

The challenges in digital marketing application in the Dutch startup sector

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Abstract

The technological advances made in the digital environment have not only transformed the ways individuals interact with another but has also greatly impacted the practice of marketing. Due to the rise of social media platforms, various new means of communication and strategic marketing in the virtual environment, digital marketing has become one of the most profound tools for businesses to enhance their visibility, brand awareness and subsequently drive growth in revenue. Therefore, smaller and young enterprises such as startups, which tend to have limited financial and human capital resources harness these newly arisen opportunities in order to grow faster, stronger, and even compete with more well-established enterprises across all industries. However, uncertainty in decision-making in regard to strategic digital communication, scarce resources in time and financial capital, in addition to the limited human capital working on communications and marketing in a startup context, constitute towards a loosely-tied digital marketing strategy and insufficient emphasis on communication and marketing efforts in small enterprises. Therefore, this thesis aims to examine the characteristics and challenges of the Dutch startup sectors when applying digital marketing strategies.

This research consists of theoretical and empirical parts of the study. Firstly, the academic literature and the theoretical framework explores digital marketing, various digital marketing tools, and their strategic implementation in practice. Secondly, the empirical part of the research consists of 11 interviews which have been conducted with representative experts from the Dutch startup sector in order to analyze and shed some light on challenges that the respective startups in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and Eindhoven encounter while conducting digital marketing in their practice. The interview questions have been based on the academic literature and are divided into three separate, yet correlated themes, namely, digital marketing tools, digital marketing strategies, and the challenges in the aforementioned digital marketing tools and digital marketing strategy application.

The findings of the study detail the fundamental nature of digital marketing and its fluidity which is caused by the ever-changing and rapid-paced digital environment. Furthermore, lack in decision-making and necessary technological and practical skills which are required for the creation and execution of digital marketing and its strategies are seen as obstacles in the startup context. Subsequently, deficiency in human and financial resources, pose challenges for younger or smaller startups which do not necessarily have enough financial resources to employ experienced and skillful professionals.

Keywords: digital marketing, digital marketing tools, digital marketing strategy, startups, the Netherlands.

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1. Introduction

“A startup is a human institution designed to create a new product or service under conditions of extreme uncertainty.”, this is how Eric Ries, the author of the bestselling book “The Lean Startup: How today's entrepreneurs use continuous innovation to create radically successful businesses” defines a startup (Ries, 2011, p. 67). According to A. Colombelli and colleagues (2016), new businesses are the engines of economic development and positive change, who play a critical role in the development of competition and innovation (Colombelli et al., 2016). Moreover, startups have a significant power to create new occupations and bring market growth, which is highly important for the recovering economy after the 2008-2012 global economic crisis, which has left many Europeans unemployed and has yet to recover to its pre-crisis state (Moreira, 2016; Kilhoffer and Beblavý, 2015). Additionally, according to the 2010 research conducted by Kauffman Foundation, big corporations and enterprises have created zero new net jobs throughout the last 40 years, instead, 100 percent of new jobs have been created by entrepreneurs from the startup sector (Kane, 2010). Furthermore, startups and medium-sized enterprises are considered to be the backbone of the economy as it accounts for 99 percent of all enterprises in addition to 65 percent of job providers amongst all European countries and are expected to continue to grow in numbers in the future (OECD, 2017; Grundström et al., 2012). The economic rationale of such entrepreneurial role in innovation arises from what Schumpeter (1939 p. 228) calls “creative destruction” which ascends from the ability of new and small enterprises to obliterate the less efficient and bigger companies by applying faster decision-making, more rapid adaptability processes, and innovative-thinking (Scott et al., 2015).

According to the recent study conducted by the Global Entrepreneurship Network, the Netherlands are ranked 10th globally in the Global Entrepreneurship Index that measures the health of the entrepreneurship ecosystems from each of the 137 participating network countries (Acs, et al., 2017). Furthermore, a study conducted by Startup Genome in 2017 placed Amsterdam in the 19th place in the 2017 Global Startup Ecosystem Ranking and is considered to be one of the best performing cities and a European hotspot in the global startup scene with attraction rate of 10 percent (Startup Genome, 2017). Such strong performance, considering the size of the country, is an indication of a strong economy, high levels of innovation, and robust market growth. However, it is also a strong indicator of competitiveness in the market, considering the fact that only around 55% of all startups in the Netherlands survive the first three years (Calvino et al., 2015). Therefore, in order to succeed in such rigorous market, startups and small enterprises need to loom, excel and accelerate in every means possible.

Such continues rise of startups, according to various researchers, constitutes from the technological advances made in the last decades, especially, the digital transformation of businesses. (Anderson, 2012; Brynjolfsson, and McAfee, 2011; Pollman, 2016). According to S. Ismail, the author of "Exponential Organizations" (2014), we have entered a digital world where technology moves in the fastest pace ever witnessed by the human kind and enables small enterprises to compete with multi-billion-dollar corporations. However, in order to compete with industry giants, startups need to harness these technological advances, adapt their strategies, and engage with clients by communicating who they are, what they do, and what do they stand for (Rode and Vallaster, 2005). Therefore, strategic digital marketing communication plays a crucial role in the development of startups through brand exposure and brand awareness, which contributes to the establishment of identity and/or reputation in addition to growth in revenue (Abimbola and Vallaster, 2007). Moreover, technological advances made in the last couple of decades gave birth to the World Wide Web and subsequently gave means for people and businesses to connect and showcase their activities through various means of digital communication which are usually referred as the social media, amongst other digital tools of communication (Godin, 2015). Subsequently, the combination of both technological advances and the need for exposure of startups determined the necessity of advertising and marketing through various websites and platforms. Therefore, in order to reach potential customers, startups need to have a thorough and comprehensive digital marketing strategy.

Although the digital age has given means for startups and small enterprises to engage with customers through various digital communication platforms, research shows that many startups encounter difficulties and are fraught with choosing the correct digital platform. Furthermore, in addition to the difficulties in choosing the correct platform, the creation of marketing content that would be truly engaging and subsequently would lead to the positive delivery of results, according to research, is a reoccurring difficulty (Pulizzi, 2012; Aaker, 2015). However, strategic communication via digital tools and in-house content marketing is considered to be one of the most widely used tools by startups, because of its relatively low-costs, in comparison to the traditional advertising, convenience, and in some instances direct and mutually-beneficial relationships which are established through constant communication with customers (Bresciani & Ewing, 2014). Nevertheless, uncertainty in decision-making in regard to strategic digital communication, scarce resources in time and financial capital, in addition to the limited human capital working on communications and marketing in a startup context, constitute towards a loosely-tied digital marketing strategy and insufficient emphasis on communication and marketing efforts in small enterprises. Particularly considering the fact that just only over the half (54%) of enterprises have a digital marketing strategy (Chaffey's & Smith's 2013). Therefore, this research analyses the characteristics and challenges of Dutch

startup sectors when applying digital marketing strategies. Hence, the research question of this study examines **RQ: What challenges do the startups in the Netherlands face in applying digital marketing strategies?**

SQ1: What digital marketing tools do startups use to communicate with consumers?

SQ2: What kind of digital marketing strategies can be identified?

SQ3: What kind of challenges do startups encounter in applying their digital marketing tools in their digital marketing strategy?

As the growing impact and importance of startups on the economy continue to rise, the academic world has harnessed the growing interest of such enterprises and has seen a considerable growth in volume, quality, and theory-drivenness amongst startup and entrepreneurship focused publications (Davidsson, 2016). However, knowing how to yield and harness strategic digital marketing, particularly in regards to startups and small businesses, has been underwhelmingly unrepresented in the academic world and most academic findings can be considered outdated as they were conducted mostly in the early 2000s'. Therefore, in order to further contribute to the existing academic literature, the aim of this study is to take a more of a holistic approach and examine what strategic digital marketing strategies and their implementations are the most effective in the startup sector by employing the concepts of various persuasive communication theories in addition to strategic marketing methods and concepts. This study builds upon the existing strategic marketing theories and draws upon various concepts in regards to the implementation of theoretical knowledge in real-life practice. Therefore, this study aims to critically examine the purpose of digital communication strategies in regard to startups. Furthermore, one of the most important purposes of such research aims to expand the already existing knowledge of digital marketing strategies and their concepts. Moreover, this study intends to examine the problems and challenges of the Dutch startup sector in regard to the implementation of strategic digital marketing tools by examining how startups in the Netherlands use strategic marketing methods and digital tools.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework chapter covers the definitions of various concepts in addition to the literature used in this study with the aim to answer the aforementioned research question. The theoretical framework chapter firstly narrows down and defines what is a startup considered in this study, followed by explanations of concepts such as marketing, digital marketing, digital marketing tools, differences between business-to-business and business-to-customer marketing, search marketing tools and the distinction between search engine advertising and search engine optimization, digital marketing strategy, and finally, digital marketing strategy framework. In doing so, the obtained knowledge on this particular study is used as a tool to portray the information which subsequently would lead to a thorough and thought-provoking research. Therefore, this chapter forms and presents the understanding of digital marketing and the strategic digital marketing tools that are being used in practice. Furthermore, this chapter establishes connection between digital marketing and the business approaches and processes which have an impact on the digital marketing strategy development. Finally, this chapter presents the SOSTAC model which is used as a tool for the digital marketing strategy development and subsequently, the evaluation of digital marketing strategies which are conducted by the Dutch startup sector.

2.1 Startups

A startup (or start-up) is usually referred as a young entrepreneurial venture that is just at the beginning of development (Čalopa et al., 2014). According to the European Startup Monitor (ESM), startups are frequently associated with (1) rapid-growing enterprises that are younger than 10 years, (2) that feature innovative technologies or/and develop their business models around innovative business models, (3) aim for substantial employee and/or sales development (European Startup Monitor, 2016). Nevertheless, the term “startup” in this study has a more narrow definition. A startup in this research is considered to be a newly established venture which is younger than 10 years old and is characterized accordingly by what Kelly (1999) considers a startup to have a foremost affinity towards up-to-date business models, information technology, digital media and connectedness to the rules of “New Economy” (Kelly, 1999). Therefore, this research focuses only on startups in the Netherlands, which are less than 10 years old, and which fit the affinity criterion as proposed by K. Kelly (1999).

2.2.1. Marketing

According to the American Marketing Association: “Marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings

that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large.” (American Marketing Association, 2013). However, in regard to the startup context, marketing can be explained as tool that is applied by enterprises in order to tell the customers about their products and/or services through information dissemination which subsequently leads toward higher rates of consumer engagement, interest in the enterprise and/or product, and ultimately growth in revenue (Centobelli et al., 2017). Therefore, marketing is considered to be an essential part of any startup business development, since its development is highly dependent on the effectiveness of marketing efforts. Typically, in the startup environment, marketing is managed by an employee or a unit of employees responsible for marketing. However, startups run on a limited budget and because marketing activities are relatively costly, startups usually try maximizing their marketing efforts with cheaper alternatives such as digital marketing (Hæreid & Indregård, 2015).

2.2.2. Digital marketing

According to Kannan and Li (2017), digital marketing is a process that uses digital technologies in order obtain customers, promote brands, build client preferences and eventually drive growth in revenue (Kannan & Li, 2017). Digital marketing enables the enterprises to attract prospective customers or keep in touch with already existing ones by providing the customers with digitally generated content which drives customers to the enterprise (Chaffey & Smith, 2013). However, in recent years, the purpose of digital marketing has shifted and is no longer perceived only as a tool to drive growth in revenue. The contemporary digital marketing sector noted that digital marketing can also be used to create mutually valuable relations with the consumers and enterprises (Sharma, 2012). Furthermore, digital marketing has gained its popularity also because of its capabilities which enable the enterprises to both (1) connect with a broader audience, and (2) specific or segmented audiences through interactive and real-time content (Järvinen, 2016). However, the effectiveness of digital marketing is an important issue, therefore researchers and marketing experts adapt the Hierarchy-of-Effects model by Lavidge & Steiner (1961). The Hierarchy-of-Effects model by Lavidge & Steiner (1961) is based on an assumption that audiences respond to marketing and advertising messages in a hierarchical order: (1) cognitively (“thinking”), affectively (“feeling”), and conatively (“doing) (Barry and Howard, 1990). Therefore, digital marketing strives to make digital content which would firstly: (1) reach the audience and raise “awareness” and “knowledge” of the enterprise and/or their product/service, secondly (2) engage with the audience to establish “liking” and “preference”, finally (3) “convince” the audience to “purchase” their product or service (Barry & Howard, 1990). By doing so, digital marketing can help startups drive growth revenue, whilst engaging and raising awareness of their enterprises. Furthermore, for this research, it is pivotal to

understand and explain how the shifting marketing environment towards digital contributes and builds upon the existing concepts in the academia.

2.2.3. Digital marketing tools

The Web 2.0 has been first mentioned in 2003, as a phenomenon which gave means for “users adding value” or in other words: “user-generated content” (Wigand et al., 2010 p. 4). The Web 2.0 phenomenon made the online technologies enormously flexible, dynamic and influential, therefore has changed the way consumer behave, interact and consume. Subsequently, this radical change influenced marketing to adapt to the new digital marketing tools in order harness their potential for growth in revenue and customer engagement (Hajli, 2014). According to Pew research, social media has become an integral part modern life as the use of social media between the age of 18-29 has risen to 90% in the last 10 years (Pew, 2017). Therefore, marketers accustom and harness digital networks, social media platforms, and various mobile apps in order to reach consumers by means of electronic devices (Chaffey & Smith, 2013). However, it is important to distinguish the differences between electronic, internet, and search marketing tools as proposed by A. Chris (2015). Therefore, different marketing tools are distinguished in three separate, but correlated hubs. The first hub (1) *Electronic marketing* includes TV, SMS, and radio. Second hub – (2) *Internet marketing*, encompasses social media, content marketing, banner ads, email marketing and mobile marketing. Finally, (3) *Search marketing* – comprehends SEO or search engine optimization, and PPC or pay-per-click tools (Chris, 2015). However, according to Ghose and Yang (2009), SEA or search engine advertising is be considered to be part of search marketing toolkit.

Ultimately, the knowledge of marketing tools and their differences are pivotal for this research, as it allows to adapt specific marketing tools to a thorough digital marketing strategy. This particular research will mainly investigate and analyze how the *Internet marketing* and *search marketing* tools are adapted to the digital marketing strategies in the Dutch startup's sector. Furthermore, the digital marketing tools are being analyzed in order to investigate how they are applied in practice, therefore in this research, it is also used as a tool to explore what challenges to Dutch startups face in applying digital marketing tools in their practice. By doing so, it allows the research to draw and build upon the existing academic concepts of digital marketing tools and their application in practice.

