THE STRENGTH OF DIGITAL NARRATIVES

Exploring value creation and customer influence

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Abstract

Social media has become one of the main platforms for telling stories, not only for individuals but also for corporations of all sizes. The published content on these platforms can be as simple as a picture or lines of text as long as they captures the attentions of other users they will qualify as a digital story or narrative. This opens up for effortless interaction between customers and corporation, but also for value creation alongside the two parties. Other researchers has contributed with different takes of how this value creation can be conducted and defined. Our contribution aims to closer examine how consumer interaction and value creation can strengthen digital narratives. We will not aim to standardise how a digital story should be told, but provide guidelines for designing narratives that include the public as a story contributor by seeing if there is a correlation between the choice of social media platforms used and the type of stories the organizations narrate.

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# Table of Contents

1. Introduction ........................................................................................................................................... 1  
   1.1 Outline and research question ........................................................................................................... 1  
2. Related research ....................................................................................................................................... 3  
   2.1 Digital Narratives ............................................................................................................................. 3  
   2.2 Value Creation ................................................................................................................................... 4  
3. Method .................................................................................................................................................... 7  
   3.1 Choice of method and approach ..................................................................................................... 7  
      3.1.1 Additional categories ................................................................................................................ 7  
   3.2 Methods for data gathering .............................................................................................................. 8  
   3.3 Selection .......................................................................................................................................... 9  
   3.4 Ethics .............................................................................................................................................. 9  
   3.5 Method for analysis .......................................................................................................................... 10  
   3.6 Critique ......................................................................................................................................... 11  
4. Result & Analysis ................................................................................................................................. 12  
   4.1 Storytelling ............................................................................................................................... 12  
   4.2 Social Media .............................................................................................................................. 12  
   4.3 Marketing ...................................................................................................................................... 15  
5. Discussion .............................................................................................................................................. 18  
   5.1 Expressions ..................................................................................................................................... 18  
   5.2 Guideline ....................................................................................................................................... 19  
   5.3 Value of likes ................................................................................................................................. 20  
6. Conclusion ........................................................................................................................................... 21  
   6.1 Further research ........................................................................................................................... 21  
7. References ............................................................................................................................................ 22  
8. Appendices ........................................................................................................................................... 24  
   8.1 Quantitative data ............................................................................................................................ 24  
   8.2 Interview guide ............................................................................................................................... 27
1. Introduction

Social media has become one of the main platforms for telling stories (Alexander, B. 2011) not only for individuals (Jenkins et al. 2013) but also for corporations regardless of size, that can find value in user interactions on social media (Bechmann, Lomborg. 2012). But where Bechmann and Lomborg (2012) focus on the social media companies themselves, we want to focus on production companies and how they conduct their storytelling using digital narratives.

One definition provided by Ryan (2011) states that digital narratives can be as basic as a description of a relatively repetitive action, due to the fact that they are an incomplete composition of a narrative without closure. As long as they still feel relatable to the audience, their functionality still matters. Koenitz & Roth (2016) offer another take on digital narratives, as they can carry an interactive component, making them not only a processed version of established narrative formats but a form of narrative expression in the digital interactive medium.

These digital narratives can be viewed from another perspective: corporate narratives (Alexander, J. 2006) told on social media. Pihl (2013) used blogs as observation subjects to illustrate that the concepts of Muñiz, & Schau, (2007, 2011), can be regarded as commercialised instead of self going due to the company’s involvement. By this he showed that organisations can have an influence on the content, opening up for a new type of awareness on how to approach co-creation. Have companies now developed a method to actively steer this co-creation in order to engage customers in to adapting the role as promoters of their own content, suggested by (Hatch & Schultz, 2010). Has the meaning of customer influence changed again? Or has the vast population of social media users (Davidson, Thoresson. 2017) created more points of interaction between users and companies and therefore enabled for a more easily accessible value creation as described by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004)? Does this mean that small local companies can compete with the giants for the consumers’ attention? We want to examine closer how these smaller companies can take advantage of customer influence to create additional value for themselves and spread their digital narratives. In this study we want to see if there is a correlation between the choice of social media platforms used and the type of stories the organizations narrate.

1.1 Outline and research question

The purpose of this study is to explore how customer influence can create value for corporate digital narratives and how to convey these digital narratives. We will not aim to standardise
how a digital narrative should be told, but provide guidelines for designing a digital narrative that includes the public as a story contributor.

- How can customer influence and value creation strengthen the digital narrative?

By mapping customer interaction and presence on social media we will explore how customers can influence and can create value for digital narratives. We are only focusing on the types of narratives used, not the message or content of them. We have chosen to do this because we want to know where and with which type of narrative the customer can influence a company and therefore create value for the corporate narrative. We decided not to study a large company because of the extensiveness and complexity of their digital narratives and due to our own limited resources.
2. Related research

In this section we will present the research relevant for our study.

