Åhléns is actually promoting competitions on e.g. Instagram. This promotion tactic gives the consumer an incentive to visit that channel.

In difference to the description of interactive digital media channels that will follow, the newsletters and the companies' websites are providing a higher level of basic and practical information. The websites and the newsletters often provide information with direct value to the customer, as for instance product information or offers. As mentioned earlier, this type of information allows the customer to take direct action.

### 4.1.3 Facebook – building a relationship with the customer through dialogue

All three companies studied have their own Facebook account. Heinonen (2011) as well as Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) argue that this the type of digital media channel focuses on interactivity, which also seems to be the general function of the three companies Facebook pages. On Facebook a dialogue is kept between the customers and the company. The companies studied are posting content in the network between four and six times a week, and in-between that customers contribute with own content of different kind. Their Facebook pages are often very closely connected to the brand identity that the company wants to communicate. However, the Facebook page is more simple and ordinary than the companies' websites.

Comparing Facebook to other digital media channels, Facebook is in this case definitely the most popular way of keeping a two-way communication with the consumers. The network is, through photos and offers, providing information in an entertaining format. The possibility for the consumer to interact through likes and comments are high and an active dialogue is kept between the company and the consumers. Above activities are all concrete examples of the elements Heinonen (2011) finds as motivators for consumers to use social media.

*" They post **current & local** in-store events – sometimes different type of invites were RSVP can be needed or not. Since I have received the newsletter, these events have not been promoted through e-mail. Probably because it's usually local!"*
(Quote from field notes 2013-05-17)

Compared to the companies' websites and their newsletters, local events are more commonly promoted on Facebook. One reason for this may be because Facebook is an open network where anyone can take note of the information posted. The message is ordinary without encouraging the customers to take part of the event. Instead it is communicated as news where customers whom feel motivated to answer to the company's posts. Again, this shows the ordinary way of how the company communicate with the consumers within the Facebook network.


**Figure 7.** *Åhléns invites to children day Facebook 2013-04-12*

All three companies post professional product photos and store pictures to remind customers of the company and their products. Customers then have a chance to "like" and "share" content to others. This creates additional exposure for the company.

Both Lexington and Marimekko are also posting non-professional photos, such as snapshots of real-time activities of what is going on within the company. Such content can be store events, photo shoots and visual merchandising. Åhléns does not use non-professional photos, but the company is still promoting local events. However, in difference to the other two companies, Åhléns does so before the events are actually happening (see figure 7). This way they enable their customers to take action and participate during the event.

Both Lexington and Åhléns are also using the network to answer customer questions. This type of dialogue improves the companies' respond to the customers' new demand of interaction (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004).

The consumers' "likes" and their "sharing" of content, provided by the three companies, have quickly increased during the last year, which can be seen in figure 8. When consumers "share" or "like" something on Facebook, this can be shown on other users' Facebook "news feed". According to Hennig-Thurau et al (2004), Campbell et al (2011), José-Cabezudo and Camarero-Izquierdo (2012) this phenomena is recognized as word-of-mouth or eWOM, where online content is spread to others. All of the three companies have achieved some sort of eWOM on Facebook

