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Juliana Tobon

MARKETING AUTOMATION ADOPTION IN B2B COMPANIES

1st Supervisor: Professor Sanna-Katriina Asikainen.

2nd Supervisor: Associate Professor Anssi Tarkiainen.

ABSTRACT

The scientific literature on marketing automation is in a nascent stage. Previous literature has focused primarily on other CRM systems such as sales force automation. This study opens a relevant research area and offers insights on how practitioners perceive marketing automation and how this technology is adopted. To explain the adoption, this paper builds and tests a framework which includes the stages, the activities on each stage, and the factors affecting the adoption. In addition, the study increases the understanding of the challenges and benefits when adopting marketing automation.

The empirical part of the research is based on multiple-case studies, consisting of eight Finnish B2B companies. The data are collected from semi-structured interviews with the marketing managers and directors. The findings indicate that marketing automation is perceived as a strategic resource. External pressure and TTF are the factors that affect the most the adoption decision. Moreover, the findings demonstrate that the biggest challenge in the adoption is the lack of skills. After implementing the platform, direct benefits such as saving time and customizing content are commonly achieved. However, indirect benefits such as aligning marketing and sales and demonstrating marketing's accountability are not generally reached by all the companies.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

After five years studying international business and two years studying international marketing, this was the time to make my final contribution. This thesis is the beginning of something big in my life and means a lot to me. I dedicated to it all my energy during this nine months.

I dedicate this thesis to my family. Thank you for giving me all your support and keeping me focused during these months. I would like also to thank my thesis supervisor Anssi Tarkiainen. His guidance and support during this process were crucial. He inspired me to give my best and believe in my skills.

Lastly, I want to express my gratitude to all the people who participated in the interviews. Thank you for being open to sharing your knowledge with me.

Turku, October 2017

Juliana Tobon

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

B2B – Business-to-Business

B2C – Business-to-Consumer

CRM – Customer Relationship Management

MarTech – Marketing Technologies

MQL – Marketing Qualified Lead

SME – Small and Medium Enterprise

SQL – Sales Qualified Lead

TPC – Technology-to-Performance Chain

TTF – Task-to-Technology Fit

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1. INTRODUCTION

The world has seen a drastic change in the last two decades with the emergence of the internet and social media. Consumers are looking more for information from online sources and they are living in a hyper-digital world where they keep connected. (Estrada 2015; Wood 2015) The increasing influence of digital communication channels and the changes in consumers' behavior have transformed the way companies operate (Järvinen & Taiminen 2016; Putkinen 2014). Companies are heavily relying on the power of technology to fuel their marketing departments to meet the changing needs of their customers (Biegel 2009).

Sophisticated marketing technologies have emerged to manage the complexity in today's business environment. One of those technologies is marketing automation. Even though the notion of this technology has existed since the 1990's (Heimbach et al. 2015), its popularity only started to increase in the last decade, and it has become now the latest buzzword in marketing (Dworkin 2016). While the roots of marketing automation are in email marketing (Del Rowe 2016), this technology has expanded to cover other functions such as campaign management, digital and social media marketing, lead management, and marketing analytics.

Marketing automation is currently one of the most promising sectors in the software industry (Lamont 2015). This technology is expected to reach US$7.63 billion by 2025 according to the Grand View Research report (CMO Innovation Editors 2017). Important software companies such as IBM, Salesforce, and Oracle have added it as part of their solutions (Lamont 2015) and they are continuously acquiring other companies to expand the tool's functionalities to consolidate their market share (CMO Innovation Editors 2017).

The vendors highlight promising benefits from adopting marketing automation, but in practice, companies struggle to achieve such benefits and understand how marketing automation fits their strategies. In addition, even though, marketing automation is a relevant topic to contemporary marketing, the scientific research on it has stayed behind. The current knowledge comes mainly from vendors' white-papers, informal online articles, and single-case studies and interviews.

Based on this background, this research achieves the main goal of advancing the knowledge on marketing automation in the Business-to-Business (B2B) context. To advance the knowledge, this study covers the perception of marketing automation, it describes the process of marketing automation adoption, and it explains the challenges and impact of adopting it.

To achieve the main goal, this study develops a framework based on the literature on the diffusion of innovations theory by Everett Rogers (2003) and the Technology-to-Performance Chain (TPC) model by Goodhue and Thompson (1995). The framework of this study is applied to the empirical part of this research which consists of multiple-case studies. Eight marketing managers and directors from different Finnish companies that already have marketing automation were interviewed. The interviewees explained their perception of marketing automation, why their companies adopted marketing automation, what challenges they encountered during the adoption, and what benefits their companies are getting from this technology.

This research is structured as follows. It begins introducing the topic and provides the research questions, the definition of the main concepts for the paper, and the structure of the study. It continues elaborating on concepts of marketing automation and adoption of technology innovations to come up with the framework of the study. Later, it explains the reason to use a qualitative research method and more specifically, a multiple-case study. Subsequently, the findings and the analysis are presented to finalize with the conclusions and discussions.

1.1.   Research Questions and Objectives of the Research

The main goal of this study is to increase the knowledge on marketing automation in B2B companies. To achieve this goal, the research clarifies the perception of marketing automation, it describes the adoption process, and it discusses the challenges and the impact of adopting this technology. Previous literature has focused mainly on the commercial aspect of marketing automation, but there is little scientific evidence regarding how companies perceive this technology and how its adoption affects the overall organization. Therefore, the scientific goal of this study is to building theory on marketing automation to understand the

role of this technology in B2B companies. On the other hand, the managerial goal of the research is to help B2B companies to understand how marketing automation supports their plans.

The following figure summarizes the research questions of the study.
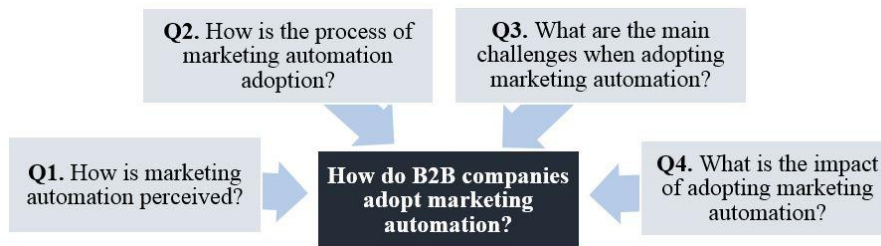
Figure 1 Research questions of this study.

Based on the goals of this study, the main research question is formulated as follows:

How do B2B companies adopt marketing automation?

To reach the goals of this study, four more research sub-questions are answered. These questions help to contribute to the knowledge of what marketing automation is, and they are defined as:

How is marketing automation perceived?

How is the process of marketing automation adoption?

What are the main challenges when adopting marketing automation?

What is the impact of adopting marketing automation?

1.2. Literature Review

The literature of this paper consists of the current knowledge of technology innovation adoption and marketing automation. In terms of the literature on technology innovation adoption,

this study focuses primarily on two theories, the diffusion of innovations theory by Everett Rogers (2003) and the Technology-to-Performance Chain (TPC) model by Goodhue and Thompson (1995). The first theory, the diffusion of innovations, helps to explain the stages of innovation adoption and the attributes that affect the adoption process of innovations. On the other side, the TPC model complements the literature on innovation adoption as it demonstrates how the technological and task fit, and the behaviors and attitudes of individuals affect the adoption of a technology.

Regarding the literature on marketing automation, the term was found not to be new. Its origins date from the 1990's with the development of the first CRM platform (Biegel 2009). Marketing automation by then was an added module to the CRM functions (Kumar 2011). Bucklin et al. (1998) in their paper "From Decision Support to Decision Automation: A 2020 Vision" discussed the fact that some proportion of marketing decisions may be automated. According to them, marketing decision automation was going to be driven by enhanced productivity, improved decision-making, and the demands for mass-customization. This demonstrates that the idea of automating marketing processes began in the 1990's, however, it was until 2001 when the term marketing automation was firstly introduced by John D. C. Little (Heimbach et al. 2015).

Even though the concept of marketing automation is not new, it has only gained relevance in the last decade when more companies adopted this tool and began claiming it to be a must for today's marketing departments. The main reason why the concept of marketing automation did not get enough attention during its early years relates to the technological advances of the time. High expectations and overambitious objectives coming from companies were, in most of the cases, unmet since the technology behind the system was rather complicated and projects were getting delayed causing a disconnection between IT and marketing requirements. (Biegel 2009) This disconnection caused resistance from marketers to adopt the technology which later was diminished once innovations in the technology reached a point where the tools became more user-friendly and they did not require being an expert to use it. (Ibid 2009)

Despite the increasing adoption and technological development of marketing automation in the last decade, the literature on the topic is still in a nascent stage. Perhaps one of the reasons

for this gap in the literature relies on the fact that even though the adoption of marketing automation has increased, according to Templeman (2015), less than ten percent of companies have adopted it. In addition to this, another possible explanation could be the emergence of different technologies for marketing such as email marketing and web analytics that have similar features which have attracted more the attention of researchers. Because of this, the current knowledge on marketing automation comes mainly from vendors' white-papers, informal online articles, and single-case studies and interviews.

Around the definition of marketing automation, there is an extensive discussion whether marketing automation is part of the Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems or not. The confusion emerged due to the functionality of marketing automation. Since vendors of marketing automation software are expanding its features until the point that it contains features that other CRM systems have, it is difficult to define if it is part of it, or if the fact of having numerous features justify its autonomy (Redding 2015). According to Heimbach et al. (2015), marketing automation exceeds CRM discipline because marketing automation systems utilize data from various sources to establish a real-time communication in different touchpoints such as the website, mobile phone, and email among others. To add to the discussion, Dworkin (2016) states that while CRM only addresses leads in a one-to-one matter, marketing automation allows managing entire groups of prospects.

Contrary to that position, authors that consider marketing automation as part of CRM (e.g. Buttle & Maklan 2015; Mohr et al. 2010) explain that even though marketing automation features exceed other types of CRM systems, its features do not cover all the aspects to building relationships with prospects and customers. In this respect, Estrada (2015) argues that marketing automation cannot provide information after the leads enter the sales funnel and get contacted by sales representatives. It lacks the information of what happens during the interaction of the sales force with prospects and current customers. Therefore, marketing automation requires an integration with other CRM systems to cover the entire funnel (Dworkin 2016) and this can be done, for example, by integrating marketing automation with a sales automation software.

Since there are two different perspectives regarding the topic of marketing automation and CRM, a position must be taken for the development of this research. This study assumes that

marketing automation is part of CRM. As marketing automation collects information of both, current customers and prospects, it could be said that marketing automation complements other CRM systems by enabling to build relationships not only with customers but also with prospects. However, it is not autonomous because it requires integration with other CRM systems to fully operate.

1.3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework presents the theoretical perspectives of this research. It explains how the literature on marketing automation and technology innovation adoption are developed throughout the paper. This study concentrates on the B2B environment, therefore, the theories, models, and concepts applied are focused to fit this context. Figure 2 gives an overview of the theoretical framework of this study.
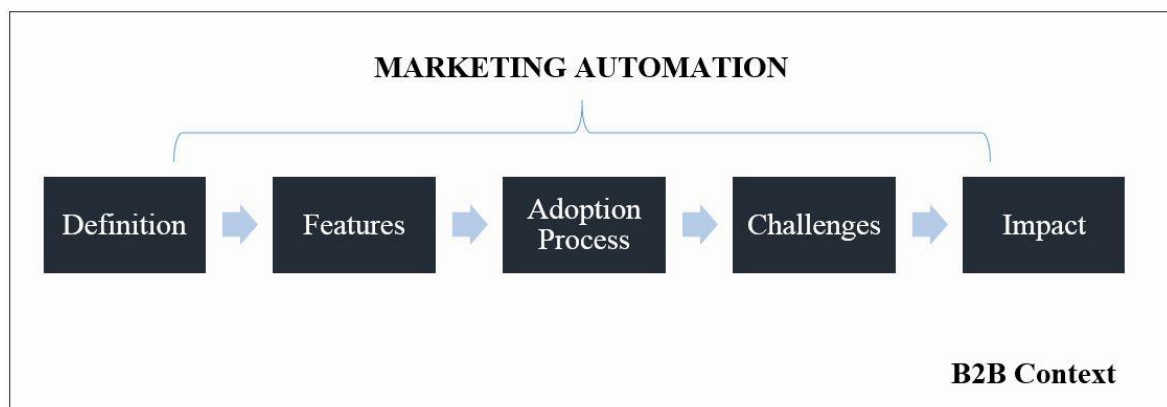
Figure 2 Theoretical framework of the research.

The theoretical review introduces first, the concept of marketing automation. It begins defining the concept to later explain its functionality in terms of the features. The literature on marketing automation is based on the current knowledge on the topic and it includes journal articles and vendors' white-papers, brochures, and blog posts. Subsequently, to describe the process of marketing automation adoption, since there is not scientific literature specifically on this topic, the literature for this part is based principally on the theory of diffusion of innovations (Rogers 2003) and the TPC model (Goodhue & Thompson 1995). These two comprehensive and validated theories create a solid basis for this paper to define the stages of the adoption process and the factors affecting the adoption of technological innovations.

Lastly, based on the literature on marketing automation, the challenges and the impact from marketing automation adoption are covered.

1.4. Concept Definitions

This section introduces the most relevant concepts used in this study. Since some of the definitions are ambiguous in the literature, the aim of introducing these concepts is to show the author's perspective on each term to facilitate the readers' understanding of the paper. The definitions are based on the existing academic literature and most of them come from the literature used in the theoretical part of the study.

As this research focuses on B2B companies, a brief explanation of the concept "B2B marketing" is given to describe how this type of marketing differentiates from B2C marketing. Later, the concept of "CRM" which is highly connected to marketing automation is introduced. Lastly, as marketing automation helps to manage the relationships with customers, to explain better the customer journey, a brief description of the sales and marketing funnel is included as well.

B2B Marketing

The term Business-to-Business (B2B) refers to the commerce between organizations. It differs from Business-to-Consumer (B2C) in the fact that, in the latter, the goods and services are consumed personally by the person who buys them, whereas, in B2B, the products are not consumed by the buyer (Fill & Fill 2005). B2B commerce has existed since organizations were developed which implies that B2B marketing has existed since then. Nevertheless, the study of B2B marketing only began in the 19th century, and most of the contributions to the study of it have been done in recent decades. (Hadjikhani & LaPlaca 2013)

A key characteristic of B2B marketing is the importance of relationships. For B2B companies, the development and maintenance of relationships is a core element in the companies' strategy. In this matter, the success of the organization highly depends on the development of the relationships with the customers. (Fill & Fill 2005) One of the main challenges recognized by Wiersema (2013) in today's B2B environment is the extraction and utilization of

market and customer knowledge. To develop and strengthen the relationships with customers, companies need to understand what customers are looking for, in what stage of the cycle they are, and how to approach them in the right way (Ibid 2013).

B2B markets are generally characterized by having a smaller audience compared to B2C. Also, in most of the cases in B2C markets, the relationships between the company and the consumer are temporary and not so close, whereas in the case of B2B, relationships with customers demand to be closer and their duration is longer. (Fill & Fill 2005) Since the buying process can take several years and a number of resources involved in the transaction can be higher than in B2C, the seller must establish a trustful and more direct type of relationship with the customer. This requires more often face-to-face (F2F) meetings, invitations to events, webinars, company visits, etcetera. Therefore, the role of marketing in B2B companies is more strategic than operational, and technology plays a significant role by enabling B2B marketers to focus more on designing strategies to build long-lasting relationships and deviate their attention from the more operational part of their tasks. (Ibid 2005)

Customer Relationship Management (CRM)

The term Customer Relationship Management (CRM) has been used since early 1990's (Buttle & Maklan 2015). Regarding its definition, there are three main views. On one side, there is the technological view which defines CRM as a technology that facilitates the contact between employees and customers (Peelen 2005). In this sense, CRM consist of software applications to support customer service, marketing, and sales departments (Buttle & Maklan 2015). On the other side, another view that takes a more managerial perspective defines CRM as the process of identifying customers' needs and satisfying those needs in the best possible way to develop long-term relationships that bring benefits to both companies and customers (Mohr et al. 2010; Peelen 2005). In this last-mentioned view, technology does not necessarily play a significant role in the process of building long-lasting relationships with customers (Buttle & Maklan 2015).

In the middle of the above-mentioned views, the third view defines CRM as a process that has both managerial and technological elements. In this sense, CRM is defined as "the core business strategy that integrates internal processes and functions, and external networks, to

create and deliver value to targeted customers at a profit. It is grounded on high-quality customer-related data and enabled by information technology" (Buttle & Maklan 2015, 16).

This last definition is the one adopted for this study. To build long-term relationships, companies require developing a strategy to coordinate their internal processes to deliver high value to the customers. However, to deliver high value, companies need the support of technology to facilitate the process of recognizing and satisfying customers' needs.

Sales and Marketing funnel

The sales and marketing funnel includes and explains the stages in the customer acquisition process. This funnel allows companies to identify in which stage the person is in the buying process, and it shows the threshold between marketing and sales actions. The definition of the sales and marketing funnel employed in this study is adapted from the frameworks developed by HubSpot (2017a) and Järvinen and Taiminen (2016). Figure 3 summarizes this study's sales and marketing funnel.

Visitor	Person who shows interest but has not been identified.
Lead / Prospect	Identified visitor. Visitor who left his contact information.
MQL	Lead that is a good fit and/or has shown interest.
SQL	Lead approved by marketing and ready to be contacted.
Opportunity	Contacted lead.
Customer	Lead who made a purchase.
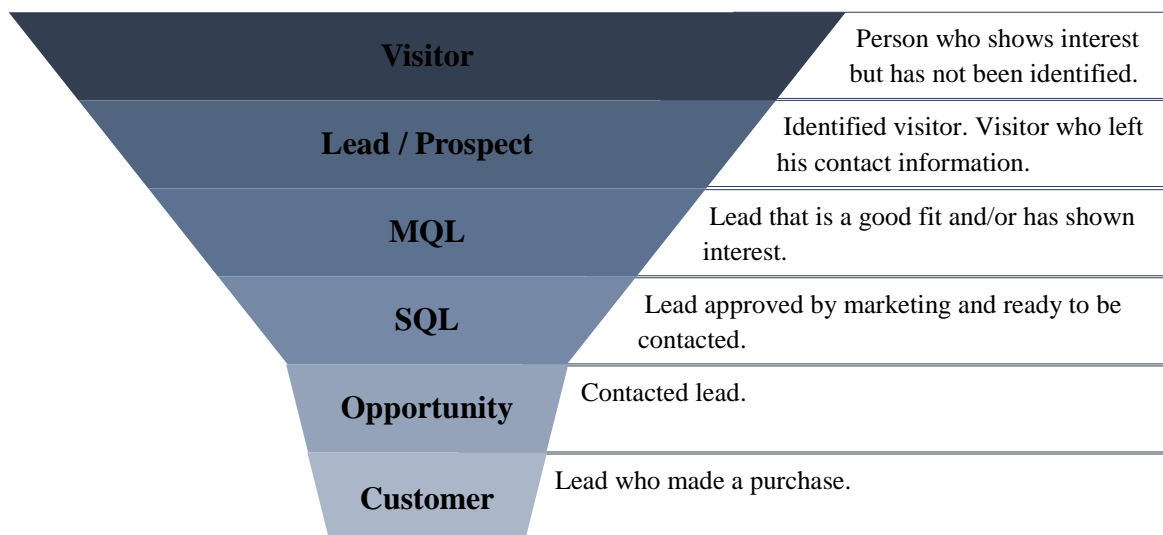
Figure 3 Sales and marketing funnel (adapted from HubSpot 2017a; Järvinen & Taiminen 2016).

The funnel begins with visitors. *Visitors* are the people who show some interest towards the company in one or more of its channels. They are the people who visit the website or read a

blog post for example. They differ from the leads in the fact that they do not provide their contact information, thus, they cannot be identified. In this sense, *leads,* also called *prospects* in this study*,* are the visitors who left their contact information. They leave their contact information by filling in a form on the website, subscribing to the newsletters, or by contacting directly the company among others. (HubSpot 2017a; Järvinen & Taiminen 2016)

Not all the leads that enter the funnel are *Marketing Qualified Leads* (MQL). For a lead to become a MQL, it needs to be a good fit and/or to show interest. Leads that are a good fit but do not show interest require more nurturing from marketing to get their attention (HubSpot 2017a). Nurturing is the process of attracting, educating, and engaging leads with relevant content in the right time (Järvinen & Taiminen 2016). On the other hand, for leads that show interest but are not a good fit, the next step with those will depend on the company's strategy.