2.1 Digital Narratives

Page & Thomas (2011) place the digital narratives in post-classical section of narration which is characterized by the expansion from the classical narratology’s literary approach. This expansion draws concepts from other fields of research in order to define what is regarded as storylike content. Ryan (2011) provides an example of this storylike content. In this definition she uses an example to demonstrate that as long as the audience can emotionally relate to the content - also confirmed by (Alexander B. 2011; Lambert, 2002) - even though it is not strictly a narrative it can still be regarded as one. This makes way for an assumption that something as simple as a picture or a line of text can be regarded as a digital narrative as long as it is interactive. Another take on the matter of interactivity is what Koenitz & Roth (2016) offer in their adaptation of interactive digital narratives, as a form of expression in digital medium. These interactive components described by the authors enable the users who interact with the digital narrative to participate and to create their own versions of the narrative experience. Therefore can these interactive digital narratives not only be observed as enhanced versions of established forms of storytelling but as narrative expressions. Lambert (2002) describes how companies build their narratives to shape their audience. They tell stories to evoke emotions in the consumer and ensure that they’ll remember the brand.

“They are counting on the shaping of our desires and fears, they need to connect to our intimate selves in order to sustain our attention, but their real goal is to shape our identities as Homo consumerus.” (Lambert, 2002)

Another approach to narratives is what Alexander J.(2006) calls corporate narrative. This generic term covers several storytelling opportunities. He suggests that there are four approaches to a corporate narrative: the external and the internal, and the narrated and the scripted.
 Furthermore any company or organization has an array of elements that make up their narrative. According to (Alexander, J., 2006) these are called story bytes and can be divided into three main categories: the visible, the implied and the abstract. We want to clarify that this approach is not digital until they are published or narrated in any form of digital platform. While on the subject of what a narrative can consist of Lambert (2010) offers a guide in how to construct content that fits into storytelling. These seven steps of storytelling pose questions for the creator to answer in order to verify their narrative’s foundations.

2.2 Value Creation

Prahalad & Ramaswamy (2004) state that the interaction between companies and customers is changing in character and importance as the movement towards co-creation experience as the basis of value becomes more and more prevalent. Co-creation is in essence empowers customers seeking to utilize their influence to interact with companies to co-create value, making customers creators (Green & Jenkins, 2008). This co-creation is a two way street, demanding requirements from both sides in order to function properly. Thus the points of
interaction between both parties become the crucial aspect in co-creation. However, Green & Jenkins (2008) present three categories of openness regarding company contact with customer influence. One is embracing collaboration, one is deliberately holding back the customers from collaborating and the final one is where a company is not able to decide whether they should and if yes, how to capitalise on customer creation. This is not true for all types of corporations. Bechmann and Lomborg (2012) highlight the importance of user involvement and participation as the central function of social media companies such as Facebook, Foursquare and Twitter. Without this user involvement, the service would not have any economic value according to the authors. Value creation in this case can be traced back to the user-to-user relationship and interaction. Returning the focus to customer influence, Muñiz, & Schau (2007) contribute with research about vigilante marketing. This research concludes that customer creation not only can produce quality content (Muñis, & Schau, 2011) to suit their own interest (Jenkins et al, 2013) but can also hold the responsibility of the entirety of the brand-sustaining experience even when collaborating with other undisclosed creators for no economical benefits (Muñis, & Schau, 2011), therefore fulfilling the definition of vigilante marketing (Muñiz, & Schau, 2007). The internet functions, accordingly Muñiz, & Schau (2011) as a quick and inexpensive channel to share content as mentioned above to a multitude of other creators. Collaborative consumer generated content or CGC (Muñiz, & Schau. 2011), is valuable due to its nature and as from of outsourced creation of brand content and marketing communication. Hatch & Schultz (2010) provide another outlook on a similar aspect of co-creation by concluding that participating actors in this can also be seen as promoters of their own content. However, Pihl (2013) contributes with research that uncovers the potential and possibility of corporate influence over a form of vigilante marketers (blogs) via co-creation of content. His findings open up for interpretation that vigilante marketing and marketers do not have to be seen as a self-support movement. There is also commercial value to be gathered from the entire structure which includes the bloggers (Pihl, 2013). Green and Jenkins (2008) give a different take on the matter by saying that user participation can be viewed as “creative labor”. Social media companies promote user creativity to keep participants interested in the service and hoping to be able to reap the benefits of their content consumption.

The platforms on which these narratives and values are being created are also important as pointed out in a report by Davidsson and Thoresson (2017). According to their statistical data the different social media platforms have different demographics, and frequency of usage suggest that companies using these platforms have different target audiences on each. One must also consider how the different platforms’ algorithms operate to sort the feeds and provide users with relevant information. These algorithms are based on interaction- the more one interacts with a type of content (regardless if it’s from personal connection, companies,
etc.) the more prevalent it will be in their feed (Facebook, 2018; Twitter, 2018; Instagram 2018).