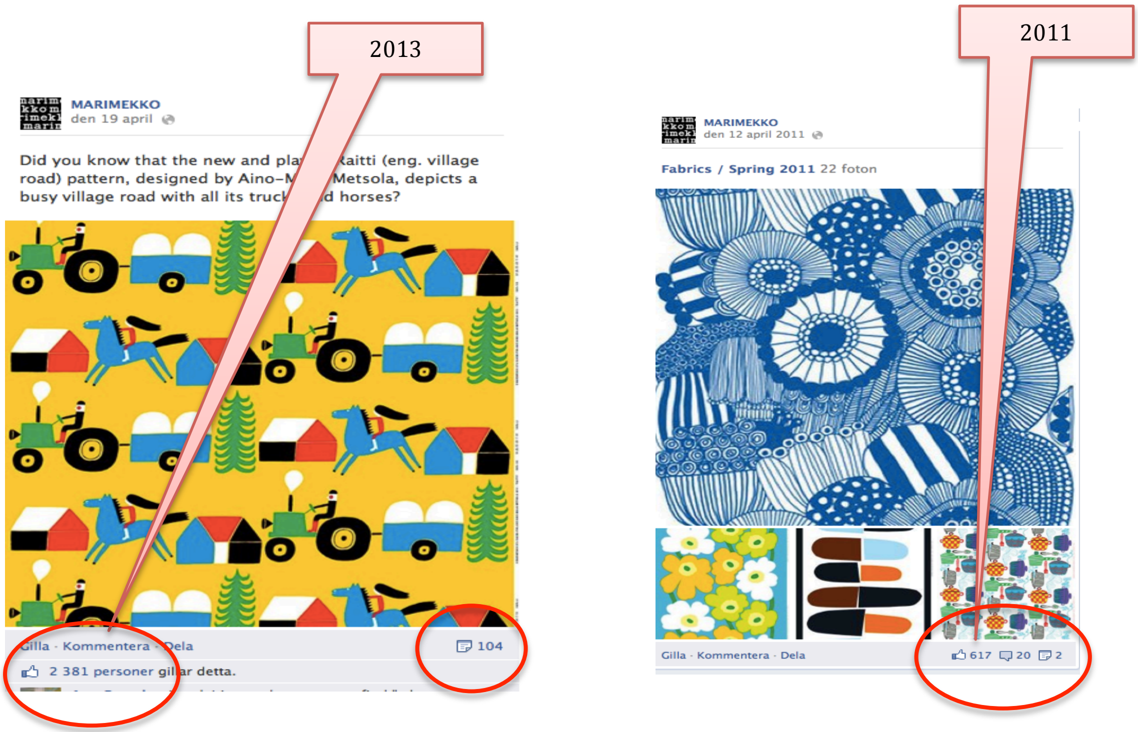


**Figure 8** *Marimekko screen shot from Facebook*

All three companies studied refer to other digital media channels through their Facebook page. Both Åhléns and Marimekko are using the Facebook account as a unique media channel providing customers with unique content that is not provided in any of the channels of their eco-system (Lesidrenska and Dicke, 2011). Lexington however, is since last year referring almost all content on Facebook from their Instagram account. By using this tactic of only having referred content Lexington becomes a passive user of Facebook. By providing customers with the same content in both channels Lexington's unique activity on Facebook has decreased.

### 4.1.4 Instagram – transforms the company into a person

By studying the companies it is possible to distinguish that Instagram is commonly used to communicate the company in action. By providing non-professional taken photos of real time events and activities that are going on at the company, such as fashion shows or VIP-events, the channel personalises the company. Both Åhléns and Lexington promote their Instagram account from other online digital media channels that they are present in. Marimekko does also have an Instagram account but the account is driven by their NYC store and this is probably the reason to why they are not promoting this channel from their website or any other digital media channel. This is the reason why Marimekko's Instagram account is not studied during this research.

Åhléns and Lexington's Instagram accounts communicate a personal image of the company. In the case of Åhléns this channel is relatively new and is delivering a unique content different from any of the other online channels. In this network the company posts personally taken snapshots of the "daily life of the company". The photos are often taken in the stores or at events arranged by the company, commonly related to some humoristic comment. Examples of this are close up photos of a product in the store, the humoristic comment, price and then related hash tags, which allows more people to see it when searching for tags (see figure 9).


**Figure 9** *Åhléns on Instagram: With humoristic comment, price and hashtags 2013-04-13*

This informs and reminds the customer of products in the store in a very simple and concrete way, in difference to website and newsletter information where the company challenges the customer to make a purchase. Since the company's Instagram account is relatively new, they are during the month of May this year promoting their account to attract more followers. For this reason the company has arranged a competition where they encourage the customers to get involve in the network by co-creation. As Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) note, co-creation plays an important role when creating an experience. In order to participate, the customer needs to create content themselves and post in the network with the hashtag #Åhléns (see figure 10).

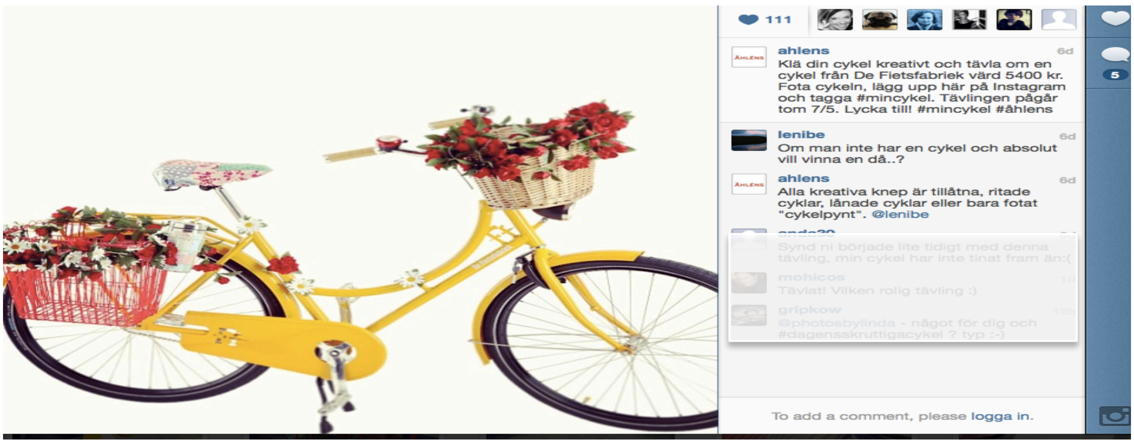


**Figure 10** *Åhléns Instagram competition: decorate your own bike 2013-04-13*

Lexington does also communicate their personality through Instagram, maybe even on a higher level than Åhléns. The company posts personally taken photos of products and in-store events, but also photos taken during moments of vacation and dinners (see figure 11). The posts are usually closely related to the heart of Lexington – the life in East Hampton. However, they do not embrace the possibility of co-creation in this network, which according to Heinonen (2011) as well as Prahalad and Ramaswamy's (2004) plays an important role when creating a customer experience. One reason for posting during vacations and other personal events could be that the founder of the company Kristina Lindhe stands for the account, @lexingtonkristinalindhe, and therefore it is not a pure company network.

