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Exposé

**The Impact of Hotel Website Content  
on the Online Customer Experience**

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## 1. Introduction

Content marketing is a marketing field that promotes interesting and engaging content to trigger a reaction of customers, which leads to commercial success of companies in the long term. To address this strategy, it is important to include online and offline touchpoints. The digital transformation promotes content marketing for online touchpoints notably because of saving potentials and budgets (Granata & Scozzese 2019, p.60). Furthermore, it is important to recognize, that purchasing website traffic, like it is common in online marketing, is not an efficient way to successfully interact with customers. Hence, one goal of content marketing is to attract customers with valuable content, that is precisely tailored to the requirements of a defined target group (Löffler 2015, p.37). Content Marketing is an inbound marketing strategy, which does not disturb customer activities by advertising. It focusses on communication with the customer without trying to sell directly (Granata & Scozzese 2019, pp.60). Content marketing is not an entirely new topic to academic literature but, is not completely explored and currently just used in a few digital contexts (Granata & Scozzese 2019, p.60). A well created content strategy bases on content that is suited to the needs of customers and has a high expediency. For this reason, a customer will visit the company's website again (Granata & Scozzese 2019, pp.60). Besides that, a content marketing strategy requires a concentration on a special niche and on valuable content for customers. According to technological progress, customers make decisions on the base of more information and marketers are in need of producing the most valuable content (Ann Kee & Yazdanifard 2015, p.1062).

Purchasing decisions are made for emotional reasons, therefore brand communication should evoke emotions (Wagner 2014, p.11). Especially entertaining content leads to sympathy and happiness, which intensifies the engagement with a company or can be utilized to establish a commitment during the customer journey (Kruse Brandão & Wolfram 2018, p.359). Moreover, the brand experience directly influences the brand reputation (Falkenreck & Wagner 2010, p.34). One can come to the conclusion, that companies should intensify their ambitions to build a whole online brand experience (Granata & Scozzese 2019, p. 70). Lemon and Verhoef define the Customer Experience as an objective of the Customer Journey that highlights the cognitive, emotional, behavioral or social customer reactions on companies' messages (2016, p.71). In addition to that Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello conduct the following four

dimensions for the Online Customer Experience: sensory, affective, behavioral and intellectual (2009, p.63). Traditionally the sales funnel is an important basic tool of corporate marketing strategy. Per definition it includes every phase of decision making. The digital development requires adaptations on the sales funnel as well, marketers need to create special content for each phase (Granata & Scozzese 2019, p.63). A special discipline in marketing examines the Customer Journey Analysis which tries to keep track of the steps a customer undertakes during his journey and finally analyse the impact of single touchpoints on the customers decision, regarding the media a customer used in certain decision-making phases (Holland & Flocke 2014, p.215). For Verhoef et al. the customer journey is a series of interactions between customers and companies throughout the purchase decision (2016, S.73). According to that, the cycle of the Customer Experience is iterative, integrating the pre purchase phase, the purchase and the post purchase phase. The authors incorporate into their model a dynamic, triggered by previous experiences as well as external elements (Verhoef et al. 2016, S.73). Edelman and Singer determine a difference between the classic customer journey and a “new” customer journey. The classic way is to have a widened phase of searching and evaluating before the purchase decision. In the new customer journey these phases are reduced or even not existing, customers directly move into the loyalty loop (2015, p.90).

Customers and marketers use social networks for informational and communicational purposes. In fact, the Internet User demands individual communication in social networks (Klaus, Schwerdtfeger & Wagner 2010, p.1). Companies were not used to completely focus on customer dialogue and individual communication, like it is common on blogs nowadays (Wagner 2011, pp.462). This makes it even harder for companies to receive the awareness of customers. Every company needs a unique selling proposition, telling their own story to activate customer emotions (Granata & Scozzese 2019, p.62). Owned media include online platforms such as, corporate blogs or websites (Mühlenhoff & Hedel 2014, p.520). Websites are provided by companies to offer product information and should be designed interactively to gain the attention of customers (Wagner 2011, p.462). On the one hand owned media are important to build and maintain customer relationships, on the other hand this task takes a lot of time and effort (Mühlenhoff & Hedel 2014, p.520). Content marketing with its focus on owned media, extremely differs from other marketing fields that specify in paid media. Recognizing that the customer is less involved in companies but rather in fulfilling his