Because of these algorithms affecting the spreading of narratives, likes and other user activities are important in this study. To measure the success of different narratives on social media platforms, we gathered data in the form of likes and other user created contributions to help us identify patterns in consumer behaviour. While likes may seem like a simple action, they have a lot of value, and can even have legal consequences. Schultz (2018) explains the legal consequences of liking and sharing content on social media, with Facebook as his reference point. He points out two types of crimes that can occur on social media. According to Schultz (2018) these crimes have a common core in how information is spread. He states that one is equally guilty of a crime just by sharing even if they are not the one who originally posted the content. When someone “likes” something on Facebook the internal algorithm increases the chances of the content to spread to their friends too.

He explains that legally, liking something can have the same weight as making an official claim. It is important to point out however, that the laws for these crimes are not fully clear as of yet. Schultz (2018) claims that it’s unlikely to prosecute someone for a like that is done in a setting where the person liking is not fully aware of the way a like works on social media. But a person who deliberately and strategically likes content can perhaps be held accountable.
3. Method

In this section we will present our method of collecting and analysing data. The selection, ethics, identifying and critiquing the research method will also be covered in this part.

3.1 Choice of method and approach

Since we actually are looking on interaction (Prahalad, & Ramaswamy, 2004; Green & Jenkins, 2008; Bechmann & Lomborg, 2012; Muñiz, & Schau, 2007,2011; Hatch & Schultz, 2010) in our observation we have chosen to apply the approach presented by Alexander, (J., 2006) in order to categorize the interaction into different types of story bytes. This has been conducted on the company's social platforms as well as other popular social media platforms.

A disclaimer: while the amount of likes is not representative of the number of people interacting with the story, because may times it's the same individuals liking several times (not unique viewers), but the number hints at how engaging the content is. The more engaged the customers are (regardless of their number) the more acquired narratives they will contribute with. As Mason (2002) points out, there are many factors to take into consideration when designing a research. She encourages the use of combined methods while claiming that a qualitative analysis is best suited for cases where the individual’s experience is more important than quantifiable data. We deemed that in this research the combination of a qualitative and a quantitative analysis yields the best result, because digital narratives have many aspects that can not be measured the same ways. One of these aspects is the social media presence of customers, which can best be expressed in a quantitative data. On the other hand is the customer influence, which is very hard to judge without the help of a respondent that has sufficient knowledge and experience in the field. Therefore we decided to conduct a quantitative analysis for the data regarding all the social interactions, and additionally perform an interview with a person who could confirm or deny the assumptions the raw data has let us to.

3.1.1 Additional categories

The categories provided by Alexander (J., 2006) were a good foundation to assort the narratives, but we also needed special categories for consumer interaction within acquired narratives. In order to distinguish the differences in user feedback we decided to divide these interactions into three main groups: positive, negative and requests. There was one more type of comment that did not express any thoughts or feelings. Because they didn’t contribute with anything we decided not to include them in the data. In some cases it was not possible for us to determine exactly which type a story byte was. In these cases we grouped them according to their broader category (1/visible , 2/implied or 3/abstract).
The usage of hashtags either provided by the company such as #companyname or #companyaccountname can create story bytes that enable them to trace its usage. It would be almost impossible to scan the whole social media flow in order to find posts containing acquired narratives without a hashtag. As mentioned earlier it requires extra resources to track these, but they can contribute with more value in return.

We pointed out in the chapter Related Research the importance and possible legal consequences of likes. Because of this they have their own category.

Second hand feedback is a category of story bytes found in the acquired narrative area. This category contains user feedback such as comments and likes on other people’s comments. To give a better explanation of this: A person or a company uploads a post or a narrative, the first wave of feedback comes in as positive or negative feedback or a request. The second hand feedback is when a user comments or likes that first wave.

Third hand likes, dislikes and other feedback are also categories of acquired story bytes. The relevance of this category is somewhat debatable since we can not validate that the feedback is an appreciation or an expression of dislike aimed directly at our focus company. For example, liking a friend’s post about their activity where a narrative connected to our observed organization can be applicable and has the possibility to be viewed in three different ways. Either as a like of the activity or for the company or both. Due to this uncertainty we have not included this parameter to our observation with the exception of Youtube and blogs, where it is clear that the like is attended as feedback to our focus company.

### 3.2 Methods for data gathering

The method for gathering data for the quantitative analysis is to observe the social media presence of the chosen company. The reason for this is that as Preece et.al (2015) point out, that this kind of data is often easiest to express in numerical form. This will be very important because the number of the narratives found on social media platforms are more representative of certain types of user behavior, than the quality of those posts, and as the purpose of this study is to see what influence customers have in the light of corporate digital narratives, we must begin by observing how their interaction looks like today.

