Customer Support Chat

A strategic tool for a company

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Halmstad 2017-05-23

______________________________  ________________________________
Malin Torstensson               Emmy Dannehall
Abstract

The purpose of this dissertation is to investigate if a customer support live chat can be used as a strategic tool to increase customer satisfaction and build a stronger relationship. To gather our data, we have chosen to do qualitative interviews with Customer Support Managers at eight different e-commerce companies.

By using the model *E-Service Quality in the Live Customer Service/Support Chat Success Model (2011)* developed by dr. Ahmed Elmorshidy, we tested if there is a significance between customer satisfaction and the usage of customer support chat. The results we found were in line with our expectations, that the chat can be a strategic advantage tool if used to its full potential.

Keywords: Customer Live Chat, Support Chat, E-commerce, Communication Strategy, Elmorshidy, Strategic Advantage
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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

That the digitalization has and is making an impact on the society is a knowledge that companies are aware of today. The development is rapid and companies need to adapt to meet the expectations on the market. But there’s talk about that changes will never happen as slow as it does right now and that this is just the beginning of the Golden Age of Digitalization. (Gilan & Hammarberg, 2016)

Due to the development in the e-commerce market in recent years, companies have had the need to develop their business models and CRM strategies to keep up with the changes in customer buying behaviour. Through social media, customers have developed behaviours that shows that they feel they have a closer contact with a company. One of the changes of the customer’s behaviour that have occurred is the time-to-response, that has become much shorter. This have also had effects of how fast words can travel on the Internet which has led to the expression Word-of Web that is a development of Word-of-Mouth. (Gilan & Hammarberg, 2016)

This has led to that companies have had to adapt their CRM strategies to remain a good relationship with their customers. Call Centres and email has been the frequently used channels for customers to contact companies before but now due to social media customers expect the time-to-response to be shorter than it has been. As an effect of this, there have been more popular among companies to talk to their customers in live chats instead of email correspondence and call centres (Gilan & Hammarberg, 2016).

1.2 Problem

Companies on the digital market have during the last decade seen behaviour changes in their customers. This have led to the development in the communication strategies, forcing companies to me more digital. This is not an issue just for one industry but for all industries using Internet as a communication channel (Ozuem, Howell, & Lancaster, 2008). To be successful in communicating and building a relationship with their customers, e-commerce companies need to find the best tools to build a successful communication plan.

Customers want to know that there is fast help at hand when needed (Pinto, 2013), and therefore companies have been using pages with frequently asked questions, e-mail and live chat (Yin & Straub, 2002). But waiting one or several hours to receive an answer to a simple question through e-mail is no longer acceptable. The average time a customer must wait to receive a response to an email is up to 28 hours (Andrews, 2010).

With a live support chat the company can answer a question in real time (Elmorshidy, 2013), and it also gives the company the ability to help more than one customer at the time (Andrews, 2010). By using this tool, the company gains an economic advantage to the use of an expensive customer support call centre (Elmorshidy, 2011).

Even though the overall percentage of customers who are embracing the live chat increases (Pinto, 2013) there are still customers who prefer to contact the customer support through phone
since they get the personal touch through this channel. Andrews (2010) and Pinto (2013) says that the core of a good chat support is the human touch, together with the chat technology the company will have no problem reaching one of the oldest goals; to have loyal customers.

1.3 Research question

Can companies use their online support chat as a strategic tool to maintain a good customer relationship?

1.4 Purpose

In this paper, we will review if a live customer support chat can be used as a strategic tool for companies in the field of e-commerce. To do so, we will use a model as the foundation for our study. The model is created by Dr. Ahmed Elmorshidy at Gulf University for Science and Technology. With this dissertation, we want to achieve results showing that when using a customer support live chat as a strategic tool, companies can strengthen their relationship with their e-commerce customers.