needs, content has the advantage, that it positively influences search engine rankings of websites and builds an important touchpoint to customers (Granata & Scozzese 2019, p.60). The corporate website is an important component in content marketing because companies control the communication (Löffler 2015, p.459), whereas blogs are a medium for customers to share and discuss opinions (Wagner 2011, p.462). Therefore, companies should create valuable website content and use the generated data to build customer databases, to do further research (Löffler 2015, p.459). Special processes were developed for performance evaluation of online and offline touchpoints. Whereas the response quote is a key performance indicator for offline media, tracking is used to analyse search behaviour or click rates in online media (Böcker 2015, p.172).

Companies can design their websites in a user-friendly way, including useful links into website texts which lead to landing pages giving additional information (Löffler 2015, p.460). 'With creative, exclusive, informative and 'contagious' web content you can turn your users into enthusiastic fans, buyers, subscribers or cooperation partners' (Löffler 2015, p.26). In the case of searching for particular information on the internet the results are mainly presented in text format, which can be consumed on devices or printed for offline use. Although videos are currently very popular, content in text format does not lose its importance in marketing. Texts can easily be produced and will stay an affordable tool of content marketing (Kruse Brandão & Wolfram 2018, p.361). In fact, text-based content can be easily found by search engines (Löffler 2015, p.29).

A website takes center stage of the Online Customer Experience. Different verbal design or visual elements are used to create this experience (Bleier, Harmeling & Palmatier 2019, p.102). The most common form of content is verbal content, which is provided on websites (Brandão & Wolfram 2018, p.124) and is used for advertising purposes in newsletters or banners (Wagner & Meißner 2009, p.981). More precisely verbal content has linguistic style elements like pronouns, adjectives or verbs, also called content words (Tausczik & Pennebaker 2010, p.29). According to Bleier et al. (2019, p.102) information is distributed with verbal elements which could be bulleted points, descriptive features or linguistic style. If a company's main goal is to generate new leads for a website, it is important to highlight knowhow and to have the right solutions to customer problems in order to build trust and have loyal customers (Löffler 2015, p.37). More precisely, companies focussing on Customer Experience should

engage in Content Marketing because it is an important connection to customers (Petifourt 2019, p.26).

## 2. Literature Review

The literature review was based on platforms or services like EBSCO Discovery Service, Springer Link, Research Gate und Google Scholar. The following table provides an overview about the current state of research in Content Marketing and about the Online Customer Experience. Articles from academic journals published between 2013 and 2020 are listed below.

<b>Author/ Ressource</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Content</b>
<b>Lemon, K. N. &amp; Verhoef, P. C. (2016). <i>Journal of Marketing, 80, 69- 96.</i></b>	Understanding Customer Experience throughout the customer journey	This article gives a general definition for the Customer Journey and the historical background of the topic. An Understanding for the changes in the Customer Journey because of different channels should be established.
<b>Kumar, V.; Chattaraman, V.; Neghina, C.; Skiera, B.; Aksoy, L.; Buoye, A. &amp; Henseler, J. (2013). <i>Journal of Service Management 24(3), 330-352</i></b>	Data-driven services marketing in a connected world	Advantages of data-driven service marketing are mentioned in this article. A concept is developed to combine new and traditional resources of customer data.
<b>Kuehnl, C.; Jozic, D.; Homburg, C. (2019). <i>Journal of the Academy of</i></b>	Effective customer journey design: consumers' conception,	Two studies in Europe and the USA are conducted, which analyse the correlation between effective