Using Alexander’s (J., 2006) definition we counted and categorized posts that contain promotional pictures, competitions, logos and other narratives that are telling about the company or their products as PR narratives. Under acquired narratives, stories that are retold by the consumers, we counted customer interactions, where reposts and @tags are brand story bytes. Most of these posts were clear promotions of the brand. Meta narratives, being “the story behind the brand” (Alexander, J. 2006) are by nature less prevalent online. The associations are supposed to be made by the customers and are rarely pronounced.
Accumulated narratives, the “folk tales” told within the organization are the least visible. We found only two instances that hinted at stories that could be considered internal narratives. To be able to get a better understanding of how companies look at user participation, we deemed it necessary to conduct an interview with a person who has a lot of insight into the subject matter. While the research and the data from the quantitative analysis point in one direction, we found it important to have it either confirmed or denied by an expert from the company’s side. As both Patton (2002) and Preece (et al., 2015) remark, the personal experience of representatives is very valuable and often can not be measured in numbers. Because of this we decided to also conduct a semi-structured interview (Preece, et al. 2015). This structure gives the opportunity to prepare essential questions in advance and at the same time leaves it open to further inquiries if need be. Therefore is an interview guide (Patton, 2002) a necessary structure to have in place especially when forming questions about a field of research with flexible boundaries as co-creation and interaction has. The person conducting it has to make sure that they are not guiding the interviewee’s answers by using leading questions (Preece et. al. 2015). The semi-structured interview combines elements from both the structured and the unstructured form, meaning that it uses both prepared and spontaneously emerging questions. The authors also imply that probing is a useful strategy for getting more information from neutral parties. This approach aims to make the results replicable without leading to bias.

3.3 Selection

It’s been established at the start of the research that the research object would be a small, preferably local (non-multinational) commodity producer company, to be able to observe their strategies about creating narratives that consumers can interact with and to see the effect of these interactions.

The organization chosen is small in the sense that instead of being a large, leading actor on the market, they are supplying to a growing niche. This enables us to gather and analyse data in our given timeframe, and makes it more likely to find a representative to interview. To avoid disclosing too much information on the company’s strategies and to preserve the personal integrity of our interviewee, the company and its representant will be kept anonymous.

3.4 Ethics

Our research has been done in accordance with the Research-ethical Principles (2002), taking into account the four main principles: requirement of information, of consent, of confidentiality and of usage.

Requirement of information means that the interviewed individuals have to be informed about the purpose and nature of the study, and the terms and conditions related to it. They
also have to be informed that their participation is voluntary and they have the right to interrupt it at any point. Furthermore it is essential that the person(s) conducting the interview must not in any way try to influence participants to continue if they decide to interrupt their participation. This principle has been established at the beginning of the interview and the interview has been completed without interruption.

Requirement of consent means that the participants can decide over their contribution. If the participant has an active role in the research, their consent must be obtained. Consent is not required if the information is gained from for example existing government records. Furthermore there are special rules for working with sensitive information.

Requirement of confidentiality is about how to handle personal information. The participants' information must be handled with utmost confidentiality, and it must be assured that no one unauthorized can access it. In this study this has been done by anonymizing any information that might disclose the identity of the respondent or the company.

Requirement of usage entails that data collected from individuals may only be used for research purposes. Under no circumstances should this data be used for marketing and advertising. If another researcher intends to use the same data he or she has to adhere to the same rules of research ethics. The collected data may not be used for decisions or action that directly affect the individual.

### 3.5 Method for analysis

Preece et al. (2015) state that the more familiar you get with the data, the greater the likeliness of spotting emerging patterns and themes. The authors stress that any derived impressions need to be checked and polished with even more analysis with the goal to confirm or disconfirm the evidence in the data pool. One way to identify these patterns is to organize the ideas and insights from the data into a hierarchy. This can be done for example by creating an affinity diagram (Beyer and Holtzblatt, 1998; Holtzblatt, 2001), where the information is categorized and grouped based on their relationships to make it easier to see though and organize. Preece et al. claim that “patterns and themes in your data may relate to a variety of aspects. To behavior, to your user group, to place or situations where certain events happen and so on. Each user may be an outcome of data analysis that focuses on patterns of participant characteristics.”(Preece, et al., 2015). While we talk about patterns and themes mostly in the context of qualitative analysis, it also often occurs when working with quantitative data.

For this research we are going to apply a deductive qualitative analysis. Preece et al. (2015) present three different takes on a qualitative analysis. Identifying recurring patterns or themes, categorizing data and the search for critical incidents.

While exploring the overall strength of a company’s digital narrative and drawing conclusions from it, we found the first two approaches are the most suitable for our work.
3.6 Critique

While arguably there could have been more interviews, we deemed that one with a person whose occupation makes him fitting as an interviewee was enough. In smaller companies, like the one we were focusing on, the marketing department often consist of very few people. Our interviewee is a person closest to the management of the social media and therefore another interview might not have yielded more and qualitative data.

The strength of a semi-structured interview can arguably be its weakness as well. The freedom provided by its form comes with a self awareness and a need to control not to deviate and ask unnecessary or ill-phrased questions. Nevertheless the benefits of being able to reference and follow up on emerging themes and topics surpass its possible shortcomings.