2.2.4 Internet marketing tools classification

According to the Global Web Index (2017), 98 percent of all digital customers on the internet are social media users. Furthermore, it is estimated that there were over 2.3 billion active social media users in 2016, which grew approximately 10 percent since the previous year

and is expected to grow in the future (Chaffey, 2016). Moreover, in 2017 the average number of social media accounts held by active internet users is estimated to be around 7.6 (Global Web Index, 2017). Therefore, as noted by Chaffey and Smith, in order to develop a digital marketing strategy, it is essential to identify and accordingly classify the key types social media platforms (Chaffey & Smith, 2013). By doing so, it allows to identify the most important social media platforms and characterize the targeted audiences which leads towards a more profound digital marketing strategy. Subsequently, Chaffey and Smith (2013) identify and classify the social media platforms in 10 separate, but often correlated categories:

1. Social networks (Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Google+) – refers to social media platforms which encompass interaction between individuals, consumers, and enterprises.
2. Social publishing and news (Tumblr, Pinterest) – refers to newspapers, magazines, and communities which interact with each other usually via visual content posted on the abovementioned social media platforms.
3. Social commenting on blogs – refers to digital diary-like platforms where both individuals and enterprises interact by sharing visual and textual content. The interaction between the consumers and enterprises occurs through sharing and commenting on social blogs.
4. Social niche communities (TripAdvisor, Trustpilot, Yelp) – refers to platforms which encompass user-generated content in regard to various services, networks and often incorporate guidelines and experiences of other individuals.
5. Social customer service (Get Satisfaction) – refers to social media platforms which provide the customers with the necessary support to resolve, address or connect with various issues that the customers attain.
6. Social knowledge (Wikipedia, Yahoo! Answers, SlideShare, Quora) – refers to social media platforms where users collaboratively generate, modify and/or structure information with the main goal to share, create and explain knowledge-based or factual information for public use.
7. Social bookmarking (Reddit, StumbleUpon, Digg, Delicious) – refers to social media platforms which help individuals and businesses organize, manage and store information or documents from content providers and various information sources.
8. Social streaming: photos, videos (YouTube, Instagram, Flickr, Pinterest, Vimeo) – refers to social media platforms which contain user-generated visual and audio content which is reachable to other individuals or enterprises.
9. Social search (Google+) – refers to social media platforms which are used for social networking between individuals and/or enterprises.

10. Social commerce (eBay) – refers to social media platforms which entail user-generated content in regard to products and retail sector reviews, ratings, and deals.

In addition to classifying the internet marketing tools, it is also essential to understand which social media platforms are most relevant in a startup context. According to Valos (2008), consumers embrace the practice of using multi-channel consumption, therefore there is a necessity to combine multiple social media platforms in order to increase the reach of customers. Furthermore, as noted by Gensler, Dekimpe and Skiera (2007 p.17) “*Evaluating channel performance is crucial for actively managing multiple sales channels and requires understanding the customers’ channel preferences*”. Therefore, in order to maximize both the reach of the customers or targeted audiences and the profitability of social media marketing, it is essential to understand which social media channels are the most beneficial for such efforts.

2.2.5 Main social media marketing platforms

According to Ellison (2007), although the social aspect in the digital environment can be traced back to the early 1970’s, however the very first identifiable social media platform is considered to be SixDegrees.com, which was launched in 1997. The platform allowed users to create their own private accounts and interact with friends from their friends lists, which made the platform very attractive to communicate with other people. SixDegrees.com in the first couple of years attracted millions of users, however did not manage to develop a sustainable business (Ellison, 2007). Consequently, more social media platforms have ascended, especially in the early 2000’s which can be contributed to the technological advances which made the internet use more accessible to wider population of users (Sajithra & Patil, 2013). Subsequently, social media platforms such as MySpace, Friendster, AsianAvenue, BlackPlanet and many more, allowed the internet users to create personal accounts for digital interaction, professional communication and dating opportunities (Ellison, 2007). Although, the early 2000s’ gave rise to many social media platforms, the most noteworthy ones could be considered LinkedIn (2003), Facebook (2004), and YouTube (2005), which up to this day have a significantly large popularity between the internet users. Therefore, this research outlines the most important social media platforms which have the greatest following. The main social media marketing platforms according to Global Web Index (2017) are the following:

2.2.5.1 Facebook - According to Caers and colleagues (2013) although Facebook has been founded only in 2006, it has become one of the most profound social trends in the last ten years. Fundamentally, Facebook can be described as a social media platform where

users can share images, video content, articles, react to news and interact with other friends through privately held accounts (Caers et al., 2013). Furthermore, Facebook allows both private individuals and various organizations or enterprises to create accounts. The Facebook Reports (2017) state that in 2017 Facebook had approximately 1,4 billion active daily users in addition to approximately 2,13 billion active monthly users. Furthermore, both the active daily and the active monthly users in comparison to 2016 grew by 14% and is expected to grow in the future (Newswire, 2017; Statista 2018). Moreover, in recent years, social media and especially Facebook has become an increasingly profound platform for customer service where the customers or potential customers are able to connect and interact with enterprises in order to receive quick and real-time answers (Chaffey, 2018). Subsequently, Facebook has become the biggest social media platform with an annual revenue in 2017 of over 40 billion USD, which is approximately was 50 times more than in year 2009 (Statista, 2017). The revenue is created through various means of advertisement including imagery, audio, and visual content generated by organizations and enterprises who wish to share their content on Facebook (Caers et al., 2013). The cost of such advertisements created by enterprises is accounted by combination of Click Through Rate (CTR) and View Through Rate (VTR) calculations which are offered by Facebook (Curran, Graham & Temple, 2011). The averaged and approximate numbers show the potential CTR and VTR rates which refer to the potential reach of customers. These rates, depending on the preferable customer-reach size, are offered by Facebook and come in different price-ranges. Subsequently, businesses who choose to advertise their content on Facebook choose from one of the optional CTR and VTR offers and respectively the price-range which suits the enterprise (Curran et al., 2011). In return, the enterprise receives statistical insights on advertisements' reach, the calculated amount of individuals that have clicked on the enterprises ads (Curran et al., 2011). Moreover, Facebook paid advertising is used to target various demographics which are set by the enterprises and usually include the targeted audiences age, gender, location, the level of education, and various personal interests (Caers et al., 2013). Therefore, research shows that Facebook advertising has become one of the most useful platforms for digital marketing, because it offers a substantial reach of customers for a low-cost, whilst being flexible to the enterprises and needs.

2.2.5.2 Instagram - can be described as a social media platform which allows both individuals and enterprises share photos, images and video content with other individuals on Instagram (Instagram, 2017). According to Hochman and Manovich (2013), Instagram was launched in 2010 as a user-generated content platform that connects individuals through visual content, namely videos and photos. Currently, Instagram has over 800 million active users and especially in the last years has established itself as one of the most significant

social media platforms for digital advertising (Berg & Sterner, 2015). Although initially Instagram was created with the purpose to connect individuals, in 2014 the executive board of Instagram has changed the policy and permitted the enterprises and various organization to use Instagram as a platform for advertising means (Pessala, 2016). According to Instagram's report, currently, around 25 million enterprises and organizations are using Instagram for advertising means, which is approximately 15 million customers more since July 2017 (Instagram, 2017). Consequently, the aforementioned policy-change has opened opportunities for marketing and advertising and it is estimated that around 67 percent of the major brands have adopted Instagram in their digital marketing strategies (Olsen, 2014). Furthermore, such rise in Instagram's' popularity for advertising means can partially be contributed to the compatibility and simultaneous posting option for both Instagram and Facebook, in addition, to be considered cheap, however effective mean of digital advertising (Alhabash & Ma, 2017). Moreover, research shows that Instagram is the third most visited social media platform with a penetration rate of 27 percent in 2015 (Chaffey, 2018). Therefore, Instagram is one of the most profound social media platforms that have a significant influence on engagement with consumers.

2.2.5.3 Twitter - can be defined as a social media platform which encompasses microblogging service where individuals, enterprises or organizations can post "tweets" which are 140-character limit messages, optionally with an accompanying visual image (Kwak, Lee, Park & Moon, 2010, April). According to the data, Twitter has approximately 330 million active users around the globe, though in the last couple of years it has been the slowest growing social media platform in regard to active user acquisition (Chaffey, 2018). However, despite being the slowest growing social media platform, Twitter is amongst the most popular social media platforms which held its position due to slow-but-steady rise in active user acquisition (Alhabash & Ma, 2017). Therefore, marketing and advertising professionals participate on Twitter by usually promoting their products via tweets, accounts and various trends (Eftekhar & Koudas, 2013). Furthermore, research shows that in most cases the marketing and advertising professional target the audiences mostly through Instagram and Facebook advertising, whilst Twitter is used for community engagement and informational purposes (Eftekhar & Koudas, 2013).

2.2.5.4 LinkedIn - can be described as a social media platform for professionals to showcase individuals' skills, accomplishments, education and portray the individual's professional experience (McFadden, 2014). LinkedIn has been one of the first major social media platforms since its launch in 2003 and currently has over 450 million users (Statista, 2016; Ellison, 2007). LinkedIn allows both individuals and companies create accounts which

are then used to exhibit individuals professional experience, as for enterprises, showcase their company information and post offerings for job-seekers (McFadden, 2014). Furthermore, LinkedIn provides the individual job-seekers and enterprises to connect, expand their professional networks, and establish business relationships, in addition to publishing and sharing articles and videos in regard to their professional or academic experiences (Utz, 2016). Furthermore, data shows that LinkedIn is particularly popular among the younger professional generation between the ages of 18 to 34. According to data the audience penetration and engagement between the aforementioned age group reaches over 50 percent, therefore it shows a significant use of LinkedIn as a social media platform since it exhibits the time spent on this particular platform (Chaffey, 2018). Subsequently, because of such high rates of audience penetration and engagement, LinkedIn is often used by marketers and advertising professionals to build a brand reputation through engaging and quality content, therefore often is used as a strategic digital marketing tool (Zhang & Cabage, 2017). Furthermore, LinkedIn is considered to be the most business-focused social media platform which represents the largest pool of educated, influential, and professional individuals, therefore LinkedIn has gained its popularity amongst both business-to-business and business-to-consumer enterprises (LinkedIn 2015).

2.2.5.5 Pinterest - is a social media platform launched in 2010 which allows the users to post visual images, such as photos and videos from the wider-web, by using user-generated or internet-found photos which are referred as the action of “pinning” (Hansen, Nowlan & Winter, 2012). According to the data provided by Statista, Pinterest has over 200 million active users, which nearly doubled since 2015 and therefore falls under the section of one of the most popular social media platforms (Statista, 2017). Furthermore, Pinterest allows the users to curate and personalize the display of their homepage in accordance with the user’s interests and needs. Moreover, in recent years, Pinterest has become a pivotal part of driving sales more effectively in contrast to other social media platforms, therefore according to Gilbert and colleagues (2013, April) has become widely adopted by advertising and marketing professional in respective digital marketing strategies. Such rise in popularity between marketing professionals is contributed to the “Rich Pin” tool, which is only available to enterprises with the main goal to improve customer experience on Pinterest (Mittal, Gupta, Dewan & Kumaraguru, 2014, March). The “Rich Pin” tool allows the enterprises to pin content which contains information in regard to the marketed apps, movies or any other product that is being advertised. Subsequently, this option allows the marketers to analyze the data and the website performance of such advertising (Mittal, Gupta, Dewan & Kumaraguru, 2014, March).

2.2.5.6 Snapchat - is a smartphone application that allows its users to share visual content, namely, photos and videos which can be seen in a time-framed manner with other friends (Roesner, Gill & Kohno, 2014, March). Furthermore, the users, who share the visual content with other friends, specify how long can the specific content be seen by the recipient friends which then after the specified time disappears. According to Chaffey (2018), Snapchat has over 250 million users, which popularity grew significantly in the last couple of years by 86 million users as in 2015. Moreover, according to the data the audience penetration and engagement between the ages 18-34 is the second biggest penetration rate after Facebook and reaches around 40 percent, therefore it shows a significant use of Snapchat as a social media platform since it exhibits the time spent on this particular platform (Chaffey, 2018). Additionally, research shows that Snapchat scores highest from all main social media platforms on the social interaction and entertainment dimensions rates, therefore it is considered to be amongst the best tools for digital marketing (Voorveld, van Noort, Muntinga & Bronner, 2018).

2.2.5.7 YouTube - is a video-sharing website which has been founded in 2005 (Wattenhofer, Wattenhofer & Zhu, 2012, June). Since 2005, YouTube has gained a substantial popularity amongst its viewers and in 2017 managed to get a billion views in one day (Luckerson, 2013). Moreover, YouTube is the second biggest social media platform after Facebook and has around 1,5 billion registered users (Chaffey, 2018). One of the reasons for such high viewing rates, according to research by Wattenhofer and colleagues (2012, June) can be attributed to the broadcast of video content experience, since YouTube connects with Facebook, Twitter, and Google+ and facilitates off-site diffusion. YouTube is popular amongst marketers and advertising professionals and is often used as a tool for communication by the enterprises through the creation of short ads which play before other videos can be seen (Pikas & Sorrentino, 2014). Moreover, YouTube receives many visitors from the Netherlands and according to data is ranked 8th in Europe by the number of visitors it receives, therefore it makes YouTube a significant tool for reaching Dutch customers (Chaffey, 2018). Finally, according to Nikuten, Saarela, Oikarinen, Muhos, and Isohella (2017),

2.2.6 Search marketing tools

According to Kannan and Li (2017 p.29) *“search engines allow customers to acquire free information on products and services and identify firms and brands that fit their search criteria.”* Search marketing and its tools are used as customer acquisition instruments who stem from listings of websites on search engines such as Google, Bing, Yahoo etc. through responses to various keywords (Kannan & Li, 2017). Multiple studies have shown the

effectiveness of search marketing tools for acquiring customers, driving growth in revenue, and the impact on customer value for respective brands which have been found via search engines (Pan, Xiang, Law, & Fesenmaier, 2011; Dinner, Van Heerde & Neslin, 2014). Search engines are comprised from three actors involved in the process, namely, the search engine, the customer, and the marketer or the advertiser who is using the search engine to reach out to customers (Dinner, Van Heerde & Neslin, 2014). However, the advertising or marketing professionals in order to reach out to customers need to decide upon which specific keywords and the bids for these specific keywords need to be chosen in order to efficiently and most effectively put into action (Kannan & Li, 2017). Therefore, marketing and advertising professionals use search engine tools, such as Search Engine Optimization (SEO), Search Engine Advertising (SEA), and PPC or pay-per-click tools which are often managed by advertising agencies who specialize in search engine marketing tools (Kannan & Li, 2017). Therefore, this research seeks to examine how startups in the Netherlands are using SEO, SEA, and PPC as part of SEO and SEA use as search engine marketing tools.

2.2.6.1 Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

According to Spais (2010 p.7), Search Engine Optimization or “*SEO can be defined as a natural or rather an organic way of ensuring that a website comes out on top when someone searches for a particular product or a particular keyword.*” The SEO is mainly used with the objective of increasing web traffic to the enterprise's website by enhancing the visibility of the website in the results of searches list (Katumba & Coetzee, 2017). According to Pew Internet project (Purcell, 2011), in the United States, around 92 percent of all activities on the wider web involves the use of various search engines such as Google, Bing or Yahoo (Lopez-Pellicer, Béjar, Zarazaga-Soria, 2012). Therefore, SEO is used as a technique for enhancing websites ranking on various search engines in order to establish dominance or higher visibility for enterprises (Katumba & Coetzee, 2017).

SEO is considered to be a technique which is part of Search Engine Marketing (SEM) process and is often used as a tool in the implementation of digital marketing strategies (Spais, 2010). This technique helps not only to give meaning for various keywords, but also for searches that include visual, locational, or/and commerce-specific searches (Spais, 2010). Furthermore, SEO can also be used as a technique which to indicate the online customer's journey on the company's website, which is recorded as an algorithm, therefore it helps the marketing and advertising professionals to evaluate the customer value and/or the cost-effectiveness (Spais, 2010). Consequently, effective use of Search Engine Optimization techniques can help to drive growth in revenue whilst ensuring the effective visibility of the enterprise or the product. Moreover, SEO is considered to be an essential part of digital marketing strategy, since the algorithmic systems allow the marketing professionals to boost

sales by promoting various products and services to specific audiences which arise from the customer traffic on the website (Spais, 2010). Therefore, marketing and advertising professionals usually consider Search Engine Optimization an essential part of any digital marketing strategy in hopes of increasing the levels of revenue and visibility of the enterprise in the digital world (Olbrich & Schultz, 2008 p. 182). Finally, according to Nikunen, Saarela, Oikarinen, Muhos, and Isohella (2017), Search Engine Optimization is widely used by micro-enterprises, such as startups, family-owned business, and self-employed enterprises with small numbers of employees, however usually lack the financial and human capital to augment the SEO capabilities for further growth.