Once the lead is approved by marketing to continue in the process, it becomes a *Sales Qualified Lead* (SQL). SQLs are automatically transferred to the CRM system and they are assigned to the suitable sales team depending on the region where they are located or the business unit (Järvinen & Taiminen 2016). If the lead is contacted, it becomes an *opportunity*, and if the deal is closed, the opportunity becomes a *customer*. (Ibid 2016) In cases where the SQL cannot be reached by the sales representative or it is not the right moment for buying, the lead can be moved to another stage to further nurturing, or depending on the reason why it was moved, it can exit the funnel.

1.5.   Delimitations

This study focuses on Finnish B2B companies that are currently using a marketing automation tool. Since the current literature in marketing automation is not extensive, this research takes a broader perspective for selecting the companies. This means that it does not focus on companies of an industry in particular or a specific size. The goal of this is to identify similarities and differences between those to provide directions for future research.

The research also takes a broader position to analyzing the process of marketing automation adoption. Even though in the literature there are numerous factors that affect the adoption of

technologies, not all of them are covered in this study. This research analyzes in the empirical part, the factors defined in the framework of the study. In terms of the benefits and challenges of marketing automation adoption, the current research takes the perspective of the company to define and analyze those. Although customers can benefit or experience challenges when companies adopt marketing automation, this study does not include the customers' point of view. Also, this study recognizes that the vendors of marketing automation play a significant role in the adoption process, however, their perspective is not included either in the empirical part.

Lastly, this research assumes a strategic perspective on marketing automation, therefore, the analysis of the operational side is not included. In this sense, the sample is selected according to their strategic position in the marketing department. This means that not necessarily the person who was interviewed is the responsible for using the system. In addition, the technical specifications and the technical challenges of each platform are not covered either.

1.6.   Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research method. Since the literature on marketing automation is in a nascent stage, this method supports the goals of this study by enabling to build and test theory (Creswell 2014; Shah & Corley 2006). Furthermore, a multiple-case study is the research strategy used. The aim of selecting this strategy is to identify similarities and differences in the adoption process of marketing automation and to reduce the risk of making conclusions based on one single case study.

The research context is Finnish B2B companies that have already adopted a marketing automation platform. In Finland, as an innovation leader country (European Commission 2017), there is an increasing attention on marketing technologies (Syvänen 2017). In the last years, the number of companies offering marketing technologies has grown considerably which demonstrates the relevance of analyzing the adoption of marketing technologies in the Finnish context.

The primary data of this study are collected from semi-structured interviews and analyzed with the support of NVivo, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software. The semi-

structured interviews are designed following specific themes but the questions are adapted to each case. This method is selected as it gives flexibility and allows to get in-depth insights on a topic (Creswell 2014). Moreover, the interviewees are selected following the elite interviewing technique in which the participants that know the most about a topic are chosen (Tansey 2007). In this case, the participants are expected to have good knowledge on marketing automation, and since this research assumed a strategic perspective on the topic, they are supposed to occupy a strategic position in the marketing department.

1.7.   Structure of the Study

This section presents the structure of this study. The paper is broadly divided into two sections, the theoretical and the empirical part. Each part is divided into chapters and the paper has in total five chapters. Figure 4 shows how this study is divided.
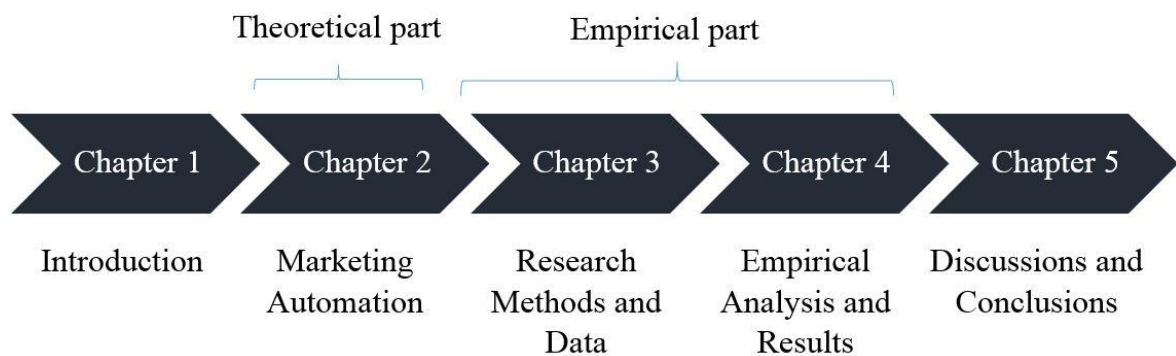
Figure 4 Structure of the study.

The first chapter introduces the topic and presents the research questions and the literature review. Furthermore, it presents the theoretical background and provides a definition of the main concepts included in the paper. This chapter clarifies as well, the delimitations and the research methodology used in the study.

The second chapter constitutes the theoretical part. It focuses on explaining the existing literature on technology innovation adoption and marketing automation. This chapter presents important concepts around the topic of marketing automation and analyzes and applies the literature on technology innovation adoption to explain how companies adopt marketing au-

tomation. Moreover, the second chapter covers the benefits and challenges of adopting marketing automation. In the last part of the chapter, based on the literature, the framework of the study is presented.

Chapters three and four form the empirical part. Chapter three provides an overview of how the research was done and includes a description of the research method, the context of the research, data collection method, and data analysis. In chapter four, the case companies are introduced and the findings are presented.

In the last chapter, chapter five, the findings are summarized. Additionally, the theoretical, and managerial implications of the research are covered in this chapter as well. Lastly, this chapter explains the limitations of the study and provides directions for future research.

2. MARKETING AUTOMATION

The marketing environment is now more complex than ever. With fast changes in customer behavior and preferences, the emergence of new distribution channels, lower product life-cycles, and the increasing importance of sustainability are making more challenging market-ers' job. In addition to this, marketers are driven now by high internal demands for account-ability and fewer resources to perform the tasks, mainly in terms of staff (Biegel 2009). Because of these internal and external changes, marketers are forced to relying more on marketing technologies to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of their departments and being able to perform the tasks and achieve their goals.

Marketing technologies give more visibility and control to marketers, and marketing auto-mation is one of those technologies. As it was mentioned in the literature review, marketing automation has existed for a while, however, it only started to gain relevance in the last decade when major software companies began to include marketing automation to their product portfolio (Lamont 2015). Marketing automation origins are in email marketing (Del Rowe 2016) but its features have expanded to integrate features of other products such as inbound and outbound marketing platforms, content creation, list management (Dworkin 2016), and more recently added, Content Management Systems (CMS) (Del Rowe 2016).

People are living in a hyper-digital world where they are always connected and that is why marketing automation has become an essential tool for business development (Estrada 2015). According to Putkinen (2014), the biggest driver of the increasing adoption of mar-keting automation is the changes in customers' buying behavior. Customers are demanding more personalized content, and the sales dynamic has changed from the typical salesperson giving the information to the prospect to a more active consumer who looks for the infor-mation by himself before getting in touch with the salesperson. (Putkinen 2014)

Another driver is the availability of data. Currently, there is more updated and real-time data on customers' recent activity (Del Rowe 2016), and marketing and sales departments need to design strategies according to those data. Marketing automation allows companies to col-lect great amounts of data from the distinct touchpoints and provides the tools for analyzing it. Therefore, companies see in marketing automation adoption the opportunity to satisfy

those data needs. (Grossberg 2016; Kumar 2011)

2.1. Definition

The concept of marketing automation has two main perspectives, the operational and the strategic one. In terms of the operational perspective, authors like Buttle and Maklan (2015) consider marketing automation a technology that is applied to performing marketing processes. Following this perspective, marketing automation defined by Marketo (2015, 4) is a "technology that allows companies to streamline, automate, and measure marketing tasks and workflows to increase operational efficiency and grow revenue faster".

On the other hand, other authors with a more strategic perspective (e.g. Del Rowe 2016; Ginty et. al 2012) define marketing automation as a core element that supports companies' strategies. In this sense, marketing automation is not considered only a software to automate tasks, but it is seen more as a strategic resource for managing customer relationships. In this respect, Del Rowe (2016) states that marketing automation has moved from being merely an email management system to become a central element for building and maintaining long-term relationships with customers.

Table 1 summarizes the different definitions of marketing automation.

Table 1 Views on marketing automation definition.

Marketing Automation Definition		
View	**Definition**	**Authors**
Operational	Marketing automation as a software supporting operational marketing.	e.g. Buttle and Maklan (2015); Marketo (2015).
Strategic	Marketing automation as a core element for managing customer relationships.	e.g. Del Rowe (2016); Ginty et. al (2012); Järvinen and Taiminen (2016).

This paper assumes the last position for developing the remaining theory on marketing automation. In this regard, marketing automation is assumed to combine both, methodology and technology, as it involves a software platform to automate marketing processes to be able to track, engage, and manage prospects and customers along their buying journeys

(Dworkin 2016; Ginty et. al 2012; Järvinen & Taiminen 2016; Keens & Barker 2009). The technology behind marketing automation does contribute to the development of marketing operations but its use is not limited to this. Marketing automation combines the necessary tools to manage the interaction and communications between the companies and their prospects and customers. By using marketing automation, marketers can see who is engaging, how, when, where, and why as the software offers real-time data from the different touchpoints. (Estrada 2015) A more strategic perspective allows to understand the other benefits that can be achieved with marketing automation besides the benefit of improving operational efficiency.

Even though this paper assumes the strategic perspective to develop the theory, since there are two views on the definition of marketing automation, this study explores how practitioners perceive it. The goal is to uncover if the position assumed in this study matches the perspective of people who are involved with the tool.

2.1.1. Features

Some of the processes that can be automated with marketing automation include planning and budgeting campaigns, segmenting and managing contact databases, lead management, and analysis of reports (Keens & Barker 2009). Marketing automation features vary depending on the vendor, nevertheless, most of the offers include some common basic features which can be divided into groups depending on the function they support. Buttle and Maklan (2015) divide the features into three categories; (1) marketing campaigns, (2) digital and online marketing, and (3) strategic marketing management. On the other side, Marketo (2013) classifies the features in seven groups, (1) email marketing, (2) lead management, (3) lead generation, (4) social marketing, (5) analytics, (6) resource management, and (7) infrastructure.

In this study, based on Buttle and Maklan (2015) and Marketo's (2013) classification, the features are divided into five groups. The first group contains the features that support email marketing. The second group includes the ones that support campaign management. The third group has the features for digital content and social media marketing. The fourth group comprises the ones for lead management. Lastly, the fifth group encompasses the features

for marketing analytics. Figure 5 illustrates marketing automation features according to the function that they support.
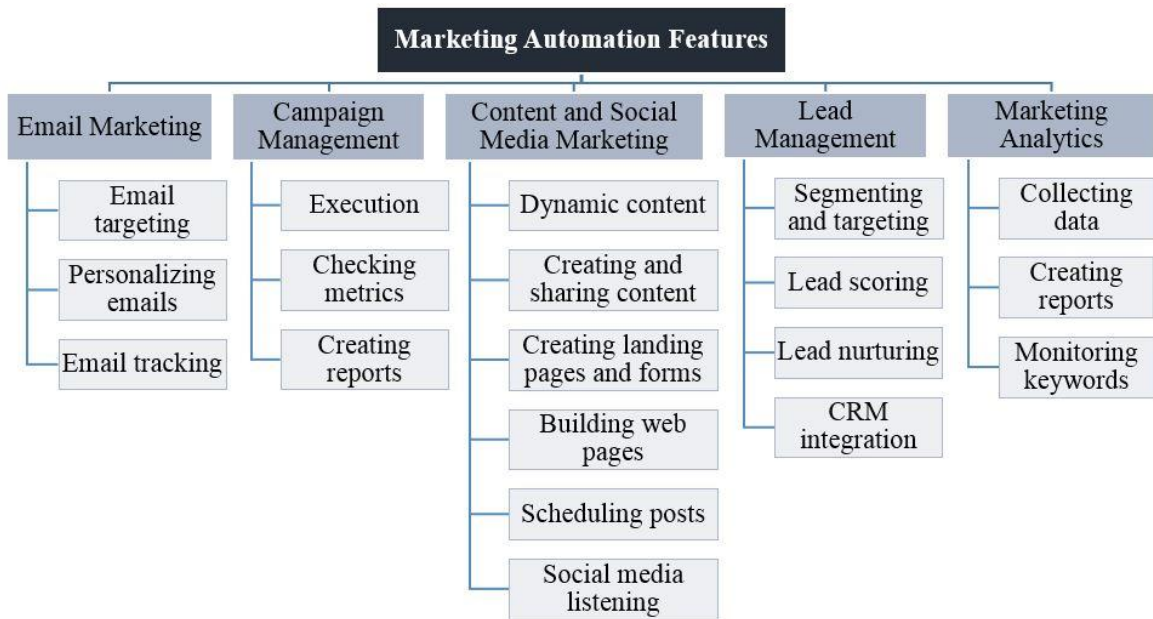
Figure 5 Marketing automation features.

Email marketing

Email marketing, when done delivering useful content and with the permission of the recipient, is one of the most efficient instruments in online marketing (Mogos & Acatrinei 2015). This marketing strategy allows companies to reach out prospects and customers to keep them informed and connected (Durga 2015). According to Hartemo (2016), email marketing empowers consumers as it makes them active in the communication. Email marketing besides being a useful tool in the communication process, it also helps to drive traffic to a website and motivates customers to acquire products (Mogos & Acatrinei 2015; Reimers et al. 2016).

The content of the email should be personalized according to the recipient's requirements and behaviors (Mogos & Acatrinei 2015). Marketing automation allows to design and to send personalized email marketing campaigns. As marketing automation software collects data from the multiple touchpoints, the content of the email can be designed according to the data collected by the software. (Woods 2009) For example, it allows to include in the email, the topics readers are most interested in (Carrigan 2006), and the email can be sent in real-

time or in a specific range of time – triggered emails (Heimbach et al. 2015).

In addition to those features, marketing automation also supports email marketing by enabling an email tracking feature. With this feature is possible to know when a person opens an email, unsubscribes from the email list, downloads an attachment or clicks a link within the email. (Todor 2016) Vendors like Marketo, Pardot, and Eloqua include other features related to email-tracking such as bounce management and spam checking which helps to know if the email that will be sent can go to the spam inbox (Marketo 2013; Oracle, 2016; Pardot 2016).

Campaign management

One of the most important changes in marketing is the increasing interest towards data-driven campaigns (Del Rowe 2016). Campaign management consists of applying data-driven strategies to send customized communications to customers and leads. They are used to raise awareness, influence behaviors such as buying or visiting a website. (Buttle & Maklan 2015)

Campaign management is a process of five steps – (1) planning, (2) executing, (3) analyzing, (4) checking the main metrics, and (5) creating reports (Todor 2016). Planning consists of defining the objectives, target group, budget, and the type of campaign. Once this step is completed, the campaign is executed. After its released, the process of the campaign is evaluated to see if the objectives of the campaign were met. Lastly, the main metrics are checked and reports are created to measure the performance of the campaign. (Ibid 2016)

Marketing automation supports the second, fourth, and fifth steps in Todor's (2016) process. This tool facilitates the use of customer-related data for sending targeted communications (Buttle & Maklan 2015). Also, it allows marketers to do not only email campaigns but also social and mobile campaigns (Durga 2015). With marketing automation, companies can track the behavior of the leads and customers to later create follow up campaigns based on their behavior (Grossberg 2016). In addition, with this tool, companies can measure the results of their campaigns (Mohr et al. 2010), especially in terms of Return on Investment (ROI) (Lamont 2015).

Digital content and social media marketing

Content marketing is a useful inbound marketing technique for companies aiming to achieve and maintain brand loyalty. Digital content marketing consists of creating, distributing and sharing valuable digital content to engage customers, and increase awareness and sales. (Holliman & Rowley 2014) Digital content can be defined as the blogs, images, videos, and other premium content assets such as webinars and eBooks uploaded to a website or an app (Handley & Chapman 2011; Wainwright 2015). For this content to be valuable, it needs to be compelling, useful and delivered in an appropriate time to the right audience (Holliman & Rowley 2014). In addition, valuable content tells the brand's story to create an emotional connection with the target audience to engage them with what the company does (Wuebben 2012).

Marketing automation supports digital content marketing by allowing users to create landing pages for campaigns, webinars or other activities, and to build forms in those landing pages for converting visitors. With marketing automation, landing pages and emails can have dynamic content which means that the content is customized according to the information gathered on a lead or customer. (Lamont 2015; Todor 2016) Additionally, with marketing automation, forms can have a progressive filling. (Todor 2016) The progressive filling consists of recognizing the visitor and asking different questions every time the visitor fills in a form to collect more information. (Ibid 2016). All the information provided by the user is collected and processed by the system depending on the rules given to it (Järvinen & Taiminen 2016).

Another feature marketing automation can provide in terms of digital content marketing is publishing blogs and building web pages. This last feature depends highly on the vendor. For example, HubSpot has integrated a CMS which allows users to build web pages, personalize the content for the web pages depending on the visitor, and create blog posts and publish them (HubSpot 2017b).

Digital content can be created and distributed through social media channels (Pulizzi 2012). In social media, content can be shared in form of weblogs, videos, rating, social bookmarking, wikis, and podcasts (Kim & Ko 2012). The content created for social media should engage people in the conversation and be authentic instead of only delivering a one-direction

message (Weinberg & Pehlivan 2011). By distributing content in social media, companies create brand awareness, stimulate sales by influencing the purchase decision, improve brand image, reduce marketing costs, and influence referrals and advocacy (Felix et al. 2017; Odden 2012). As it was mentioned by Järvinen et al. (2012), social media enhances other digital media as opposed to replacing them.

In terms of social media marketing, marketing automation can be used for adding intelligent share buttons to campaigns and content such as blog posts or emails, scheduling automated posts to the different social accounts, and monitor what happens in the social media channels. More advanced software such as Eloqua, HubSpot, and Marketo include the option of tracking what people do or say in social media and use that information for segmenting or lead scoring (HubSpot 2017c; Marketo 2013; Oracle 2016).

Lead management

Lead management is a marketing process that focuses on acquiring new leads, evaluating, and nurturing them to continue engaging them. If the leads meet the requirements, they are moved to the sales funnel (Marketo 2017). For the function of lead management, marketing automation features include segmentation, lead scoring, lead nurturing, and CRM integration.

Segmentation and targeting features in marketing automation allow sorting, managing, nurturing, and engaging leads and contacts as a group (Dworkin 2016). Contacts include current customers or other stakeholders such as partners and suppliers. With these features, marketers can micro-segment the database with filters including profile and behavioral information to target the right list of leads or contacts (Buttle & Maklan 2015).

Attempting to nurture and engage all the leads that come to the marketing funnel can be expensive. Companies look for finding out which leads have the biggest chance to turn into customers and be profitable. (Aquino 2012) Lead scoring is a practice for ranking the leads according to their profile and behavior (Järvinen & Taiminen 2016). According to Grossberg (2016), there are three characteristics of a "best customer", fit, engagement, and intent. "Fit" refers to how much the profile of a lead is suitable to what the company is looking for. On

the other hand, "Engagement" and "intent" relate more to the lead's behavior, in other words, the interactions the lead has with the company and the key actions that show a buying intention.