By studying these two companies, the common reason for using Instagram appears to be to deliver a more personal impression of the company to the consumers. The channel may be an effective alternative for the companies to respond to the consumers' new demand of "experience the company", which is discussed by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004). Lexington's way of referring their content on Instagram to Facebook may then explain why their Facebook account seems to communicate the same personal experience as Instagram.


**Figure 11** *Lexington screen shot of typical content 2013-04-03*

### 4.1.5 Twitter – as a curiosity/attention builder

Only Marimekko and Lexington use this micro blogging network. This is a network where the frequency of the posts overall varies and can be produced everything from once a week to multiple times per day.

Regarding Marimekko, it is possible to distinguish three different tactics of how they use the network. First, the company is posting content very similar to the posts the other companies are posting in the network Instagram, snapshots of real-time events with some comment, which gives heart and blood to the company. The two other companies of the research provide this personalisation of the company, at a slightly deeper level, via the network Instagram.

Second, the company uses the network to create interest around an upcoming company event. Usually this type of content is posted more frequently. The posts are easy for followers to share within and outside the network in order to create eWOM (Hennig-Thurau et al, 2004; Campbell et al, 2011; José-Cabezudo and Camarero-Izquierdo, 2012) around the events.

Last, Marimekko also uses Twitter to promote offers in the same way the other companies use Facebook. By providing this type of content on Twitter only, Twitter becomes an *exclusive news* channel for the customers. The company is then using the network in a unique way compared to the other channels where the company is active.

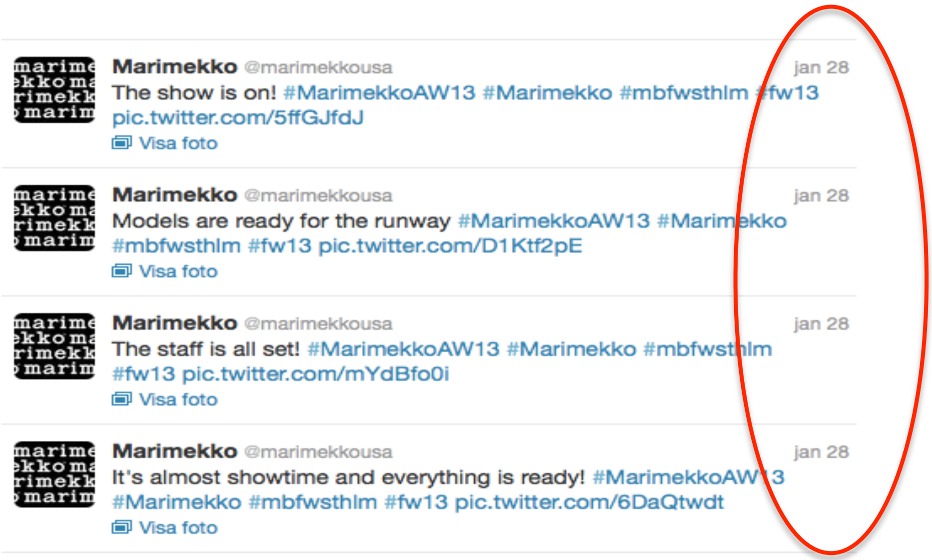


**Figure 12** *Twitter builds curiosity and excitement for the collection*

On Lexington's Twitter account almost all content is shared from Instagram and has thereby already been explained earlier in the chapters of Facebook and Instagram.

#### 4.1.6 Viral media – a channel easily used in order to benefit from eWOM

Åhléns and Marimekko use YouTube for delivering viral media, while Lexington uses Vimeo. Pavlov, Melville and Plice (2008) mean viral content is the most effective tactic to spread eWOM. With this in regard the goal with the companies' viral media may be to create a buzz around and spread the videos to other consumers.

Currently, YouTube is widely spread among the consumers. Popular videos are viewed millions of times and have a great ability of creating immense eWOM, positive or negative (Liu-Thompkins, 2012). The purpose of the videos is to be "liked", "commented" and "shared" in social media. However, when studying the viral channels of the case companies it is not possible to distinguish how many times the videos have been shared. This makes it difficult to draw any conclusions on how effective their viral marketing is in terms of spreading eWOM (Hennig-Thurau et al, 2004; Campbell et al, 2011; José-Cabezudo and Camarero-Izquierdo, 2012).

However, for Åhléns it is quite easy to provide relevant content within this channel since the company is producing TV-commercials. Posting the commercial on YouTube creates an opportunity for the consumer to watch the video again and share it with others. The company has 62 customers that have even subscribed to receive information regarding new videos. The Åhléns commercials are not standard TV-commercials; the videos future experts who are recommending products within their area of expertise (see figure 13). The videos are bringing add-value to the consumers and as discussed by Robert Rose (in McNeal, 2012) people share content when it induces emotions, and this really does.