2.2.6.2 Search Engine Advertising (SEA)

According to Ghose and Yang (2009 p.480), Search Engine Advertising or SEA is considered to be a phenomenon where *“search engines are able to leverage their value as information location tools by selling advertising linked to user-generated queries and referring them to the advertisers.”* This is achieved through advertisers and marketing professionals who are paying a fee to various internet search engines, such as Google, Bing, Yahoo, Baidu, etc., in order to have their website to be displayed along with organic or non-sponsored internet search results (Ghose & Yang, 2009; Lewandowski, Kerkmann, Rümmele, & Sünkler, 2018). Although, SEA was developed by Overture in 2001, which was later bought by Yahoo, Google developed AdWords who incorporated Generalized Second Price Auction (GSP) and quality-based bidding systems, which allowed the advertisers to conduct SEA in a more efficient way and in accordance with their needs (Yuan, Abidin, Sloan & Wang, 2012). Consequently, Google AdWords have become the most popular SEA tool and according to Sullivan (2013) encompassed approximately 65 percent of the global search volume in 2012.

SEA as a digital marketing tool is used by advertising and marketing professionals who advertise products or services by submitting the information of the product or service in the form of “keyword” which are then enlisted in the search engines (Ghose & Yang, 2009). Subsequently, Google AdWords and other search engine advertising tools assign bid values to each of the keywords which are determined in accordance to the listings which appear in the search results from a users perspective (Lewandowski et al., 2018). Hence, the advertiser may allocate the bids on the keywords which are deemed to be the most relevant for the task. However, the bid price of the assigned keyword is paid by the advertiser for the users who have clicked on the listing of the website in search engines (Ghose & Yang, 2009). Furthermore, according to Yuan and colleagues (2012), SEA is considered to be one of the most effective advertising means for its cost, especially since the cost can be variable to the pricing models such as cost-per-click (CPC), cost-per-mille (CPM), and cost-per-

acquisition (CPA). By doing so, the advertisers have the means to reflect on the user's interest and subsequently base an effective targeting method which derives from data acquired from Search Engine Advertising (Yuan et al., 2012).

In practice, the role of the SEA is designed to capture demand, whilst the traditional and digital media tools and platforms in most cases are intended to generating demand (ZMOT Handbook, 2012). Additionally, the popularity of Search Engine Advertising amongst advertising and marketing professionals derives from the substantially accurate measurability and statistical reliability of the marketing efforts regarding SEA (Jerath, Ma & Park, 2014). Furthermore, the academic literature and practice consider SEA being cost-effective and having a significant reach across various markets, devices, and physical limitations.

2.2.7 Multichannel omnichannel communication

According to Godfrey, Seiders and Voss (2011, p.94), multichannel communications can be defined as “*communication with customers through various channels as part of a broader relationship marketing strategy*”. It is used as a communications and marketing tool which combines various communication channels in order to reach targeted audiences to foster good relations with existing or prospective clients (Godfrey, Seiders & Voss, 2011). Furthermore, in startup context, multichannel marketing and communication efforts are usually communicated via the internet or online medium which eventually evolves into a revenue-generating tool (Sultan & Rohm, 2004). Moreover, the rise of mobile communication devices and various online platforms, have means for the advertising and marketing professionals to engage with their consumers (Pescher, Reichhart & Spann, 2014) and to tailor real-time consumer advertising which derives from the capability to track and record location-based-services through such devices (Okazaki & Taylor, 2008).

According to Vinhas and colleagues (2010), multichannel communications are the most popular tools of communication in small and medium-sized enterprises because they allow to generate information exchange between the customer and the enterprise and therefore utilize the information in order to interact with the customers which subsequently lead towards growth in revenue. Furthermore, the academic literature suggests that enterprise pursue to make marketing efforts through various multiple channels in order to “*maximize the efficiency and effectiveness and to exploit potential synergies across the channels and media*” (Keller, 2010), which is achieved through integrated mass and personal communication via particular platforms of communications which are considered to be the most suitable to serve in a particular situation.

2.2.8 B2B and B2C marketing differences

According to Miller (2012) and Michaelidou, Siamagka & Christodoulides (2011), the business-to-business (B2B) enterprises are considered to be slower in regards to the digital marketing adoption in comparison to the business-to-consumer (B2C) enterprises. Consequently, there is a difference in digital marketing efforts which derives from the understanding and relevance of such efforts for the growth in revenue. A study conducted by Michaelidou and colleagues (2011) show that around 60 percent of the B2B respondents assume social media being irrelevant to their business model. Furthermore, the same study shows that 44 percent of the respondents from the B2B sector consider social media having no beneficial monetary or nonmonetary value to their business (Michaelidou et. al., 2011). However, according to Moore, Hopkins, and Raymond (2013), social media adoption to the overall digital marketing strategy in both B2B and B2C enterprises, especially the smaller or younger ones, is becoming rapidly more popular. Although research shows that the mainstream social media platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Youtube are the most popular applications used by the B2B and B2C marketing departments and professionals, the utilization of such marketing efforts for new customer acquisition and higher brand awareness is still predominantly lead by the B2C enterprises (Moore et. al., 2013).

The main differences between B2B and B2C marketing differences stem from the complexity and different layers of interaction with customers and the purchasing volume of the aforementioned business models. In essence, B2B enterprises tend to have fewer customers, however, the purchasing volume although is greater, buying cycles take significantly more time (Bradstreet, 2017). Additionally, B2B purchasing and decision cycles are skewed towards more rational purchasing in comparison to smaller quantities, shorter purchasing cycles and emotional purchasing in the B2C environment (Bradstreet, 2017). Therefore, the B2B enterprises in comparison to the B2C mainly employ digital marketing platforms and especially social media to increase the flow of web traffic, analyze potential business possibilities and distribute content (Michaelidou et. al., 2011). On the other hand, B2C companies tend to rely significantly on the customer web-flow and purchasing and decision cycles which are lesser in volume, however, sell more often (Bradstreet, 2017).

However, according to Michaelidou and colleagues (2011) utilization of digital marketing between the aforementioned types of business models, is usually influenced by both human and financial capital which the particular enterprise possess. Although B2C enterprises tend to experiment more with social media and various other platforms and pursue probabilistic targeting of customers, B2C enterprises tend to utilize these platforms for deterministic, meaning, segmentation of specific audiences, targeting

efforts (Bradstreet, 2017). Consequently, B2B enterprises are more limited to the utilization of digital marketing platforms which would be beneficial for their enterprises, therefore tend to maneuver their digital marketing strategy with less experimental and more measurable marketing efforts (Moore et. al., 2013).

2.3 Digital marketing strategy

The understanding of digital marketing tools is not enough to succeed in the market, therefore in order to harness the digital marketing tools and maximize the efforts, it is also important to have a digital marketing strategy. A comprehensive digital marketing strategy allows the marketers in startups to understand the positioning of their product or/and service in the market, which arises from research which is a part of a thorough digital marketing strategy (Kannan & Li, 2017). Regrettably, according to Chaffey's & Smith's (2013) research, only over a half (54%) of enterprises have a digital marketing strategy, which arguably indicates the unfulfilled potential or opportunity to maximize their sales or engagement with customers. However, a thorough digital marketing strategy, even though requires much more effort, it can help to achieve goals and to concentrate on the objectives. The prime goal of a digital marketing strategy, according to Chaffey's & Smith's (2013), is to define what digital marketing tools can be used to take full advantage of digital communication and subsequently increase its effectiveness. However, in order to make a coherent digital marketing strategy, it is important to have a comprehensive digital marketing strategy framework.

2.3.1 Digital marketing strategy development

According to Chaffey and Bosomworth (2012), digital marketing strategy development is similar to the development of a traditional business strategy. Furthermore, Chaffey and Bosomworth (2012) suggest using the SOSTAC model, which has been developed by Smith (2011) and is considered to be an important model which leads towards the development of a comprehensive digital marketing strategy. The SOSTAC model, which is illustrated in *Figure 2*, is comprised of six different variables which ensure a thorough consideration of the most relevant factors which determine a good digital marketing strategy, namely (S) situation analysis, (O)objectives, (S)strategy, (T)tactics, (A)actions, and (C)control (Chaffey et al., 2013). Furthermore, Smith's model explores and illustrates the relationship, the causation, and effect of the aforementioned variables. For this study, Smith's model is used to refine and integrate the digital marketing strategy as a roadmap plan which contributes to the evaluation of (1) planning, (2) performance, and (3) post-execution processes and outcomes. Eventually, this leads towards an establishment of tools which help to monitor, respond,

research, measure, and take reasonable action in order to develop or re-develop the digital marketing strategy (Chaffey et al., 2013). In this research, the SOSTAC model by Smith (2011) is used as a tool to investigate whether digital marketing strategy development in Dutch startups is linked and correlates with the aforementioned model.

Furthermore, the digital marketing framework is particularly valuable because it provides a basis for the evaluation of digital marketing strategies from enterprises that will be interviewed and analyzed. Therefore, the aforementioned framework is going to help investigate the digital marketing strategies by evaluating the touchpoints, the interaction between the touchpoints, and whether they are objectively adapted to the digital marketing strategies conducted by the analyzed Dutch startups. Furthermore, the digital marketing strategy framework in this research is used as a tool to investigate the challenges that the Dutch startup sector faces in applying the digital marketing strategies. Therefore, the digital marketing strategy framework helps to identify the touchpoints which are used in the digital marketing strategy by particular startups and whether they are not implemented or implemented incorrectly. By doing so, digital marketing strategy framework helps to analyze the implemented digital marketing strategies of Dutch startups by comparing the existing or non-existing touchpoints across the startups which are being analyzed in this research and call upon the generalizability of challenges that the Dutch startup's sector faces in applying digital marketing strategies in practice.

Figure 1. SOSTAC Model. Adapted from Smith P.R (2011)



2.4 Conclusion of the theoretical framework

As presented in the theoretical framework, digital marketing is a relatively new phenomenon which has grown significantly in the recent years because of its accessibility, convenience for both the enterprises and costumers, and remarkably lower financial costs in comparison to the traditional marketing efforts. Therefore, digital marketing has become a pivotal part for the survival and the success of small and young enterprises, such as startups, which harness the existing digital marketing tools to get-in-touch with existing and prospective customers through strategic digital marketing efforts. However, for this research, it is pivotal to understand and know how to make good use of digital marketing, the digital marketing tools, and the development of digital marketing strategies for the startup sector. Moreover, as the digital marketing strategies and their development theories and concepts can be found both in the academic and private sectors, it is troublesome to decide upon the right theories and concepts which would be the best for this study. Nevertheless, the theories such as the Hierarchy-of-Effects model by Lavidge & Steiner (1961), Digital Marketing Strategy Framework SOSTAC Model by Smith, P. R. (2011), in our opinion, provide a solid grounds and balanced understandings in regard to digital marketing strategy development for startups.

Firstly, it is essential to narrow down the definition, in regard to this study, of the Dutch startup sector since it will allow to strategically analyze the Dutch startups which are younger than 10 years old, which have a foremost affinity towards up-to-date business models, information technology, digital media and connectedness to the rules of “New Economy”, as characterized by Kelly (1999). Secondly, that marketing and marketing tools have changed significantly because of the rise of digital and social media (Chaffey & Smith, 2013). However, the prime objective of convincing and generating revenue has not changed therefore the Hierarchy-of-Effects model by Lavidge & Steiner (1961) is still applicable. Thirdly, the acknowledgement of digital marketing tools and the differentiation of these tools as proposed by Chris (2015), is critical in order to employ a digital marketing strategy. Finally, SOSTAC model, which has been developed by Smith (2011) helps to strengthen the development of digital marketing strategies by providing monitoring, response, research, measurement, and action tools (Chaffey et al., 2013). By doing, the theoretical framework is used as a tool which provides guidance in regard to the operationalization and evaluation of the data, aforementioned touchpoints and research as a whole.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

In order to answer the aforementioned research question, qualitative research method approach is chosen for the purpose of this thesis. Qualitative research allows the researchers to explore the topic in-depth (Carlsen & Glenton, 2011) since its primary focus is the search of explanatory patterns which arise from causal relationship amongst variables (Babbie, 2013). In qualitative research, these explanatory patterns are made sense through data which are grouped by (1) Frequencies, (2) Magnitudes, (3) Structures, (4) Processes, and/or (5) Causes (Lofland and Lofland, 2006). Therefore, when aiming to answer such questions as “what” or “how”, qualitative research is considered to be the most appropriate (Agee, 2009). Furthermore, as stated by the Qualitative Research Consultants Association (2017), qualitative research contributes to insightful results when the research explores: (1) Customer needs; (2) Behavioral aspects, such as, feelings, ideas, and values; (3) The perceptions and attitudes towards communication, marketing, and/or strategies; (4) Creation of ideas, products or brands. Therefore, the qualitative research is the most appropriate one for this particular research, since it analyzes the digital marketing strategies and the processes of persuasive communication.

Furthermore, in order make a thorough and insightful research, whilst answering the research question, the research is conducted as a case study in regards to the Dutch startup scene. In order to achieve that, the research conducted a (1) theoretical study of digital marketing strategies. This theoretical part of the research includes a review of digital marketing theories, digital marketing tools and various communication and marketing strategies. By doing so, the theoretical data, strategic concepts in addition to theoretical research finding helps to identify the cause-and-effect relationship in regard to marketing strategies in the startup sector (Zikmund and Babin, 2010). Secondly, this research conducted (2) a qualitative research by applying in-depth, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. According to Kvale (2006 p.31) “*The qualitative research interview seeks to describe and the meanings of central themes in the life world of the subjects.*”. Since for this research it is pivotal to understand how digital marketing strategies and digital marketing tools are harnessed by the Dutch startup sector, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions are conducted with experts from the Dutch startup sector. This study uses semi-structured interviews with the open-ended question since they allow the researchers to provide consistent and comparative data, whilst being flexible enough for the researcher to go in-depth by following-up questions which arise during the interview (Babbie, 2013). Furthermore, interviews in qualitative research are considered to be a relevant method to do analysis of current events and topics since they

can provide information about an ongoing process and can help to study and analyze the rapid development of the communication tools and marketing in the XXI century (Edwards & Holland, 2013). Therefore, this research conducted 11 interviews with experts responsible for marketing in their respective startups as suggested by Baker and colleagues (2012). Moreover, the interviews were conducted in a two-month period from the beginning of March 2018, to the midst of May 2018. The collected data from the interviews have been analysed by applying quantitative methods and searching for (1) Frequencies, (2) Magnitudes, (3) Structures, (4) Processes, and/or (5) Causes as proposed by Lofland and Lofland (2006).

Furthermore, the selected interviewees of the research had been provided with consent forms along with a short presentation of the topics and the objectives of the research, in order to inform the interviewees about the interview process, and the duration of interview (Kvale, 2006). However, the interviewees of the research were provided only with the aforementioned information, in order to prevent any personal or professional biases, which may arise from the researcher's perspective (Bogner & Menz, 2009). Moreover, consent form provided for the interviewees of the study also indicated their voluntary participation and stated the fact that the participants of the study, namely, the experts from various startups in the Netherlands, have the right to stop the interview at any given time of the interview procedure, or conceal their personal identity if requested (Bogner & Menz, 2009).