1.5 Definitions

IM - Instant Messaging
An instant messaging system is a mean to present information between a customer and an agent and where the support agent can manage more than one conversation at once with different customers' (USA Patentnr US20030131064 A1, 2003), all happening in real time (Elmorshidy, 2013).

CSC- Customer Service Chat
A customer service chat is based on the instant messaging software. The conversation between a customer support agent and the customer is taking place online by chatting (Andrews, 2010).

Sessions, Incidents
The time between when a customer starts to write to a support agent at a company, to when the stop writing when the problem is solved.

VOC - voice of the customer
A way for the customers to get their inputs heard in business situations. VOC is a hierarchy based on the needs of the customer, where the different need has different priorities that shows what need is the most important to the customer (Griffin & Hauser, 1993).

Networked Economy
Networked economy is defined as an economic environment that has risen from the digitization, where interaction in real time between people, devices and business have taken form by using multi-layered communication and high form of interaction (Review, 2014).
2. Frame of references

2.1 The digitalization

The map of how communication between companies and customers work is currently rewriting itself in a rapid pace due to changes brought by modern technologies. The Internet is the major force that has challenged the traditional communication process between customers and companies. According to Ozuem, Howell & Lancaster (2008) there is an interesting change in the customers’ behaviour that has been influenced by marketing communication. Though these actions are made by the companies on the market there has been a communicative interactivity between the customers and the actors on the market. The massive development of the internet in recent years has resulted in to the creation of a new place for interaction and identity formation (Ozuem, Howell, & Lancaster, 2008).

Internets potential of being a mean of communication that fast reaches out to a big part of the market has been documented many times. One example of many is that it has been argued that the increasing popularity of the internet have given many customers, marketers and over all users’ new experiences. The fact has nonetheless been recognised as a central problem in the literature of market communication and implies that there is a lack of strict cross-industry research on interactivity and the advantages with gaining access to a developing market space. The potential of the networked economy, as one of the consequences of Internet, haven’t just created a global economy but also shaped a mean of communication through the popularity of internet (Ozuem, Howell, & Lancaster, 2008).

Gilan & Hammarberg (2016) talks about that the whole era of the digitalization, has resulted in that the Internet today is the one of the main communication channels. They also state that the usage exploded with the mobile revolution 2007. Today most of the population use their smartphone to access internet. They also say that the average mobile user picks up their smartphone more than 200 times per day. This is also confirmed by UK communication regulator Ofcom’s International Communication market report 2016 (Ofcom, 2016).

“Smartphones stand out as being the device of choice for consumers to use to spend time online. In the US, smartphone users spent 87 hours per month browsing on their smartphones, compared to 34 hours on their laptops or desktops. UK smartphone users spent the second-longest time browsing online, at 66 hours per month.” (Ofcom, 2016)

Gilan & Hammarberg (2016) says that this is because we are slaves under a need for feedback which is stilled by looking in the email inbox, social media flow or by playing our favourite mobile game. They also insinuate that for companies to survive in the second phase of the digitalization they need to acknowledge that in a world where the customer constantly is online, they expect service and commitment from the company regardless of time.

Shae, Garg, Bhose, Mukherjee, & Guven, (2007) discussed that information technology has played a key role when it comes to the revolution that has taken place in the service industry.
Shae et al. (2007) and Gilan & Hammarberg (2016) both say that the service sector has grown over the last 50 years due to the advancement of IT.

To change from a business model that in the past has been proved successful for the company is a sign of courage. The will to change and develop their organization to a business model that retrieves and uses the companies gathered data from their market. If the data is used to create a new digital platform these companies will have a large advantage when the market changes (Gilan & Hammarberg, 2016).

Maxwell Wessel also says in his article *How Big Data Is Changing Disruptive Innovation* (Jan 2016) that something new is going on in the world of innovation. Historically companies looked at the lower end of the market to detect changes and disruptions that could create shifts on the market. But according to Wessel the disruptions now comes from players that create products that is based upon analysing data of the market. He mentions the innovating transportation company Uber (www.uber.com) as one of the companies that has been successful in creating a business model just from analysing data. Uber captures a wealth of information through data gathering by using their mobile application. By being so successful of gathering data Uber have mapped the logistics of human transportation.