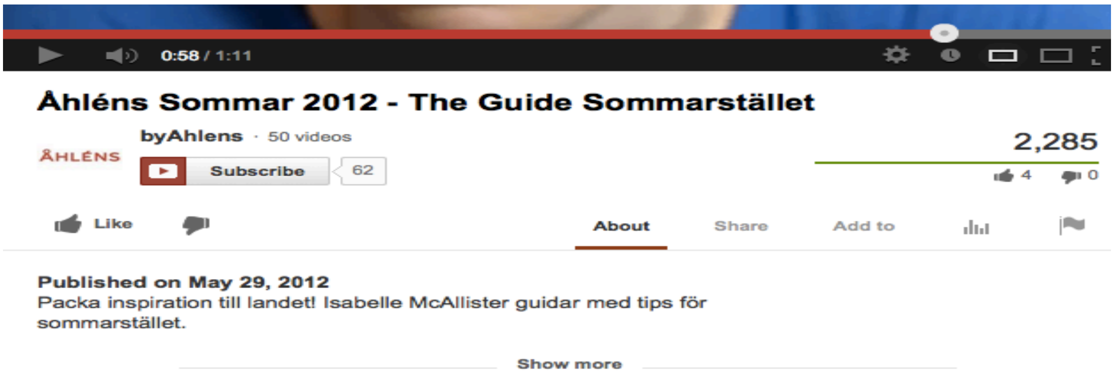


**Figure 13** *Åhléns on YouTube: "The guide Beach house"*

Marimekko uses YouTube, where they post videos of fashion shows, campaigns and cooperation's with other companies. The videos have from 400 to 18,000 displays and generally around 20 likes and 1-2 comments. As mentioned earlier it is difficult to draw any conclusions regarding effectiveness, at least in terms of spreading eWOM. However, according to Watts and Peretti (2007) and Liu-Thompkins (2012), viral message is most likely to have a positive outcome when the video is posted at the launch of a new campaign or collection – as the majority of Marimekko's content are.

Unlike the other two companies of the research, Lexington uses Vimeo. Vimeo is a U.S. based video-sharing website where users can upload, share and view videos. Lexington joined Vimeo a year ago and they have only posted 15 videos so far. They have mainly posted fashion shows and "lifestyle" videos.

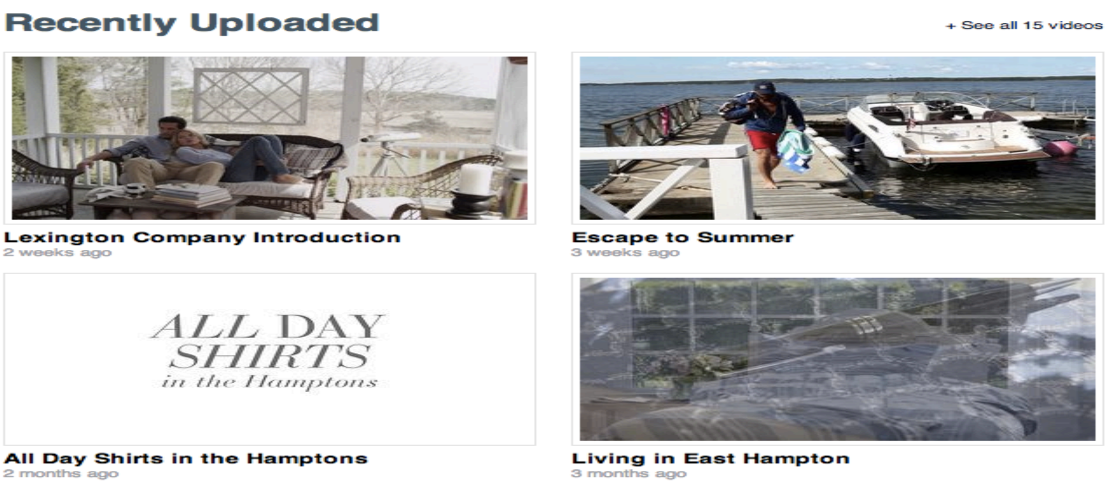


**Figure 14** *Lexington on Vimeo*

Meanwhile the two other companies provide content on YouTube in connection with launching a new collection or a new campaign or trigging emotions, Lexington's "lifestyle" videos are posted unprompted with less reason for the content of the video. Watts and Peretti (2007) and Liu-Thompkins (2012) mean that viral message is most likely to have a positive outcome when the content is spread at the launch of a new campaign or similar. Lexington seems to focus on just being present within this digital media channel without concerns of the quality of the videos, which makes content more difficult to relate with emotions. The quality of their content within this channel is very low compared to the other companies studied, which Liu-Thompkins (2012) means also decreases the opportunities of the message being spread. Accordingly, their presence in viral channels does not appear to achieve any success since the company has zero followers on Vimeo and only one "like".

### 4.1.7 Summary

This first part of the chapter explains how the companies studied use different digital media channels to communicate with the consumers. Each channel serves a specific function, which is identified by the similarities of how the companies use the channels. The following part of the chapter further explains the digital media channels in *combination* with each other and how different *strategies* can be structured.