3.2. Sampling

In order to answer the research question, this study is dependent on available subjects as well as the purpose of the interviewees, therefore this study uses a nonprobability sample (Babbie, 2013). Furthermore, according to Creswell (2005 p. 203) in qualitative research, when "*the intent is not to generalize to a population, but to develop an in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon*" it is best accomplished by applying purposive sampling. Since, this study explores a central phenomenon, namely digital marketing strategies in the Dutch startup sector, the aim of the purposive sampling is to create a representative sample which would consist of knowledgeable people who are marketing professionals working in the marketing unit, in a Dutch startup which is younger than 10 years old, and the startup has a foremost affinity towards up-to-date business models, information technology, digital media, and connectedness to the rules of "New Economy" (Kelly, 1999). Therefore, this research used the expert sampling approach, which according to Etikan and colleagues (2016 p. 3), allows the researcher to "*select candidates across a broad spectrum relating to the topic of study*" and "*is a positive tool to use when investigating new areas of research*". Furthermore, expert interview method is used in this study in order to "*attempt to understand the world from the subjects' points of view and to unfold the meaning of their lived world.*" (Kvale, 2006

p. 481). Therefore, in this research, it allows to understand how marketing professionals in the Dutch startup sector perceive and implement the digital marketing tools and strategies in practice. Moreover, this research used geographical distribution of the startups, in order to have a triangulation of three main startup hubs in the Netherlands, more specifically, Amsterdam being the Dutch capital for startups (Acs, et al., 2017), followed by Rotterdam (Innovation Quarter, 2016), and Eindhoven which according to Forbes (2013) is “*hands-down the most inventive city in the world*”. The reason for such triangulation arises from what Kelman and colleagues (2016) describe as “geographical distribution of knowledge”, which in this particular research helps to enforce the generalizability and representativeness of results in the regard to the Dutch startup scene. Therefore, in addition the criterion for eligible startups of this research, namely, the startup definition according to Kelly (1999), and the geographical distribution of knowledge, the experts were also chosen based on the position in their respective startups. Although this research primarily conducted interviews with professionals responsible for marketing and/or sales in their respective startups, the importance of including founders as experts was logical for this research (Scott & Bruce, 1987), considering the fact that smaller or younger startups do not necessarily have enough human capital for the distribution of certain responsibilities. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that the selected startups and experts from respective startups were chosen regardless of the startups field of work, business model, or the size of the company. By doing so, the research ensured the potential in the variety of contextual and insightful perspectives in regard to the digital marketing tools and strategy application in practice. The selected list of startups that had been interviewed is exhibited in appendix A.

3.3. Operationalization

For this study, the operationalization section is used as a tool to explain how the research concepts are explicitly linked to one another. Furthermore, it is important to identify how aforementioned definitions and the theoretical framework are linked to the interviews and the arguments made during the interviews (Wall, 2011). Since this research seeks to examine how Dutch startups apply digital marketing strategies in their practise, the main concept or phenomenon of this research could be considered the digital marketing strategies. Henceforth, the operationalization of digital marketing in this research is examined from two heights, namely, strategic and practical levels. According to Bryman and Bell (2011), interview questions are created accordingly to the selected theories in the research. Therefore, the variables in this study could be categorized in three groups, namely, (1) Digital marketing tools, (2) Digital marketing strategies, and (3) Challenges in digital marketing tool and strategy application. All of the aforementioned categorizations provide themes for the interview guide which is devised to plea in accordance with the three

variables which subsequently aim to answer the aforementioned research question, in addition to allowing the researcher to systematically analyze the data in the data analysis period. Finally, the operational definitions are formed in accordance to the three groups and therefore the interviewees are asked questions to uncover how they argue or/and perceive the digital marketing tools, Digital marketing strategies, and the challenges in digital marketing tool and strategy application in their place of work. Therefore, the research instruments, namely, interview questions are formed in accordance to the theoretical framework and not only used as tools for the interview guide, but also correspondingly help to answer the research questions.

3.4. Data collection

To explore the central phenomenon, the research used in-depth, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. The eleven interviews that have been conducted for this research spanned over the period of 10 weeks and the length of the interviews averaged at around 45 minutes. Moreover, this research invoked face-to-face interviews, therefore, all eleven interviews had been conducted in-person with marketing professionals or owners of respective startups that agreed to participate in this research. It is worth mentioning, that the interviews have been conducted at the offices of respective startups of the research in order to ensure that the interviewees would be familiar with the surroundings and to establish a good environment for argumentation (Bogner & Menz, 2009). However, before the interviews were conducted, the interviewees of the research were provided with a written consent form, it is noteworthy that all participants have signed and agreed to the consent form provided for participants. Subsequently, all interviews had been audio-taped and afterwards transcribed verbatim.

Furthermore, when it comes to the conducted interview process, the researcher first explained the topic and the procedure of the interviews in a descriptive way. Followingly, the interviewees of the research had been asked to introduce themselves by stating their name and respective startups they represent. Subsequently, the interviewees had been asked general questions about their personal perception of marketing and digital marketing, which were used as a tool for the interviewees to naturally dive-into the topic from a broader perspective. Followingly, the main questions about digital marketing tools, digital marketing strategies and the challenges that the respective startups encounter, amongst other questions, had been asked in accordance to the interview guide. Therefore, the interview guide has been used as a tool to not only to guide the interview, but also to ensure the standardization of the interviews, which is essential for the validity and reliability of the data collection (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Although the interviews had been conducted in accordance to the interview guide, interview flexibility has been ensured by addressing emerging themes

and topics during the conducted interviews in order to deep-dive in to the topic (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Therefore, the aforementioned semi-structured interview approach has provided certain insights, especially in regard to the challenges that the startups in the Netherlands face while applying their digital marketing tools and strategies in practice.

3.5. Data analysis

In order to answer the research question, the gathered data from the interviews had been analysed by adapting thematic analysis according to Creswell's (2009 p.185) "Steps of qualitative data analysis". By doing so, thematic analysis allows to condense and extract the meaning and important themes from written data, which in this instance are the transcripts of the interviews (Kvale, 2006). Furthermore, considering the fact that the aim of this research is to analyze the challenges that the startups face while applying their digital marketing tools and strategies at respective startups, thematic analysis is considered to be appropriate for this research since it allows to analyze the understanding of personal experiences (Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017), which vary across the analyzed startups.

Therefore, the first step of conducting thematic analysis according to Creswell's (2009 p.185) "Steps of qualitative data analysis" is the transcription of interviews, followed by the second step - reading through the data. In order to identify codes and themes, first, the transcribed data is read in order to get a general sense of the data. Secondly, it is necessary to read through the data in order to give meaning (Creswell's, 2009).

Subsequently, the third step according to Creswell's model is taken in order to generate codes and themes. The first round of coding derived from the three main themes that have been found from the theoretical framework. According to Miles and Huberman (1994 p. 56) codes are "*tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during the study*". Subsequently, this research used open coding, therefore, the aforementioned units are then categorized into (1) sub-codes, (2) codes, and (3) themes. The most abstract categories which are deduced from the research questions and/or central phenomenon were called "themes". Then, the less abstract categories were "codes", which result and correspond to the theoretical understanding of literature. Lastly, sub-codes, were the findings which emerge from the interview data analysis and which are relevant to the research question (Creswell's, 2009). After the completion of the open coding, the second round of coding was applied. By doing so, the second round of coding, more specifically, axial coding, has been used as a tool to narrow-down the aforementioned three themes by applying subordinate themes which derive from the conceptual framework of this research (Boeije, 2014). Subsequently, the last and final round of coding, namely, selective coding, has been conducted in order to establish and finalize the conclusive themes, codes, and categories (Boeije, 2014).

Followingly, the thematic analysis includes the comparison of the findings, which arise from the interview data, and the theoretical data, which was acquired before conducting interviews. Lastly, the fourth step is finalized by coming back to the second step and reading and comparing the data in order to ensure the validity and reliability of the data (Creswell, 2009).

Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that for generating codes and themes, this research used a coding software, namely Atlas.ti, because it allows inductive and/or deductive coding, coding overlaps and has coding memos. By doing so, this program allowed the research to support a certain coding structure (or hierarchy) (Hesse-Biber, 2010). Subsequently, the finalized themes and categories have been linked with the theoretical framework and later had been signified in order to support the results of the research. Hence, the data which derived from the interviews supported the both the analysis and the interpretation in order to answer the main research question and the sub-questions.

3.6. Validity and reliability

According to Silverman (2015), qualitative research, especially in regard to the conducted interviews, is considered to be high in validity, since the participants being interviewed are obligated to actively provide answers, instead of passively accepting what is provided to them. However, Silverman (2015) points out that high validity can only be achieved if the researcher has carefully designed and developed the interview. Additionally, if the researcher contributes towards the generation and co-creation of the data with the interviewee by being active and following-up on questions and/or answers (Silverman, 2015). Moreover, in order to ensure validity, interviews will be conducted in accordance to Davidsson's (2016) "Measurement validity or construct validity" aspects which allow the researcher to follow the operationalized questions, whilst questioning the interviewee's answers by measuring whether the measure correlates highly with the theoretical construct (Davidsson, 2016). The measurement will have a nominal scale as proposed by Suppes and Zinnes (1963) measurement scale which allows to measure the answer provided by the interviewee in a scale from 1 to 6, namely 1 being = gold, 2 = silver, 3 = tin, 4 = lead, 5 = iron, and 6 = copper, which represent the validity of the answer in respect to the theoretical operationalization (Davidsson, 2016). This measurement is essential for this research because only by ensuring that the answers correspond to the questions, subsequently, it leads towards a more valid interview itself. Finally, the key findings and arguments which have been held with the interviewees after the interview has been conducted, have been repeated and confirmed by respective interviewees to ensure the confidence of the findings.

Reliability refers to the replicability of the processes that have been conducted throughout the whole course of the research (Leung, 2015). However, according to

Stenbacka (2001, p. 551), the reliability concept in qualitative research refers to the “purpose of explaining” of various phenomenon or developments which tend to be unquantifiable. Even though the sole purpose of this research is to explore and investigate specific phenomena, such as challenges in digital marketing and their application in practice, opinions and interpretations are likely to occur and therefore have a direct influence on the research findings (Stenbacka, 2011). Nevertheless, such variations and differences in opinions, according to Stake (2010, p. 162), do not necessarily reflect the unreliability of the research, but rather allow to evaluate various views and phenomenon which are necessary in order to understand the practices and developments of new and changing phenomenon, such as digital marketing. Therefore, in order to ensure the reliability in qualitative research, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the quality of research is assessed by taking into consideration the credibility, neutrality, and transferability aspects. Subsequently, the credibility of the research refers to the richness of the data gathered throughout the research process, which is ensured through the selection and participation of appropriate interviewees, who are experts in their respective fields (Bogner & Menz, 2009). Furthermore, the neutrality aspect refers not only to the neutrality of the researcher but also to the neutrality of the data (Krefting, 1991). Therefore, in order to ensure the neutrality of the data, this research has provided detailed information in regard to the methodological aspects, such as sampling, operationalization, data collection, and data analysis. Finally, transferability aspect concerns how the findings of the research can be applied to a particular environment, or a particular population (Krefting, 1991). Subsequently, according to Krefting (1991, p. 216) the transferability of findings to other fields of study “*is more the responsibility of the person wanting to transfer the findings to another situation or population than that of the researcher of the original study*”. However, the transferability aspect in this particular research is ensured by providing contextual information which derived from the interviews and the interview data, which according to Lincoln and Guba (1985) are necessary in order to ensure the transferability of the research.

4. Results

The results chapter presents the findings of 11 interviews which have been conducted in order to understand how startups in the Netherlands conduct their digital marketing and the challenges that they face in applying the digital marketing strategies. The themes from the theoretical framework have been used as guidelines for the thematic analysis of the data gathered from the interviews. These themes have been tested in practice in order to analyze how the Dutch startup sector applies digital marketing tools, digital marketing strategies, and which obstacles or challenges do the startups in the Netherlands face while applying their digital marketing strategies. The results section is structured around four main theoretical concepts, namely, (1) Digital marketing tools, (2) Digital marketing strategies, and (3) Challenges in applying digital marketing tools and strategies.

As previously mentioned, this research analyzed startups in the Netherlands which are newly established ventures which are younger than 10 years and have a foremost affinity towards up-to-date business models, information technology, digital media and connectedness to the rules of “New Economy” as proposed by Kelly (1999). Furthermore, this research analyzed startups which are from or are based in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and Eindhoven. Subsequently, the 11 interviews conducted with experts working in the field of marketing at their respective startups, and their transcripts can be found in the Appendix A. Short information about the experts and their respective startups are presented in the Table 1, however, more information about the startups and their size, business model and etc. can be found in the Appendix A.

Table 1. List of interviewee names, position, and respective startups

Interviewee number	Name	Position	Startup represented
1.	Gianluca Bellan	International Growth Manager	Declaree
2.	Christiaan Huynen	CEO	DesignBro
3.	Ron van Valkengoed	Strategic Advisor, currently responsible for marketing	Easy Generator
4.	Jonathan Stranders	CEO	Gearbooker
5.	Hugo Melis & Jelle Koot	H. Melis - Owner, CEO; J. Koot - Intern	Glamorous Goat
6.	Tessie Hartjes	Head of Sales, Marketing, and Communications	Lightyear
7.	Robert Leefmans	CEO, founding partner	Notificare

8.	Veronika Kartovenko	Co-founder, Business Development Manager	Sweek
9.	Bree Tahapary	PR and Marketing Manager	TestBirds
10.	Marc van der Hulst	Head of Marketing	TravelBird
11.	Rob Alderson	Vice-President, responsible for Content Marketing	WeTransfer

4.1. Digital marketing tools

As noted by Chaffey and Smith, in order to develop a digital marketing strategy, it is essential to identify and accordingly utilize the key social media platforms which are being utilized in order to reach the targeted audiences (Chaffey & Smith, 2013). By doing so, it allows to identify the most important social media platforms and characterize the targeted audiences which lead towards a more profound digital marketing strategy. Therefore, this particular research, in regard to the digital marketing tools, mainly investigated and analyzed how the *Internet marketing tools* and *search marketing tools* are utilized in the digital marketing strategies in the Dutch startup sector. Consequently, the first theme of the results section is used to explain how the Dutch startup sector deploy both internet and search marketing tools in order to understand the various strategic approaches and perceptions of digital marketing tools application which lead towards a more profound digital marketing strategy understanding of the Dutch startup sector.