<b><i>Marketing Science</i> 47, 551-568.</b>	measurement, and consequences	Customer Journey design and Customer Loyalty.
<b>Bleier, a.; Harmeling, C. M.; Palmatier, R. W. (2019). <i>Journal of Marketing</i> 83(2), 98-119.</b>	Creating Effective Online Customer Experiences	This research investigates 13 design elements on amazon product webpages. It analyses verbal and visual stimuli.
<b>Granata, G. &amp; Soczzese, G. (2019). <i>European Scientific Journal</i> 15(1), 58-72.</b>	The Actions of e-Branding and Content Marketing to improve Consumer Relationships	In this article the authors shed a light on how digital marketing, e-branding or Storytelling can improve the Content Marketing and communication with the customers to reach a better Customer Relationship.
<b>Gao, H.; Tate, M.; Zhang, H.; Chen, S. &amp; Liang, B. (2018). <i>Journal of International Marketing</i> 26(3), 45-69.</b>	Social Media Ties Strategy in International Branding: An Application of Resource-Based Theory	On the base of resource-based Theory Social Media ties are analysed according to three criterions: value, rarity and inimitableness. Combined incentives need to be placed for customers in order to let them spread the messages on social media.
<b>Kee, A. W., &amp; Yazdanifard, R. (2015). <i>International Journal of Management, Accounting and Economics</i>, 2(9), 1055-1064.</b>	The Review of Content Marketing as a new Trend in Marketing Practices	Benefits of using Content Marketing in organisations are presented. Moreover, six implementation strategies of Content Marketing are illustrated.

<b>Hamilton, R. &amp; Price, L. L. (2019).</b> <i>Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science</i> . 47, 187-191.	Customer journeys: developing consumer-based strategy	This article focusses on customers and especially the Customer Journey. It gives an overview on research streams.
<b>Halvorsrud, R.; Kvale, K.; Følstad, A. (2016).</b> <i>Journal of service therapy and practice</i> . 26(6), 840-867.	Improving service quality through customer journey analysis	Case studies of the Customer Journey are presented, service processes of touchpoints are highlighted. Four deviations in service provision are found and implications are drawn.
<b>Wolny, J. &amp; Charoensuksai, N. (2014).</b> <i>Journal of Direct, Data and Digital Marketing Practice</i> 15, 317-326.	Mapping customer journeys in multichannel decision-making	This study focusses on Multi-Channel-Shopping and defines influencing elements of decision-making and reactions on different media and channels.
<b>Van Auken, S. (2015).</b> <i>Journal of Marketing Analytics</i> 3, 38-45.	From consumer panels to big data: An overview on Marketing data development	An overview is given on potentials, challenges and the future of big data in marketing. The Relationship between panels and big data is demonstrated, according to the transition from transaction marketing to deepening customer relations.
<b>Ertekin, S.; Pryor, S. &amp; Pelton, L. E. (2017).</b> <i>The Marketing Management</i>	An empirical study of consumer motivations to use in-store mapping application	In this study the characteristic traits and motivation, which influence the acceptance of using In-Store-Mapping of young Americans are analysed.

		<i>Journal, 27(1), 63-74.</i>
<b>Nam, H. &amp; Kannan, P. K. (2020). <i>Journal of International Marketing 28(1), 28-47</i></b>	Digital Environments in global Markets: Cross-Cultural Implications for Evolving Customer Journeys	A Framework is developed to explain intercultural and socioeconomic differences and their influence on the Customer Journey. Motivational factors like Augmented Reality are examined.
<b>Balducci, B. &amp; Marinova, D. (2018), <i>Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science 46, 557-590</i></b>	Unstructured Data in Marketing	Definition and development of a concept for unstructured data in marketing. Analysing unstructured data and using them to promote marketing fields that are not highly developed.
<b>Tang, L. (2017). <i>Journal of International Marketing 25(2), 88-110.</i></b>	Mine Your Customers or Mine Your Business: The Moderating Role of Culture in Online Word-Of-Mouth Reviews	An investigation of the correlation of Online Word-Of-Mouth and the market performance of companies. Influencing factors are examined.
<b>Meire, M.; Hewett, K.; Ballings, M.; Kumar, V. &amp; Van den Poel, D. (2019) <i>Journal of Marketing 83(6), 21-42.</i></b>	The role of Marketer-Generated Content in Customer Engagement Marketing	Analysis of Customer Engagement in social media, as well as influencing the customers emotions through interaction measures. Recognizing a special meaning of marketers for influencing customer emotions.
<b>Dunn, K. &amp; Harness, D. (2019). <i>Journal of Marketing Management 35(9-10), 886-915.</i></b>	Whose Voice is heard? The influence of user-generated versus company-generated content on consumer scepticism towards CSR	Study about credibility of user-generated Content in food retail industry in the United Kingdom. The risk of communication of Corporate Social Responsibility using social media is examined.