## 4.2 Online marketing strategies in practice: combining digital media channels

Researchers argue for the importance of an eco-system and how different digital media channels have certain outcomes (Lesidrenska and Dicke, 2011). Therefore it is important to understand how different channels, especially in combination with each other, have different appearances and serve different functions. The following episode explains how the three companies studied combine their digital media channels into different strategies, which we have named according to content. For the convenience of the reader the strategies will be explained in the following order: digital media channels used, the content of the strategy and the level of consumer interactivity.

### 4.2.1 Åhléns – Diversified Content Strategy

Taking a diversified approach Åhléns delivers unique content in multiple of the digital media channels identified in the research. The company runs a website and a newsletter. They are also present in the social media channels, Instagram, Facebook and YouTube. The company fulfils different purposes through different channels, e.g. the website serves as basic source of information whereas social media invites the customer to participation.

It is possible to divide the company's digital media channels into two categories, depending on what purpose the channel serves. The first category serves a practical function, delivering basic information and news to the customer, which enables the customer to take direct action. The media channels that are included within this category are website and e-mail, where the website focuses on basic information and the e-mail on news. According to Ellis-Chadwick and Doherty (2012) as well as Pires, Staton and Rita (2006) the information in these channels should be kept simple and concrete, a strategy that seems to be adapted by Åhléns. Even if these practical channels contain hyperlinks and are adjusting towards being more interactive (see figure 15), there is a low level of interactivity within this part of the strategy.


**Figure 15** *Adding “share” enables the company to gain success from the benefits of “sharing”. As Ellis-Chadwick and Doherty (2012) find in their research “sharing” is one of the most effective tactics in e-mail marketing, and to offer the possibility to share increases the opportunities of spreading word-of-mouth*

However, the company refers their customers to interact and participate through other digital media channels, namely social media. Social media, the second category of the strategy, serves a function of delivering the intrinsic values to the customer, such as co-creation (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). The different digital media channels the company uses within the interactive category are Facebook, Instagram and YouTube. As the company provides specific content depending on the interactive channel the content rarely overlaps between the channels.

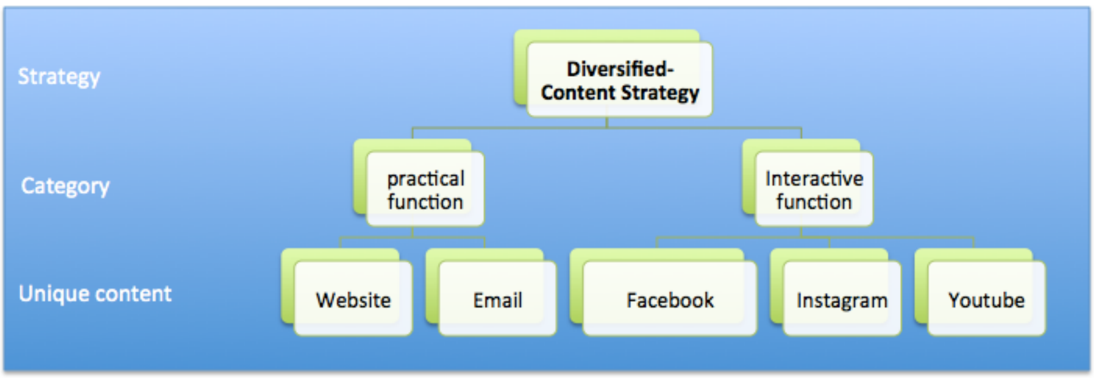


**Figure 16** *Diversified Content Strategy*

By applying the Diversified Content Strategy (see figure 16), the company is present in many of the digital media channels studied in this research. By delivering unique content in each of their digital media channels each channel is different from the other. Compared to the strategies identified for the two other companies, this strategy has an average level of customer participation, as the company does not try to get deeper understanding of the customer via its website or via e-mails (Heinonen, 2011). The function of interaction and building a stronger relationship between the company and the customer (Hoffman and Fodor, 2010) is instead created through social media.

**4.2.2 Marimekko – Interactive Channel Strategy**

It is possible to distinguish a consistent strategy among the company's online activities. The company is present on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. They do also have a website where it is possible to sign up for newsletters. These digital media channels are discussed earlier in this chapter. However the company does also use a couple of other channels, which are not discussed in this research. The company communicates diversified content in each of their channels, but in difference to the Diversified Content Strategy a high level of customer interaction is applied in *all* the digital media channels.

Marimekko embraces new thinking when communicating the spirit of the company across all channels and encouraging consumer engagement and participation outside of the typical social media channels. As discussed by Hanna, Rohm and Crittenden (2011) consumer participation and interaction have become crucial and by using the website more as a community, than for product information only, the company increases the opportunities for consumer participation. By engaging the consumer already on their website Marimekko is at the forefront of this new thinking. In difference to the other companies studied Marimekko runs a website which delivers a vivid feeling. Even though the website does not provide the most logic structure, it truly communicates the heart of the brand:

*"The most colourful high fashion company."* - Quoted from Fieldnotes

Compared to the two other strategies, the website and the newsletter in this case are run in a playful theme, which in multiple ways invites the customer to participation and interaction.