4.1.1. Internet Marketing tools

When it comes to the internet marketing tool application in the Dutch startup sector, the findings indicate that the investigated startups tend to employ the traditional or the most popular social media platforms as a tool to communicate with their audiences, with only a few exceptions. More specifically, all 11 analyzed startups have noted that they use Facebook as one of the social media platforms to communicate with their audiences. However, when it comes to other social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Snapchat, and Youtube, it becomes evident that the utilization of social media platforms varies across all investigated startups, according to their business models and targeted audiences. More specifically, around half of the interviewees (Interviewees No. 2,4,8,9,10,11) use Instagram actively, while one of the startups - Lightyear does not use it anymore. Twitter is actively used by startups (Interviewees No. 1,6,7,8,9,11) mainly as a community engagement tool, however, participants (Interviewees No. 2,3,4,5) have limited or no use for Twitter at all. LinkedIn, on the other hand, is widely used by the analyzed startups (Interviewees No. 1,2,3,5,6,7,9) especially which pursue the business-to-businesses models,

however other participants (Interviewees No. 4,8,10,11) have limited or no use of LinkedIn. In contrary to Facebook, none of the analyzed startups in the Netherlands use Pinterest as one of their social media platforms for their digital marketing efforts. Furthermore, Snapchat was used only by TravelBird enterprise which at the time of the interview was in the testing phase. When it comes to YouTube, interviewees (Interviewees 7,9,10) stated that they are active users of this particular internet marketing tool for their digital marketing efforts. However, the remaining interviewees (Interviewees 1,2,3,4,5,6,8,11) argued to have limited use for YouTube as their digital marketing tool. Furthermore, when it comes to other internet marketing tools which are being employed by the analyzed startups in the Netherlands, it becomes evident that only a small fraction of the interviewed startups use other internet marketing tools. Three startups (Interviewees 1,8,9) noted that they use other social media platforms besides the aforementioned ones, namely, Vimeo as a substitute for YouTube, Xing as a substitute for LinkedIn in the Dutch-German market, and Vkontakte, as a substitute for Facebook in the Russian-speaking markets.

Consequently, because of such variations in the utilization of internet marketing tools, in-depth analysis of social media tools is presented in order to understand the reasons and underlying implications for the use of the main social media tools which are used by the analyzed startups in the Netherlands. Therefore, the Internet Marketing tools section is divided in four sub-section, namely, (1) Facebook, (2) Instagram, (3) LinkedIn, and (4) Twitter, Pinterest, Snapchat and YouTube as internet marketing tools, in which the internet marketing tools and their use is explained in accordance with the popularity and usability criterion which derives from the of gathered data.

4.1.1.1. Facebook as an internet marketing tool

Although most of the analyzed startups tend to use Facebook as a promotional tool to raise awareness and share various content which enhances their visibility in the social media environment, interview data shows that Facebook can be used as a strategic tool for business-specific reasons. As the interviews showcased, Facebook can be used as a tool which enables the audiences not only to participate in the digital environment through commentary and sharing but can also harness the audiences in order to enhance the quality of the service that the particular startup conducts. *“Facebook is mainly [used] for the crowd-testing audience but also for recruitment, not so much for our business audience.”*, as noted by Bree Tahapary, the PR and Marketing Manager at TestBirds, a company which specializes in the enhancement of the functionality and user-friendliness of apps and websites. Furthermore, Tessie Hartjes, Head of Sales, Marketing, and Communications at Lightyear - an automotive company which builds solar-powered vehicles, notes that Facebook is a great tool for community growing:

[...] for Facebook is the community side bigger. So we do noticed that there are a lot of people that are excited about our mission and about the product but they might not be able to buy the product itself but they are very important to get a community growing.

However, it became clear from the interviews that the utilization and importance of Facebook are dependent on particular business models and targeted audiences. Therefore, business-to-business startups in the Netherlands such as Declaree, DesignBro, Notificare, TestBirds, and Glamorous Goat expressed their uncertainty whether Facebook is the right social media platform for their type of business. The CEO of DesignBro - Christiaan Huynen states that *"[...] you could be a business owner and yes, you're on Facebook, but you're not going to get triggered by something, that is a professional product on Facebook very easily."* In contrary to B2B startups, business-to-consumer startups such as TravelBird, Sweek, and Gearbooker, argued that Facebook is the best internet marketing tool for their marketing efforts which derive from Facebook audience targeting abilities. Marc van der Hulst, Head of Marketing at TravelBird explains:

[...] I think everyone is almost on social channels active, spend a lot of time per hour and I can perfectly target them. So, there are so much data in Facebook, I can target people who have just been on a holiday because people share information or a or I cannot show them advertisements when they are on holiday, because then they probably won't be interested in buying a new trip.

Therefore, research findings indicate that startups in the Netherlands tend to use Facebook in order to raise visibility and brand awareness on social media. Moreover, some startups also use Facebook for community building reasons, which subsequently can be harnessed to enhance the quality of products and services that the startups provide or offer. However, research also indicated that there is a distinction between B2B and B2C startups and their use of Facebook as a strategic marketing tool which is correlated with the targeted audiences that the startups are trying to reach.

4.1.1.2 Instagram as a digital marketing tool

When it comes to Instagram use in the Dutch startup sector, the findings of the analysis suggest that Instagram as a social media platform is used by the startups in the Netherlands as a promotional tool to raise awareness and share various content which enhances their visibility in the social media environment. Similarly to the use of Facebook,

the interview data shows that Instagram can be used as a strategic tool to reach your targeted audiences which are representative to the business model and business objectives that the particular startup pursues. *“[...] the fun thing is that creative people are heavily on Facebook and Instagram. If you use those channels, you start the new rates, a good number of that.”* as noted by Jonathan Stranders, the CEO of Gearbooker - a peer-to-peer online rental platform for film, audio, photo and other equipment.

Furthermore, interview data reveals that Instagram can also be used as a tool to change the perception of a brand or a service that the particular startup provides. Rob Alderson the Vice-President, responsible for content marketing at WeTransfer, a cloud-based computer file transfer service company notes:

I think Instagram has been really interesting for us. [...]. We made the decision a couple years ago the only thing that goes on Instagram was some of the great artists that we feature. And I think our community on Instagram is really engaged in that and bought into that. So, I think it's probably not the biggest, it doesn't drive much results, but I think it's probably the most interesting from a brand point-of-view.

4.1.1.3 LinkedIn as a digital marketing tool

The participants of the research in terms of LinkedIn use for their digital marketing efforts reported that LinkedIn is actively used by the majority of the analyzed startups (Interviewees No. 1,2,3,5,6,7,9). The participants also found LinkedIn to be one of the best internet marketing tools to attract prospective clients and engage with various stakeholders. Considering the fact that LinkedIn is a social media platform which specializes in building professional relationships, the majority of the interviewees (Interviewees No. 1,3,5,6,7,9) consider LinkedIn as the best social media platform for their digital marketing efforts. Subsequently, deriving from the gathered data, it becomes evident that LinkedIn is mostly used by the analyzed startups which are in the business-to-business environment. Ron van Valkengoed, Strategic Advisor responsible for marketing at EasyGenerator confirms the assumption by saying: *“LinkedIn [...] has the best targeting options, in the world, in terms of reaching out to your target audience in the B2B world.”* Similarly, Robert Leefmans the CEO and Co-Founder of Notificare - mobile marketing platform states that *“[...] I think a lot of things moved business-to-business to LinkedIn past two years. So I definitely see a lot of engagement there [...].”*

However, research findings also hint towards contradicting ideas in regards to the reach of individuals and professional relationship building on LinkedIn. *“[...] we use it for promotional support sales purpose so with Sales Navigator we can get in touch quite easily with people through that.”* as noted by Gianluca Bellan, the International Growth Manager at

Rotterdam based software startup called Declaree. On the other hand, Christiaan Huynen from DesignBro noted:

It's a difficult platform to build a solid base and to target people that are outside of your direct network or any of your team member's direct network, that just takes a very long time to slowly build that up over a longer period of time.

4.1.1.4 Twitter, Pinterest, Snapchat and Youtube as a digital marketing tool

When it comes to other social media platforms, such as Twitter, Pinterest, Snapchat and Youtube, the research indicates that all aforementioned social media platforms are not widely used by the Dutch startup sector. However, the reasons for not being actively involved in these particular social media platforms, according to the interviewees, derive from the limited abilities of reaching out to the targeted audiences, quality of the followers, lack of prospective clients or targeted audiences who are on these platforms, and lack of human and/or financial capital which is necessary in order to be active on the aforementioned social media platforms. When the participants were asked to elaborate on their reasons for not being active on the aforementioned social media platforms, the interviewee responses correlate with one another in regards to the use of Twitter, Pinterest, and Snapchat. Ron van Valkengoed from Easy Generator stated that “[...] Twitter [...] platform is limited. people are using it as a kind of broadcasting channel, so we have limited interaction [...]”. Furthermore, Christiaan Huynen from DesignBro explains: *“Honestly, the quality of the followers, just wasn't there [in Twitter]”*. Similarly to the response of Marc van der Hulst from TravelBird: *“So people are not looking for a nice holiday there. They want to know, [about] democracy in Iran or about protests in France.”*

Furthermore, the data gathered from the research demonstrates that Youtube as a social media platform has limited use for the analyzed startups in the Netherlands (Interviewees 1,2,3,4,5,6,8,11). The limited use, according to the interviewees, derives from limited human and financial resources which are required in order to produce content on this particular platform. *“[...] purely that we don't have resources to upload new videos.”*, stated Veronika Kartovenko from Sweek, which is also supported by Jonathan Stranders from Gearbook who stated: *“YouTube, for example, is no story. I would love to be more active there, but it takes a lot of investment and effort”*. However, lack of financial and human capital seems to be unapparent for TravelBird which is a scaleup based in Amsterdam which employs around 350 people, therefore, Head of Marketing Marc van der Hulst stated that *“YouTube is the second biggest social network”* for their digital marketing efforts.

When it comes to Pinterest and Snapchat, the gathered data from the participants of the interviews, stated that in their opinion the digital audience is not present on these

platforms. “[...] *our target audience is not super into Pinterest*”, noted V. Kartovenko from Sweek in regards to the use of Pinterest. Robert Leefmans from Notificare responded similarly to the aforementioned interviewee by stating: *“Pinterest definitely would not be anything [...]”*, followed by an explanation for not using Snapchat: *“Snapchat it's not the audience there.”* Furthermore, one additional reason for not using Pinterest and Snapchat was explained by Bree Tahapary from TestBirds, who stated: *“[...] it's not that we are like actively discarding those social media, it's just that it hasn't crossed our mind yet to see how we could use those media, to target our audience.”*

4.1.2. Search Marketing tools

Firstly, according to the gathered data from the interviews, Search Marketing tools such as Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and Search Engine Advertising (SEA) are used by the wide majority of the analyzed startups in the Netherlands. More specifically, the participants of the research indicated that all startups are using Search Marketing tools. However, when it comes to the use of both the Search Engine Optimization and Search Engine Advertising - 8 participants (Interviewees 2,3,4,5,7,9,10,11) use the combination of both Search Marketing tools. Although participants, such as Glamorous Goat (Interviewee 5) and Notificare (Interviewee 7) use both SEO and SEA, the main focus is targeted towards the Search Engine Optimization. According to Hugo Melis, the CEO of Glamorous Goat app development company: *“[...] We focus mainly on the SEO, Search Engine Optimization, because I think in the long-term that's cheaper if you can just make sure that you get good rankings [...]”*. Furthermore, Lightyear (Interviewee 6) solar-powered automotive company uses both SEO and SEA, however not actively. The reason from that arises because of big interest in the startup from the media sector, therefore, Tessie Hartjes noted that: *“[...] especially when we did the public launch we had so much interest in people coming in that we were just overloaded by all the interest.”* Therefore, Tessie Hartjes later explains: *“So I think that for us at this point, it [SEO and SEA] might feel like it's not very needed”*. SEO as an only Search Marketing tool is used by Declaree startup, according to Gianluca Bellan (Interviewee 1), the International Growth Manager, the reason for conducting only SEO derives from the fact that *“[Declaree] have done already a lot of investment in ads part but also focusing on SEA would be another thing on top [...]”*. However, Sweek (Interviewee 8) was the only company which used only SEA as their Search Marketing tool. *“So we're planning on focusing more on SEO and people actually want organically finding out about us, then to reducing our budget on Google advertising [...]”* said Veronika Kartovenko the Co-Founder and Business Developer of Sweek.

Secondly, when the participants of the research were asked to pinpoint what in their opinion is rather more important for their company in regards to SEO, SEA or a combination

of both, gathered data from the interviews indicates that 6 out of 11 participants (Interviewees 1,4,5,8,9,11) indicated that SEO is more important. *“I think that Search Engine Advertising is a bit short-term whereas we can optimize and make sure we can get it in front of people, [...] I think for us it's always the longer-term option which would be optimization.”* thinks Rob Alderson, VP at WeTransfer. *“in addition it also is that the way we think of ads, for example, we are really critical when we search for something, you see ads - then the ads are the ones you skip.”* thinks Bree Tahapary from TestBirds and explains the startups opinion with an alternative explanation for choosing SEO over SEA or combination of both.

However, 4 out of 11 participants (Interviewees 2,3,7,10) of the research noted that in their perspective, a combination of both SEO and SEA could be considered the most important tools for their respective startups. *“You need to find a balance between getting, actionable clients, working on the keywords with regards to your, your search engine advertising, ah and at the same time, build up content so that you can naturally get those people in as well,”* explains Christiaan Huynen, CEO of DesignBro. Additionally to that, Marc van der Hulst from TravelBird explains that for his company *“on the revenue side, it's Search Engine Advertising. Advertising is really important, but because you also need free advertising, this Search Engine Optimization and the results are important.”*

Finally, when it comes to the measurement of success of SEO and SEA in respective startups, it becomes evident that most of the startups account the success of their SEO and SEA efforts based on the reports of scores from Google Analytics which are based on conversion rates (Interviewees 1,2,3,4,5,8,9,10,11). However, some startups (Interviewees 1,3,10) also take into account the outreach and presence scores, and the revenue that it generates. *“it's driving more traffic or getting traffic and then also the conversion rate of that traffic. So that's for the marketing science, but of course, marketing also owns the target for inbound revenue. So how much revenue we generate from that activity.”*, said Ron van Valkengoed from Easy Generator.

4.1.3. Multi-channel communications and segmentation of messages

Although all interviewed startups state they use multi-channel communications, wide-majority of the startups (Interviewees 1,2,3,4,6,7,8,9,10,11) segment their messages, posts or content across their social media platforms which they use for their digital marketing efforts. However, interviewees (Interviewees 1,2,3,4,6,7,8,9,10,11) indicate that the segmentation of their messages, posts of content is based on the social media platforms where they want to publish or share content and the representative target audience which is on the social media platform. Veronika Kartovenko from Sweek explains their decision-journey in regards to message and content segmentation:

They differ of course per channel. So for instance on Twitter more information on articles and tweeting. [...] Then on Instagram, is, of course, more visual and people just either we'll tag someone or write something short, and then Facebook it's a combination, a little bit of both. [...] But some content is unique just for Instagram or just with Twitter and Facebook.

However, a more elaborate approach in strategic messaging and content segmentation is taken by TravelBird, where the segmentation of messages and the overall content is dependent on the customers or prospective customers interest in the service that the company provides.

We have segments based on their interest in us. So if you are in a dream-phase for holiday, we target you with [a] different kind of messaging. So, now I'm fantasizing about a holiday but I have already planned something, but it doesn't mean that I am not willing to see something else. [...] and if you are closer towards a purchase you can change the story. So, in the beginning, it's much more like, "hey, have you ever thought about South America or North Pole" or whatever, and if is towards more of the booking-phase like, "hey, we have done your [travels] cheaper".

4.2. Digital marketing strategies

The second theme that has been analyzed is that of a digital marketing strategy and its application in the Dutch startup environment. According to Chaffey and Bosomworth, the SOSTAC model which was developed by PR Smith in 2011 is considered to be one of the most comprehensive tools for understanding digital marketing strategies. Therefore, the following theme analyzes how the interviewed startups conduct their digital marketing strategies by providing the findings of the research in accordance with the SOSTAC model. Subsequently, the digital marketing strategies conducted by the startups in the Netherlands are explained through relevant factors and different variables which derive from the SOSTAC model.