Answers can sometimes be vague or evasive, in order not to put the company or its representants in a bad light or say something that doesn’t align with their advertised narratives. However, with the collected data we can reinforce our findings or enable us to find answers just in the data itself. Finally sometimes it is not what your respondent says but what he or she does not say.

Another concern is the two different methods of data collection and how they should be analysed. The challenge is to be able to find patterns that emerge both from the qualitative and the quantitative data. The positive with this aspect is that cross referencing information can fill in any eventual gaps.
4. Result & Analysis

Our study has produced a vast amount of information, not all relevant, but because of our research purpose we have categorized the result into three main themes, were quantitative and qualitative data will be sewn together to form a homogenous presentation. The categories are Storytelling, Social Media and Marketing with value creation being the link between them.

4.1 Storytelling

Local production, transparency and craftsmanship are the key values that the company we observed wants to convey. As a small producer, they direct most of their efforts into creating an appealing package design to tell their story, relying on the fact that most decisions made in a store are based on visual inputs. This narrative can be observed on the company’s social media platforms as well. One major way they tell it is by posting PR brand narratives that the consumers then interact with and create acquired narratives from (75 on Facebook, 56 on Instagram). Another observation that implies the importance of acquired narratives for the brand is the use of third party companies that specialize on generating acquired narrative. When partnering with an organization they give samples of the products to some of their registered consumers in exchange for honest reviews on certain digital platforms. The interview confirmed that the company considers this an important way of telling their narrative.

“...We are working very hard to reach out to influencers and bloggers by sending them our goods [...] because we think they are so damn good. So to get as many as possible to try them and rate them” R

In theory meta narratives and accumulated narratives could be powerful stories, but the company has not made them engaging enough for the customers (Alexander, B. 2013). Thus not obtaining benefits from co-creation (Prahalad, & Ramaswamy, 2004) and failing to make the customers into vigilante marketers (Muñiz, & Schau, 2007). This proved to be the reason why we have seen such a low amount of interactions and story bytes created form there.

4.2 Social Media

Social media enables companies to build a reputation and strengthen their brand, regardless of the resources or the organization. The observation of the digital presence of a company showed that customers like to engage on social media with brands they are interested in, above all on Facebook. They share information and notify each other about new products,
competitions, etc. thus creating “buzz”. Our respondent confirmed that besides the package
design of the products, this social media activity is the most valuable for them to reach out.

“It is a super important channel for us [...] very essential. One can put it this way, that the
stores and the digital platforms are the two most important ways of communication we got.”

The platforms where we found customer activity about our observed company were Facebook,
Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Vimeo and blogs. Our respondent confirmed that the
demographics on these channels are not identical, but added that the content present on them
is not tailored for these minor differences. As some of our data from the observation does not
fully support this statement, we have concluded that the company published 16 story bytes (5
logo, 7 personal and 4 value) on Facebook which were not present on Instagram. “Likechart 1”
and “likechart 2” under 8.1 provide confirmation to the difference in demographic, because
there is such a small divergence of story bytes between the two platforms.

We also observed that customers used social media to directly communicate with the
company as well. This was most prevalent on Facebook. The interview then confirmed that
many customers choose to approach them via these platforms instead of emailing or calling in
when they have requests or questions about their products. Observing the numbers also
showed that individual brand story bytes, considering each separate image a narrative, spread
best via Instagram.

We found that people respond more frequently on Facebook with 977 acquired brand story
bytes, 1000 positive feedbacks, 102 requests and 12 negative feedbacks, but more brand story
bytes are created by the usage of hashtags (878 on Instagram, Facebook: 4), leading to a higher
number of likes (8518, Facebook: 6268) and total amount of posts regarding the company.
This can also tell us that it is easier to see on Facebook how far a shared message reaches since
4641 users have actively chosen to follow the Facebook page. It is harder to track on Instagram
due to that 550 users follow the account and also because posts have a much wider reach thanks
to the hashtag bytes tagged by users on their posts. There is more value to be obtained from
these customer-created stories, that can lead to more creative narratives as well. The observed
company does not fully utilize this however. There is an inadvertent value created by the
interactions on Twitter: the company have obtained 193 hashtag bytes, 88 positive feedbacks,
9 negative ones and 2 requests without even having an official account.

The reason for creating them was to avert the negative effects of a restriction that resulted
in the company having to use a slightly altered name when creating their official social media
account on Instagram, they have marked a hashtag to ensure that the company gets presence
with the right name and therefore acquired narratives. The data point at that having an account
and being an active part of these narratives would also add a lot of value and our respondent points out that they would like to remedy this once they have the resources to do so. According to him it plays an important part in creating visibility and help obtaining information about consumer behaviour. He pointed out that thanks to these platforms, smaller companies can have the same chances as the big, well-established ones, even if they don’t have the budget to conduct promotional campaigns at the same scale.