**Figure 17** *Facebook: creating a hype of their Christmas collection by launching one product every day 2013-04-15*

The other companies studied use social media to create a deeper understanding of the customer needs or build a stronger relationship between the to actors through personalisation (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). Even though these companies use different strategies of how they operate in social media, their use can be distinguished as basic compared to Marimekko. Marimekko uses this channel to create curiosity and a buzz among the customers by hyping or using sneak peaks of upcoming events (see figure 17). By taking this direction the company's social media strategy is different from the other two companies studied. The tactic is used on both Facebook and the company's Twitter account. As figure 12 shows, the company posts content in close intervals and by doing so they remind the customer and at the same time they create hype around the event. This increases the possibility of spreading e-word-of-mouth (Hennig-Thurau et al, 2004; Campbell et al, 2011; José-Cabezudo and Camarero-Izquierdo, 2012). The common function of social media, using the channel to personalise the company, is run in similar way to the other two companies, even if it is done at a slightly lower level.

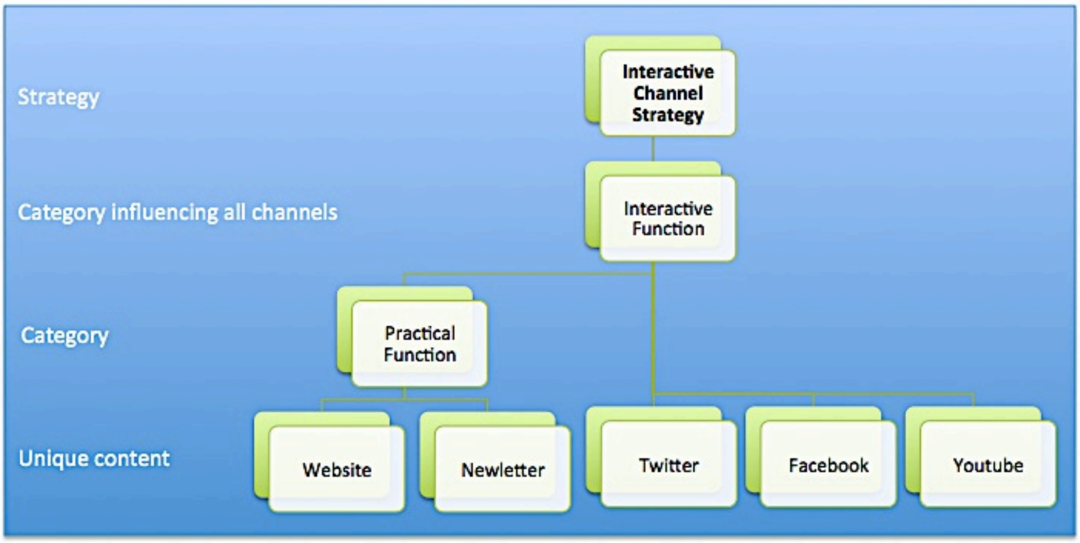


**Figure 18** *Interactive Channel Strategy*

In conclusion, by applying the Interactive Channel Strategy (see figure 18) the company successfully delivers a consistent pulse of the brand identity through all the digital media channels. Delivering unique content in each of their digital media channels studied, each channel is different from the other. Some content is only possible to reach in one of the channels. Compared to the strategies identified for the two other companies, Marimekko delivers a high level of customer participation through all the digital media channels. As can be seen in the two other strategies websites and e-mails usually contain simple and concrete information that only refers to interactivity. Buckling and Sismeiro (2009) means it is difficult for the company to conduct depth and quality data from these channels. However, in the Interactive Channel Strategy, the company tries to get a deeper understanding of the customers and engage them as early as in their website and via e-mails.

### 4.2.3 Lexington – Multichannel Standardised Content Strategy

Lexington is the only company in the study that is present in all the digital media channels discussed earlier in this chapter running a website and a newsletter, while also having user accounts at Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Vimeo. The company appears to focus on being present in multiple digital media channels. The content provided in the digital media channels are standardised and usually overlap each other. By using a standardised approach the company holds a low level of consumer interactivity in all the digital media channels.

Similar to the Interactive Channel Strategy the Lexington's strategy communicates a consistent "New England identity" through all the digital media channels. The consistency of the message occurs due to the standardised content. The standardisation is made in two categories, divided by content produced for use in social media and content produced for use in the practical channels. Currently most of the content posted within social media is originally produced in the digital media channel Instagram. Consequently the content produced for the practical channels, website and newsletter, are similar to each other and contain simple information as Ellis-Chadwick and Doherty (2012) as well as Pires, Staton and Rita (2006) mean these channels should do.