4.2.1 SOSTAC Model

The SOSTAC model which was created by PR Smith (2011) is comprised of six different variables which ensure a thorough consideration of the most relevant factors which determine a good digital marketing strategy, namely (S)Situation analysis, (O)Objectives, (S)Strategy, (T)Tactics, (A)Actions, and (C)Control (Chaffey et al., 2013). By applying this model, it allows to evaluate how the Dutch startup sector implements their digital marketing strategies in action. Therefore, the following findings from the research exhibit how the

analyzed startups in this research analyze, decide and plan their digital marketing strategies according to each of the six elements from the SOSTAC model. The SOSTAC model has been used to analyze the startups which confirmed having a digital marketing strategies, namely, Declaree, DesignBro, EasyGenerator, Notificare, Sweek, TestBirds, TravelBird, and WeTransfer.

4.2.1.1. Situation

When it comes to the *Situation* analysis, gathered data from the interviews indicate that all startups which confirmed having a digital marketing strategy or strategizing their digital marketing efforts (Interviewees 1,2,3,7,8,9,10,11), have conducted either market and/or marketing research. Furthermore, research participants such as Declaree, EasyGenerator, Sweek, and TravelBird specified that either market or marketing has influenced their overall digital marketing strategy. When it comes to other startups (Interviewees 2,7,9,11), research finding indicates that these particular startups in the Netherlands conduct market and/or marketing research, however, it is not known to which extent does the market and/or marketing research influence the overall digital marketing strategy.

According to the participants of the research, market research is considered to be one of the most important and integral parts of a digital marketing strategy. *“Market research is simply one of the [best] components [...] because it's high-trust content and also [...] It gives you a lot of momentum and a lot of reach, it's very effective.”*, thinks Ron van Valkengoed from EasyGenerator. Similarly to the position of Ron van Valkengoed, Marc van der Hulst from TravelBird, when asked whether his respective startup conducts market research explains:

“Absolutely. The head of research sitting next to me, in my block, [market research] is an integral part of the marketing. So we have the part of the traveling team, [...] the travel service, marketing, and research and they will research every week. So every Friday we have a room, whereby we invite real travelers and real people who know us or don't know us and we showed them our products”

Furthermore, the gathered data from the research also indicates that the process of analyzing the *Situation* of the respective startups in the market varies across startups. Research shows that the analyzed startups have different approaches in conducting market and/or marketing research. Declaree, a Rotterdam-based startup explains that their current market and marketing research has been conducted by the members of the international team which according to Gianluca Bellan was then combined by matching *“[...] the market research, the marketing research, and the traditional and existent marketing strategy, from*

the Dutch team.” However, Sweek, an online publishing house, harness the customers on their platform to give an opinion about the ongoings of the startup. According to Veronika Kartovenko and the employees at Sweek *“[...] ask our users quite a lot for feedback, opinions. We have feedback-Fridays, [...] we are trying to ask them quite often, so that gets [us] two types of research. Your consumer because [of] your research on them, and market research.*

4.2.1.2. Objectives

Another aspect regarding digital marketing strategy and its application in practice as perceived through the SOSTAC model is the overall objectives and goals of a digital marketing strategy. Research data gathered from the interviews indicate that the objectives and goals vary across the analyzed startups in the Netherlands. Research shows that all startups (Interviewees 1,2,3,7,8,9,10,11) from 8 startups which confirmed having a digital marketing strategy or strategizing the respective startup’s digital marketing efforts have clear objectives and goals which they are trying to achieve. Furthermore, the aforementioned startups also indicated having clear Key Performance Indicators (KPI’s), which are used as short-term goals which help to reach the overall objectives of their digital marketing strategy. However, from the gathered data of the interviews, it becomes evident that the objectives of respective startups and their digital marketing strategies vary from brand awareness, visibility, understanding of the company or their services, and prospective client attraction and revenue.

According to Rob Alderson, Vice-President of WeTransfer, the most important objective of WeTransfer digital marketing strategy is awareness and understanding of the company and the services that the enterprise provides. The main objective of WeTransfers digital marketing strategy is to let the people know that:

“There is a thing called WeTransfer, we want to be in people's minds when they got big files to send - the people who know us, it's understanding. So that I'll split, so people that don't know us it's here we are but people who do know us, it's like, “Hey you know that file transfer thing, where [WeTransfer] also got these creative sites and [...] I think those things are important.”

Whilst startups such as WeTransfer could be considered more customer- focused, startups such as DesignBro and EasyGenerator perceive the main objective of their digital marketing strategy to be revenue and client-attraction. *“[...] marketing has 1:1 correlation to revenue, revenue growth of this company, but of course that's more the financial goal.”*, said

Ron van Valkengoed from EasyGenerator. Similarly to Ron van Valkengoed, Christiaan Huynen from DesignBro says:

“The main objective is to grow and to get more clients in....it’s as simple as that. I would love to say that we want to become a thought-leader in the field of you know, the offerings that we have and design. However, I don’t think that’s realistic as a startup...when you’re beginning, you know. I think you need to have a tangible approach and when you are aiming to be top of mind for a specific field [...]”

4.2.1.3. Strategy

When it comes to the digital marketing strategies and their application in the Dutch startup sector, the data of the research indicate that 8 out of 11 (Interviewees 1,2,3,7,8,9,10,11) have a digital marketing strategy. The other startups, such as Gearbooker, Glamorous Goat, and Lightyear indicated that at the time of the interviews took place, they did not have a digital marketing strategy, however, Glamorous Goat and Lightyear are in the process of developing a digital marketing strategy. However, according to the participants (Interviewees 1,11) of the research, some digital marketing strategies consist of separate yet correlated strategies in regards to more specific objectives which the startup wants to achieve. “[...] it’s like subdivided into two parts. We have on one part the social media slash ads. And then on the other side, we have the content.” said Gianluca Bellan from Declaree. A similar approach is also taken by WeTransfer, Vice-President Rob Alderson explains:

We have a marketing system, we have [a] concrete strategy and then within application I think there’s a broad layer. There is a digital strategy and there is a brand strategy and there is an advertising strategy, but they all get wrapped up into one.

However, according to some other startups such as TestBirds, Sweek, DesignBro, and Notificare, these startups explained that although they do have a digital marketing strategy, it is not necessarily to set in stone and is constantly changing. “[...] we do have a marketing strategy, explicit. However, second you make the marketing plan, explicit, next day it’s changing - it’s a fluid concept.” thinks Christiaan Huynen from DesignBro. Similarly to Christiaans opinion, Bree Tahapary when asked if TestBirds has a digital marketing strategy explained:

In some way “yes” but in another way “no” and by that, I mean that we do have the bones of a strategy. Basically, the fundamentals and where we want to go and where

ever you want to be, but along the way you encounter many things that make you shift your path, basically that you think “okay maybe this is not the way to go right now, so we need to go that way”.

Therefore, research findings also point out the nature of marketing and its fluidity as mentioned by Christiaan Huynen, which explains the uncertainty of having or not having a digital marketing strategy. *“Yes, I guess. We don't have anything specified on paper, like a marketing plan or digital strategy, but of course, we stick to certain strategy in our digital media,”* said Veronika Kartovenko from Sweek. Which is also supported by Robert Leefmans opinion: *“[...] so indeed we know what to do, we do have a strategy, but it's not strategy written down”.*

Furthermore, the gathered data from the interviews suggests that for the startups which have a digital marketing strategy, digital marketing strategy is crucial for the existence and the well-being of the startup. The gathered data also indicates that the reasons for such importance derive from the business environment and the business model in which the respective startup operates. *“I think is very important because [...] it really shrunk the sales process.”*, said Gianluca Bellan from Declaree. Moreover, Ron van Valkengoed from EasyGenerator explains that for his startup, digital marketing strategy is very important because *“[...] all the awareness interests and the first point-of-contact are often through digital.”*

4.2.1.4. Tactics

When it comes to tactics of digital marketing strategies and their application in practice, gathered data from the interviews signifies that most of the startups use regular and data-driven objectives to plan and execute their digital marketing strategies. Furthermore, interviewees of the research (Interviewees 1,2,3,8,10) indicated that they use various management tools and analytics tools which help set the tactics and the overall execution of digital marketing strategies at the respective startups. However, from the gathered data it becomes evident that the analyzed startups tend to focus more on execution related objectives and goals (Interviewees 1,2,3) or have a more data-driven approach (Interviewees 8,10) which help to strategize their digital marketing strategies in accordance to the objectives and goals which the startups pursue to achieve. According to the Head of Marketing at TravelBird, Marc van der Hulst strategizing the tactics of their digital marketing strategy are data-driven:

So we set the goals every quarter, every month, but also every week and we report if all the data is available, so every morning I get to report what the updates are and we

have a meeting every week and every month we'll do a recap and we shared it with the organization. So we've very high accountability of all the targets that we set. The goals with the strategy is transferred into goals and all the goals are measurable and we reports on that very often.

However, other startups tend to focus more on the execution of marketing tasks and creation of content which are achieved through implementation of management. “[...] *Asana gives the tempo [of] the rhythm. So what we need to do, how we're going to do it, and then we keep monitoring that the performance what is done, what is not done, etc...*” said Gianluca Bellan from Declaree.

4.2.1.5. Action

In regard to the actions taken by the analyzed startups, the gathered data from the interviews indicates that startups tend to use timeframes to set and execute their digital marketing efforts which are based on situational circumstances. The timeframes for setting digital marketing efforts and their execution vary across all startups regardless of their business models, targeted audiences, or size of the enterprise. However, what becomes evident from the gathered data from the interviews, that the analyzed startups tend to strategize and change their approach in regards to their digital marketing actions as often as daily, weekly, and quarterly. “[...] *during our weekly session we discuss “oh this post worked really well in this market”, and then in two days we already implemented it the other markets.*”, said Veronika Kartovenko from Sweek.

Moreover, research finding also indicates that startups tend to plan their actions for their digital marketing strategy execution by strategizing digital marketing tools and content which is being used to reach set goals and objectives. However, the approach and the execution is not set-in-stone and tends to be more experimental. “[...] *we don't want to have 100 percent complete and clear view. We want to have 80 percent very good strategy that allows us to try different things and then we can go out there with what we have and then really fast change it.*” thinks Gianluca Bellan from Declaree. Similarly to Gianluca's opinion, Marc van der Hulst from TravelBird explains that in digital marketing strategy the actions are constantly changing and needs to be evaluated constantly. “*it's a nonstop process. [...] every day we changed our approach. Every day we test new things, everyday we'll find the ultimate, we've stoped things that are shit.*”

4.2.1.6. Control

When it comes to the control or monitorization of the performance of the digital marketing strategy conducted by the analyzed startups, gathered data indicates that the

startups tend to assess the overall effectiveness of their digital marketing strategies on regular basis (Interviewees 1,2,3,8,9,10,11) which varies across all startups. However, the regularity of the assessment of respective digital marketing strategies according to some interviewees (Interviewees 1,2) is fluid and situational. *“we readjust whenever necessary, depending on the results that are coming out of that dashboard [...]”*, said Christian Huynen from DesignBro. On the other hand, some startups (Interviewees 3,9,10,11) tend to assess their respective digital marketing strategies in accordance to set timeframes. *“[...] on an annual basis we'll do the annual plan, on a quarterly basis we have our session again, on the monthly we evaluate monthly and, and with our operation level every week.”*, said Ron van Valkengoed from EasyGenerator. Furthermore, the gathered data from the interviews also suggest that bigger and more well-established startups such as TestBirds and WeTransfer assess their digital marketing strategies on regular basis. Although both interviewees indicated that they assess their digital marketing strategies twice per year (Interviewee 9) or quarterly (Interviewee 11), the aforementioned fluidity of the nature of digital marketing and its strategy is also present in these enterprises. *“I think the world and online culture moves so quickly that we wouldn't be right. So, the broad format doesn't change what we're trying to achieve and how we are trying to achieve it, but some of the tactics might change [...]”*, thinks Rob Alderson from WeTransfer.

4.3. Challenges in applying digital marketing tools and strategies

Challenges in the application of various digital marketing tools and their strategies in the Dutch startup sector are the central focus of the current research. Therefore, the challenges have been greatly discussed by the interviewees of the research. Subsequently, this chapter exhibits the challenges the startups face in regards to the (1) internet marketing tools, (2) search marketing tools, (3) multi-channel communication, and (4) digital marketing strategy.

4.3.1 Challenges in internet marketing tools application

When it comes to the challenges in the internet marketing tool application, gathered data from the interviews indicated that the challenges can be grouped into internal and external challenges in regard to internet marketing tool application in the Dutch startup sector. More specifically, internal challenges relate to the human capital challenges such as content creation, engagement, creativity and right skill-set to produce content, internal communication, and multi-language use challenges. Moreover, the external challenges faced by the analyzed startups in the Netherlands related to the changes in the digital social media environment, more specifically the algorithmic change in certain social media platforms, but also the attitudes of the digital audiences in regard to advertising on social media.

One of the internal challenges faced by the analyzed startups in the Netherlands is engagement with the created content. *“the biggest challenge is to like engage your audience, to make sure that they interact with the things that you post and the content that you deliver.”*, thinks Bree Tahapary from TestBirds. However, content creation which would be engaging with the targeted audiences is also dependent on the human and financial capital of the respective startups, Ron van Valkengoed from EasyGenerator explains:

[...] you need to have the creative marketer, you need to have the digital marketer who is able to create digital assets. [...] you need a good visual designer, you need a good copywriter. So, you have a lot of different skills which are not readily available for a small company.

Furthermore, from the gathered data of the interviews, it becomes apparent that multi-language use for different markets and targeted audiences is a recurring challenge for startups which function abroad. *“It's a multi-language. [...] posting something in six different languages at the same time two different crowds is quite a challenge.”*, thinks Gianluca Bellan from Declaree. Furthermore, this challenge is also apparent for Sweek, for which cultural preferences have an impact too, Co-founder and business developer Veronika Kartovenko explains:

Well of course not all the content works for all the languages. So for instance in India, they love one thing and then in Germany, they like it more differently. So, just because something worked out in one market doesn't mean that it will work in the other market [...].

Moreover, interviewees of the research indicated that internal challenges in the startups such as internal communication and responsibility for content creation pose a challenge for internet marketing tools application in their digital marketing efforts. *“you have to look into your organization, think what are we going to post and then internally we have some division about responsibility who is going to come up with texts and etc.”*, said Tessie Hartjes from Lightyear. She further explains that industry-specific implication has an impact on the internet marketing tool application because: *“we're [a] very engineering minded company. So the marketing, sales communication is very soft-sided and it's not always valued as important because our basis is very technical [...].”*

When it comes to the external challenges that the analyzes startups encounter while applying their internet marketing tools, it becomes evident that the changing digital marketing environment poses a challenge for startups in the Netherlands. *“[...] Facebook is constantly*

changing their algorithms. So your company page is decreasing all the time because they want you to spend more money on paid [advertising].”, thinks Veronika Kartovenko from Sweek. However, for more established startups such as TravelBird, the algorithmic changes in social media are perceived as an opportunity. *“I see it as a great opportunity, but I can imagine that a lot of people think it's frustrating, that you have to constantly bring in new ad formats”,* said Marc van der Hulst.