Lead scoring consists of finding those "best customers" by giving the leads a score to their demographic information and behavior (Aquino 2012). Demographic information, in the case of B2B companies, includes for example number of employees, type of industry, and sales revenue among others. In the case of behavioral information, leads are ranked depending on their actions in social media, on the website – such as downloading a white-paper, watching a video, pages visited, etcetera – or their behavior once they receive an email from the company. Scores will depend on the company's goals, and they can be positive or negative depending on what type of lead the company pursuits. (Lamont 2015; Marketo 2010)

With a marketing automation software, companies can build a lead scoring model. In this model, each company defines the scores that will be given to the profile and behavior of a lead and the threshold between a Marketing Qualified Lead (MQL) and a Sales Qualified Lead (SQL). Once a lead reaches the score to cross the threshold, it turns into a SQL, and then it is the sales team job to continue moving that lead through the sales funnel to convert it into a customer. If a lead does not reach the necessary score to cross the threshold, the marketing department will continue its nurturing process. (Eloqua 2010; Marketo 2010; Woods 2009)

Lead nurturing is the relationship-build process of sending highly relevant, valuable, and branded content to a lead until this becomes ready to be moved to the sales funnel (Järvinen & Taiminen 2016; Todor 2016). According to Sweezey (2014), the difference between traditional email marketing and nurturing email marketing lies in the fact that the first one is mass-delivered and standardized, while the latter is personalized and one-to-one. In this sense, marketing automation allows companies to identify which leads are requiring further nurturing and enables marketers to develop and distribute personalized nurturing campaigns to collect more information on the lead.

Another feature of marketing automation is enabling the integration with other CRM software. In most of the cases, the integration is done with a sales force automation software.

Dworkin (2016) states that this integration is crucial to getting the entire value from adopting marketing automation. When leads are turned into a SQL and the systems are integrated, sales personnel can see and analyze all the available data of a lead before this was moved to them by marketing. Sales personnel can use these data as part of their strategy when contacting a lead. Marketers will have more visibility on the effectiveness of their strategies and will be able to track leads' progress after they are moved to sales in the dashboard. In this regard, as discussed by Ginty et al. (2012), CRM integration is critical to bringing marketing and sales departments to work together.

Marketing analytics

Big amounts of data on customers' feelings, behaviors and interactions with companies are daily generated from the different channels. Data play an important role for marketers that aim to build and strengthen relationships with customers, automate marketing processes, and personalize the product offerings. Marketing analytics refers to the collection, management, and analysis of data from multiple channels to get insights of marketing performance and optimize companies' ROI. (Wedel & Kannan 2016) According to Germann et al. (2013), the use of marketing analytics can lead to favorable performance outcomes and even can be a source of competitive advantage.

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is a digital marketing strategy that consists of improving a website's ranking in search engines. With marketing automation, marketers can monitor and track the ranking of keywords on search engines and benchmark the performance of those against competitors (Buttle & Maklan 2015).

In addition to collecting data on the keywords, marketing automation also compiles data from the website, emails, and campaigns. In terms of website analytics, marketing automation tracks the behavior of visitors via click-stream data (Järvinen et al. 2012). For instance, it provides reports on how much time visitors spend on the website, which pages they visit, how often they come back, bounce rates, etcetera. On the other hand, regarding emails, marketing automation creates reports on opening rates, click-through rates, and the number of unsubscribed people among others. (Buttle & Maklan 2015) In terms of campaigns, market-

ing automation provides data of the different campaigns developed by marketers which allows them to understand how effective their campaigns were (Lamont 2015).

As it was mentioned before, marketing automation CRM integration feature enables marketers to track leads' progress once they enter the sales funnel. With marketing automation, marketers can get data on, for example, the number of leads that turn into customers, the amount of time they took to convert, the number of leads on each stage among others. (Buttle & Maklan 2015)

Finally, marketing automation collects data as well from the different social media platforms. Since the adoption of social media applications has changed the way people communicate, collaborate, and consume information (Stieglitz et al. 2014), it is becoming more relevant for companies, including also B2B companies, to have a presence and stay active in social media. Marketing automation software collects data on what is happening in the company's social media channels. In this regard, it compiles information on who shares the content, the number of impressions and engagements and so on (Buttle & Maklan 2015).

2.2. Adoption Process

The diffusion of innovations theory by Everett Rogers (2003) and the Technology-to-Performance Chain (TPC) model developed by Goodhue and Thompson (1995) are used as a basis for developing the framework for this study. Rogers' theory has been widely used in the academic literature to measure the adoption of different innovations in both B2C and B2B. It provides valuable information on the attributes that affect innovations and the overall innovation-decision process. On the other hand, the TPC model which has been previously used to analyze CRM adoption (e.g. Gu et al. 2015), combines the Task-Technology Fit (TTF) model by Goodhue (1995) with theories on attitudes and behaviors that predict the utilization of information systems (Goodhue & Thompson 1995). In other words, the TPC model provides insights on how the fit between the technologies and tasks, and the behaviors and attitudes of individuals affect the impact of a technology. In addition to these models, literature concerning innovation adoption and CRM adoption is used to complement the theory.

According to the diffusion of innovations theory, the adoption of an innovation goes through different stages (Rogers 2003). Additionally, other authors (e.g. Alsaad et al. 2017; Iacovou et al. 1995) suggest that the adoption process of innovations is influenced by several factors which affect the adoption decision. Based on those findings, the following part of the research explains the stages of adoption of an innovation and the factors influencing the adoption.

2.2.1. Stages of innovation adoption

In the theory developed by Rogers (2003) on the diffusion of innovations, the adoption of an innovation in a company goes through a process of five steps – (1) Knowledge, (2) persuasion, (3) decision, (4) implementation, and (5) confirmation. According to this theory, the first step, *knowledge,* is when an individual recognizes the existence of an innovation and gets some information about it. The second step, *persuasion*, is when the individual forms an attitude towards the innovation which can be favorable or not. Depending on the individual's attitude, he makes the *decision* to adopt or reject the innovation. If the decision is positive, the process continues and the fourth step, *implementation,* is when the individual starts to use the innovation. Once the innovation is in place and has been used, the individual looks to *confirm* the decision that he made before. If the individual finds out negative messages or perceptions on the innovation, he may opt to reverse the decision. (Rogers 2003)

Damanpour (1991) groups Rogers' steps into two stages – (1) initiation and (2) implementation. According to Damanpour (1991), the *initiation* stage comprises all the activities related to identifying the need, searching for information about the innovation, forming an attitude towards it, and making the adoption decision. If the decision is to adopt it, the *implementation* stage considers the initial utilization of the innovation and the continual use of it (Damanpour 1991). In this sense, the Damanpour's initiation stage consists of the first three steps of Rogers' theory – knowledge, persuasion, and decision – and the implementation stage includes the other two ones – implementation and confirmation.

Following the proposed literature on the innovation-decision process, for this study, the adoption of an innovation process is divided into three stages. The first stage is called *initiation* and is defined as suggested by Damanpour (1991). The second stage which is called

implementation by Damanpour (1991), in this study, is divided into two, *implementation* and *post-implementation*. According to Rogers (2003) and Damanpour (1991), the implementation stage begins after the decision is made and companies begin using the innovation. Nevertheless, this study considers that from the moment the decision is made until the moment the company uses for the first time the innovation, there is an additional stage. This additional stage which is called implementation but is defined differently includes the activities related to the installation and integration with other systems. On the other hand, the post-implementation stage is when the company uses for the first time the innovation. Figure 6 summarizes the stages of this study.
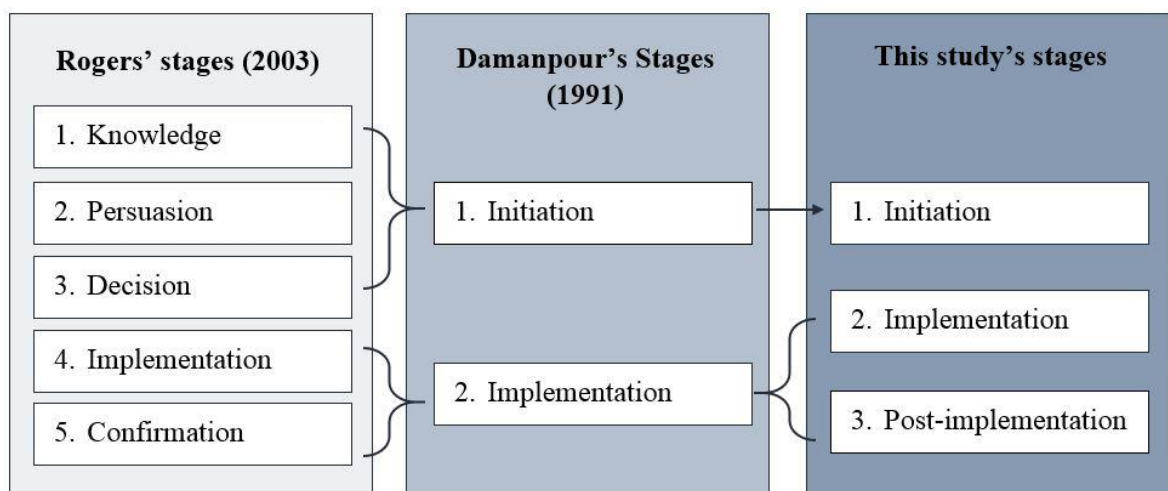
Figure 6 Stages of innovation adoption.

Following the arguments presented above, in this study, the initiation stage which is consistent to Damanpour's (1991) first stage, is when a company recognizes the existence of the innovation and searches for information about it. Depending on the information found, the company makes the adoption decision (Damanpour 1991). If the decision is to continue, then the company moves to the implementation stage. Since marketing automation requires installation and integration with other systems (Dworkin 2016), this stage covers those activities. Once the innovation is implemented and the companies start using it, the last stage, *post-implementation* begins. This final stage includes the activities after the innovation is used for the first time.

2.2.2.　　　Factors influencing the adoption decision

There are different factors affecting the adoption of a technology innovation. The factors can be related to the organization, to the external environment or to the technology itself. Kim and Galliers (2004) classified the Internet system diffusion factors into four categories, namely, internal organization factors, internal systems factors, external market factors, and external technical factors. They grouped factors such as financial resources, top management support, organizational culture, and perceived ease of use into the *internal organization factors*. For the *internal systems factors* category, they included aspects like the real value of the system, its quality, infrastructure, and everything related to the system. On the other side, in terms of the external categories, for the *market factors* group, they comprised factors related to the competition, customers, and partnerships. While for the *external technical factors*, aspects related to the vendor and external Information and Communication Technology (ICT) related factors were analyzed.

Del Aguila-Obra and Padilla-Meléndez (2006) separated the technological categories mentioned above and clustered the factors into three groups – (1) organizational factors, (2) external factors, and (3) technological factors. Based on this last classification, the factors in this research are grouped following the same logic. Therefore, the factors are divided into internal, external, and technological factors.

Internal factors

In terms of the internal factors, according to Iacovou et al. (1995), organizational readiness influence the adoption and integration of Electronic Data Interchange (EDI) in small firms. Organizational readiness relates to the availability of financial resources and technical knowledge to support the adoption, installation, integration, and usage of the technology (Alsaad et al. 2017; Iacovou et al. 1995). Iacovou et al. (1995), in their research, found that the connection between organizational readiness and the adoption of EDI is unclear. Other studies (e.g. Alsaad et al. 2017) supported this finding by concluding that this factor was not significant for the adoption. Even though the evidence suggests organizational readiness is not a condition to adopt an innovation, this factor is explored further in this research. Iacovou et al. (1995) stated that organizational readiness may affect the integration, which in turns

affects the impact of adopting a technology. Since integrating marketing automation with other systems is crucial for its proper functioning (Dworkin 2016), the availability of resources and knowledge may affect the integration level, and therefore the impact of it may be influenced by this factor.

Besides the organizational readiness factor mentioned by Iacovou et al. (1995), Alsaad et al. (2017) add the support from the managers as another factor influencing the adoption. Management support fosters the ability of a company to gain knowledge and understanding of new technology developments, and the ability to respond to those developments (Srinivasan et al. 2002). It guarantees the sufficient allocation of resources to adopt new technologies (Alsaad et al. 2017). Since different studies demonstrate the importance of management support for technology adoption (e.g. Alshawi et al. 2011; Del Aguila-Obra & Padilla-Meléndez 2006; Kim & Pae 2014; Srinivasan et al. 2002), and Nguyen and Waring (2013) results on their study prove the fact that this factor affects the company's perception of CRM systems, the management support factor is also included in the framework of this study.

External factors

External pressure has been reported to be one of the factors that influence the most the adoption of innovations (Iacovou et al. 1995). Several studies (e.g. Del Aguila-Obra & Padilla-Meléndez 2006; Srinivasan et al. 2002; Alsaad et al. 2017; Alshawi et al. 2011) confirm this finding by arguing that the influence of stakeholders can determine whether to adopt or not certain innovation.

External pressure comes from two sources, competitive pressure and stakeholder pressure (Iacovou et al. 1995; Del Aguila-Obra & Padilla-Meléndez 2006). Companies that aim to remain competitive must deal with the pressure from competitors to respond and adapt fast to the changing environment. To do so, companies seek for adopting innovations that allow them to be agile when meeting customer demand. (Del Aguila-Obra & Padilla-Meléndez 2006; Alsaad et al. 2017) On the other hand, pressure can also come from the partners, customers, and suppliers (Del Aguila-Obra & Padilla-Meléndez 2006). Partners can use three strategies to exercise pressure on a company. They can recommend the company to adopt the innovation, they can give a promise if the company adopts the innovation, or they can

threaten the company if the company does not adopt the innovation. (Iacovou et al. 1995)

As the literature suggests that pressure from competition and pressure from other stakeholders influence the adoption of an innovation, both factors are included in this research and they constitute the external factors in the framework of this study.

Technological factors

The technological factors are analyzed based on the Technology-to-Performance Chain (TPC) model developed by Goodhue and Thompson (1995). In this model, the authors complemented Goodhue's (1995) Task-Technology Fit (TTF) model, with theories on attitudes and behaviors that predict the utilization of information systems.

According to the TTF model, there should be a proper fit between the individual characteristics, the functionality of the technology, and the tasks required by the users (Goodhue 1995). Goodhue and Thompson (1995) later combined this model with theories on attitudes and behaviors arguing that technologies besides having a proper fit with the tasks, they must be utilized to provide a positive impact to performance, and user's beliefs and attitudes influence the intentions to utilize the technology (Goodhue & Thompson 1995). Figure 7 shows the correlation between the TTF model and the theories on attitudes and behaviors.
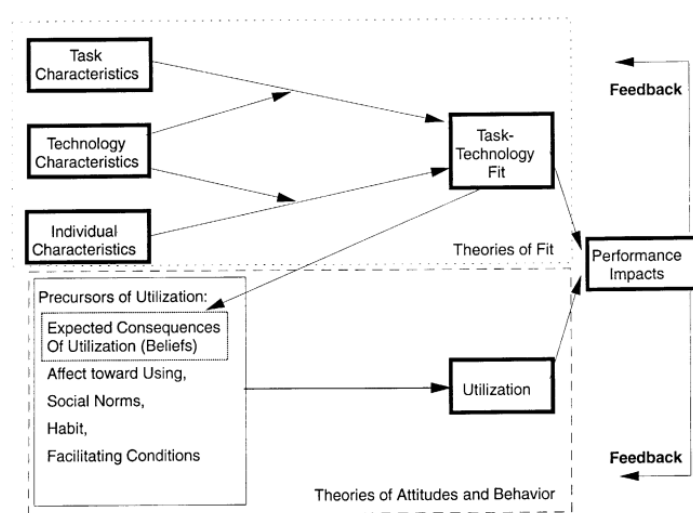
Figure 7 The Technology-to-Performance Chain (Goodhue & Thompson 1995, 217).

According to Goodhue and Thompson (1995), individuals perform tasks using different technologies to turn inputs into outputs. Marketers perform tasks such as sending emails,

building campaigns, delivering content, managing leads, and analyzing and reporting on marketing metrics. Following the TTF's logic, if marketing automation supports those tasks, the task-fit between the technology and the company may be high. However, as argued by Goodhue and Thompson (1995), when some of the tasks are not covered by the technology, this may reduce the task-fit. In this sense, this study assumes that a higher task-fit increases the likelihood of adopting marketing automation.

In the TPC model, Goodhue and Thompson (1995) show the link between the TTF and the precursors of utilization by arguing that "TTF should be one important determinant of whether systems are believed to be more useful, more important, or give more relative advantage" (Goodhue & Thompson 1995, 218). This study focuses on the relative advantage factor as it has been reported in numerous studies to be an aspect promoting innovation adoption (e.g. Alsaad et al. 2017; Iacovou et al. 1995). Rogers (2003, 15) defines relative advantage as the "degree to which an innovation is perceived as better than the idea it supersedes". Consequently, based on Rogers' definition, if marketing automation is perceived to be better than the other available options, there is a greater chance to adopt this technology instead of the other ones.

Since TTF and relative advantage were identified as two technological factors that affect the adoption of innovations, they are both included to analyze its influence in the adoption of marketing automation.

2.3. Challenges

The literature concerning the challenges evidenced that these vary depending on the stage of the adoption process. Therefore, marketing automation challenges are analyzed according to the stages defined above – initiation, implementation, and post-implementation. Challenges related to searching for information and making the adoption decision are described as challenges in the initiation stage. Challenges regarding the installation and integration of marketing automation are covered in the challenges in the implementation stage. Finally, challenges arising when the platform is used for the first time are explained as challenges in the post-implementation stage.

Figure 8 summarizes and classifies the challenges found in the literature for each of the stages.

Stages	Initiation →	Implementation →	Post-implementation →
Challenges	· Understanding marketing automation scope. · Change resistance. · Building the right processes. - Business case.	· Integration with other systems. · Data storage concerns. · Participation from IT department.	· Harnessing marketing automation potential. · Sales and marketing alignment. · Meeting the content creation requirements. · Engaging customers.

Figure 8 Marketing automation challenges.

2.3.1. Challenges in the initiation stage

During the initiation stage, one of the main challenges found in the literature is to understand the real scope of marketing automation. As stated by Wood (2015), marketing automation should be understood as a tool that enhances the effectiveness of other CRM systems but does not replace those. In addition, understanding that marketing automation is not a tool for decreasing the amount of work to be done can be a challenge (Putkinen 2014). In this regard, Del Rowe (2016) states that while improving workflows is important, the real value of marketing automation is to improve the relationship with customers.

Adopting a CRM system requires companies to move from a product orientation to become a more customer-oriented organization (Peelen 2005). As CRM is a strategy that affects the whole company, it requires changing how things were done before to make it work (Ibid 2005). As this transformation to become a customer-oriented company implies making changes, people may be resistant to those changes and this may difficult making the adoption decision. Therefore, change resistance is included as a challenge in this stage.

Another main challenge in the first stage is to build the right processes around marketing automation (Kumar 2011). The company should have a consistent business case with clear

objectives where the scope of the project is defined according to the capabilities of the company (Peelen 2005). Also, other processes such as the design of the communications, the strategy of content production, and the reporting strategy should be in place prior to the implementation (Putkinen 2014). As mentioned by Wood (2015), companies tend to see marketing automation as the solution to fix broken processes, but the reality is that automating bad processes does not improve marketing. Building a strong marketing function that combines strategic, creative, analytic, and execution capabilities prior to implementing any technology help to ensure the success of its adoption (Biegel 2009).

2.3.2. Challenges in the implementation stage

Since in the implementation stage, the installation of the platform and integration with other systems occur, challenges such as the compatibility with other systems and data storage concerns may be faced. According to Heimbach et al. (2015), data storage concerns need to be solved since sufficient storage capacity is important for collecting data on customers and leads.

To overcome these challenges, Keens and Barker (2009) suggest that is necessary to guarantee a close collaboration between IT and marketing professionals during the installation and integration. Consequently, challenges to reach agreements for the installation and integration may exist between IT and marketing.

2.3.3. Challenges in the post-implementation stage

After implementing marketing automation, a common challenge for companies may be to harness the potential of marketing automation. This, because some companies use marketing automation for only sending out emails (Aquino 2013; Del Rowe 2016; Lamont 2015). Thus, these companies may not use this technology to its full potential. For example, taking advantage of having a lead scoring feature has been proved to be difficult to achieve (Järvinen & Taiminen 2016) as it requires not only the alignment between sales and marketing but also, to be open to optimize and experiment with it (Dupré 2016).

As mentioned above, features such as the lead scoring require the alignment between sales

and marketing. However, the literature on this topic (e.g. Mohr et al. 2010) suggests that marketing and sales have worked for a long time in silos and most of the companies have not aligned these departments yet. Thus, as many companies struggle to achieve such alignment, and this alignment is necessary for harnessing marketing automation, aligning sales and marketing is included as a challenge.