Even if it is possible to divide the Multichannel Standardised Content Strategy into two categories, the interactive function, used in the Diversified Content Strategy, is not applicable. Although Lexington has a high level of activity on Instagram, the company does not take fully advantage of the possibilities to use customer co-creation in this channel nor any of the other interactive media channels. Co-creation increases the opportunities the company has of improving the customer experience and the influence over the customers' decision making (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Heinonen, 2011). Therefore the interactive function of the category does not apply in the case of Lexington. Instead the category only serves a purpose of personalising the company towards the consumers. However, the company takes advantage of the relatively low cost of using social media to reach the consumers (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010) even if the content overlaps. Yet, the first category in the Diversified Content Strategy, that serves a practical function, is applicable in this case. Lexington's newsletter and website provide the customers with basic information and possibility of taking action directly. However, Lexington does not invite the customer to interactivity on the same level as Åhléns and the links to other digital media channels are minimal illustrated in comparison. Thus, the company's consumer interactivity is virtually non-existent.

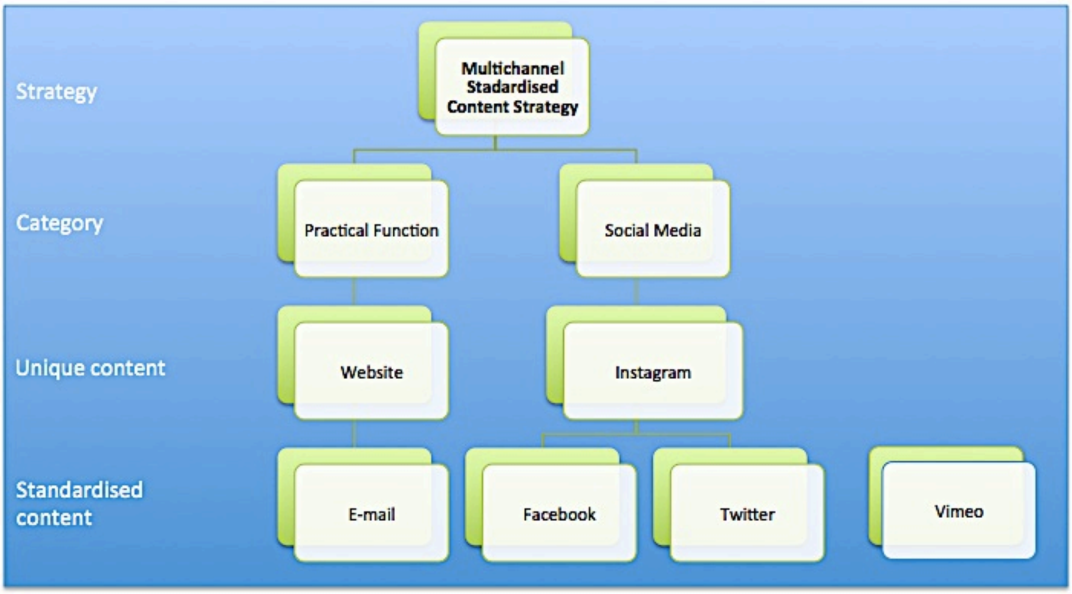


**Figure 19** *Multichannel Standardised Content Strategy*

In conclusion, through a multichannel standardised approach (see figure 19) the company is present in all of the digital media channels studied in this research. By delivering similar content in all the digital media channels the company communicates a consistent identity. Compare to the other two strategies identified, this strategy has a low level of customer participation, which may decrease their opportunities to get a deeper understanding of the customer (Heinonen, 2011). Further, at a low level of participation and co-creation the company cannot take full advantage of the benefits from spreading eWOM (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Hennig-Thurau et al, 2004).

# 5. Discussion and Conclusion

*The aim of this thesis is to examine how digital media channels are combined. By studying the online marketing activities of three companies we wish to identify online strategies and understand the advantages as well as the disadvantages of these strategies. This chapter answers the research questions and fulfil the aim by beginning with explain the individual purpose found of the digital media channels. Second an online eco-system is defined, which explains how digital media channels are combined. Last, the individual strategies are described and advantages as well as disadvantages are discussed for each strategy.*

## 5.1 The digital media channels

The first question we posed was: How do companies use different digital media channels to communicate with consumers? Through this study we are able to identify some common digital media channels that the companies use to communicate with consumers. Each channel serves a specific purpose, however the companies use them to different extents. Other researchers have touched upon the *function* of digital media channels, but we have tried to identify a concrete purpose of how digital media channels are used. The first channel identified is the *website*, which works as a platform or identity maker for the company. The website delivers basic product and organizational information to the consumer. The second channel is the *newsletter,* which has the role as company reminder for the customer. The newsletter reminds the customer of new product and organizational information, similar to the content on the website. *Facebook* is a social media channel, where the company is present in order to keep a dialogue with the customer. *Instagram* is also a social media channel, where the company is taking a very personal approach towards the consumers. Some companies use *Twitter* in a similar way as other companies use Instagram. However, generally Twitter has a purpose of creating curiosity and build attention around different events or product launches arranged by the company – very similar to a news board. Last is viral media. As stated in previous research, this channel has an extraordinary way of spreading eWOM. The companies use content created for other purposes in this channel. By doing so they can take advantage of the channels ability of spreading eWOM and creating add value to the customers.

By looking at the digital media channels used by the three companies we can see that all of the companies are present in multiple digital media channels. However depending on how the channels are combined they serve different functions, which will be explained in the following part of this chapter.