### **3. Methodology**

This bachelor thesis is based on a quantitative research method to examine a correlation between dependent and independent variables. An online questionnaire will be conducted to analyse the impact of content on hotel websites on the Online Customer Experience. With respect to content as a digital phenomenon and the target group that uses the content on websites, the chosen research method is an online questionnaire. In general, the target group is characterized by the aspects of using or generating content online and booking hotels online. In fact, 55 million Germans travelled in 2019 (Statista 2020), which builds the population size of the research design.

At the beginning of this research project literature is reviewed to gain information about the theoretical background. Afterwards the information is used to derive hypotheses that will be tested in the questionnaire. The questionnaire will consist of four parts. Part one will cover the introduction and the hotel website. A fictive website will be presented with different variations and amount of content for the experimental and the control group. Questions of part two of the questionnaire deal with the effects of content and verbal design elements. Part three examines the online experience of content. The last part will focus on sociodemographic data. For numerous questions of part one, two and three a 5-point Likert scale is applied.

#### **Data collection**

It is intended to conduct a quantitative online survey. The chosen online tool is SoSci-Survey, which can be utilized free of charge for non-commercial or student projects. This tool comes with a lot more functions than other online survey tools, such as google forms. An advantage is the integration of different research groups (e.g. control and experimental group) into one survey project and the possibility to export the collected data in a format that is suitable for Excel or SPSS. Before publishing the questionnaire, a pre-test will be started.

In general, the population of Germany is about 80 million people, but just 55 million people travel regularly (Graefe, 2020). According to a population size of 55 million people the simplified formula for calculation of the required sample size can be utilized. Taking into account a confidence interval of 0,1; a standard deviation of 0,5; a confidence level of 95 % and a z-value of 1,96 the sample size can be deviated. If this

quantitative study should represent the population adequately, it requires minimum 96 participants. More precisely, the goal is to achieve 200 participants to permit generalized conclusions for both research groups. The questionnaire will be spread on social media like Facebook or LinkedIn. The investigation does not only address Germans, therefore the questionnaire will be available in English as well.

After the data collection, a statistics analysis program, such as SPSS or an alternative free software like PAST or PSCP will be utilized for data analysis purposes.

#### **4. Research Question**

Changes in customer behaviour and technological progress make it necessary to address Content Marketing and create unique messages (An Kee & Yazdanifard, 2015, p.1062). One study on marketer-generated content examines the connection between engagement and Content Marketing. The results clarify that marketers can influence the engagement with just a few changes in content and design (Meire, Hewett, Ballings, Kumar & van den Poel 2019, p.38). Even if many companies engage in Content Marketing the challenge is to generate content, adjusted to every touchpoint and guarantee a holistic brand message (Kruse Brandão & Wolfram 2018, p.104). Bleier, Harmeling and Palmatier (2019, p.98) examined in their study how well-designed product pages can create an effective Online Customer Experience. They also emphasise how design elements should be created to influence the decision-making process. A study on e-branding by Granata and Scozzese analyses the connection of trust, engagement and loyalty. The authors try to find influencing factors of Content Marketing (2019, p.59). According to the literature review and the studies mentioned before(section 2), the concepts of content and Online Customer Experience and direct impacts have not been examined simultaneously in former research projects. Therefore, this thesis examines the research question how Content Marketing on hotel websites effects the Online Customer Experience. Moreover, it analyses, if information-focused content (Tellis, MacInnis, Tirunillai, & Zhang, 2019, p. 120) influences the customers perception during certain phases of decision-making process, including online touchpoints which can be possibly used during the customer journey. Further research questions of this thesis deal with topics like customers interest in family background, traditions, additional information for activities or the

usage of guest reviews for decision making process (Keul, Wagner & Brandt-Pook 2014, p.487).