Besides these challenges, the personalization of the content can become another challenge for companies after implementing marketing automation. (Järvinen & Taiminen 2016) As it was explained before, companies can send personalized content to their leads and customers when having a marketing automation software. However, when the company starts to learn more about its customers, it begins to identify smaller segments that require a more specific type of content. Because of this, the requirements for creating content increase to satisfy the needs of those specific segments. (Ibid 2016)

On the other hand, creating personalized content and delivering it is not sufficient to fostering customer dialogue (Järvinen & Taiminen 2016). Thus, being able to engage customers in the conversation constitutes another challenge in the post-implementation stage.

2.4. Impact

The impact of adopting a technology can result in direct and indirect benefits (Iacovou et al. 1995). Direct benefits, as the name suggests, are the benefits that are achieved from utilizing the technology to perform the tasks its designed for. Contrary to the direct benefits, the utilization of the technology is not enough to get the indirect benefits. To reach such benefits, companies need to coordinate different resources related to the technology as indirect benefits are derived from improving the relationships with stakeholders and business processes in general. Therefore, indirect benefits are more difficult to achieve than direct ones, but they are crucial for companies as they constitute a source of competitive advantage. (Ibid 1995)

This section covers the direct and indirect benefits from marketing automation adoption and Table 2 summarizes those benefits.

Table 2 Marketing automation direct and indirect benefits.

Marketing Automation Impact	
Direct Benefits	**Indirect Benefits**
• Saving time. • Integrating different marketing functions in one system. • Enabling the integration with other systems. • Integrating marketing and sales funnel. • Accessing information. • Customizing content. • Easier to segment.	• Enhancing marketing efficiency. • Improving marketing services. • Better visibility. • Improving marketing's accountability. • Marketing and sales alignment. • Enhancing the relationship with customers. • Higher retention rates and higher cross- and up-selling rates. • Improving responsiveness.

2.4.1. Direct benefits

In terms of the direct benefits, one of the most common benefits of adopting marketing automation is to save time from doing certain manual tasks. Since the software enables the automation of great part of the marketing processes, this allows marketers to save time in tasks that they would have to do manually if they would not have a marketing automation system (Putkinen 2014).

Furthermore, as it was covered before, marketing automation features support different marketing functions. Therefore, companies can benefit from having different features supporting several functions in one tool (Estrada 2015). Also, as marketing automation has the possibility to integrate with other systems (Lamont 2015), this can be considered as another benefit. In this regard, integrating marketing automation with a sales force automation software bring the benefit for both marketing and sales to track, analyze, and evaluate the journey of the leads. (Kumar 2011)

Besides the direct benefits mentioned above, marketing automation gives a fuller view of the customers and leads' psychographic and demographic information as it collects data from different channels and touchpoints (Grossberg 2016). This collection of data allows marketers to personalize the message based on the behavior and interests (Del Rowe 2016;

Heimbach et al. 2015). In addition, it also facilitates the process of segmenting and delivering the targeted content to a user base (Aquino 2012).

2.4.2.   Indirect benefits

One main indirect benefit from adopting marketing automation is to enhance marketing's efficiency. In this respect, Bucklin et al. (1998) argued that automating marketing decisions can increase productivity because of better decision-making, therefore, marketing automation improves the workflow processes of the marketing departments (Järvinen & Taiminen 2016; Keens & Barker 2009; Wood, 2015). Also, as marketers free up time when automating certain tasks, they can focus more on the strategic plans to improve the marketing services (Biegel 2009; Kumar 2011).

In addition to the benefits of enhancing marketing's efficiency and improving marketing services, as marketing automation collects data from different channels and can be integrated to other CRM systems, marketers get more visibility on the impact of their efforts. (Buttle & Maklan 2015; Kumar 2011) Better visibility allows to improve the things that are not working accordingly to the plans and allocate better the resources which result in improving marketing's accountability. (Ibid)

The fact of integrating marketing automation with a sales force automation software not only brings the benefit of integrating sales and marketing funnel. As marketing and sales departments get more visibility on the funnel, this can result in a better alignment between sales and marketing. (Järvinen & Taiminen 2016; Redding 2015; Kumar 2011)

Another indirect benefit related to the customers is to improve the relationship with them. By delivering relevant content to the customers and addressing their personal needs, customers are expected to show more involvement and focus more on the company's communication (Aquino 2012; Bucklin et al. 1998; Heimbach et al. 2015; Redding 2015). Because of improving the relationship with the customers, retention rates may increase, as well as, cross- and up-selling rates (Heimbach et al. 2015).

Lastly, companies can enhance their responsiveness (Buttle & Maklan 2015). As marketing

automation allows to have the campaigns up and running continuously without requiring human intervention, the responsiveness is enhanced from reacting in real time to opportunities that may appear at any point (Ibid 2015).

2.5.   Framework of the Study

The framework of this study explains the process of marketing automation adoption. As mentioned before, the process consists of three adoption stages – (1) initiation, (2) implementation, and (3) post-implementation. In the initiation stage, while companies search for information to make the adoption decision, internal, external, and technological factors may influence the process. Also in this stage, companies evaluate and select the marketing automation vendor. Once the decision is made and the vendor is selected, the installation of the platform and the integration with other systems occur in the implementation stage. Lastly, in the post-implementation stage, the companies start utilizing the platform. Since the impact of adopting a technology comes with the utilization, the last stage includes the direct and indirect benefits of marketing automation.

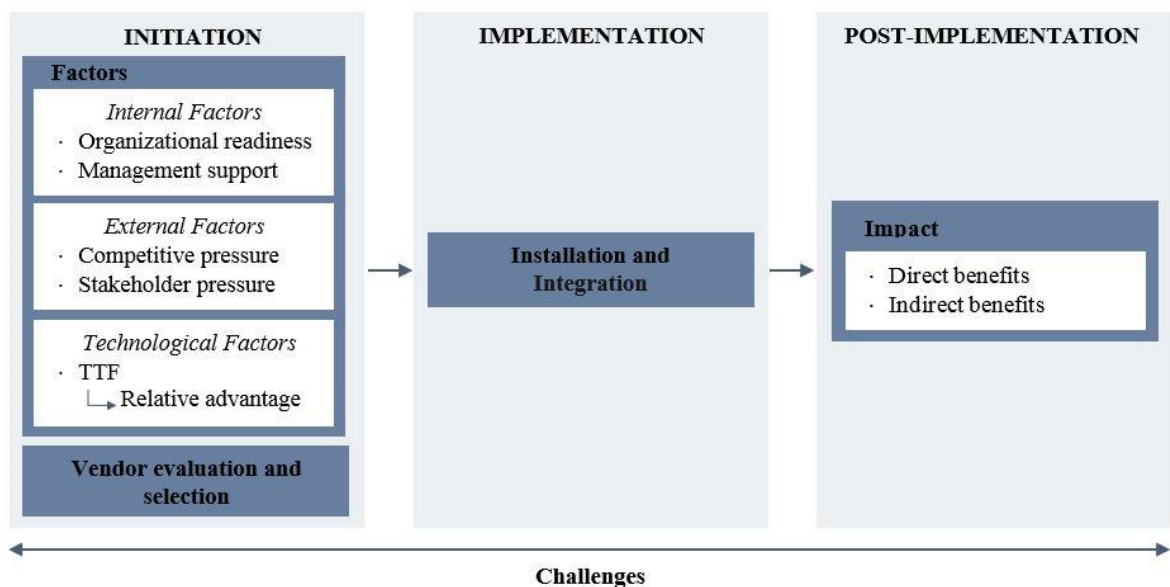Figure 9 summarizes the framework of this study.

Figure 9 Framework of this study.

As it was mentioned before, throughout the process of adopting marketing automation, companies may face different challenges, thus, the double-sided arrow in the figure indicates the presence of challenges along the process.

3. RESEARCH METHODS AND DATA

Qualitative research is useful for building and testing theory on topics where knowledge is limited (Creswell 2014; Shah & Corley 2006). The exploratory nature of this type of research makes possible the development of new conceptualizations and provides evidence of credibility for those conceptualizations in disciplines such as marketing (De Ruyter & Scholl, 1998; Kapoulas & Mitic 2012). Through qualitative research is possible to analyze how the environment impacts the business and consumer decisions (Andriopoulos & Slater 2013), and understand the complex processes around a topic (Shah & Corley 2006). The nature of this type of research is emergent which contributes to the development of new aspects during the study which were not considered initially (Creswell 2014).

Since the knowledge on marketing automation is in a nascent stage and there is not enough scientific research on it, a qualitative research was selected as it is useful at this point for building theory and creating an agenda for future research. The following section presents the research approach of this study which includes the research method, the context of the research, and the data collection method. It also covers how the data were collected, organized, and analyzed.

3.1.   Case Study

A case study is defined as "a research strategy which focuses on understanding the dynamics present within single settings" (Eisenhardt 1989, 534). Researchers use case studies to collect data with methods such as interviews, observations, questionnaires, and archives. This research strategy is particularly effective in situations where the knowledge on a topic is not extensive because it does not require previous literature or empirical evidence. (Eisenhardt 1989) The case study is useful for theory development as it helps to validate concepts and identify new variables and hypothesis (George & Bennett 2005). The case study strategy is applied to a single case or to multiple cases. The multiple-case strategy increases the objectivity of the research by considering different perspectives of a topic and finding similarities or variations between the cases (Yin 2009).

For this study, the research strategy chosen is the multiple-case study and the data were

collected through interviews. The decision to use multiple cases for this study had two reasons. The first reason was to identify commonalities and divergences in the adoption process of marketing automation. The second reason was to reduce the risk coming from drawing to conclusions based on one single perspective. The lack of literature and empirical evidence on marketing automation justify using case study to begin the process of theory-building which is one of the main purposes of this research.

3.2. Research Context

Finland is within the top five innovation leaders in the European Union (European Commission 2017) and is considered a country with high levels of innovation and adoption rates. Finland records high levels in cooperation and high levels of human resources in science and technology which indicate that Finnish environment promotes the adoption of innovations (Autant-Bernard et al. 2010).

The number of companies using marketing automation in Finland is difficult to find because of the contrasting data on the number of adopters. The main reason for the discrepancy in the number of adopters, as indicated by Brown (2013), is that people are likely to confuse email marketing solutions with marketing automation ones. For example, on one hand, in a study performed in 2013 by Ovum, a research and consulting company, the results indicated that in Western Europe, more than 80% of the companies have adopted marketing automation (Brown 2013) while, on the other hand, Templeman (2015) argued that by 2015 less than ten percent of companies have adopted this technology worldwide.

Although the number of Finnish companies using marketing automation or planning to adopt it is difficult to find, Finland is considered a leading developer of marketing technologies (MarTech). According to a study done by Avaus, a marketing services firm, Finland is one of the leading developers of MarTech with more than 117 companies in this landscape. (Syvänen 2017) This shows that the future is promising for this country in terms of marketing technologies development. Based on these arguments presented, it is demonstrated that Finland is a relevant research context to analyze the process of marketing automation adoption. Therefore, the sample of this research consisted of Finnish B2B companies.

3.3. Data Collection

The sampling method in this study was *purposive sampling*. This method consists of selecting the sample according to the study's objectives and the researcher's knowledge of the population (Tansey 2007). In this research, the criteria for selecting the case companies was the following. First, since the research context of this study is Finland, the companies are of Finnish origin. Second, as this research focuses on the B2B context, the companies operate within this context. Lastly, to explain the process of marketing automation adoption, the companies had already adopted marketing automation before contacting them. In addition, since this research assumed a broader perspective on the topic of marketing automation, the sample was also selected looking for companies with different marketing automation vendors. The reason for this was to compare the results and analyze if the answers varied depending on the vendor.

For collecting the data for the empirical part, the interview was the qualitative method selected. In case studies, the interview is a common and useful qualitative data collection method to acquire historical information (Creswell 2014). It allows the researcher to control the questions and participants are expected to answer open-ended structured questions based on their perceptions (Creswell 2014; Shah & Corley 2006). The interview technique called *elite interviewing* which was used in this study, consists of interviewing people who know the most about a topic and it is particularly useful for corroborating what has been established in other sources and for getting new information to advance the research process (Tansey 2007).

Following the criteria discussed above, the sample consisted of eight Finnish B2B companies. One of them is a startup, two are small and medium companies, four are large companies, and one is a consultancy company. The interviewees were selected according to their position and knowledge on marketing automation. Participants were expected to have good knowledge on the topic and occupy a strategic position in the marketing department, therefore, in most of the cases, the interviewees occupied a manager or director position in marketing.

The interviews were conducted via Skype and at the company's premises, and they were

held between May and June 2017. The names of the companies were changed to protect their privacy. The length of the interviews varied depending on the participant. Two people from company Zeta participated in the interview. Table 3 summarizes the details of the interviews.

Table 3 Interviews details.

Classification	Company Name*	Platform	Length (min)	Position
Startup	Alpha	HubSpot	20	Marketing Manager
SME	Beta	Eloqua	22	Head of Sales and Marketing
SME	Gamma	MailChimp	22	Marketing Specialist
Large	Delta	Pardot	40	Communications and Branding Manager
Large	Epsilon	Eloqua	49	Marketing Technologist
Large	Zeta	Marketo	69	Marketing Director Digital Community Manager
Large	Sigma	ClickDimensions	60	Marketing Director
Consultancy Company	Omega	N/A	48	Marketing Consultant

*The names were changed.

The interviews were semi-structured. In this type of interview, there is a list of themes to be covered, but the questions are adapted to each case (Saunders et al. 2009). For this study, the interview questions aimed to cover the participants' perception of marketing automation, and the process of adoption including the impact and the challenges. Therefore, the questions were formulated following this logic.

The fact of having semi-structured interviews implied that the questions were adapted to fit each case and they were modified or more questions emerged depending on the answers. However, as the questions were designed to cover the themes of this study, they were adapted from the interview base found in Appendix I.

For the consultancy company, the questions were slightly different and they aimed to explore the company's perception on their customers' adoption process. The themes were the same as the ones before, but the questions were designed to understand the adoption process of the company's customers. The base for the consultancy company interview is found in Appendix II.

3.4.   Data Analysis

To facilitate the process of data collection and analysis, the audio from the interviews was recorded and then transcribed into text. After this was done, the text of each interview was read-through and summarized to get a general overview of the content of each. Subsequently, the data were transferred to NVivo, a software for the analysis of qualitative data which helped to simplify the process of categorizing and structuring the data. Since the questions were designed based on the themes of the research, when the files were uploaded to NVivo it was easier to code the data.

The sources were analyzed using the NVivo's auto-code wizard and the items were coded using the source style. The headings in the sources were the questions of the research, hence, the answers were coded to their respective nodes. After this, the nodes' names were changed according to the themes and later, the transcripts were reread to see if some of the codes applied also to other themes. Lastly, the nodes were organized into a hierarchical order as shown in Appendix III.

4. EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

This chapter discusses the findings of the empirical research and is divided into five main sections. The first section introduces the case companies by providing a general overview of their background, the year when they adopted marketing automation, and the platform they have adopted. This section, in like manner, includes a short description of the interviewees and their experience with marketing automation. The second part analyses the interviewees' perception of marketing automation and how this concept is applied to the B2B context. The third section covers the findings on the process of marketing automation adoption, and the fourth and fifth sections present the findings on the challenges and the impact of adopting marketing automation.

4.1. Case Companies

Company Alpha is a Finnish startup that began operations in 2016. The company offers a digital platform for recruiting processes and provides services to job seekers and recruiters. Their target market is the recruiters. Company Alpha's marketing automation system is Hub-Spot and this was implemented about a year ago.

The interviewee from company Alpha is the digital marketing manager. She has been working in the marketing area for about two years. Her responsibilities in company Alpha include leading the marketing team, creating marketing campaigns, analyzing marketing data, social media marketing, and generating leads. Her experience with marketing automation is rather short, less than three months, and she learned about marketing automation by taking the online courses from HubSpot when she joined company Alpha.

Company Beta is a Finnish SME that provides hotel booking services to other companies. The company has operations in more than five countries and has been in the Finnish market for over 40 years. In 2014, company Beta was acquired by an American company. Beta started the adoption of Eloqua at the beginning of 2016 and finished implementing it at the end of the same year.

The interviewee from company Beta is the head of marketing and sales, and he is a member

of the management team. He is responsible for all corporate sales and B2B marketing activities for company Beta. For the adoption of Eloqua, he led the project from the early stages and played a crucial role in the process. His experience with marketing automation is shorter than two years and he learned about it by doing research and keeping updated with the industry trends.

Company Delta is a global leading company born in Finland with over 100 years of experience in the energy and marine sector. Throughout the years, this company has acquired several companies in different countries. In 2014, company Delta adopted Marketo as its marketing automation solution, but at the beginning of 2017, the company changed the vendor to Pardot.

The interviewee from company Delta is the manager of communications and branding. He is responsible for the digital marketing strategy, the online communication, and the digital presence among others. He learned about marketing automation when the company Delta began the adoption project in 2014. He contributed to the adoption of both Marketo in 2014 and Pardot in 2017.

Company Epsilon was established in the 1930's in Finland and provides global solutions for industrial and environmental measurement. As company Delta, company Epsilon has acquired numerous companies around the globe. The company has been using Eloqua for about ten years.

The interviewee from company Epsilon is a marketing technologist who has worked with marketing automation systems for over five years. He is responsible for administrating Eloqua in company Epsilon. When the company initiated the adoption of Eloqua, he was not working there, hence, he did not comment on the adoption process during the initiation and implementation stages. He learned about marketing automation six years ago while working for a marketing agency.

Company Gamma is a Finnish SME in the energy sector that employs around 200 people. It provides energy solutions for companies in the wind and marine industry. The company was established in 2006 and was acquired in 2014 by an Asian company. Company Gamma

started to use MailChimp in 2013 and now is considering the possibility to change the vendor.

The interviewee from company Gamma is a marketing and communications specialist. She is responsible for everything related to the communications and content in the company. Gamma has been working for more than 30 years in marketing and communications. She heard for the first time about marketing automation while listening to HubSpot's webinars.

Company Omega was founded ten years ago in Finland and provides marketing-related services including the implementation of marketing automation solutions for B2B companies. This company has installed marketing automation systems for some of the biggest companies in Finland.

The interviewee from company Omega is an expert in management consulting. He has over five years of experience in consulting and is now helping companies to adopt marketing technologies. He has been involved in over 15 marketing automation adoption processes. He heard for the first time about marketing automation in 2012 while following industry news.

Company Sigma is a global leader in the minerals and metals processing industry and has created many breakthrough technologies over the past decades. In 2016, company Sigma started to use ClickDimensions as its marketing automation solution.

The interviewee from company Sigma has been working in the marketing area for more than ten years. He is now the marketing director in company Sigma and is responsible for leading the department and planning the marketing strategies. He contributed to adopt marketing automation in his previous company and that is when he heard about this technology for the first time. Now, in his current company, he led the project to adopt ClickDimensions.

Company Zeta is a global leader in the welding industry. It was established in Finland over 50 years ago and has now presence in more than 50 countries. During its history, company Zeta has acquired other companies to support its expansion plans. This company began using Marketo at the end of 2015.

Two people participated in the interview of company Zeta. They are referred in the text as Zeta 1 and Zeta 2. Zeta 1 is the marketing director. She was responsible for leading the project for adopting Marketo. Zeta 1 has been working in marketing for over 15 years, and she learned about marketing automation from an academic conference.

On the other hand, Zeta 2 has been working for over two years in marketing and communications and now is the digital community manager. He contributed to the adoption of Marketo in the company, and now, one of his main tasks is to administrate the platform. He heard for the first time about marketing automation in LinkedIn.

4.2. Marketing Automation Perception

The differences in the definitions of marketing automation were covered in the theoretical part. In this part, it was explained that to some authors such as Buttle and Maklan (2015), marketing automation supports operational marketing. On the other side, other experts such as Del Rowe (2016) and Ginty et. al (2012) consider marketing automation as a resource for developing the strategic plans of companies. Due to this discrepancy in the definition, the interviewees of this study were asked to define marketing automation. The purpose of this was to explore the perception of marketing automation from the adopters' point of view.

The results showed that, to the adopters, marketing automation is a strategic resource. All the interviewees adopted a strategic position when they were asked to define it. For example, Zeta 2 and Omega defined marketing automation as a way of working. As Zeta 2 explained, *"marketing automation is a set of ways of working and tools to automate different things that normally are done by manual labor"*. In this regard, Omega also added that the software behind marketing automation is crucial.