“The value comes from creating visibility and to reach out, and that is basically the purpose. But also to be able to follow what individuals purchase, what they post, their opinions...so it is a way for us to know what people are talking about.” R

Another important aspect of social media is that the communication is not one-way. People react to the narratives that companies tell online, then creating their own narratives in return, which eventually can reach back to the company. This is not only a possibility but a demand - people who interact with the brands on social media often require feedback and voice their disappointment if that desire is not met from the company’s side. An example of this can be seen on the observed company’s Instagram. Several competitions have been initiated via this platform, but have not been followed up by announcing the end of the competition and the name of the winners, which often created discontent in the consumers who were engaged in the activity. As Lambert (2010) pointed out in the seven steps of storytelling, closure is a very important step in telling a story. Once the audience has been presented with information (in this case cues about a competition), they also have to see where it leads.

Competitions are one of the main catalysts for buzz and companies can use this to their advantage to get more acquired narratives and benefit of the impact, if they see to it to complete the story. There are a lot of possibilities for creating value from the user created acquired narratives. Ways to do this according to our interview include are noticing and acknowledging, re-posting and sharing, and also paying attention to useful ideas in posts. This however is a resource question, and therefore not prioritized by some companies.
4.3 Marketing

According to the interview the company profiled themselves in the beginning towards female customers by telling a story of sophistication and health consciousness with their package design. Now they emphasize that they are targeting customers looking for an “extraordinary taste experience.”

According to our respondent it is very important for companies and their employees to know what they stand for, so that they can convey a coherent and well polished narrative. They are well aware of the versatility of their consumers and their shopping habits due to the information provided by the stores. From that information they can get a precise idea about the differences in their target audiences.

“There you can see a clear difference in customer behavior based on what flavours they choose. On can put it this way, we are selling through some of the low-price food stores today, but there you can see that mostly the classical flavours sell there [...] people won’t buy truffles there, they will buy that in a nice ICA store or something like that...” R

Since we cannot observe accumulated narratives from the outside, there are not many examples for that in our data. However this does not mean that it is not important. The interviewee pointed out that it is more important than ever to know your own company's stories to be able to build a strong brand.

“...from a brand building or marketing perspective today, one can say that it has never been more important to know your own company's' DNA [...] Because so much happens [...] if you're looking at it from a media perspective, it's never been so fragmented and hard to navigate and if you don't know who you are then you won't know how to fend off everything today.” R

Our observation yielded a lot of information and user interaction patterns about competitions, created as way to spread a digital narrative. The usage of this narrative resulted in a lot of acquired narratives via participation. When asked about the reason why the company uses competitions, our respondent gave the explanation that it is a tool is to create customer engagement. Another issue with using the consumer generated content is that they often don’t have the same insight as the organization, and can not give useful feedback about for example what the next product should be.

“...there's always this decision between- if you ask a consumer what they want they will answer only what they know [...] it's always good to listen to the consumer, but you have to
have an idea yourself about what you think you want to supply the market with. However, you can take them [the consumers] with you in the development.” R

The value of the customer’s input is about which phase of the production it is. In the innovation phase, according to our observation and interview the value lies in the feedback itself, not in the content, while in a later time in the production the content plays more role. In marketing and in campaigning the value of customer influence gives a lot more value. An example our respondent gave us was a story about how a big company used customer influence to re-launch a soft drink in Norway. When the sales of that particular brand declined and stores dropped the product a customer made his voice heard and requested to have the product brought back. The marketing chief quickly acted on this and prompted him to gather signatures to prove that the product was desirable for a bigger audience. The consumer managed to get sufficient amount of signatures to have his wish granted. With this he inadvertently conducted a marketing research and created a focus group for the company. They quickly seized this opportunity of value creation by making him an ambassador.

To conclude this chapter about our result, we are presenting an illustration of the quantitative data we collected during the observation.
Figure 2. This is an illustration of our quantitative data, presented in a weighted state meaning that the size and colouring describes the amount of entries and its origins but also in which ways narrative are spread.
5. Discussion

How can customer influence and value creation strengthen the digital narrative? In order for customer to contribute with that, the companies have to think about how they are forming their digital narratives in order to allow for customer influence, ergo creating value.

In order to provide a way to create narratives, we are proposing a guideline that takes it into account how a story is told. In the introduction our starting points were two hypotheses. The first one was that companies are now actively steering their customers into creating value for them in a way suggested by Pihl (2013). Our research indicates though that that is not always the case. The second premise, based on Prahalad and Ramaswamy’s (2004) suggestion that company-customer interaction should have increased due to higher usage of social media has been confirmed by our study. With these research findings in mind, and focusing on digital narratives we asked the question: How can customer influence and value creation strengthen the digital narrative? The answer we found was that in order for customers to influence and create value to strengthen the digital narratives the companies have to think about how they are forming their digital stories to enable interaction (Green & Jenkins, 2008). We are proposing a guideline derived from our result and related research that takes into account how a story is told. We are calling these “expressions”.