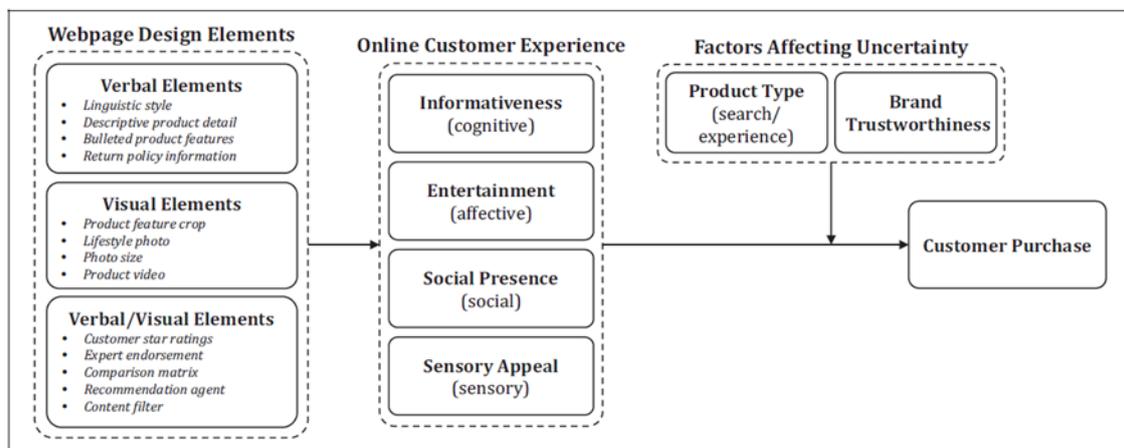


Figure 1 - Designing the Online Customer Experience. Source: Bleier, Harmeling & Palmatier, Creating an effective Online Customer Experience 2019, p.101

Based on the following three constructs bulleted points, descriptive features and linguistic style (Bleier et al. 2019, p.102), this investigation includes the development of content (verbal design elements in Figure 1 above) for hotel websites (experimental and control group) and finally the evaluation of the effects on the online experience. Therefore, the main objectives of this thesis are website texts, especially the linguistic style, descriptive details and bulleted points, as well as the amount of content and highlighting in the text. Moreover, the phases of decision making will be integrated into the research design as well. The phase of research and particularly the post purchase phase lately gain in importance (Kruse Brandão & Wolfram 2018, p.97). The characteristics of content can influence the Customer Experience, which is normally analysed with parameters like trust, loyalty (Granata & Scozzese 2019, p.59) or satisfaction (Lemon & Verhoef 2019, p.70). The design of the website is needed to support the website content but is not a particular part of the investigation. These concepts are used to derive various questions for the survey. The results of the survey could be used to develop new marketing activities and implications for web designers and content creators. In section 5 of this Exposé you can get an overview of the contents and structure of the thesis.

## Hypotheses

Considering the results of the literature review, the customer perspective on content marketing has not been examined by former research projects (Granata & Scozzese 2019, p.60). Therefore, the online survey analyses the customers perception and opinion on content.

Petifourt has shown that companies engaging in Customer Experience management, need to recognize the importance of content. Content as an interface, can be divers in design, data and creativity and should get special attention (Petifourt 2019, p.26).

A study of Bleier et al. (2019, p.98) investigates in Online Customer Experience with the following objective “understand[ing] how online design elements shape multidimensional Customer Experiences to influence purchase and how these experiences should be customized depending on the products or brands sold”. Their research addresses amazon product pages and their impact on the Online Customer Experience, which show parallels to this thesis. The main difference is their focus on product web pages and visual stimuli (2019, p.102). This thesis analyses the of verbal elements and content on hotel websites and further the impact on the Online Customer Experience, especially the decision-making-process and the purchase.

According to Bleier et al. (2019, p.102) information is distributed through different verbal elements. These three verbal design elements and their effects should be analysed by the following hypotheses.