> *[Marketing automation] is more about a way of working than it is about software. The software is essential for marketing collaboration and aligning marketing and sales but it is more about changing the organizational way of doing things in marketing and sales.* (Omega)

From a broader perspective, the companies defined marketing automation as a resource that

supports email marketing, campaign management, content marketing, and lead management. Social media marketing and marketing analytics functions were not mentioned in the definitions. Epsilon defined marketing automation as a *"tool to deliver the right message at the right time to the right audience".* Zeta 1, Beta, Delta, and Gamma mentioned that marketing automation helps to manage the leads along the funnel and to increase the possibilities of converting the opportunities into customers. Alpha, Sigma, and Omega assumed a more customer-centric position by arguing that marketing automation allows to engage with the customers in the digital channels and manage the relationships with them.

Some of the interviewees added to the discussion of the definition that the term "marketing automation" is misleading as it does not explain well what it truly is. As Delta commented, *"even though it is marketing automation, of automation it does not have anything because it is very labor-intensive work".* To this, Omega added, *"the term itself is misleading to many people. It says you automate the work even though it typically means more work".* This last part evidences that a mismatch between the users' expectations and the technology's functions can exist when assuming an operational perspective for adopting marketing automation. This mismatch can ultimately lead to dissatisfaction with the technology or underutilization of the tool.

As demonstrated in this section, the definitions uncovered that marketing automation is perceived as more than a software for automating marketing tasks. The software behind this tool is essential for marketing tasks but it does not define the whole concept. Therefore, in the B2B context, marketing automation is perceived as a strategic resource for customer management that supports functions such as email marketing, campaign management, content marketing, and lead management. This is consistent with the position assumed at the beginning of this research that sees marketing automation as a core and strategic element for companies.

4.2.1. Marketing automation in the B2B context

The difference of marketing automation for B2B and B2C companies was provided by Delta. In the interview, he illustrated and explained the buying process in B2B, and mentioned how marketing automation supports this context. After this, he described the difference between

the buying process in B2B and B2C, and how marketing automation supports the latter. Figure 10 illustrates Delta's buying process in the B2B context.
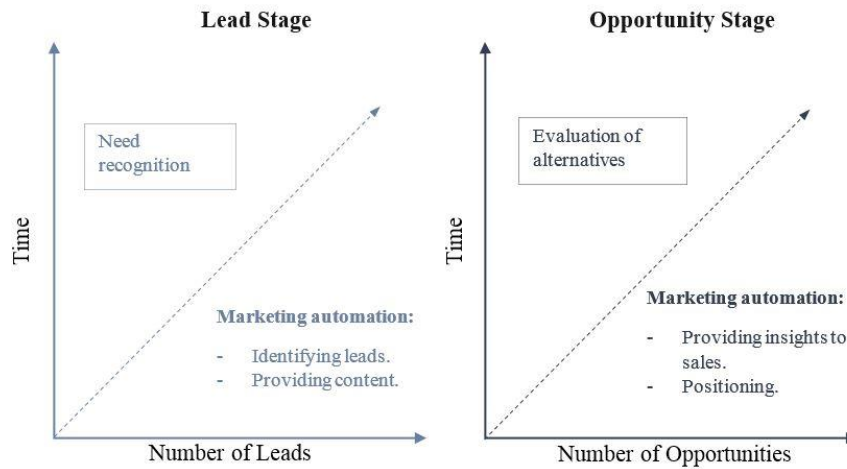
Figure 10 Buying process in the B2B context (Adapted from the interview with Delta).

According to Delta, the buying process in the B2B context is divided into two stages, the lead stage, and the opportunity stage. In the first stage, the leads are uncertain of their needs. Marketing automation supports to identify and provide content to those leads who are figuring out their need and trying to increase the percentage that they continue in the process. Once the leads figure out the need and make the decision to buy, they enter the opportunity stage where they evaluate the alternatives. In this stage, as the leads evaluate different suppliers, marketing automation contributes to increasing the number of opportunities by providing insights to sales and providing content for positioning the company. *"The customers know at this point who you are and that is the point of brand value"* (Delta).

Delta clarified that the difference between the buying process in B2B and B2C contexts is that in the latter, in most of the cases, the process occurs and finalizes in the first stage. He continued saying that since most of the process occurs in the first stage, marketing automation's role focuses mainly on raising awareness and moving the leads along that part. *"In B2C [marketing automation] is more focused on the first part because the conversion normally happens at the end of the first stage"* (Delta).

Following Delta's explanation, it is evidenced that marketing automation is used differently

in B2B and B2C companies. In B2B companies, as the buying process is usually longer than in B2C, marketing automation role is fundamental in both the lead and the opportunity stages. In the lead stage, it contributes to identify and provide content to the leads so they recognize their need. In the opportunity stage, marketing automation helps to provide insights to sales and position the company to increase the possibility of turning the opportunities into customers. Once the opportunities become customers, the role of marketing automation is to continue developing the relationship with them. On the other hand, marketing automation contributes B2C companies to raise awareness and convert the leads into customers in the first stage. Just as in B2B, in B2C companies once the leads become customers, the role of marketing automation is to continue developing the relationship with those customers.

4.3.   Process of Marketing Automation Adoption

In the theoretical background, the process of marketing automation adoption was divided into three stages, initiation, implementation, and post-implementation. This section is divided in like manner covering the findings and analysis of each stage. Figure 11 summarizes the findings on the process of marketing automation adoption.
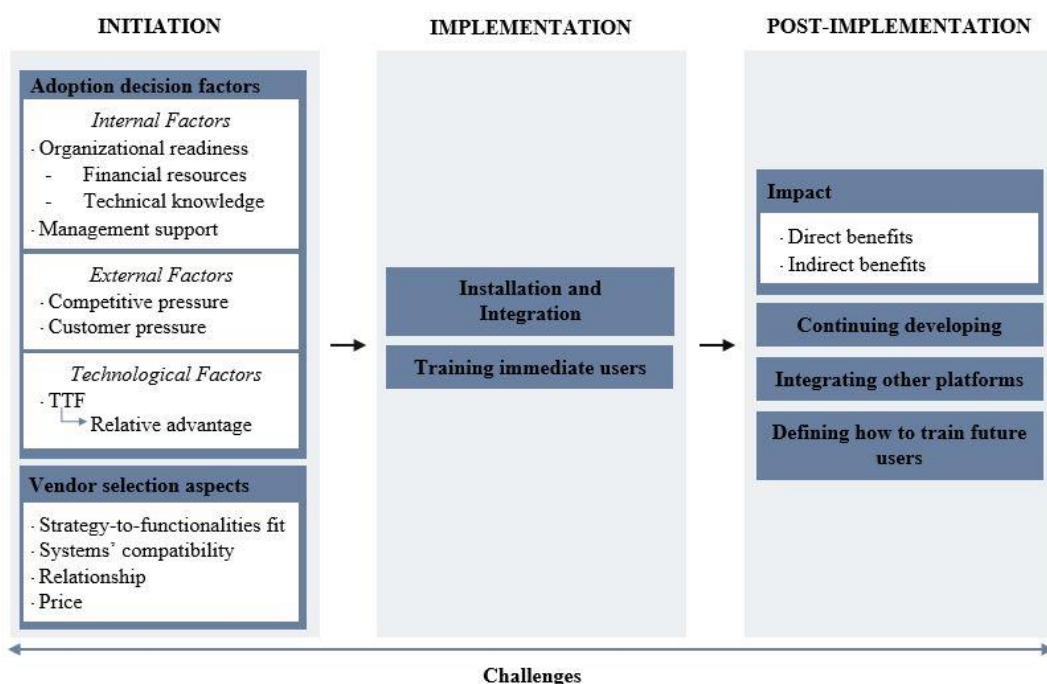

Figure 11 Marketing automation adoption process.

4.3.1.   Initiation stage

In the theoretical part, it was found that there are certain factors that hinder or encourage the adoption decision (e.g. Kim & Galliers 2004). In the framework of this study, following Del Aguila-Obra and Padilla-Meléndez (2006) division, the factors were grouped into three categories, internal, external, and technological factors. Also, in the framework, it was mentioned that the evaluation and selection of the vendor occur in the initiation stage. During the empirical part of this study, the interviewees were asked why their companies decided to adopt marketing automation and why they selected their current vendor. The aim of these questions was to discover the factors affecting the adoption decision and the reasons why companies select a specific vendor. The findings on the factors affecting the adoption decision and the aspects influencing the selection of the vendor are summarized in Figure 11.

Internal Factors

Organizational readiness and management support were classified as internal factors. Organizational readiness was defined in terms of availability of financial resources and technical knowledge (Iacovou et al. 1995; Alsaad et al. 2017). The findings support the influence in the adoption decision of both availability of financial resources and technical knowledge.

Regarding availability of financial resources, the evidence suggests that it affects more B2B than B2C companies. As Omega said "*in B2B, marketing is just minuscule if you compare it to sales, so marketing does not have a budget. It is also a lot about where to find the money, how to be able to show results*". In addition, the findings indicate that this factor affects more the decision in SMEs than in large companies. According to Delta, the availability of financial resources is not a limitation for larger companies but for smaller ones it can be. "*The tools do not really cost much. These tools are not expensive for big companies. The cost is not an excuse for bigger companies to go to marketing automation. For smaller ones, it can be*" (Delta).

On the other side, for the availability of technical knowledge, the findings demonstrate that people with previous experience on technologies such as email marketing or marketing automation influence greatly the adoption decision. According to Omega, when these people

start to work in a new company, they are the ones who want to initiate the adoption process.

> *Typically, there is somebody driving this [process] further [...]. There is maybe somebody who has been working previously in a company that already has used marketing automation, so when this person comes to the new company, that person wants to initiate the same process.* (Omega)

People with previous knowledge on marketing automation help to identify the advantages of this tool compared to other systems. This contributes to encouraging the decision of adopting marketing automation instead of the other tools. This is the case of Sigma. Before joining his current company, he had experience with marketing automation in his previous job. Now, working in company Sigma, when they initiated the adoption of the sales force automation system, Sigma said that one of the reasons why they decided to adopt marketing automation at the same time was because they noticed that the sales force automation system did not serve well enough marketing purposes. This suggests that without the previous knowledge and good understanding of marketing automation, it could be more difficult to identify the need for it which in turn can affect the adoption decision.

For the other internal factor, management support, the evidence demonstrates that affects the adoption in large companies. For SMEs no evidence was found but for large companies, the evidence suggests that not only the support from the top management affects the adoption, but also the support from other departments. This factor was mentioned as well as a challenge, therefore a more detailed explanation of it is covered in the section *challenges in the initiation stage*.

External Factors

External pressure from competitors and from stakeholders such as partners, customers, and suppliers were identified as external factors (Iacovou et al. 1995; Del Aguila-Obra & Padilla-Meléndez 2006). The findings showed strong congruence to both factors. One of the questions in the interview with Omega was why there is an increasing interest from companies towards marketing automation. To this question, he replied that many companies are adopting it because other ones are doing it and that in some of the cases, they do not even know

what it really is.

> *For some companies [marketing automation] is just a buzz word; that they know that the others are doing it, and they really do not know what it is about. For some it is just the hype of keeping up the industry trends.* (Omega)

Along the interviews, the participants confirmed the external factors to be crucial to adopt marketing automation. They all mentioned the fact that, as customers are demanding more personalized content, companies need the support of modern technologies to do so. For example, when Alpha was asked why her company adopted marketing automation, she answered *"because it is how the marketing world works nowadays"* and then she continued explaining the need the company had for it to strengthen the relationship with the customers.

The arguments above demonstrate the importance of the external environment in the process. However, what is unclear at this point is whether the pressure from the external environment comes first and then companies recognize the need for it, or if they identify the need first and then they feel pressure from the external environment to solve that need to remain competitive. Perhaps, this situation is different depending on the company. Some companies might recognize the need first and then, when looking for alternatives to solve the need, they might come up with marketing automation as a solution. Or it can be the other way around. First, they identify the solution and then they recognize the need. As it was expressed by Omega, *"in many cases, the process is initiated by companies like us or by the technology vendors"*.

For the companies that are acquired, the effect of the pressure from the acquiring company was examined in this study. In the findings, the evidence showed that this type of pressure did not affect the adoption decision in Beta and Gamma. In both case companies, Beta and Gamma mentioned that their parent company did not influence the decision to adopt marketing automation. They clarified that the decision was made autonomously.

This last finding might depend heavily on the role of the acquired company and how decentralized the marketing activities are from its parent company. In this research, both companies have a decentralized marketing function which gives them more autonomy to make

decisions concerning their marketing departments. But, for parent companies that have a more centralized marketing function, it might be better for them to share the same platforms to facilitate operations and data exchanges, as well as to have more control on their processes. Therefore, pressure from the parent company to adopt marketing automation may exist in those cases.

Technological Factors

TTF and relative advantage were defined as technological factors. In the theoretical part, TTF was found to affect the relative advantage (Goodhue & Thompson 1995). In this study, both factors showed a strong effect on marketing automation adoption, and TTF was demonstrated to affect the relative advantage.

In the interviews, all the participants explained how marketing automation supports different tasks in marketing. Email marketing, campaign management, content marketing, and lead generation were the most mentioned reasons to adopt marketing. According to Omega, of those, lead generation is the most common function to adopt marketing automation.

> *They claim that they want to increase marketing effectiveness to be able to measure the whole marketing and sales process to be able to generate leads. Lead generation is the most common term when it comes to why marketing automation.* (Omega)

Beta confirmed what Omega said as he highlighted that the main reason to adopt marketing automation was to support the lead generation. "*We wanted to increase the number of leads generated through the website and other online channels but also to have a better and more automated follow up with leads*" (Beta).

This fit between the technology and the tasks did affect the relative advantage of marketing automation for the interviewees. Some of the participants mentioned that email marketing tools and other CRM systems did not meet the requirements to perform the tasks in their departments, consequently, when looking for solutions, they found marketing automation. As Sigma said when he talked about the implementation of a sales force automation system in his company, "*we realized that the features that the CRM has are not good enough for*

marketing purposes. You can do simple transactional emails there but they are more suited to one-to-one communication than the marketing automation spectrum". In addition, Delta argued that when they were looking for a marketing solution, they were initially considering an email marketing system. But while evaluating email marketing vendors, they discovered marketing automation and they saw the potential for it. As Delta said, they realized that marketing automation superseded email marketing as it has more features. *"We saw that in the future, it will be a growing trend and it will provide value"* (Delta)*.

Vendor Evaluation and Selection

In the framework of this study, it was stated that companies begin the process of evaluating and selecting a vendor in the initiation stage. In some of the cases, the companies are not necessarily only looking for marketing automation vendors but they are searching for solutions to their needs. This means that other platforms such as email marketing systems are evaluated as well. For example, when Delta was looking for an email platform, they considered email marketing as their solution, but while evaluating the vendors, they found a better match between marketing automation solutions and the company's needs.

During the evaluation and selection process, while companies benchmark the vendors, certain aspects were indicated by the participants to influence the decision to choose one vendor over another. Four main aspects were found in this study, namely, the strategy-to-functionalities fit, the compatibility with other systems, the relationship with the vendor, and the price (Figure 12).
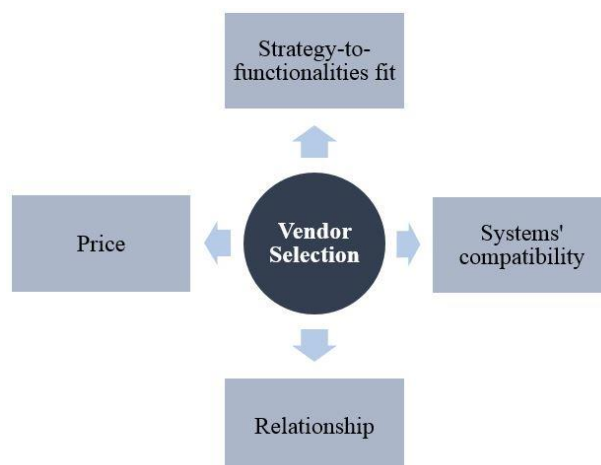

Figure 12 Vendor selection aspects.

The fit between the company's strategy and the vendor's functionalities was found to be an aspect affecting the first phases of the evaluation process. Even though, in general, all the vendors offer similar features, there are differences on how they are positioned in the market and they specialize in certain features more than others. Therefore, when companies analyze and compare the offerings from different vendors, they try to find a good match between the company's needs and the features the vendor supports. For example, when Beta argued why they chose Eloqua, he replied, "*we compared various platforms. The main reason was the usability and the features provided*".

When the fit between the vendor and the company's strategy is low, companies may not select that vendor or, if they already have it, they may consider changing it. In the case of company Gamma, the interviewee told that one of the main reasons why they are considering changing MailChimp is because the system falls short especially for lead generation and other vendors have more advanced features for that function. As she said, although the tool works well for email marketing purposes, now that they are wanting to penetrate a new market, they need a more advanced technology.

The strategy-to-functionalities fit is the main reason why HubSpot has become the most popular vendor for startups and SMEs. In the interview with Alpha, she explained that they chose HubSpot because it supports not only marketing functions, but also sales and customer service. For small and medium companies, it is convenient to have this type of platform that allows doing different tasks instead of having multiple systems. But for larger companies, this research found that it is more important to have a system that specializes in one function and offers advanced features and then integrate that platform with other ones.

Since more sophisticated marketing automation platforms require more integrations with other systems, especially other CRM systems, the compatibility between marketing automation and other platforms was found to be amongst the most important aspects to select a vendor. Companies Delta, Sigma, and Zeta agreed on the fact that the integration, especially with the sales force automation system was one of the main aspects they considered when comparing the vendors. In this respect, Zeta 1 stated that different CRM systems are more compatible with certain marketing automation platforms.

You want to integrate your marketing automation to a certain CRM system, and different CRM systems love different marketing automation [...] we had a renewal process for our CRM and it ended up being Salesforce. We started to look for the marketing automation from the Salesforce point of view. (Zeta 1)

For example, Sigma explained that when they decided to go with Microsoft Dynamics as their CRM, it was making sense to them to select ClickDimensions as their marketing automation solution to facilitate the integrations. For Delta, the main reason to change from Marketo to Pardot was to look for a better integration and fit between its current sales force system and the marketing automation system. Company Gamma mentioned as well that another reason why they are considering moving from MailChimp to Pardot is that they are looking for a better integration with their sales force automation platform.

The influence of the parent company for the acquired companies was encountered to affect the selection of the vendor. For company Beta, one important reason to select Eloqua was that this is the marketing automation platform of its parent company. Beta commented that the fact of having synergies with the parent company in terms of technical assistance for the implementation and training, as well as achieving commercial benefits in the negotiations with the vendor was crucial in the selection process. For company Gamma, now that they are considering the possibility of changing the vendor, one of the strongest options is Pardot as its parent company is using it. As Gamma said, selecting Pardot will help them to be more synchronized with what their parent company is doing.

For acquired companies having a more centralized marketing function with their mother company, the vendor selection process could be different than those with a decentralized function. In those cases of more decentralized marketing, such as companies Beta and Gamma, the vendor selection seems to be more autonomous and independent. Meanwhile, for the other cases, acquired companies might have more pressure from the mother company as this may want to have more control and facilitate the integrations of the systems. In this respect, Epsilon said, *"we have acquired a couple of companies a couple of years ago, and luckily, they did not use any marketing automation tool, so they were quite eager to start using Eloqua"*. As he suggested, having the same vendor simplifies the overall process of the integrations and training.

The third aspect found affecting the vendor selection process was the relationship with the vendor. Companies Gamma and Zeta 1 suggested that the relationship with the vendor during the demonstrations and negotiations was crucial in the selection process, especially in the last stages. Gamma had a bad experience when they contacted another vendor before selecting MailChimp, and that was the ultimate reason why they did not proceed with that vendor. Zeta 1, in this respect, explained that once companies have a short list of the possible vendors, since those on the list have similar offerings, it is the relationship with the vendor what makes the difference.

> *Always when you come to the top three you have your short list. Then, there are nuances that count in, of course, the chemistry with the people is one thing. It is to really get a partner and not just a vendor. Building this kind of partnership is really important in this whole business. It is all in the people and the attitude of the vendor. When a company starts, like us, with no experience, it is all about the people.* (Zeta 1)

Additionally, when Alpha was asked why they selected their vendor, she answered that because the vendor has good customer service and they have helped them with their marketing and management. Likewise, when Epsilon mentioned why they have not changed their current vendor, he said that because the vendor has a good community and they are listening to their needs.