Data and foremost Big data has been on everyone’s tongue in the business industry since the middle of the nineties. This has led to that companies have stored massive amount of data in various databases today. Both Gilan and Hammarberg (2016) and Wessel (2016) says the important data is the right data, regardless if it is big or small. Wessel (You Don’t Need Big Data — You Need the Right Data, 2016) discusses that the key for innovators is to figure out what those critical pieces of data are that drive competitive position on their market. Both Gilan and Hammarberg (2016) and Wessel (2016) says that this data should be searched for and analysed regularly.

Gilan and Hammarberg (2016) even states that the companies who aim to become data-driven and successful of analysing data will be those who carve gold in the digital world.

### 2.2 Customer Service Management (CSM)

Customer Service Management is one of the many branches that goes under the term Customer Relationship Management (CRM). CRM is often used interchangeably with the term relationship marketing because it builds on the process of building a strong relationship with customers to create more sales opportunities (Payne & Frow, 2005).

According to Tucker (1994) one approach to customer service management is the marketing approach. The marketing approach to customer service is defined by physical distribution customer service, product services and a wide range of marketing-related customer services. “It can be characterized as all activities existing to sell the prospect and gain repeat sales” (Hopkins & Bailey, 1970, s. 1).

Customer expectations have increased when it comes to communication with companies. The estimated time to respond has become much shorter for customers today, so waiting 24 hours or 4 hours for an answer by e-mail is becoming unacceptable (Elmorshidy, 2011). To meet those expectations companies have been using internet based technology to enhance the experience for the customers. Frequently asked questions (FAQs), self-help, e-mail, live chat,
and VoIP (voice over IP) are common tools that companies can use to make the communication more like face to face communication (Yin & Straub, 2002).

Andrews (2010) states that the personal touch has proven to be the important factor when it comes to communication through internet based technology. A live chat creates possibility for a remote support to be more immediate, sophisticated and with a more personal touch. The chat conversation has more in common with the face-to-face conversation than with using Google or other search engines and email conversations (Hvass & Myer, 2008).

Previous researches (Ghose & Dou, 1998) suggestions that providing an interactive customer support is significant with high quality and in what degree of interactivity of an e-commerce site is important to create returning customers’. Buy not providing an easy communication tool on a website customers are hesitant to complete a purchase even if they only have one question that they want an answer for (Elmorshidy, 2011).

“Visitors who get quick answers to their questions stay longer, buy more products, and show more confidence in your company” (Elmorshidy, 2011, s. 326)

Interactive communication lead to that customers feel they are met with a perception of responsiveness and mutuality. Customers that interacts through customer interchanges trust the company more which lead to that they are more likely to come to a purchase decision. To make the communication to be effective and kept at a satisfactory level it need to be immediate and relevant for the receivers and the sender. In their model, Yin & Straub (2002) show that interactivity of communication build customer relationship which leads to intention to buy.

Figure 1. Research Model - Yin & Straub, 2002

Yin & Straub (2002) believe that responsiveness and mutuality, if conveyed and understood correctly, will be a significant part of the customer experience in the customer service and will likely affect the customer relationships with the company. They also think that when there is highly interactive communication (face-to-face or live chat), which lead to that the sender and the responder can communicate with each other immediately through simultaneous and
continuously exchanging messages, that this leads to mutual understanding for both parties more quickly.