5.1 Expressions

The first is baseline expression: it’s direct, instant, short range and initial. This is when the narrative is solely about to introduce a brand and create a common recognition for it. It speaks directly to the potential consumers, which also means that its effects will be more trackable and create more points of interaction (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). According to our study this type of expression is most common on Facebook among the social media platforms and the type of story bytes used is almost exclusively PR brand story bytes. One of the advantages of spreading baseline expression via Facebook is that here it is the easiest to see how far a post reaches. Furthermore, as seen in the data and gathered from our interview, it is the consumers’ preferred site for direct communication with the company.

The second aspect is the creative expression: long range, made to inspire (Alexander B. 2011; Lambert, 2002), its goal is to flesh out the baseline story - it does not exist on its own. By long range we mean that due to consumer interaction it will reach people even beyond the company’s target audience, as it inspires users to co-create their version of the narrative which in turn they can share in their own social circle. This leads to new acquired narratives, diversity of content and sometimes even innovation.

The best platform for this proved to be Instagram. With the help of hashtags, the brand narratives can spread substantially further. This however also makes them harder to track-
while it may still be possible in the case of a smaller company, it might prove to be impossible with a huge organization. The value that this type of expression provides lies in the creativity and uniqueness that each individual co-narrator can contribute with (Muñiz, & Schau, 2007, 2011) but also provides findings (Pihl, 2013) with a conceptual guideline of approach. As Jenkins (et al. 2013) pointed out, letting consumers engage in creative labor is a great way to keep them committed, but despite the benefits, we found that it is rarely the main choice for companies. The reason for this, based on the data and the interview, is that the amount of contributions and resources needed from the company do not amount to the positive outcomes. The next question that emerged was where competitions and all the narratives created from partnerships with companies like Smartson and Buzzador fit in.

As they are neither a baseline nor a creative expression, we identified a third category: viral expression. The goal is to prompt participation and to change in a controlled environment the consumers’ behavior and how they interact with the narrative (Lambert, 2002). Both our quantitative and qualitative data pointed at that competitions are a great way of creating engagement among the consumers. We talk about viral activities where users are a big part of the spreading of the narrative (Hatch & Schultz, 2010). This factor can contribute with a lot of value, and that is the reason why there are organizations existing solely to help brands promote more of this kind of consumer behaviour. The word “influencer” comes also often up in this context. They are people that already have an established social media following which brands can capitalize on, if they manage to reach the influencer and get them to transmit the narrative.

5.2 Guideline

When looking at the different aspects of narratives (Page, & Thomas, 2011; Ryan, 2011; Lambert, 2002; Koenitz & Roth, 2016), the seven steps of storytelling (Lambert, 2010), the nature of value creation (Prahalad, & Ramaswamy, 2004; Green & Jenkins, 2008; Bechmann & Lomborg, 2012; Pihl . 2013; Muñiz, & Schau, 2007, 2011), and story bytes (Alexander, J., 2006) then relating it to the data observed from the social media and the interview, we found that there is a path that can be derived from these elements: a path from idea to digital narrative. It all starts with an idea, which then can be used in three categories (baseline-, viral- and creative expression), which are closely correlated. After determining this, one can move on to choose the platform to work with, within social media. The next step is to build the story. Here we chose to use the seven steps (Lambert, 2010) as guidelines. When all these elements are taken into account, the result is a successful digital narrative. This approach of optimization and adaptation of a digital narrative will theoretically ensure to capture the interest and engagement of the audience and therefore qualify as a good narrative according to Alexander (B. 2011).
Optimizing the narrative to the right social media platform has the potential to create the desired consumer behaviour, the identity that Lambert (2002) calls *Homo consumerus*.

### 5.3 Value of likes

The power of likes shouldn’t be underestimated. It is one of the most energy efficient and fast way to accelerate the spreading of digital narratives. This statement is founded on how the different feeds work on various social media platforms like Facebook (2018), Twitter (2018) and Instagram (2018). This is further confirmed by Schultz (2018) in the interview, where he explains the legality of likes, and how it can be viewed as content spreading in the eyes of the law. To present a narrative in a likeable format is an important step and not to be overlooked, because the value from exponential spreading gives insights about how engaging the customers find the narrative. Here we should also mention the category we named 3rd hand likes, as a possible source of value. However, it is hard to determine what these likes refer to, and because of that their value is not as clear as first hand likes. From third hand feedback however, one can get a better insight about the nature of the third hand like. Second hand feedback is also ambiguous and its value depends on the content. However, both third hand likes and second hand feedback are still important, because they contribute to changing the algorithm just as much as other likes.
6. Conclusion

This study explored with help of quantitative and qualitative data, how value creation and customer influence work today within digital narratives. While we are aware that our results would likely differ somewhat when the conducting a similar research on a much larger scale with more and larger companies that might already have a guideline for activating customer influence, we find that our results are reliable and can be a useful addition in the field of digital narratives. This study can be beneficial to companies and individuals that are aiming to involve their audience more in co-creating narratives on social media. We found that there is a lot of value in co-creation and utilizing even third hand interactions can help digital stories reach even further. However, the influence provided by users will vary depending on how the story is told and on which digital platform.