Lastly, the price of the platform was found to be an aspect affecting the selection of the vendor, especially for SMEs. However, of all the aspects, the results of the study demonstrate that the price is not the most important one. The evidence suggests that the price helps to reduce the long list of vendors, but ultimately, the other three aspects are the ones that affect the most the selection process.

4.3.2. Implementation stage

In this study, it was defined that the installation of marketing automation and the integration with other systems occur in the implementation stage. The number and type of platforms to integrate were found to be highly dependent on the company's strategy. In general, the case

companies integrated first the most crucial platforms to perform their tasks, and as they developed more their skills, they integrated new systems with their marketing automation tool in later stages. For example, company Beta divided the project into modules depending on the integrations and in the implementation stage, they integrated the sales force automation system because they needed the data from it. After using the platform, they integrated the booking tool to gather more data to make better decisions regarding the type of content preferred by their customers.

To most of the companies, during the implementation, the marketing automation and the sales force automation platforms were integrated. Companies Beta, Delta, Epsilon, Sigma, and Zeta integrated the sales force automation at this stage. Company Alpha does not have a sales force automation system because they perform the sales functions in their current marketing automation system. On the other hand, company Gamma has a sales force automation platform but they have not integrated it yet. According to Gamma, the actual marketing automation system has worked well without the integration as they have been using it mainly for email and content marketing. But now that they are expanding to new market segments, they are considering integrating both systems to support primarily lead management functions.

Overall, the integration with the sales force automation is the most important for the majority of the companies in this stage. Integrations with other platforms generally happen in the post-implementation stage as the need for data increases. As mentioned before, the number of integrations and the type of platforms to be integrated is highly dependent on the company's strategy. For example, the integration with the social media platforms was crucial for company Alpha because that is one of their main communication channels. But, for company Epsilon which performs more marketing activities and uses more online channels than Alpha, they have their marketing automation tool integrated with the sales force automation system, social media, business intelligence, and webinars platforms.

4.3.3. Post-implementation stage

The post-implementation stage, in the framework of this study, was defined to begin when the companies use for the first time the marketing automation platform. This study found

that utilizing marketing automation potential is a gradual process. At the beginning, companies use the platform mainly for email marketing, campaign management, and content marketing. Then, as they gain more knowledge and experience, they include other features for lead management. Marketing automation for marketing analytics and social media marketing was found to be highly underutilized.

As an evidence that harnessing marketing automation potential is a gradual process, Sigma, for example, mentioned that now in his company, they are using marketing automation only for email campaigns. Since they have been using the platform for a short period, Sigma explained that email campaigns are the first step, but in the future, they are planning to use it for other purposes including lead scoring. Companies such as Beta and Delta told as well that they began using marketing automation for basic functions, especially related to email marketing, and now they have integrated activities for campaign management and lead management.

In terms of lead management, the findings indicated that lead scoring is one of the features that companies take the longest to use once they have implemented marketing automation. Not all the case companies have developed a lead scoring model yet, and some of the companies that have it, are unsatisfied with the current one and are planning to develop it further. For example, Alpha, Gamma, and Sigma have not developed a lead scoring model yet. Beta and Zeta told that they have plans to develop further the current one because it is still basic. And, Epsilon and Zeta said that they have one that works fine and it is matter of fine-tuning it continuously.

Regarding marketing analytics features, most of the companies only use the reporting capabilities of their marketing automation platforms to get reports on basic metrics for campaign and email analysis. They analyze the data and make some decisions based on those metrics to improve emails and campaigns but they do not make further analysis on marketing performance. In this study, only Epsilon and Zeta described that they gather data not only for email and campaign analysis but also for demonstrating marketing's accountability and for improving their lead scoring models.

To harness marketing automation power for marketing analytics, Epsilon and Zeta had to

integrate the marketing automation system into a business intelligence platform. This is because, as Omega clarified, even though the marketing automation systems have reporting capabilities, they are not reporting tools as such.

> *None of the marketing automation platforms is a reporting tool even though they have the analytical reporting capabilities. The key is to integrate the marketing automation system with some sort of business intelligence tool and then visualize the data there and make it available to top management as well.* (Omega)

This is supported by Zeta 2 when he told that they have their marketing automation platform integrated with other platforms because the data that they get only from marketing automation or the sales force automation system is not sufficient to make informed decisions.

> *If we just only analyze the numbers from Marketo, then, it is not relevant. Well, it is relevant for marketing automation reporting. When we have the whole, not only marketing automation and sales, we should have logistics there, ERP [Enterprise Resource Planning] systems, Google Analytics, everything that has data in it to combine it into one.* (Zeta 2)

Besides the underutilization of marketing automation for marketing analytics, the evidence indicated that marketing automation for social media marketing is highly underutilized as well. Out of the seven companies of this research (excluding company Omega), only Alpha said that their marketing automation platform is crucial for developing the social media strategy. The rest of the companies revealed that as social media marketing is not their primary focus now, they do not concentrate a lot of resources on it. If they use marketing automation for social media, they do it mostly for adding intelligent share buttons to their content, to schedule posts, or to get basic reports but they do not use it for adding social profile data for segmentation and lead scoring or for social listening and tracking.

The main reason why marketing automation is not typically used for social media marketing is that the companies see more value on allocating their marketing budget to events, conferences, and seminars than on social media. *"In larger [companies], most of the marketing budget goes to events and trade shows"* (Omega). The companies recognize the importance

of social media marketing, but for their current target market, they consider more relevant to have face-to-face interactions which are typical for B2B companies. In this respect, Gamma said that as their target market consists of people from an older generation, they are not typically using social media as a main online channel for communicating.

> *We just have not had the resources to do that [social media]. Plus, we have felt that our clients and customers right now so far have been more a bit older generation. From a more conservative point of view. So, they are not the ones who are really on social media as much, we do need to keep that in mind for the upcoming generation and start looking into it but it is not a high priority now.* (Gamma)

Regardless of the number of features offered by marketing automation, this research demonstrated that companies focus on developing their skills to use the features that they consider support better their strategy. As their strategy evolves, they continue improving their skills to include other features to support their plans.

4.4.   Marketing Automation Challenges

In the theoretical part of this research, the literature on the challenges was divided into the stages of the adoption process. The findings on this topic are presented following the same structure. Thus, they are divided into the stages of the adoption process, challenges in the initiation, in the implementation, and in the post-implementation.

Figure 13 summarizes the findings on the challenges.
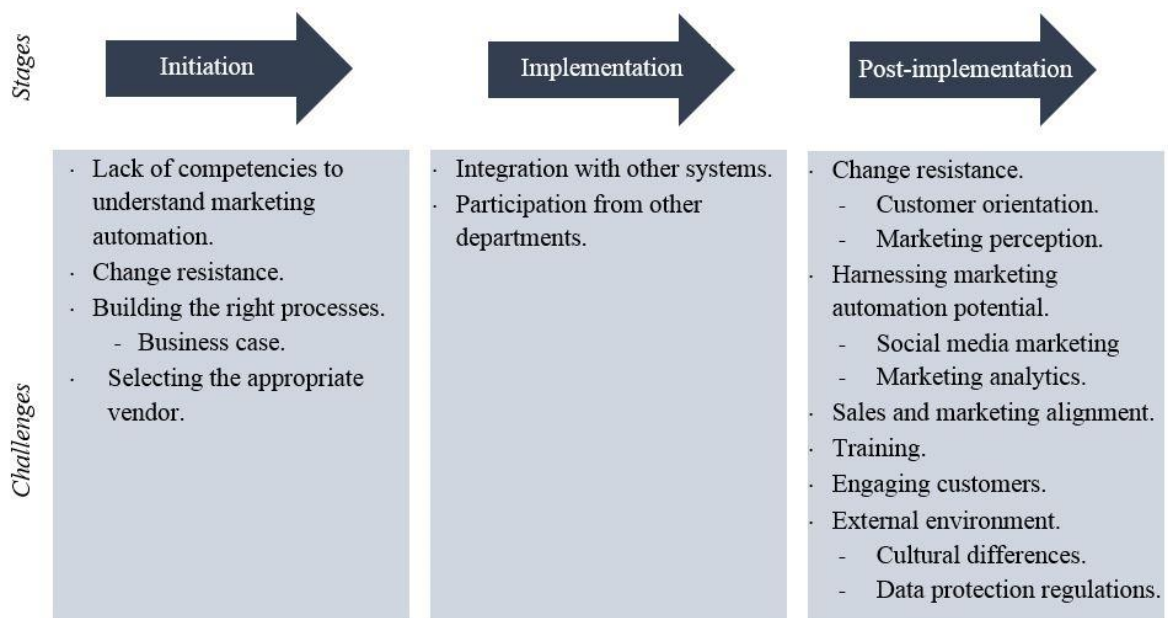
Figure 13 Findings on marketing automation challenges.

4.4.1. Challenges in the initiation stage

In the initiation stage, three challenges were identified in the literature review. The first challenge relates to understanding the scope of marketing automation (Wood 2015); Putkinen 2014; Del Rowe 2016). Since adopting marketing automation implies a change in how things were done before, the second challenge identified is resistance to change. Finally, the third challenge deals with building the right processes around the adoption project (Kumar 2011).

Regarding the challenge of understanding marketing automation scope, evidence from Sigma and Omega was encountered. As Sigma said, *"I think the biggest challenge is to get everybody on board to understand what you can do with the marketing automation tools and platforms and what are the best ways to use the platforms"*. Omega, in this sense, mentioned that one of the main misunderstandings companies have of marketing automation is that they think it will automate the work when in reality, it automates part of the work but it typically means that more things need to be done before automating it. This demonstrates that companies do not always have a clear understanding of marketing automation.

The challenge of understanding marketing automation scope derives from the lack of competencies in companies on this topic as Omega suggested. According to him, this is by

far, the biggest challenge for most of the companies in the initiation stage. He said that depending on whether the companies have or not the competencies, they need to make the decision of doing the implementation of marketing automation in-house or to use a partner. This is a challenge that for example Beta and Zeta recognized in the early stages of the process. They both identified they did not have the internal competencies on marketing automation, so, they relied on a partner for the adoption. In other cases, companies can also consider hiring somebody who has previous experience with marketing automation as Zeta 2 explained. *"If a company starts from zero, they want to hire someone who knows about it. Either you hire someone to build up the system and you can count on your internal people to do that"* (Zeta 2).

In terms of the second challenge, change resistance was mentioned by Delta and Zeta. These two participants agreed on that when someone tries to bring new ways of doing things, there are people who do not want to make this change happen. Delta explained that to them, this was the main challenge at the beginning of the project because people were familiar with how things were done before and with the new project, they needed to do things differently. Zeta 2 on this subject commented, *"in the beginning, the first problem or obstacle was to convince others in this company that it is worth investing it"*. Then, Zeta 1 added, *"when you bring new ways of doing, there is the restriction that people do not want to change"*.

The change resistance challenge seems to be more common in larger companies than in SMEs as it was only mentioned in the interviews with large companies such as Delta and Zeta. The main reason why this challenge might happen more in larger companies may be related to the lower risk-taking behaviors typical of the larger ones.

In the third challenge from the theoretical part, building the right processes around the project was determined in terms of defining the case and the scope of the project (Peelen 2005). Zeta 1 and Zeta 2 mentioned that finding the time and defining the scope are difficult at this stage. To Delta, the scope in terms of how many people should be involved was challenging. Beta also found defining the scope as a challenge because there were several factors to consider – data flows, people involved, platforms to integrate – and not all of them were possible to cover in the initial plans.

Besides demonstrating the three challenges from the literature, an additional challenge was found in this stage during the evaluation and selection of the vendor phase. One of the obstacles discussed by Zeta 2 is to find the appropriate vendor and recognize which vendors are truly offering marketing automation solution and not just an advanced email marketing software. He explained that the fact that marketing automation has become so popular has encouraged email marketing vendors to add more features and claim themselves to be marketing automation vendors. Since there is not a concrete definition of marketing automation and email marketing vendors provide similar features supporting the same functions, they can call themselves marketing automation vendors. However, as Zeta 2 said, when people begin to use those systems, they start to realize that they fall short to do more advanced functions that truly marketing automation platforms can do, for example, creating dynamic landing pages or progressive profiling.

This last-mentioned challenge can lead to making a wrong decision which can cause dissatisfaction with the vendor and can result in extra costs in the future. To avoid this type of challenges, Zeta 2 recommends to companies to think carefully what the goal is of adopting marketing automation. In other words, what the company is planning to achieve from its adoption. In this sense, if what the company is looking for is only to send emails, create landing pages, and capture some basic data from the website and the emails, then it might be better to consider an email marketing solution. This will help them to save some costs from having an advanced system only for email and content marketing functions.

All in all, the biggest challenge found in the initiation stage is the lack of competencies to understand marketing automation. Recognizing this challenge from the beginning and designing the strategies to overcome it can help to reduce the future consequences derived from it. Once the company has gained the knowledge and understanding of marketing automation, it becomes easier to convince others on why it is needed, and they will not feel forced to accept the change. And, once it is understood the scope of this technology, challenges in building the right processes around it and finding the appropriate vendor will be diminished.

4.4.2. Challenges in the implementation stage

The most discussed challenge in the implementation stage was the integration of marketing

automation with other systems. The findings for this challenge varied depending on the company. Companies Beta, Delta, and Zeta experienced this challenge during the implementation, and Omega confirmed it saying that companies usually face this challenge. On the other side, for companies such as Alpha, Gamma, and Sigma the integrations with other platforms was not a challenge.

To companies Beta and Delta, the integration with the sales force automation was the biggest challenge in the implementation. Before starting the adoption of marketing automation, they had already the sales force automation platform in place, therefore, integrating the data from one source to another one and defining the data logic were the main obstacles.

> *For example, the prospect object in Pardot is more or less as the contact object in Salesforce but they are not one-to-one. All of those need to be defined and set up. These problems are not solved on the platform level. All companies need to figure it out for themselves.* (Delta)

To this, Omega explained that it is not as easy as the vendors claim it to be but the integrations are not overly complicated as they can be in B2C. He mentioned as well that one challenge in the integrations in B2B companies is that, since most of them have been growing through mergers and acquisitions, what it looks like one big company, in reality, is many small ones combined. These companies have different systems and cultures and when marketing automation is adopted globally, the complexity in the integrations can increase. This is the case of company Zeta for example, and as Zeta 2 pointed out, "*things that we have encountered from the technical point of view, we have 16 subsidiaries in different countries, different languages, different businesses meaning different business value. We had to focus on different things and find a balance*".

In the cases of companies Alpha and Gamma, the possible reason why they did not encounter the challenge with the integrations is that they did not integrate the marketing automation platform to a sales force automation system. For company Sigma, on the other hand, the interviewee said that the reason why this was not a challenge had to deal with the chosen vendor. Nevertheless, another reason for Sigma could have been the fact that they did not have installed before other CRM platforms, so when they adopted marketing automation,

they adopted the other platforms simultaneously.

Besides the challenge of the integrations, an additional challenge was found in this research. This challenge comes from the challenge in the initiation stage of defining the scope and determining how many people should be involved in the project. For the implementation of marketing automation, the participation of the IT department was mentioned as necessary in the literature review (Keens & Barker 2009). This research did not find evidence suggesting that getting IT's participation is a challenge but rather involving sales personnel. Sales participation in this stage was found to be necessary for facilitating later alignment as Beta and Zeta 1 suggested. The sales department only participated in the implementation in companies Beta and Zeta. In Alpha, Delta, Gamma, and Sigma, sales personnel were not part of the process. According to Delta, the reason why sales did not participate in the implementation is that aligning the efforts of both departments is difficult. This might be the case for Alpha, Gamma, and Sigma as well.

This challenge mentioned above can be avoided before initiating the adoption. To prevent it, companies must design a strategic plan defining how marketing automation will support their business. This way, depending on the business strategies, they can recognize which departments need to be involved. For example, the main need for marketing automation in company Zeta was to support lead management. Before Zeta initiated the process, they had a separate project for creating the customer journey. In this project, both sales and marketing departments participated to create the leads' path and they defined the tools, means, and responsibilities. By doing this, they knew from the beginning which tasks are sales-related and which ones are marketing-related. This way, each department had clear the ways of working and its own responsibilities, but they also got to know what the other one will be doing.

Concerning the challenge of data storage that was mentioned in the theoretical background, this study did not find evidence supporting such challenge. None of the companies mentioned having this challenge while implementing their marketing automation system, however, more research is required to conclude whether it is or not a challenge in this stage. Overall, the main challenges in the implementation stage are the integrations with other systems and getting the participation of the sales department. To overcome the challenge of the

integrations with other systems, companies should first understand that marketing automation will not solve the already existing data problems. These problems must be solved internally before starting the implementation to facilitate the integrations. On the other hand, in terms of getting the participation of the sales personnel, since this challenge can be prevented before initiating the process, it is recommended to solve it from the root-cause by defining clearly how marketing automation will support the company's strategies.

4.4.3.   Challenges in the post-implementation stage

One common internal challenge the companies faced after implementing marketing automation was to get the acceptance of the technology. Delta, Epsilon, Omega, and Zeta agreed on this by stating that their companies are still facing change resistance after the implementation. Zeta 1 mentioned that the change resistance happens not only because companies are moving from a product-oriented to a customer-oriented organization, but also because there is resistance to think of marketing as an important part of the lead generation. As she explained, it is hard especially to the sales department that with marketing automation now marketing generates leads as well, and these leads can be as valuable as the leads identified by sales.

> *It is difficult for salespeople to understand that the leads generated by marketing are as valuable or even more valuable than leads that they have been collecting by calling or meeting someone*. (Zeta 1)

Moreover, besides facing this challenge of change resistance, Delta, Epsilon, Omega, Sigma, and Zeta, explained that changing the mindset of people has been complicated, and they assure this is the biggest challenge after the implementation. All of them agreed on that changing the old-fashioned way people have done marketing is the most difficult part. As Epsilon said, people still think about the marketing of just selling a product.

> *People are still thinking about the marketing that we need to sell and market a specific product. But we should really concentrate in which phase in the funnel the contacts are and which message is the best and at what time, and how we support sales to convert those leads in the right time.* (Epsilon)

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To this, Delta added, *"the biggest challenge is that it fundamentally changes how marketing should think and the fact that it needs to work together with sales"*. To deal with this challenge, Epsilon mentioned that it is necessary for companies to have people with logical skills who can see the big picture of adopting marketing automation and not just to concentrate on specific tasks that the platform enables to perform.

As Delta mentioned in the last part, with marketing automation, sales and marketing need to work together. The alignment between sales and marketing was covered in the literature review (Dupré 2016) and the findings of this research confirm this as a challenge. Even though the alignment between sales and marketing is a benefit that the companies can get from marketing automation, most of the companies of this study manifested struggles to achieve this benefit. The reasons why both departments are not aligned are the same as in the implementation stage. Each department is working to reach its own goals, sales do not perceive marketing as a lead generator, or the sales function is highly decentralized as in the case of larger companies.

Another challenge defined in the theoretical review is harnessing marketing automation's potential. The evidence of this research demonstrated that, in fact, this is a challenge for companies in the post-implementation stage. As expressed by Omega, when people think about why marketing automation, they immediately relate it to lead generation. But as he said, it should not stop there, and it should be more about customer journey and customer relationship management instead.

> *Lead generation is the most common term when it comes to why marketing automation. It should not stop there. It is much more than that. It is about customer journey management so you need to be able to manage the customer journeys which take place more and more in the digital channels, and if you manage them well, then you will create more leads, pipeline, revenue and increase the efficiency.* (Omega)

As it was mentioned before, companies start to use the features of marketing automation gradually. Most of them, have not got yet to use the possibilities offered by the platforms for social media and marketing analytics. This demonstrates that taking full advantage of marketing automation is a challenge, but the effect of this challenge depends on whether the

companies have plans or not to improve and perform more functions with the system. If they have plans for the unutilized features, then marketing automation can cover their current needs and future ones as well. On the other hand, if they do not have plans, then probably they should reevaluate if it is necessary to have a sophisticated tool for doing basic functions.