H1a: An informative linguistic style on websites increases the trustworthiness of information.

H1b: An emotional linguistic style on websites increases the trustworthiness of information.

Moreover, new research projects should highlight multiple ways how design elements influence decision making processes (Bleier et al., 2019, p.110). In conclusion hypotheses 2 are developed.

H2a: If a website provides information in a form of verbal design elements like bulleted points, it is more interesting for customers.

H2b: If a website provides information in form of verbal design elements like descriptive details, it is more interesting for customers.

H2c: If a website provides a combination of bullet points and texts it is more interesting for customers.

As presented in figure 1 above, the Online Customer Experience has different dimensions. This thesis focusses on the cognitive and affective aspect. Tellis et al. (2019, p. 120) were evaluating the virality of contents in their study and developed the construct of information-focused content. It includes a various number of the categories on products, behavior or attributes. These aspects are included in the following hypotheses.

H3a: Additional Information such as the family history increase the trustworthiness of a website.

H3b: Additional Information such as guest reviews increase the trustworthiness of a website.

H4a: The guest prefers a hotel website with lots of information.

H4b: The guest prefers a hotel website with easily understandable contents.

H4c: If the guest finds more information than he searched for, he has a positive Customer Experience.

H4d: The guest prefers short texts with highlighted information such as bold.

An advantage of user experience design is the increase in customer satisfaction according to the products and services perfectly adapted to user expectations (Moser 2012, S.19). In most cases the user has his first impression with digital touchpoints and this user experience builds the base of any further Customer Experience. Therefore, marketers use software to design appealing experiences (Kruse Brandão, & Wolfram, 2018, p. 101). These arguments express the importance of user experience, therefore one hypothesis addresses this issue.

H5: The hotel guest prefers a user-friendly hotel website.

The digital transformation changed the Customer Journey, particularly the relation between touchpoints is influenced by different factors. The touchpoints do not build a sequence and the customer has many different touchpoints with companies. Every customer has his own decision-making process and is triggered by different stimuli in

different phases (Kruse Brandão & Wolfram 2018, p. 98). Hypotheses 6 address the phases of consideration during decision-making.

H6a: If guests are in the phase of consideration, they use comparison portals for hotels.

H6b: If guests are in the phase of consideration, they use travel blogs.

H6c: If guests are in the phase of consideration, they visit the social media accounts of the hotel.

H6d: If guests get coherent messages on comparison portals, travel blogs and social media they have a positive Customer Experience.

Another development of the customer journey uncovers that the experience does not end with the purchase, in this case the booking of a hotel. The customer does not go through every phase of decision making according to the traditional sales funnel. Moreover, every touchpoint needs to work without the other ones and after purchase touchpoints, such as support are higher rated (Kruse Brandão & Wolfram 2018, p. 97).

H7a: If the customer service can answer questions after booking, guests have a positive experience.

H7b: If a guest expresses special wishes during booking and these are not considered, he has a negative experience.

## 5. Timeline

Phases/ date	July – Sept 2020	Nov / Dec 2020	January 2021	February 2021	March 2021
literature review					
finding topic/ exposé			End of survey January 10th, 2020		
survey/ data collection					
theoretical back- ground					
data analysis					
layout, introduction abstract					
correction					
buffer					
submission					

Registration  
bachelor thesis at  
Prüfungsamt  
January 11th, 2021.

Submission date  
bachelor thesis  
March 7th, 2021

## **6. Table of Contents**

Title: 'The Impact of hotel website content on the online Customer Experience'

### **1. Introduction**

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1.2 Research question

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2.2.1 Owned Content

2.2.2 Earned Content

2.3 Verbal design elements on websites

### **3. Customer Experience**

3.1 Customer Journey and Customer Experience

3.2 Concept of Customer Experience

3.2.1 User Experience

3.2.2 Online Customer Experience

### **4. Quantitative Analysis and online survey**

4.1 Methodology

4.2 Research Design

4.3 Hypotheses

### **5. Results**

### **6. Discussion**

### **7. Conclusion**

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### **Appendix**

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