Moreover, according to the gathered data from the interviews, another external challenge is considered to be the changing attitudes of digital audiences and especially advertising on social media platforms. *“I think there is a shift in people's attitudes to social media and I think we need to be conscious of what those are and where your brand should be using”,* thinks Rob Alderson from WeTransfer, which is also supported by the opinion of Veronika Kartovenko, who thinks that: *“everyone is so saturated with social media posts that you need to really figure out what they want to see and what they will interact with. So that's the main challenge.”*

4.3.2 Challenges in search marketing application

According to the gathered data from the interviews, it becomes evident that in regards to the challenges in search marketing application by the startups in the Netherlands can be grouped into internal and external challenges. When it comes to the internal challenges, research interviewees indicated that the financial and human capital, particularly the required knowledge and skill-set and its acquisition in addition to multi-language use for search engine optimization pose as the biggest boundaries for search marketing application in practice. In regards to the external challenges, the gathered data indicates that the functional changes made by search engine marketing providers, dependence on such tools, and competitiveness in the market are considered to be the main obstacles which prevent startups in the Netherlands to take full advantage of the search marketing tools and their application in practice.

The most apparent challenge which derives from the interview data, is lack of financial and human capital which poses challenges and boundaries for the startups in the Netherlands. *“funding, that's one of the main challenges for a small business, especially a starting business, and you need to have enough of it, in order to get in.”,* thinks Christiaan Huynen from DesignBro. Moreover, lack of financial and human capital is evident not only in order to conduct search marketing, but also the know-how of search marketing implementation which in smaller startups need to be acquired through external sources. *“[...] you have to buy this knowledge from external sources or even have to invest a lot in getting the developers to get that knowledge.”,* thinks Jonathan Stranders from Gearbooker.

Furthermore, interviewees from startups which operate in markets abroad or target audiences which speak different languages, indicated that search marketing is particularly difficult because of variations in keywords in different languages which are necessary in order to optimize or advertise their businesses. *“The challenge is to make it friendly in different languages because you need to have meta-tag in-depth per language.”*, said Veronika Kartovenko from Sweek. Similarly, Bree Tahapary from TestBirds further explains that not only the knowledge of different markets but also consistency amongst all offices which operate abroad is a challenge.

[...] things that work in the DUCH markets, do not necessarily work within the Dutch market. So that's something that you definitely need to take an account once you work different markets but it's really interesting and valuable to learn, and also concerning SEO I think consistency because your team of multiple people.

When it comes to the external challenges in regard to the search engine marketing tools and their application in practice, research data indicate that functional changes made by the search engine marketing providers pose challenges. *“[...] it's difficult, because Google and others don't give you that level of detail anymore, [...] it's difficult to attribute, the success to the channel or to the keywords or other things.”*, thinks Ron van Valkengoed from EasyGenerator. Furthermore, dependence on search engine marketing is also apparent from the gathered data. *“I would say there's a huge danger of becoming dependent on it because all of a sudden you pull the plug and, all your traffic everything is gone in one go.”*, said Christiaan Huynen from DesignBro. Finally, interviewees indicated that the competitiveness in regard to buying the most common keywords poses a challenge for startups. *“Everyone will be advertising with the same kind of keywords, so that makes it more expensive.”*, thinks Marc van der Hulst from TravelBird.

4.3.3 Challenges in multi-channel communication

When it comes to the multi-channel communication use by the analyzed startups as part of their digital marketing strategy, it becomes evident that startups face challenges in content dissemination on various channels and platforms in addition to the choice of most appropriate platforms for their digital marketing efforts. Furthermore, research data indicated that the attribution of success and conversion of various channels and platforms are considered to be challenging. Moreover, multi-device use and multi-device tracking have been noted to pose a challenge for the startups in the Netherlands.

According to the gathered data from the interviews, the analyzed startups tend to have difficulties in choosing the most appropriate channels and targeted audiences. *“The trick is*

all about understanding your target audience and your target audience for a small business website.”, thinks Christiaan Huynen from DesignBro. Similarly to Christiaan's opinion, Tessie Hartjes from Lightyear further explains the difficulty of choosing the right platform which is derived from the labour of creating content. *“choosing the right platform and when you generate content for one platform and you don't want to share it on the other, then it might feel like you're putting in a lot of effort for not so much reads [...]”*, thinks Tessie Hartjes.

Moreover, when it comes to the attribution of success to various platforms and channels and platforms which are being used by the startups, it becomes evident that some startups are having difficulties. *“[...] contributing to your success sometimes it's not clear, between the efforts you put in virtually and the results. So it's difficult to really allocate attribution to which channel is the most effective.”*, thinks Ron van Valkengoed from EasyGenerator. Furthermore, attribution of the success of various platforms and channels used by the startups in the Netherlands are also apparent in startups which use multi-device tracking. *“So it's hard to track the user's over both devices from mobile to web to desktop. Across device tracking is a big challenge.”*, said Marc van der Hulst from TravelBird.

4.3.4 Challenges in applying digital marketing strategies

According to the gathered data from the interviews, challenges in the application of digital marketing strategies vary across the analyzed startups. However, the challenges can be grouped into two groups, more specifically, creativity and long-term focus, and capabilities and execution of digital marketing strategies.

When it comes to creativity and long-term focus, the analyzed startups indicated that one of the major challenges that they face in applying digital marketing strategies are content creation which would be engaging with the targeted audiences. *“figuring out how to constantly keep people engaged. So, how not to get them bored with your content”*, thinks Veronika Kartovenko from Sweek. However, some other startups such as WeTransfer, *“balance between what's good for the business and what's good for the user”* is considered to be a challenge which relates to the creativity of the digital marketing strategy. Furthermore, creativity and long-term focus have also to do with the decisions and pathways that the startups want to pursue. According to Tessie Hartjes from Lightyear, the biggest challenge is *“[...] deciding for ourselves what works now for other companies do we want to do the same or do we want to come up with something that's new but might be untested and might give some insecurity about how it works.* Long-term perspective and the application of digital marketing strategies is an apparent challenge for other startups such as TravelBird. According to Marc van der Hulst, the fast and rapid-paced environment in which they operate poses a challenge, because according to Marc:

“We're always quite busy, quickly doing stuff, that taking the time to really think things through and look for maybe what's happening in 10 years, to create more visionary stuff is sometimes a challenge.”

When it comes to the capabilities and execution of digital marketing strategies, gathered data from the interviews indicate that *“It's very difficult to find people that are qualified”*, thinks Gianluca Bellan from Declaree. Furthermore, in his opinion, young professionals *“don't really have [an] idea of how to just [be] hands-on and develop something. People just strategize too much, and they don't take responsibility just execute on it.”* Subsequently, human and financial resources are required to execute the digital marketing strategies, therefore *“it's a resource issue, in terms of experience and in terms of skills, competence”*, thinks Ron van Valkengoed from EasyGenerator.

4.4. Summary of the results

The results chapter presented the results of the data collected from the interviews which were conducted in order to answer the research question and the sub-questions of the research. Subsequently, the interviews conducted with representatives from the Dutch startup sector revealed three themes: (1) Digital marketing tools, (2) Digital marketing strategies, (3) Challenges in applying digital marketing tools and strategies. Furthermore, this chapter explained the most important themes and provided examples from the data set in regards to each of the themes.

Subsequently, research findings indicated that the utilization of social media platforms varies across all investigated startups, according to their business models and targeted audiences. Moreover, Facebook and LinkedIn are considered to be the best and most widely used social media platforms by the Dutch startup sector. Furthermore, search engine advertising, more specifically, both SEA and SEO are widely-used by the analyzed startups in the Netherlands, however, SEO is considered to be the best search engine advertising tool for startups which tend to have limited financial and human capital resources.

When it comes to the digital marketing strategy development and application in practice, it becomes evident that the fluidity and the ever-changing digital environment has an impact on the digital marketing strategies which are developed and executed by the startups. Therefore, the digital marketing strategies in the Dutch startup sector tend to more flexible and adaptable to the situation and circumstances of both the startups and the digital environment in which respective startups operate.

Finally, the challenges in applying digital marketing tools and strategies tend to derive from both internal and external influences. The internal challenges, according to the gathered data from the interviews, usually refer to the limited financial and human capital recourses or

skills which influence both the use of digital marketing tools and consequently the overall digital marketing strategy development, execution and evaluation. However, the external challenges refer to the changes in the digital social media environment, more specifically the algorithmic change in certain social media platforms, but also the attitudes of the digital audiences in regard to advertising on social media.

The next chapter will present the conclusion of the research, in addition to the discussion of theoretical and practical implications of the research, limitations, and future research. Finally, this chapter will also present the recommendations which were provided by the analyzed startups in regard to the digital marketing strategy and its application in the Dutch startup sector.

5. Conclusion & Discussion

The purpose of this research was to examine what challenges do the startups in the Netherlands face in applying digital marketing strategies in order to fill the academic gap on this topic. This study contributes to the understanding of the digital marketing situation among the startups in the Netherlands in the fields of internet and search engine marketing, and their application in practice. This research focused on the role of digital marketing and its strategies as applied by the Dutch startup sector, therefore this research analyzed newly established ventures which are younger than 10 years old and are characterized accordingly to what Kelly (1999) considers a startup to have a foremost affinity towards up-to-date business models, information technology, digital media and connectedness to the rules of “New Economy” (Kelly, 1999). Moreover, in order to answer the main research question and the posed sub-questions, this research applied the qualitative approach of conducting research. To be more specific, this study used in-depth, face-to-face interviews with 11 experts responsible for marketing at their respective startups. Subsequently, the gathered data from the interviews has been analyzed in accordance with Creswell’s (2009 p.185) “Steps of qualitative data analysis” model. Furthermore, this research used the geographic distribution of knowledge as proposed by Kelman and colleagues (2016) which allowed to call for generalizability of results which derives from the triangulation of findings from three main startup hubs in the Netherlands, namely, Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and Eindhoven.

Even though some research has been conducted on the topics of digital marketing and digital marketing strategies in the startup sector, no other research has investigated the challenges which the startups face in their practice. Furthermore, considering the fact that the digital environment and especially the digital marketing tools are under constant change, knowing how to yield and harness strategic digital marketing, particularly in regards to startups and small businesses, has been underwhelmingly unrepresented in the academic world. Therefore, combined with the existing academic gap in research on digital marketing strategy application in practice, this study answers the main research question:

What challenges do the startups in the Netherlands face in applying digital marketing strategies?

5.1 Relevant findings

The thematic analysis of the interviews conducted in this research presented a series of findings which answer the aforementioned research question and the posed sub-questions. The following findings are grounded in the practices, knowledge, and perception of experts which are responsible for marketing at their respective startups in the Netherlands. Therefore, the most relevant findings are presented in accordance with the theoretical

models and concepts and the posed sub-research questions which relate to the overarching research question. Subsequently, the findings of this research are categorized into three themes, which are in accordance with the posed sub-research questions of the research. More specifically, the findings are presented in regard to the digital marketing tools used in the Dutch startup sector, digital marketing strategies, and the challenges in the application of digital marketing tools and digital marketing strategies.

The first sub-research question refers to the digital marketing tools used in the Dutch startup sector. The findings of the research indicate that the analyzed startups in the Netherlands tend to use the most popular internet marketing tools, namely, social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn for their digital marketing efforts which complies with the theoretical knowledge of the study as proposed by the research of Global Web Index (2017). According to the findings, these social media platforms are used by the startups in the Dutch startup sector to raise awareness about their products and services which the respective startups sell to their targeted audiences. Furthermore, research shows that startups in the Netherlands aim to raise awareness of their products and services through the aforementioned social media platforms to generate leads and drive growth-in-revenue which is in line with the Hierarchy-of-Effects model proposed by Lavidge & Steiner (1961). Therefore, the use of internet marketing tools, according to the findings of the research, are an integral part of startup marketing efforts, which derives from internal capacities of the startups, namely, limited financial and human capital which make the digital marketing as the main form of marketing as proposed by Bresciani and Ewing (2014). Furthermore, research indicated that social media platform use for digital marketing efforts is also dependent on the business models and targeted audiences of the startups in the Netherlands. More specifically, business-to-business startups whose targeted audiences tend to be less present in the digital environment, tend to pursue probabilistic targeting of customers, as proposed by Bradstreet (2017), however, research indicated that LinkedIn is considered to be the best social media platform by most of the analyzed startups in the Netherlands for targeting audiences for both B2B and B2C startups.

However, when it comes to other social media platforms such as Twitter, Pinterest, Snapchat, and YouTube research indicated that startups in the Netherlands have limited or no use for the abovementioned social media platforms which is contradictory to the research findings of the Global Web Index (2017). Consequently, research findings show that such limited use for the aforementioned social media platforms stems from internal and external motives, namely, limited financial and human capital as an internal motive, and limited presence of targeted audiences as an external motive. Furthermore, findings indicate that internal motives, more specifically, limited financial and human capital, especially in regards

to time and knowledge of social media use and content creation, prevent startups from actively using such social media platforms as Snapchat and YouTube.

When it comes to the use of search marketing tools, namely search engine optimization and search engine advertising, research findings indicate that the wide majority of the analyzed startups tend to use both of the search marketing tools. However, research showed that the analyzed startups tend to emphasize their efforts more on search engine optimization, which is in line with Olbrich and Schultz (2008), who propose that SEO is used as a more natural tool to raise the visibility of the enterprises in the digital world. Furthermore, findings show that although the analyzed startups tend to use search engine advertising, smaller and less financially stable startups, because of limited financial and human capital tend to limit their use of search engine advertising. According to the research findings, although SEA is considered to be an effective mean of advertising, constant investment in SEA is required in order to keep the web-traffic flowing, therefore, it poses a threat for the analyzed startups to stop using SEA, because of the potential loss of customers, which is apparent across startups regardless of their business models and products or services that they sell.

The second-theme, namely, digital marketing strategies, has been analyzed in accordance to the SOSTAC model, which has been proposed by PR Smith (2011) and according to Chaffey and Bosomworth (2012), is considered to be one of the most profound models for digital marketing strategy framework development and evaluation. Therefore, this research examined how the analyzed startups in the Netherlands integrate the digital marketing strategy as a roadmap plan which contributes to the evaluation of (1) planning, (2) performance, and (3) post-execution processes and outcomes. Findings indicate that majority, more specifically, eight of the analyzed eleven startups have a digital marketing strategy, which in contrast with the research conducted by Chaffey's & Smith's (2013) is significantly higher than the 54% that the previous study found. However, although some startups do not have a digital marketing strategy, yet they strategize their digital marketing efforts, therefore it brings this research to the fundamental question of what should be considered a digital marketing strategy. According to the theoretical knowledge of this research, the prime goal of a digital marketing strategy, according to Chaffey's & Smith's (2013), is to define what digital marketing tools can be used to take full advantage of digital communication and subsequently increase its effectiveness. However, in order to analyze how startups in the Netherlands plan, perform and execute their digital marketing strategies and the strategic digital marketing efforts, the study analyzed the startups in accordance to the most relevant SOSTAC model factors, namely (S)situation analysis, (O)objectives, (S)strategy, (T)tactics, (A)actions, and (C)control (Chaffey et al., 2013).