In terms of a specific feature that some companies find challenging to start using is the lead scoring feature. Delta explained that the current lead scoring model that they have is not functional for all businesses or stakeholders. As he explained, *"how to identify if a stake-holder is a customer or an investor or a job seeker. Their behavior is somehow similar based on the content they consume but it depends a little bit"*. The solution from Epsilon was to simplify the model and keep it only for one of its business units. However, Epsilon also recognized that the lead scoring can be a challenge especially when it is applied to a global level and the cultural differences in each country affect the results.

On this subject, Omega suggested that the best solution is not to overanalyze the lead scoring model. As he said, *"you just create some sort of model, your best estimate and you set it running. The key is that you have dedicated salespeople that are giving you the feedback"*. Therefore, as he said, developing the model it is not the complicated part. It all comes to getting the feedback from sales to fine-tuning it. However, in the cases of companies with no sales and marketing alignment, then perhaps it is better to solve that challenge first and then move to the lead scoring. And, if the companies are planning to have it as well for other stakeholders such as job-seekers, they should probably think about an alignment between marketing and human resources.

The fact of meeting the content needs of new customer segments identified with marketing automation was analyzed in the literature review as a challenge (Järvinen & Taiminen 2016). However, in the empirical findings, the evidence supporting this challenge was not clear. On one side, Beta mentioned that it is a challenge as the campaigns are getting more complex. *"The campaigns are getting more and more complex and managing that complexity is now the challenge"* (Beta). On the other side, companies Sigma and Zeta suggested that they do not see the complexity as a challenge but more as an opportunity. Nevertheless, as Zeta 1 recognized, this fact also means that they need more resources to meet the needs of those segments. *"It means more work and resources both in manpower and resources that one has*

not been able to take into account" (Zeta 1).

Omega, in this regard, commented that more than identifying new needs for content, the challenge for companies is to create the right content. After the lack of competencies, Omega said that content creation is the second biggest challenge. *"...The second biggest, I would say is content creation. How to create right content*" (Omega). Since the evidence is not clear at this point, further research for this is needed to conclude if meeting the content needs of new customer segments identified is a challenge or the challenge is how to create the right content.

One more challenge analyzed in this study relates to training. Adopting marketing automation requires to train the current users but also to design a plan on how to train future users. This is a challenge because as Omega stated, *"finding time to teach people how to use the platform it is one of the biggest difficulties".* As Epsilon added, not defining how to train new users can result in negative consequences. *"You can do a lot of harm if you are just playing it around and if you do not think about those actions that you are doing in the software"* (Epsilon). In this research, Beta and Gamma did not have a strategy on how to train new users, and Delta mentioned that they are still defining it. As Delta said, defining how to train people is challenging because if the training is done in the wrong way, people might end up building the business around the tool instead of using the tool to support their business strategies.

> *Not everybody needs to know everything. Learning to use a tool is one thing, understanding what marketing automation is, it is a completely different thing. Learning the two at the same time might make you think that you need to do something because this tool does something, and that is not the correct way. You first figure that this is your business, this is how marketing automation as such supports it, and this is how I make it happen with any tool.* (Delta)

This study also found evidence suggesting that the external environment in terms of cultural differences and data protection regulations in different countries may be a challenge in the post-implementation. Since these factors were not analyzed in depth in this study and the

evidence only came from one source, they are mentioned in the *limitations and future research* section because they need further research.

4.5.   Marketing Automation Impact

The impact of marketing automation adoption was defined in terms of direct and indirect benefits (Iacovou et al. 1995). The following section compares the findings in the theoretical part against the benefits the companies that participated in this study are achieving. Table 4 summarizes the findings on the impact of marketing automation.

Table 4 Findings on marketing automation impact.

Marketing Automation Impact	
Direct Benefits	Indirect Benefits
• Saving time. • Integrating different marketing functions in one system. • Integrating marketing and sales funnel. • Accessing information. • Customizing content. • Easier to segment.	• Enhancing marketing efficiency. • Improving marketing services. • Better visibility. • Improving marketing's accountability. • Marketing and sales alignment. • Improving responsiveness. • Supporting branding strategy.

4.5.1.   Direct benefits

The first direct benefit of marketing automation mentioned in the literature review is to save time (Putkinen 2014). This study found that this benefit is common as all the interviewees said that automating part of their tasks helps them to save time from doing those. However, some of the participants highlighted that automating certain tasks does not necessarily mean reducing the number of tasks to do. As Epsilon mentioned, *"what I have seen with my experience with automation is that you basically need to do more work but now you are working on those things that really matter".* According to him, you free up the time from building emails and campaigns templates to focus more on the customer journeys and customer personas. To this, Sigma added that before marketing automation adoption, only 20% of the time was dedicated to planning because 80% of the time was needed for executing the tasks. But now with the tool, planning takes 80% of the time and executing 20%.

Another benefit covered in the literature review is integrating different marketing functions such as email marketing, campaign management, content and social media marketing, lead management and marketing analytics in one system (Estrada 2015). This benefit was only discussed by Alpha when she said that they can do numerous functions as they have a massive platform. Even though the other participants did not mention this benefit, all of them are using their platforms for performing several functions, thus, they are benefiting from having them in a one-single platform. Hence, the fact that marketing automation integrates different marketing functions is a direct benefit.

Enabling the integration with other systems was also defined as a direct benefit in the literature review (Lamont 2015). In the empirical research, however, none of the participants mentioned this as a benefit. They perceived the integration with other systems more as a requirement to get other benefits such as the alignment between sales and marketing. Consequently, since the integrations were more perceived as something necessary, this is considered a requirement and not a direct benefit.

With the integration with the sales force automation system, the direct benefit for marketing and sales to integrate their funnels was suggested in the theoretical part (Kumar 2011). As this benefit highly depends on the integrations between the systems, not all the companies in this research are reaching this benefit. But, for the ones that have both systems integrated, the participants said that, with marketing automation, they have a closer follow up on the leads (Beta), and they know in which stage of the cycle leads are (Delta).

Other benefits in the literature included collecting information, segmenting, and personalizing the message (Grossberg 2016; Heimbach et al. 2015; Del Rowe 2016). This research found evidence to support the three benefits. Zeta 1 and Delta mentioned, for example, that they can track and see the behavior of the leads when they embed the cookies, and the information that they collect, they use it for targeting better. Alpha explained that marketing automation has enabled them to understand what their target group needs and wants. Also, Epsilon and Gamma said that with marketing automation they are fine-tuning their message so it goes to the right audience at the right time.

In conclusion, all the direct benefits mentioned in the theoretical part found support in this

research except for the integrations with other systems which is seen more as a requirement. The findings demonstrate that the most common direct benefit of marketing automation is to save time. Collecting information, segmenting, and personalizing the message are also typical direct benefits for B2B companies. The benefit for marketing and sales to track, analyze, and evaluate the leads was found to be dependent on the integration between the marketing automation and the sales force automation systems. Therefore, only the companies that have both systems integrated can achieve this benefit.

4.5.2. Indirect benefits

As it was discussed before, marketing automation allows marketers to save time from doing manual and repetitive tasks (Putkinen 2014). The indirect benefit of enhancing marketing's efficiency was suggested in the theoretical background (Bucklin et al. 1998; Järvinen & Taiminen 2016; Wood, 2015; Keens & Barker 2009). This research found strong evidence supporting this benefit. In this regard, Sigma suggested that marketing automation helps to escalate the marketing functions without adding more headcount or budget because campaigns are built and kept running all the time which in turns frees up time. On the same subject, Delta mentioned that marketing automation helps to make a bigger impact with the same resources, and Zeta 2 said that it adds wisdom or smartness to the whole process. These arguments demonstrate that marketing automation increases the efficiency of marketing by reducing the number of resources required to do repetitive tasks. However, as it was clarified before, this does not imply that fewer resources will be needed for marketing. It reduces the time on repetitive tasks but it increases the amount of work. As Epsilon commented, *"we need to plan more than do but the workload is, I think, bigger"*.

Regarding the benefit of increasing the number of leads generated, this was suggested by some of the companies as a benefit. Here, it is important to clarify two things. One thing is to say that marketing automation increases the number of leads, and the other thing is to say that marketing automation supports the generation of leads. While, in the first one, lead generation is defined as dependent on marketing automation, in the second one, marketing automation is perceived to play a supportive role in the lead generation. Since lead generation depends on many other factors that are not exclusively related to marketing automation, as

Delta mentioned, claiming that marketing automation directly increases the number of visitors and leads is questionable.

> *As for the lead generation side, it is debatable the real value of marketing automation because we do get leads from "contact us" forms. We always have gotten them even before marketing automation. Now we plug-in marketing automation, the leads come in, and we claim it to marketing automation. That is not true. It is due to marketing partly that the leads come in, yes, but the way that they come in does not necessarily mean that marketing automation itself contributed in any way.* (Delta)

Following the logic explained before and the arguments provided by Delta, increasing the number of leads is not included as a benefit of marketing automation. However, this study recognizes that marketing automation helps to identify the visitors and move the leads along the funnel which contributes to lead generation. Therefore, an indirect benefit of marketing automation is to support marketing in the lead generation.

Another indirect benefit from marketing automation is to get a better visibility on marketing efforts (Buttle & Maklan 2015; Kumar 2011). This, as it was suggested in the literature review, means that marketers have more visibility on what they do, so they can identify things that need to be improved and learn at the same time (Ibid). Beta and Zeta 1 mentioned that transparency is one of the benefits of marketing automation because they can see the big picture of what is happening in the online channels. Sigma added to this that when they can see how the customers are interacting, they can learn which things work and which ones need improvement.

> *It allows us to learn about the interactions with the customers. If we see that certain newsletter items are not generating any interest, then we can fine-tune our messaging or even consider re-implementing some of our campaigns. It allows us to learn constantly. Previously, we should just have done another campaign. Maybe it was also unsuccessful or successful, who knows.* (Sigma)

In this regard, Beta told that they do constantly A/B testing and then analyze the data to see what works and what does not. As he said, this helps them to allocate better the resources.

This confirms that marketing automation helps in the allocation of resources as suggested in the literature (Buttle & Maklan 2015; Kumar 2011). This benefit not only comes from the fact that it can help them to identify campaigns that are not working well before deploying large amounts of resources on those, it is also because it helps companies to allocate resources in adding value activities. Since marketing automation helps to save time from repetitive tasks, marketers can focus more on strategic tasks, thus, the resources are better allocated.

Besides getting a better visibility of marketing efforts and being able to allocate better the resources, marketing automation helps to make marketing accountable. According to Sigma and Zeta, marketing automation allows them to quantify the value that their marketing departments are bringing to the companies. Omega explained that with marketing automation, marketing departments can demonstrate how many of the leads that turned into customers were generated by them and this helps them to prove their contribution to revenue. This not only shows how much marketing is contributing to revenue, but furthermore, it gives marketing the power to ask for more resources when they are needed. *"It allows us to argument why we need a different kind of resources and why we might need more resources"* (Sigma). Therefore, marketing automation as it helps companies to make marketing accountable, it changes the perception of marketing's role. As Zeta 2 pointed out, "*this has changed the perception that marketing is only for spending money and sales is bringing the money in, to how marketing creates new opportunities to sales"*.

The most discussed indirect benefit in the interviews was the alignment between sales and marketing. Even though not all the companies have reached this benefit, they recognize that marketing automation contributes to bringing together both departments. According to Delta, marketing automation enables the "handshakes" between the people from both departments. So first, companies get the tool, and then they realize that it does not work without marketing and sales working together. But the real alignment not only means that they use information from the same tool. It means that they work together to achieve common goals. As Zeta 2 indicated, *"the sales are bringing information and marketing is adding value to what they are doing. That is the real alignment"*.

This last part indicates that even though some companies might have integrated the sales

force automation to their marketing automation platform, this does not necessarily mean that they have aligned sales and marketing. For example, in the cases of Delta and Sigma, although they have integrated both systems, they said that they have not aligned sales and marketing yet in their companies. For the companies that said that they have marketing and sales aligned, for instance, Beta, Epsilon, and Zeta, they commented that they are having meetings with people from both departments regularly. In these meetings, they said that they discuss what improvements are needed for the customers' journey, and in the cases of Epsilon and Zeta, they discuss improvements for the lead scoring system.

Epsilon explained that they normally have the face-to-face meetings for discussing bigger campaigns or bigger issues that are happening, but the way that they keep a constant alignment is by harnessing the power of integrating the platforms. In this sense, Epsilon created a feedback field in their sales force automation platform. When a MQL is sent to sales for evaluation, if the salesperson finds the lead as not ready or not having the correct fit, they need to explain in the field in their sales force automation platform why they did not proceed with this lead and then this information gets back to Eloqua. This way, marketing knows what is happening with the leads that they are sending to sales, and if they need to improve something, they will notice it from the comments from sales.

> *It is simple because it is in our sales process. When they close a lead, they have to give a reason and then Salesforce gives us goods reports that how many leads were created, how many were closed, and what were the reasons they were closed. It gives us an insight of what is happening. So, the conversation is good if there needs to be a face-to-face conversation, but when we have the hard facts, then there is no question that is this really going as it should.* (Epsilon)

Another benefit discussed in the theoretical background is improving the relationships with customers. Since with marketing automation companies have more time to plan and they get more information about their customers, they can focus on designing strategies to provide better experiences to them. This improvement in the relationship manifests in higher retention rates, higher customer satisfaction, and higher cross- and up-selling rates. (Aquino 2012; Bucklin et al. 1998; Heimbach et al. 2015; Redding 2015) All the companies said that they

have improved the way that they communicate with their customers by providing them relevant content, however, none of them mentioned about more satisfied and loyal customers. According to Omega, *"when you are able to manage the customer journey, personalized content in different channels has an effect on the customer experience. That is of course not easy to measure per se"*.

Therefore, as Omega indicated, it is difficult to measure how much marketing automation has improved the customer experience. This will require analyzing the perception of customers on marketing automation, but as it was delimited before, this research does not cover that part. Consequently, more research is needed to understand how marketing automation affects the relationship with customers.

Lastly, improving the responsiveness was the last benefit analyzed in the literature review. This research found sufficient evidence to support this as an indirect benefit of marketing automation. According to Beta, since the adoption of marketing automation, marketing changed from being reactive to be more proactive and take part in the communication with customers and leads. Likewise, on this subject, Sigma stated that with marketing automation they can engage with the leads and customers when they need to do so. Additionally, he added that marketing automation forces them to think about future actions. *"It allows you to but it also forces you to think about the next step. So, if I am today sending an email and I get a 15% open rate, what do I do next"* (Sigma). This proves why marketing automation is more than just a technology. It clearly indicates that marketing automation has forced companies to adopt a more future orientation when thinking about engaging their customers and designing their plans.

An indirect benefit that was identified in the empirical research that was not suggested in the literature review is the support to the branding strategy. Marketing automation offers the possibility for companies to have control over the brand even if certain functions are decentralized. This benefit especially applies for larger companies that have a presence in numerous countries which generally have decentralized functions such as sales or marketing. With marketing automation, companies can create master templates which can be later adapted depending on the target market. With these templates, they can keep consistency in their message which helps for branding purposes, but at the same time, they can personalize them

to give an individual touch. In this regard, Omega commented, *"now you can centrally create the master templates and programs and then just kind of scale them up to every region"*. For example, companies such as Beta said that now, they can easily brand campaigns for certain customers and then change them easily for the other ones.

To sum up, marketing automation has helped companies to be more efficient, to get more visibility, to improve marketing's accountability, to support lead generation, to align sales and marketing, to improve the responsiveness, and to facilitate implementing the branding strategy. This study demonstrated that those benefits are achievable and some companies are already enjoying them. However, reaching them highly depends on how the companies perceive and utilize marketing automation.

5. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter begins summarizing the findings answering the research questions and high-lighting the most important results. Subsequently, the chapter covers the theoretical contributions of this study linking the findings to the current literature. Later, this chapter provides the managerial implications of the study, and lastly, it explains the limitations and gives the direction for future research.

5.1. Summary of the Findings

The following section presents the summary of the findings. The main research question, *how do B2B companies adopt marketing automation?* is answered with the findings of the four sub-questions.

How is marketing automation perceived?

In the literature review, an inconsistency among the definitions of marketing automation was found. While some authors (e.g. Buttle & Maklan 2015) adopt an operational perspective and define marketing automation as a software, other ones (e.g. Del Rowe 2016) go further and claim that even though the technology behind it is important, the relevance of marketing automation lies on the support to strategic marketing. Due to this discrepancy, this study explored the perception of marketing automation from the practitioners' perspective.

This study found that from the practitioners' perspective, marketing automation is perceived as a strategic resource. The participants recognized the importance of the software, but they highlighted as well how this tool has changed the ways of working in companies. Moreover, they mentioned how marketing automation supports functions such as email and content marketing, and lead and customer relationship management.

This study concludes that marketing automation supports both operational and strategic marketing, but its relevance lies in the latter. Therefore, in the B2B context, marketing automation is perceived as a strategic resource for customer management that supports functions such as email marketing, campaign management, content marketing, and lead management.

Moreover, to contribute to the knowledge on marketing automation, this research found that this tool is used differently in the B2B and B2C context. For B2B companies, as the buying process is generally longer than in B2C, marketing automation supports both the lead and the opportunity stage. In the lead stage, it contributes to identify and provide content to the leads to help them recognize their need, while in the opportunity stage, it helps to provide insights to sales and position the company to increase the possibility of turning the opportunities into customers. On the other hand, in B2C companies, as most of the buying process occurs in the lead stage, marketing automation role is to raise awareness and convert the leads into customers in that. After the leads or opportunities are converted into customers, marketing automation role for B2B and B2C is to continue developing the relationship with those customers.

How is the process of marketing automation adoption?

Rogers' diffusion of innovations theory (2003) states that the decision to adopt an innovation is a process consisting of steps. Damanpour (1991) divided Rogers' steps into two stages, initiation and implementation. Based on Rogers' theory (2003) and Damanpour's division (1991), this study called the first stage initiation and described it as the stage where a company recognizes the existence of the innovation, searches for information about it, and makes the adoption decision. This research added that in this stage the vendor evaluation and selection occur. Damanpour's (1991) second stage, implementation, that is when a company uses the innovation and confirms its decision was separated in this study into two, implementation, and post-implementation. This study argued that, before using marketing automation, there is a stage where the company installs and integrates the platform with other systems. This stage was called implementation. Once a company uses the innovation for the first time, the post-implementation stage begins.

In the initiation, according to authors such as Kim and Galliers (2004), several factors influence the decision. This research, based on Del Aguila-Obra and Padilla-Meléndez (2006) classification, grouped the factors into three categories, internal, external, and technological. The findings of this study indicate that the external pressure from competitors and customers, and the fit between the tasks and the technology (TTF) are the factors that affect the most

the decision. Other factors such as organizational readiness in terms of availability of financial resources and technical knowledge, management support, and the relative advantage influence the decision as well. Additionally, as this study defined that the vendor evaluation and selection occur in the first stage, aspects such as the fit between the company's strategy and the vendor's functionalities, the compatibility with other systems, the relationship with the vendor, and the price were found to affect the selection of a vendor.

In the implementation, the evidence of this study suggests that the number and the type of platforms to integrate is highly dependent on the company's strategy. The case companies manifested integrating the most important systems according to their objectives in this stage. Other platforms were integrated in later stages once the companies gained more skills. To the majority of the companies, the sales force automation system was the most important one to integrate as it helps them to perform lead management functions, therefore, the integration with this system occurred at this stage.

Finally, in the post-implementation, the findings indicate that the utilization of marketing automation is a gradual process. At the beginning, companies start using the software mainly for email marketing, campaign management, and content marketing. Then, as they gain more knowledge and experience, they add more strategic activities for lead management and marketing analytics. Marketing automation for social media marketing was found not to be extensively used yet in the B2B context.

What are the main challenges when adopting marketing automation?

This study argued that companies face different challenges depending on the stage where they are in the adoption process. In the initiation stage, the biggest challenge found is the lack of competencies to understand marketing automation. Companies lack the competencies on this topic which makes it difficult for them to define strategies and objectives from its adoption. This complicates processes in later stages such as the alignment of sales and marketing. Furthermore, change resistance is perceived as another challenge at this stage as this tool brings a new way of working, and people are resistant to change how they have been doing the things in the past.