6.1 Further research

It is always important to research a new conceptual guideline to firmly establish that it functions in the intended way and provides the desired results. We deem this extra important because the subjects of this guideline are regular individuals and there is an ethical segment not to be overlooked. Globalisation is another concern, because the differences in regulation of approaching a target audience. For instance it is illegal in Sweden to market products aimed at children (Konsumentverket, 2008). The guideline does not take age into consideration, just interaction. We think that this also requires new research in other fields. For example Schultz (2018) discloses, that we don't have any valid legal framework on how to view likes as an action of spreading content. The topic chosen for this study is closely related to other research areas, where more extensive exploration could be done to get a better insight into exactly how all the data is correlated.
7. References


8. Appendices

8.1 Quantitative data

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Likechart 1: Facebook

Amount of posts

Like 1-10 11-20 21-30 31-40 41-50 51-60 61-70 71-80 81-90 91-100 100-201 201-300 301-400 401-500 1100+ 1200+ 1500+ Likes Amount of posts with likes between X->X

Likechart 2: Instagram

Amount of posts

Like 1-10 11-20 21-30 31-40 41-50 51-60 61-70 71-80 81-90 91-100 100-201 201-300 301-400 401-500 1100+ 1200+ 1500+ Likes Amount of posts with likes between X->X from Instagram
8.2 Interview guide

Presentad information för respondenten

Vi är två personer som lyssnar och deltar i intervjun
Mikael och Solya

Vi har observerat er på sociala medier, med syfte att ta reda på vad er narrative består av.
(Vi har brutit ned dom i något som kallas story bytes, av författaren John Alexander i corporate narratives)

Syftet med intervjun är att bekräfta eller dementera vad vi har sett i vår observation.

Intervjun kommer att ta ungefär 30-50 minuter

All data kommer vara kommer att konfidentiell och vi kommer inte att nämna dig eller företaget er vid namn.

Datan kommer bara att användas i forskningssynpunkt, återigen anonymt = inga namn eller personuppgifter

Du kan när som helst avbryta intervjun och när som helst välja att inte medverka

Studien kommer att publiceras och ni får gärna ta del av den; vill ni att vi delar den?

Det är bara den transkriberade intervjun som kommer finnas kvar, den originella kommer att raderas efter avklarad studie

Har du några frågor på detta?

Vi har delat upp intervjun i fyra olika teman:
Storytelling, Social Medier, Marknadsföring och Värdeskapande
Faktiska frågor:

Varför just den här produktgruppen?
Vilken är din favoritsmak?
Vilken roll har du i företaget?

Vad är storytelling för dig? Er?
Vad vill ni berätta med er storytelling?
Hur vill ni berätta det?
Vilken målgrupp har ni?

Vad är sociala medier för er?
Hur använder ni er av sociala medier?
Facebook?
Instagram?

Har ni olika målgrupper för olika kanaler? (social media)
Om ja, Hur anpassar ni det ni lägger ut efter det? Om nej, varför väljer ni att inte göra det?
Hur interagerar ni med kunder?
Hur interagerar kunder med er?
Vilket värde ser ni i att social medier kan ha för er?
Vad är värdeskapande för er?

Vi har sett att användningen av era #företagsnamn #alt.företagsnamn används i olika utsträckning på de olika plattformarna, varför valde ni att skapa den?
Vilket värde hoppade ni få ut av den?

Via #:arna speciellt på instagram och twitter har vi sett att ni får många nya och unika historier
Hur tror du att ni kan utnyttja dessa historier?
Varför kan det vara viktigt? Oviktigt?

Vilka historier berättar ni inom företaget?
För att höja moral, dela värderingar, ta lärdom av motgångar/framgångar

Ser du några fördelar med att låta allmänheten få ta del av sådana historier?
Isåfall varför? Varför inte?
Har ni anlitat någon för marknadsföring?
Varför har ni valt att använda er av Buzzador och Smartson?

Om inte - Har ni utsett personer för att hantera social media?

Har ni några dröm-samarbetspartners?
Hur mycket styr kundinflytande ert arbete?
(Om ja, på vilket sätt? Om nej, hur skulle ni vilja att det var?) (Om inte: vem gör det?)

Hur får ni synpunkter eller förfrågningar från kunder?
Får ni många förfrågningar från konsumenter?

Skulle era kunder kunna vara en samarbetspartner?
Varför inte? Vilka fördelar kan du tänka dig med det?

Har ni strategier/arbetssätt för sociala medier?
Lägger ni ut bilder enligt ett schema?
Posta bilder som ser ut som privatpersoner?
Varför har ni tävlingar?
Håller ni koll på hur många klicka eller spridningen på era inlägg på facebook? (Den informationen går att hämta ifrån sidhanteraren)

Finns det någon anledning till varför ni inte har ett officiellt Twitter, Youtube konto?
Vimeo?
Reflekterar ni över hur ert arbete skulle kunna genomföras annorlunda? I så fall hur?