Research findings indicate that when it comes to the *situation* factor, wide-majority of the analyzed startups conduct market or marketing research which subsequently influences the overall digital marketing strategy and helps the startups in the Netherlands form their *objectives*. Findings show that in regard to the *objectives* all eight startups which have a digital marketing strategy or strategize their digital marketing efforts have clear objectives and goals which they are trying to achieve. Furthermore, findings indicate that the analyzed startups have clear Key Performance Indicators (KPI's), which are used as short-term goals which help to reach the overall objectives of their digital marketing strategy, which are achieved through raising the brand awareness and the visibility of the startups in the Netherlands in the digital environment, which is in accordance to the critiques by Barry and Howard (1990) in regard to the Hierarchy-of-Effects model proposed by Lavidge & Steiner (1961). When it comes to the *strategy* of the analyzed startups, research findings show that the startups in the Netherlands tend to strategize their digital marketing efforts in accordance with their business models and targeted audiences. However, the *strategies* of the analyzed startups tend to be flexible and change often, accordingly to the situation of their digital marketing efforts and the objectives that the startups are pursuing to achieve. An important part of these constant changes, according to the research findings, derive from the nature of digital marketing, which according to the analyzed startups tends to be fluid. Therefore, the digital marketing strategies implemented by the startups in the Netherlands can be considered flexible and tend to be adaptable to the needs of the startups and the ever-changing and fast-paced digital environment.

The aforementioned fluidity of digital marketing is also apparent when it comes to the *tactics, actions, and control* of respective digital marketing strategies implemented by the startups in the Netherlands. Research indicated that startups tend to use data-driven objectives to plan and execute their digital marketing strategies. Furthermore, research showed that startups use various management tools and analytics tools which help set the *tactics*. Additionally, startups tend to use timeframes for setting digital marketing efforts and their execution vary across all startups regardless of their business models, targeted audiences, or size of the enterprise. These timeframes in regards to digital marketing *actions* change as often as daily, weekly, and quarterly which reaffirms the fluidity aspect of digital marketing and its influence on how the analyzed startups develop, plan and execute their respective digital marketing strategies which in line with the SOSTAC model, which has been proposed by PR Smith (2011) and further developed by Chaffey and Bosomworth (2012).

Finally, the last theme is the challenges in the application of digital marketing tools and digital marketing strategies. Therefore, when it comes to challenges that the analyzed startups in the Netherlands face, the findings of the research show that there are internal and

external challenges in the digital marketing tool application. The internal challenges refer to the human capital challenges such as content creation, engagement, creativity and right skill-set to produce content, internal communication, and multi-language use, especially when it comes to the digital marketing tools application in practice. On the other hand, the external challenges in the digital marketing tools application are related to the changes in the digital and social media environment, more specifically, the algorithmic change in certain internet marketing and search marketing tools, but also in regard to the digital audiences and the attitudes towards advertising on social media. Furthermore, when it comes to the challenges in the search marketing and multichannel communications in the practice of the analyzed startups, research findings indicate that the required knowledge and skill-set and its acquisition in addition to multi-language use for search engine optimization pose as the biggest internal boundaries for search marketing application in practice. However, research shows that the biggest external challenge in regard to the search marketing application in practice is the competitiveness in the market which subsequently influences the prices of search keywords, and consequently has a direct influence on the internal challenge - the financial capital.

However, when it comes to the challenges in the application of digital marketing strategies in practice, research shows that similarly to the digital marketing tool application, there are two groups of challenges, namely, creativity and long-term focus, and capabilities and execution. The creativity and long-term challenges are related to the uncertainties in decision-making in regard to the digital marketing strategy application in practice and the uncertainties in choosing the right tools and platforms that the startups want to pursue in order to reach their goals and objectives. Subsequently, uncertainties in decision-making in regard to the digital marketing strategy development and execution influences and poses as a challenge for the long-term perspective of digital marketing strategy application for the analyzed startups which derive from the limited human capital. Moreover, in combination with the uncertainties in decision-making, the changes in digital marketing tools, and changes in the attitudes of targeted audiences - reinforce the aforementioned fluidity of digital marketing and therefore constitute in fluid digital marketing strategies, which are evident from the research findings. Finally, research findings indicate that human and financial resources are required to execute the digital marketing strategies, therefore they pose as challenges for younger or smaller startups which do not necessarily have enough financial resources to employ experienced, competent and skillful professionals.

5.2 Theoretical and managerial implications

The aforementioned findings from the research have confirmed, contested, and added to the theoretical discussion and understanding of the theoretical framework. Therefore, this

section is used as a tool to show the theoretical and managerial implication of this research. Subsequently, the theoretical implications of the research are twofold. Firstly, this research has contributed to the current theoretical discussion of digital marketing use, especially in regard to the startup sector context (see e.g. Centobelli et al., 2017; Hæreid & Indregård, 2015; Kannan & Li, 2017; Chaffey & Smith, 2013; Lavidge & Steiner, 1961; Barry and Howard, 1990; Ghose & Yang, 2009; Lewandowski, Kerkmann, Rümmele, & Sünkler, 2018; Michaelidou, Siamagka & Christodoulides, 2011) by increasing the understanding of practices and perceptions of marketing experts who are working in the startup sector. Furthermore, the main research question, more specifically, what challenges do the startups in the Netherlands face in applying digital marketing strategies? is answered through the sub-research questions and answers provided by the experts responsible for marketing at their respective startups. Therefore, the main research question is answered by summarizing the answers of marketing experts working in the Dutch startup sector and the theoretical contributions.

Subsequently, the empirical evidence of this research confirms that the startups in the Netherlands encounter various difficulties and are fraught with choosing the correct digital platforms, in addition to the creation of marketing content that would be truly engaging and subsequently would lead to the positive delivery of results as proposed by Pulizzi (2012), and Aaker (2015). Furthermore, research confirmed that strategic communication via digital tools and in-house content marketing is considered to be one of the most widely used tools by startups, because of its relatively low-costs, in comparison to the traditional advertising, convenience, and in some instances direct and mutually-beneficial relationships which are established through constant communication with customers as proposed by Bresciani & Ewing (2014). However, in order to understand the challenges and implications of digital marketing strategies use in practice, the aforementioned uncertainties derive from the nature of digital marketing, which according to the research can be described as a fluid concept. Subsequently, in addition to the fluidity of digital marketing, the ever-changing and fast-paced digital environment influences the overarching digital marketing strategy planning, execution, and even the evaluation of digital marketing strategies, which builds upon the SOSTAC model (Smith, 2011), which is predominantly used by bigger and more established enterprises, however in this instance has been adapted for the analysis of the startup sector. Therefore, this adds an important contribution to transferring practices and perceptions of marketing experts towards a more academic orientation.

When it comes to the managerial, or practical implications of this research those three-fold. First, the Dutch startup sector and strategic digital marketing application in practice have not been greatly analyzed, therefore, the conducted study assists the practitioners who conduct or practitioners who are thinking of implementing strategic digital marketing in their

industry, especially in regards to small and medium-sized enterprises and startups. Hence, strategic capabilities and best practices which derive from the insights which have been gained by the interviews with the experts can assist digital marketing strategists and digital marketing professionals for digital agencies and entrepreneurs working in startups or small and medium-sized enterprises. Secondly, the empirical evidence gathered from the research also portrays the ever-changing digital environment, therefore, it shows both the fluidity and the necessity for adaptation in regard to the newest marketing trends, social media platforms, and the technology which in modern marketing is a pivotal part of marketing professionals and the daily work that these professionals conduct at respective enterprises regardless from business models and the size of the enterprises. Finally, the understanding of challenges which the startups in the Netherlands face while applying and strategizing their digital marketing tools and efforts, can be used as an antidote or as guidelines for marketing professionals who can reflect, understand, or even provide a solution for the challenges that they as marketing professionals encounter in their field of work.

5.3 Limitations and future research

Although the conducted research gave valuable insights into digital marketing and digital marketing application in practice, especially in regard to the startup context, however, the study presents certain limitations that need to be addressed.

Firstly, qualitative research and its subjective nature in essence, can be considered as a limitation, considering the fact that the measurement instrument in the research is the researcher himself. Although the research, especially when it comes to the interviews and the data which derives from the interview data analysis have been conducted with a conscious prevention of any biases in order to ensure the reliability of the research, the possibility of having influenced the research through individual or professional circumstances poses as a possible threat to the reliability of the thesis.

Secondly, considering the fact that strategic digital marketing application in startup context has not been greatly analyzed by previous scholars, the limited and in most cases relatively outdated theoretical knowledge in the field of digital marketing, is a limitation for reinforcement of the theoretical framework. Consequently, related concepts and theoretical models have been adapted for the investigation of digital marketing strategy application in practice in order to be analyzed in a more specific manner.

Finally, due to the time constrains and challenges in the recruitment of interviewees, 11 interviews have been conducted with professionals working in the startup sector. Although the interviewees have been selected from a wide variety of startups, regardless of their size, business model, however accordingly to the operationalization of the research and the criterion for what a startup is considered to be in this research in order to bring a variety of

opinions, consequently, it is uncertain whether particular variances in the practices befall on the respective startup level or as a whole on the industry level.

However, when it comes to future research, as already mentioned, there is an existing academic gap in regards to past research in digital marketing strategies and their application in practice. Therefore, research on digital marketing strategy application and their challenges in different markets would be considered highly interesting. Furthermore, as outlined in the limitations section, because of the subjective nature of qualitative research, mix method, namely the combination of both qualitative and quantitative research methods would be an interesting approach which would lead towards more generalizable results. Additionally, considering the fact that digital marketing is a dynamic process, and is constantly changing and evolving, for future research it would be interesting to analyze the application of digital marketing strategies and the challenges that the startups encounter in regular intervals. Moreover, for future research it would be interesting to investigate certain startups which are from the same industry, or startups which have the same business model. Finally, future research could explore how technological advances and new methods of marketing, such as virtual reality, or mobile-device marketing affects the digital marketing strategy application in the Dutch startup sector.

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Appendix A. – Interviewee list

Interviewee number	Name	Position	Startup represented
1.	Gianluca Bellan	International Growth Manager	Declaree - is an online expense management solution; a native smartphone app to digitize all (travel) expenses wherever you are, instead of completing your monthly declaration forms in Excel or on paper. Based in Rotterdam - 11-50 employees
2.	Christiaan Huynen	CEO	DesignBro - is an online platform that connects creative talents with clients from all over the world. Based in Amsterdam - 1-5 employees.
3.	Ron van Valkengoed	Strategic Advisor, currently responsible for marketing	EasyGenerator - is a cloud-based eLearning authoring software used by enterprises such as Nielsen, T-Mobile and Unilever to scale knowledge sharing amongst the workforce. Based in Rotterdam - 11-50 employees.
4.	Jonathan Stranders	CEO	Gearbooker - Rental platform for creatives. peer-2-peer rental of photo, video and audio equipment. Based in Rotterdam – 1-5 employees.
5.	Hugo Melis & Jelle Koot	H. Melis - Owner, CEO. J. Koot - Intern	GlamorousGoat - design and develop mobile applications. Based in Eindhoven – 1-5 employees.
6.	Tessie Hartjes	Head of Sales, Marketing, and Communications	Lightyear – automotive company which builds sustainable mobility products. Based in Helmond, Eindhoven area - 11-50 employees.
7.	Robert Leefmans	CEO, founding partner	Notificare - Mobile Marketing Platform lets you reach out, interact and gain insights from your users on mobile and desktop. Based in Rotterdam – 11-50 employees.
8.	Veronika Kartovenko	Co-founder, Business Development Manager	Sweek - mobile platform which connects readers and writers, by enabling them to create, read and share their stories. Based in Rotterdam – 11-50 employees
9.	Bree Tahapary	PR and Marketing Manager	TestBirds - investigates software for user-friendliness and functionality issues through the use of crowd and cloud-based technologies. Headquarters based in Munich, Germany, International office in

			Amsterdam – 51-200 employees in all offices.
10.	Marc van der Hulst	Head of Marketing	TravelBird – internet platform selling packaged travels across 11 markets in Europe. Based in Amsterdam – 250-300 employees
11.	Rob Alderson	Vice-President, responsible for Content Marketing	WeTransfer – is a cloud-based computer file transfer service. Based in Amsterdam – 51-100

Appendix B. – Interview Guide

Introduction

1. Explaining subject of the thesis.
2. Objective of the conversation.
3. Ensuring confidentiality of information.

General information

1. Can you state your name and company you work for?
2. Can you state that you have agreed and signed the consent form provided for you?
3. Could you describe the industry your company operates within?
4. What is your role in this company?
5. Could you describe the organizational culture of your company?

Marketing

1. Can you briefly describe what in your opinion is marketing?
2. Who do you target with your marketing activities?
3. Could you name some marketing activities that you conduct?
4. Which marketing tools do you use today?

Digital Marketing

1. Could you briefly describe what in your opinion is digital marketing? How does it differ from just marketing?
2. How important do you think is digital marketing for your company?
3. Who is your targeted audience in regard to digital marketing use?
4. As a startup, how important do you think the company's website is for the customer?
5. Do you have any contact with your end user?

Digital marketing tools

1. What kind of digital marketing tools does your company use?
2. How important are digital marketing tools for your digital marketing in regard to e-commerce efforts?

Social media marketing platforms

1. Does your company use any of the following social media marketing platforms for digital marketing efforts?
 - **Facebook**
 - **Instagram**

- **Twitter**
 - **LinkedIn**
 - **Pinterest**
 - **Snapchat**
 - **YouTube**
2. Do you use any other social media platforms for digital marketing besides the ones mentioned before?
 3. In your opinion, what is the best social media platforms for your digital marketing efforts?
 4. What is your expectation of using social media as a tool of digital marketing?
 5. What are the strengths and weaknesses of social media use in digital marketing?
 6. How does social media help you target the audience?
 7. How often do you communicate via social media?
 8. Approximately, how much time do you spend on social media compared to traditional marketing channels?
 9. Do you think that because you are a company that is working in the digital sector, you are obliged to use social media?
 10. Have you noticed any change in customer support or customer relations since you started using social media?
 11. Are there any challenges in applying social media tools that you encounter?

Search marketing tools

1. Do you use any of the search marketing tools such as Search Engine Optimization or Search Engine Advertising?
2. How does your company use search engine optimization?
3. Why does your company use search engines advertising?
4. In your opinion, what is more important for your company, search engine optimization or search engine advertising?
5. How do you measure your success with SEO or SEA?
6. Are there any challenges that you encounter using SEO or SEA?

Multichannel omnichannel

1. Do you most frequently omnichannel or multichannel communications?
2. Which channels do you use for omni or multi-channel communication? Most Often
3. Do your messages usually have the same message that is being communicated on these platforms?
4. Do you segment your messages in any way, and target particular audiences through omni or multi-channel platforms?

5. Are there any challenges that you encounter using multichannel communications?

Digital marketing strategy

1. Do you have a digital marketing strategy?
2. How important is the digital marketing strategy for your sales?
3. Does your digital marketing strategy have clear goals which you want to achieve?
Why is it important?
4. How is the success of your digital marketing strategy measured?
5. How do you track the implementation of the strategy?
6. Are there any challenges that you encounter when applying your digital marketing strategy?

Digital marketing strategy framework

1. Is your digital marketing strategy based on market research or situation analysis?
Why?
2. What are the main objectives of your DMS? Why?
3. How often do you strategize the actions in order to reach your objectives or targeted audiences?
4. How often do you assess your overall digital marketing strategy? Why?
5. How often do you make changes in your digital marketing strategy?
6. In your opinion, what are the most important touchpoints of your digital marketing strategy?
7. Do you conduct market research? If yes, does market research have an influence on how digital marketing strategy is implemented?
8. Are there any challenges that you encounter when developing DMS?

Challenges and opportunities

1. In your opinion what do you think are the biggest challenges in applying digital marketing strategies in your company? If there are any.
2. In your opinion, because the Netherlands are considered to be the most competitive country in regard to startup environment in Europe, do you think it has an impact on your digital marketing strategy?
3. Could you give any advice or recommendations for startups who are thinking of creating digital marketing strategies for their business?