During the implementation, two important challenges were found. First, the challenge of integrating the platform with another system, especially to the sales force automation tool. This challenge generally arises from the problems companies already have in terms of keeping the quality of the data. Second, getting the participation of sales. The evidence suggests that sales participation in this stage is necessary for facilitating later alignment, but to some of the companies, aligning the efforts of both departments was difficult, especially because they have highly decentralized sales function.

In the post-implementation stage, change resistance was mentioned as the main challenge. According to most of the interviewees, it has been difficult in their companies to accept the technology and the changes that come with its adoption. Another challenge found at this stage is to harness marketing automation potential. The evidence suggests that companies are limiting the potential of marketing automation, in most of the cases, for performing functions for email marketing or campaign management which can be done with simpler platforms. Features for social media marketing and marketing analytics are highly underestimated in B2B companies.

What is the impact of adopting marketing automation in B2B companies?

The impact of adopting marketing automation was defined in terms of direct and indirect benefits. The latter benefits are the source of competitive advantage. The most common direct benefit found is saving time from doing certain repetitive tasks. Other direct benefits such as collecting information, segmenting, and personalizing the message also found evidence in this study. The benefit for marketing and sales to track, analyze, and evaluate the leads was found to be highly dependent on the integration between the marketing automation and the sales force automation systems.

In terms of indirect benefits, the evidence indicates that marketing automation is helping companies to be more efficient, meaning that they can escalate marketing functions without adding more headcount or budget. Also, the findings suggest that this technology is helping marketing to have more visibility of its efforts as it enables marketers to see the big picture of what is happening in the online channels and analyze which strategies are working and which ones are not. This leads to better allocation of resources and continuous learning.

Additionally, this research found that with marketing automation, marketing departments are able to demonstrate their contribution to the revenue. The benefit of sales and marketing alignment also found support in this study. This benefit was mentioned to be difficult to achieve but three of the interviewed companies are enjoying it. Other benefits that found evidence as well are the support to the lead generation and to the branding strategy especially for large companies or organizations with highly decentralized sales and marketing departments.

5.2. Theoretical Contributions

This research findings offer four relevant theoretical contributions. First, this study advances the knowledge on marketing automation perception. The evidence demonstrates that marketing automation is part of strategic marketing (Del Rowe 2016; Ginty et. al 2012). This tool also supports operational marketing, but in essence, it concerns more the strategic side of marketing. This study validates as well, the fact that marketing automation is not autonomous and its proper functioning depend on other CRM systems (Mohr et al. 2010; Buttle & Maklan 2015; Estrada 2015). This means that marketing automation is part of CRM as its capabilities do not cover the entire management of customers' relationships (Estrada 2015).

Second, this is the first study that explains how companies adopt marketing automation and what factors affect the adoption decision. This research presents a novel illustration of the adoption process wherein the stages and the activities at each stage are described. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that the diffusion of innovations theory (Rogers 2003) and the TPC model (Goodhue & Thompson 1995) are valid approaches for analyzing the adoption of marketing technologies. Regarding the TPC model, the study confirms that values and beliefs influence the utilization, and therefore, the impact of a technology (Ibid 1995).

Third, this study identifies the challenges companies face while adopting marketing automation. Moreover, the study provides recommendations to prevent or solve those challenges. The study findings support evidence proposing that the biggest challenge in the initiation stage is the lack of competencies to understand marketing automation. Additionally, the evidence confirms that other challenges along the process include change resistance, integrating the platform with other systems, harnessing the potential of the tool, and aligning sales

and marketing (Del Rowe 2016; Dupré 2016; Mohr et al. 2010; Peelen 2005; Putkinen 2014; Wood 2015).

Lastly, the fourth contribution is that this study gives an overview of the benefits that companies are achieving when adopting marketing automation. The findings indicate that companies can get both direct and indirect benefits with this technology (Iacovou et al. 1995). Among the direct benefits, the research supports benefits such as saving time, integrating different marketing functions in one system, integrating marketing and sales funnels, collecting information, segmenting, and personalizing the message (Putkinen 2014; Estrada 2015; Kumar 2011; Grossberg 2016; Heimbach et al. 2015; Del Rowe 2016; Aquino 2012). Regarding the indirect benefits, the findings indicate that with marketing automation companies can be more efficient, have more visibility, improve marketing's accountability, support lead generation, align sales and marketing, improve the responsiveness, and facilitate implementing the branding strategy (Bucklin et al. 1998; Järvinen & Taiminen 2016; Wood, 2015; Keens & Barker 2009; Biegel 2009; Kumar 2011; Buttle & Maklan 2015; Redding 2015).

5.3. Managerial Implications

It has been almost two decades since the beginning of marketing automation as a concept but this topic seems like something new. Probably the reason for this is that the only thing that is new is the technological advances that come with the idea of automating marketing, but the concept itself has been around for a while. This is a big challenge nowadays because it is common to think only on the installation of a software, but in practical terms, this installation requires changing the ways of working to manage better the relationship with customers. Thinking only about the software behind marketing automation limits the potential of this tool. Marketing automation, as seen as a part of operational marketing, restricts the capabilities offered by this technology and ignores the possibility of using the tool for developing strategic thinking within organizations.

As marketing automation is the new buzzword in marketing, not surprisingly, many companies are adopting it because other ones are doing it. Also, as its name suggests, the idea of having a tool that automates marketing sounds appealing, and more in these times when

people are talking about artificial intelligence. Many companies fear to stay behind believing that other companies have perfect marketing departments thanks to marketing automation, but what they ignore is that this technology does not replace humans – at least yet. Having marketing automation does not equal to success because the human brain behind the technology is still the main power of it, as he is the one who sets up the system's rules.

The managerial implications of this study are illustrated with a decision-making tree (Figure 14). The illustration covers the steps to follow on each stage in the adoption process of marketing automation. The figure explains how marketing automation should be adopted according to the findings of this research.
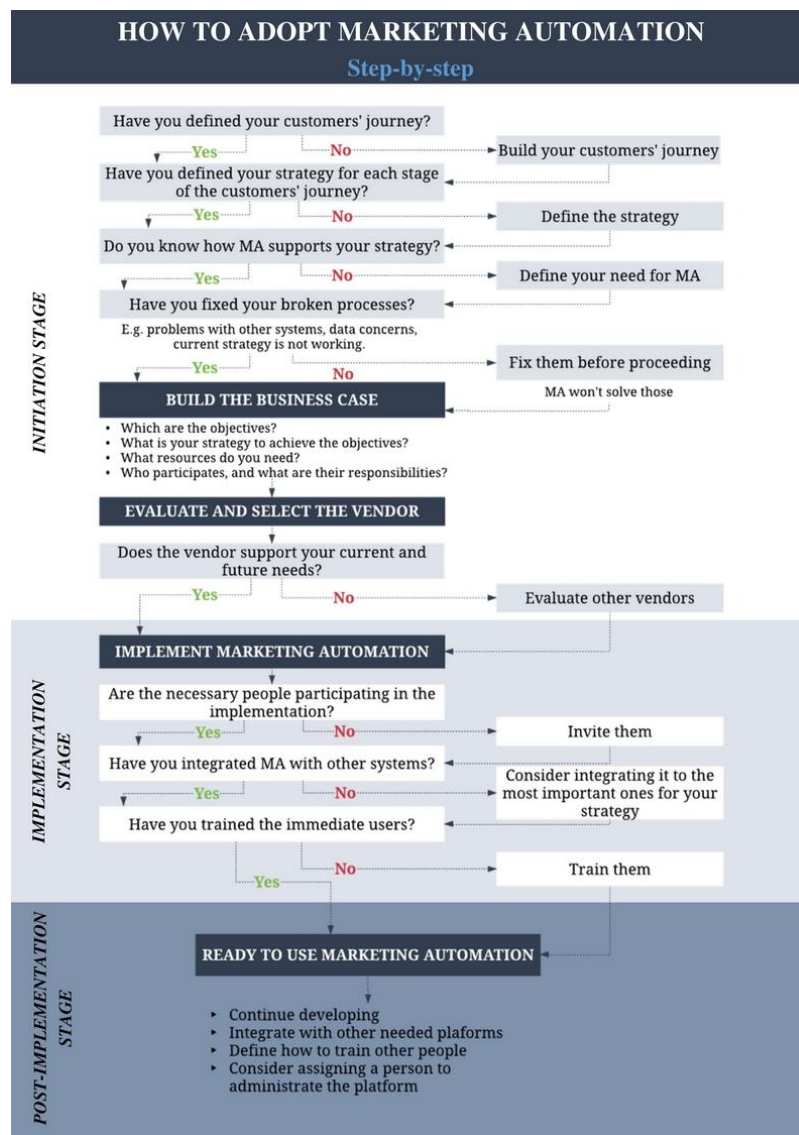

Figure 14 How to adopt marketing automation step-by-step

Initiation stage

Companies are constantly looking to reach the benefits of marketing automation, especially the indirect ones which are the source of competitive advantage. To achieve such benefits, it is necessary to initiate the adoption with a customer orientation and a strategic perspective. This means that, before building the business case and implementing the technology, companies must have a clear description of the customers' journey. This description should detail the strategic plans for each stage, keeping in mind the benefits for the customers. Once this is done, companies should define how marketing automation will support the strategic plans on each stage. Not having a clear customers' journey description before the adoption increases the risk of building the business around the tool instead of using the tool to support the business strategies.

Moreover, before the implementation, the broken processes should be fixed as marketing automation will not fix those (Wood 2015). Having broken processes may affect achieving the benefits as not solving them in earlier stages typically result in challenges later. Sometimes, companies attribute the fact of not reaching certain benefits or having certain challenges to the specific platform that they have. Changing the vendor will not solve as they cannot solve the internal problems. Data quality is, for example, a common broken process in companies that already have other CRM systems in place before adopting marketing automation. This problem often arises from the lack of having a culture that keeps the data structured and updated. Therefore, before the implementation, companies should solve first the data quality concerns and focus on developing a culture that keeps a high-quality data. This will prevent future issues especially when integrating the software with other platforms.

After the description of the customers' journey is clear and the broken processes are fixed, a structured business case defining the scope of the project and the objectives should be built. At this point, it is crucial to recognize the benefits and challenges of marketing automation. Companies should build contingency plans to the challenges and define a plan to accomplish the benefits. Often, companies know what they want to achieve with the adoption but they do not have a plan to reach what they want. Thus, building the business case detailing the strategy to face the challenges and achieve the benefits is recommended. For example, if a company is looking for aligning sales and marketing, the plan must include who need to be

involved, what are the responsibilities of sales and marketing at each stage of the customers' journey, what challenges they may encounter and how to solve those, and so on.

Once the need to adopt marketing automation is identified and the business case is built, companies can proceed to evaluate and select the vendor. In this part, as companies have clear their need for marketing automation, the vendor should be looked from their need. Doing the evaluation and selection of vendors before knowing how marketing automation will support the business strategies may cause dissatisfaction with the vendor or the tool in later stages. The key is to find the vendor that offers a platform that covers the company's current and the future needs.

Implementation stage

In the implementation stage, this study stated that the integrations to the most important systems take place at this stage. The systems to integrate are defined depending on the companies' data needs. Again, those needs are identified when the companies have recognized how marketing automation supports the business strategy. In this stage, companies should ensure that the right people participate in the integrations. For instance, in most of the cases, the integration with the sales force automation is done at this stage, therefore, salespeople should participate in the process. This facilitates the alignment of both departments in the post-implementation stage.

Post-implementation stage

After marketing automation is installed and integrated, and the people who will use the platforms are trained, the companies are ready to start using it. This is when the post-implementation stage begins, and this is the point when the companies perceive the impact from the adoption. The impact of marketing automation highly depends on the companies' strategy. In other words, even though some of the benefits are common to most of the adopters, there are some others, mainly indirect benefits, that some companies achieve and others not because of the strategy that they have developed for marketing automation.

Challenges

The biggest challenges found were the lack of skills and changing the mindset. People are still reluctant to change the way that they have done things before, and marketing automation implies a change in mentality to make it work. Some people are keeping the mentality of selling which was typical from transactional marketing. It seems the tools went further and the technology overpassed the skills of marketers because the tools' potential is much bigger than just for selling to a market. But, the problem is that the mind behind the tool, the one that gives the rules, stayed behind thinking on how to sell. People are staying thinking on the marketing of sending tons of emails or writing hundreds of blog posts to rank better in search engines, or even investing high budgets on paid advertisements to get the attention of customers. Customers are saturated and there is much of the same everywhere. If everyone is doing the same, then, how are the companies differentiating their marketing strategies?

"Customer-orientation" is a term indiscriminately used nowadays. Providing valuable content to customers does not equal engaging them. Measuring improvement in the relationship with customers based on opening rates and click-through rates is vague. The industries' standards on those rates are incredibly low, and success of campaigns should not be measured based on those. This ignores the analysis on what happens to the people who did not open the email or did not click the link. Also, it leaves on a side the analysis on how these campaigns are affecting the loyalty and interest of the people in the long run.

Marketing automation includes a wide range of features supporting different functions, but the features supporting social media and marketing analytics are still highly underestimated in the B2B context. It is concerning the lack of importance to marketing analytics in B2B companies. Even though marketing is the art of providing exceptional customer experiences, it is becoming more a science than ever. Everything that marketers do has an impact and the numbers collected by the systems represent the voice of customers. With the data is possible to know which strategies work and which not. But the problem is that there is still high focus on executing, and planning and analyzing are left on a side in most of the cases. So, how can the processes be improved if there is not an analysis of the results? The lack of a strategic culture within organizations is the result of the lack of analytical skills.

As expressed by some of the participants of this study, creating the correct reports is a science and to do so, companies need to have clear what they want to measure, why they want to measure it, and what target they have. Although it is true that marketing automation systems are not designed to be reporting tools, they have reporting capabilities to collect information from multiple channels. They need to be integrated into a business intelligence system for creating different levels of reporting to different people.

Impact

There is still a lot of confusion regarding the benefits derived from marketing automation adoption. For example, it is common to think about the benefit of reducing marketing personnel in companies. However, thinking about this benefit can result in negative consequences because the system only works if there are people dedicated to it. As it was discussed in the findings, harnessing the power of marketing automation is gradual, so, over time, companies learn to do more things with the tool which increases the number of tasks to perform. Consequently, more human resources are needed to perform the tasks. If companies reduce the marketing personnel, they will not be able to use marketing automation to its full potential. This will result in higher costs in the long run since they will adopt a more expensive technology to perform the tasks that they could be doing with a more affordable one.

Another benefit of marketing automation that is questionable is the lead generation. One thing is to generate leads and the other thing is to support the lead generation. A distinction between both is necessary because, although, marketing automation helps to identify the leads and nurture them with relevant content which contributes to moving them along the funnel, the technology itself does not generate leads. Knowing this difference will prevent companies to get disappointed if they install the system and they notice that they are not generating more leads. They will be able to understand that marketing automation is one part of marketing, and there are other activities for lead generation that are important but that the system does not cover.

The most discussed indirect benefits, and probably the ones that every company looks for, are to align marketing and sales and to demonstrate marketing's contribution to the revenue. The second one depends heavily on the first one, thus, companies that do not have aligned

marketing and sales find it difficult to demonstrate marketing's accountability. Aligning marketing and sales is difficult for many reasons, but the main one is because both departments have worked for a very long time in silos and the perception that they have of each other is not the best. It is hard for the entire company to realize that the role of marketing has changed, especially for sales. Now with marketing automation, marketing can identify the leads and nurture them before sending them to sales. But for sales, it is still difficult to value the leads generated by marketing.

With marketing automation sales and marketing are forced to work together. But, the fact of having integrated the funnel does not mean that they are aligned. The real alignment happens when they both work together towards the same goal. Also, when they understand that each one has its own responsibilities in the customers' journey, but they are supporting each other to improve their own processes. It seems unreachable to get to that point, but as it was showed in this study, some companies are already getting this benefit.

It is said that, with the evolution of marketing technologies, the recruitment of personnel for marketing is changing. In fact, it is, but not towards technical backgrounds as some suggest. To understand the systems, and to process and analyze the data, a technical background is not strictly necessary. The systems are developed to be user-friendly, thus, it is easier for a person to learn how to use those than to develop analytical and strategic thinking. Therefore, companies should look more for people who are naturally observational and analytical. They are the ones who can combine the data with human insights to find which data are relevant, and then, process and analyze it for building strategies to improve relationships with customers.

The arguments presented in this research demonstrate that the people are still the most important resource in marketing. Technologies have not been able to replace the human brain. Marketing automation as a modern technology is only now a resource to enhance people's skills. The system does not work without the people. So, a big question is left for the adopters and future adopters, are you willing to invest on both, the platform and the people?

5.4.   Limitations and Future Research

This research assumed a broader perspective to examine the process of marketing automation adoption. The study was performed in a single research context which is Finland, and the sample was relatively small. The results of this research are supposed to be generalizable for B2B companies, but more research in different contexts is needed to confirm this assumption.

The study did not include the analysis of the adoption in companies of a specific size or in a particular industry. More research focusing on companies of a specific size or industry could help to identify variations on the adoption process. Furthermore, this study evidenced that the adoption process has some differences for the companies that have been acquired. Thus, research on the adoption of marketing automation for mergers and acquisitions is needed to understand how these companies adopt the tool and what factors affect the process.

Moreover, in this research, the sample was delimited to companies with any marketing automation system. It did not evaluate how a specific platform may affect the process. A study describing how the different platforms affect the process could uncover the role of the vendor in the process or if the perception of marketing automation varies depending on the platform. The sample was delimited as well to include only the perspective of companies. Nevertheless, future research on the perspective of customers and vendors may contribute to building the understanding of marketing automation. In addition, as this study only included the views of marketing automation from the strategic marketing's perspective, research from the operational perspective and how the rest of the companies perceive the adoption could complement this paper.

The author's previous experience on marketing automation helped to develop the framework of the study. In the literature review, numerous factors were found to affect the adoption of innovations. Despite this, as the research had to be delimited, only the factors that the author considered more relevant were analyzed.

Regarding the challenges, the data storage concern (Heimbach et al. 2015) in the implemen-

tation stage, and meeting the content needs (Järvinen and Taiminen's 2016) in the post-implementation stage were identified in the literature but this research did not find evidence supporting them. Hence, they require further research to confirm them as challenges.

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APPENDICES

Appendix I Interview questions

Basic Information

- Company:
- Marketing automation system:
- Year of adoption:
- Other relevant information:

Perception of Marketing Automation

- How did you learn about marketing automation?
- How would you define marketing automation?

Marketing Automation Adoption Process

Initiation Stage

- How was marketing done before adopting marketing automation?
- Why did [company] decide to adopt marketing automation?
- Why did you select [vendor]?

Implementation Stage

- What challenges did [company] face during the adoption process?
- What was the role of the sales department in the adoption process?

Post-Implementation Stage

- Which features of marketing automation are you using now?

- What benefits are you getting from having a marketing automation solution?
- What challenges is [company] facing now after adopting marketing automation?
- Is [company] using a lead scoring model now?
- Is the marketing automation software integrated with other systems? Which ones?
- How is the sales department currently contributing to improve marketing processes?

Appendix II Interview questions for the consultancy company

Basic Information

- Company:
- Other relevant information:

Perception of Marketing Automation

- How did you learn about marketing automation?
- How would you define marketing automation?

Marketing Automation Adoption Process

Initiation Stage

- Why do you think companies are adopting marketing automation?

Implementation Stage

- What are the main challenges your customers face during the adoption of marketing automation?

Post-Implementation Stage

- What are the main challenges your customers face after the adoption of marketing automation?
- What benefits are your customers getting from marketing automation?
- Which features your customers use of marketing automation?
- Which features they do not use?

Other

- Which is the most popular vendor of marketing automation? And, why?
- What differences do you find between marketing automation vendors?

Appendix III Nodes in NVivo

Nodes

Name	Sources	References
Marketing Automation	0	0
⊟ General Information	0	0
System and Year of Adoption	8	9
⊟ Perception Marketing Automation	0	0
Definition	8	17
Source of Information	7	8
⊟ Adoption Process	0	0
⊟ Factors Affecting Adoption	0	0
⊟ Factors Initiation Stage	7	28
Vendor Selection	8	44
Factors Implementation Sta	8	17
Factors Post-Implementatio	8	65
Challenges	8	67
Benefits	8	66
Future Marketing Automation	5	11