## 5.2 The online eco-system and individual strategies

This part of the chapter answers how the companies combine the digital media channels in an eco-system and identify the individual strategies of the three companies.

By identifying the function of each digital media channel it is possible to structure a common online eco-system used by all three companies. The companies studied all run a website that works as a platform for the company online. On the website the consumer easily signs up for a newsletter provided by the company. It is through these channels the company provides customers with practical content and the possibility to take direct action. In this part of the online eco-system the companies always have full control of the content delivered to the consumers. The second part of the online eco-system is social media. Even though the social media channels individually serve different purposes, they have one common function: respond to the new consumer demand of participation and interactivity. Even if the companies try to regulate the content within these channels, they can never gain complete control over the flow, as the consumers are co-creators.

The companies studied may use the same online eco-system but the strategies within the system vary. Three different strategies have been identified in this research.

The first strategy identified is *Diversified Content Strategy*. This may be an effective strategy for a company with more marketing resources. The strategy allows the company to be active in multiple digital media channels and at the same time deliver a unique, channel specific content. By using this strategy the company creates incentive for the customer to follow them in all digital media channels. The strategy also enables consumers only interested in specific content to interact with the company without getting annoyed by information that does not interest them. The chance of the customer actually reading the content also increases. For the consumers who interact with the company in all digital media channels, this strategy decreases the risk of them to get fed up with the same information. However, by using a Diversified Content Strategy the company risks delivering an inconsistent brand identity, which may confuse the customers.

The second strategy that we identified is the *Interactive Channel Strategy.* This strategy is an alternative for companies with more resources, as it requires both time and knowledge, e.g. building advanced websites. The main advantage with this strategy is that the company promotes a high level of consumer interactivity already on the website. This enables the company to collect quality data from each customer, which increases the understanding of the customer. As in the Diversified Content Strategy, a company that applies the Interactive Channel Strategy provides a diversified content in each channel, which generates benefits already explained above. However in some parts of the eco-system, this strategy requires customers to sign up for one channel in order to get information in another, e.g. to sign up for the newsletter the customer needs to join “the Marimekko Village”. It is also important to have in mind that this strategy is relatively expensive and time-consuming.

The last strategy identified is the *Multichannel Standardised Content Strategy.* This strategy requires only limited resources and less time, as no creation of unique content for each channel is needed. The main advantage with the Multichannel Standardised Content Strategy is that it enables the company to be present in all digital media channels, communicating a consistent identity through the whole online eco-system. This strategy gives the company possibilities of reaching a large amount of customers who only use one channel or few channels. However, by applying this strategy the company risks to bore the customers, who are active in different channels, exposing them to the same content multiple times. Furthermore, as the strategy has a low level of interactivity it does not take full advantage of the benefits generated by the social media channels.

## 5.3 Contributions to the field of online marketing

This research finds that multiple digital media channels are used when performing marketing online. Depending on how these digital media channels are combined the function of the channel varies. Consequently, the same channel can have different purposes depending on how it is combined with other channels. E.g. Åhléns uses Facebook to interact with the consumers with dialogue and invitations to upcoming events, whereas Marimekko has less interactivity emphasising neither dialogue nor invitations, instead they mainly use the network to hype collections and products. On the contrary, different channels can also have the same function, e.g. Lexington uses Instagram to personify the company, while Marimekko uses Twitter for the same reason. The channels can be combined in the different strategies, which mainly differ in their level of customer interactivity and how diversified their content is in the channels.

Our findings indicate that there is little point in studying digital media channels individually as their function depends on how they are combined with other digital media channels, in a specific strategy. Digital media channels function as a whole in an eco-system and therefore it becomes important to study the wholeness. Previous research within the field of online marketing has focused on understanding the digital media channels individually, as separate units, e.g. by Liu-Thompkins (2010) and Strauss (2006). When tactics and efficiency within online marketing is discussed the importance of an online eco-system is often mentioned (Lesidrenska and Dicke, 2011; Heinonen, 2011), but no deeper research on the topic can be found.

Our study also indicates that interactivity begins to spread to other, “less interactive”, channels. Our findings show, in e.g. the Interactive Channel Strategy, that informative channels, such as websites and e-mails, develop towards a higher level of customer interactivity since the digital media channels are becoming more interrelated. Within online marketing, researchers such as Hanna, Rohm and Crittenden (2011) find the new consumer demand to be a reason for the increasing development of interactive digital media (i.e. social media). Accordingly, previous research discusses social media channels as a respond to this new demand, without reflecting over other digital media channels’ increased level of interactivity.

Practically, we hope that the strategies identified will help companies, especially small to medium-size businesses with limited resources, by providing them with insights on how digital media channels are used as well as advantages and disadvantages of different combinations; what strategy to use depends on the prerequisites and objectives of the company’s marketing plan.

### 5.3.1 Future research

Future research could focus on investigating the efficiency of the strategies by measuring e.g. consumer engagement or brand awareness. Another possibility for future research is to study online strategies through a company perspective, not as an outsider.

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