2.3 Customer Support Chat

The customer support chat, also known as CSC, is a part of the contact centre in the company where the phone and email services are included (Tezcan, 2011). The CSC is based upon an online conversation, performed by one-to-one chatting. The technological foundation is an instant messaging software. This allows the users, customer or agent to communicate with each other and meantime perform other computer based tasks (Andrews, 2010). When it comes to the responsiveness the CSC is placed in between email and phone customer service. The chat service covers for where the email services is lacking immediacy and interactivity since the chat conversations is happening in real time. It is not as fast as the phone however, since the customer must wait for one of the company agents to read and write a respond to their question (Tezcan, 2011).

The customer support chat is a web service that makes it possible for companies to communicate through a chat portal with their customers in real time as they visit the company’s web site. The usage of CSC has become more common by companies that use e-commerce websites to provide support and needed information to the customers (Elmorshidy, 2011).

At e-commerce companies a live chat is the most cost effective way to add some personalization and personal interaction to the customers shopping experience and at the same time the company gives the customer reassurance that there will be an answer to their questions immediately. A live chat results in an arising confidence for the customers’. If a company has a live chat button visible on their web page, the company will reassure that there is a support agent ready to answer whatever question the customer has (Elmorshidy, 2013).

The appearance of a CSC on the website of large organizations are increasing and getting information or support through the chat portal have gotten more common. One of the advantages of using a live chat as a customer service channel over the traditional phone-based customer service is that the CSC is semi-automated in some of the interaction between the customer support agent and the customer. This the customer has no awareness of, which is not possible if the support would have been through phone since automated speech agents are still recognizable (Kim, Cavedon, & Baldwin, 2010)

The agent can handle multiple customers at the same time and send the replies in a specific order (Tezcan, 2011; Andrews, 2010). According to (Shae, Garg, Bhose, Mukherjee, & Guven, 2007) the optimal number of active incidents are 3 at the same time for an agent, but depending on the incident and the CSC platform the agent can have up to 6 active incidents simultaneously (Tezcan, 2011).

The chat server works in diverse ways depending on which side you are on. As customer that is a user of the chat service, the server takes the inputs they have, and on the other side the server buffers responses to the company’s agent. There are two different processes; where one includes sending the message from the customer to the agent through the chat server and the
other process is fetching answers for the agent to send to the right customer (Shae, Garg, Bhose, Mukherjee, & Guven, 2007).

The use of a more interactive web building tool called AJAX, has helped to give the chat portal some automatization. The portal can now, with the help of AJAX automatically update itself and meantime asynchronously the communication between the agent and the customer (Shae, Garg, Bhose, Mukherjee, & Guven, 2007).

This results in that the application provides many improvements for the already existing chat solution and display mechanisms. The first aspect is that the agent does not have to switch open windows on the computer screen between the chat conversation and the solutions that the database provides. Furthermore, the chat agent does not need to identify the keywords in the customer's message manually, the server takes care of that automatically. All the information needed for the agent to help the current customer is provided in one unified platform and gives a good oversight of everything needed for the support agent (Shae, Garg, Bhose, Mukherjee, & Guven, 2007).

If a customer has a question and choose to go through the chat channel, the customer will be assigned to an available agent, if there are any available. If not, they will be put in a queue and wait for their turn for an available agent. Once the customer has gotten an agent the customer stays with the same agent during the entire incident. When the customer is satisfied with the solution or the response from the agent s/he leaves the chat and the agent starts a new incident (Tezcan, 2011).

When a company implements a customer service chat they must reconstruct how the customer service operations work and how the customer service agents interact with the customers' (Andrews, 2010). One example in the written chat dialogue is that a written error is not recognized as easily as over the phone, since the informal language of writing by nature is commonly ill-formed and the flow of the communication is stricter, and since the chat is dependent on the semi-asynchronous part of the conversation (Kim, Cavedon, & Baldwin, 2010). Even though the chat language is more informal, the conversation can be more straightforward than if the conversation would be written in an email. It is easier for the agent to get a real-time answer from the customer when both are online and the customer can give the agent instant feedback. The support chat conversation between the agent and the customer are commonly more rapid and informal and therefore it more similar with the spoken language (Hvass & Myer, 2008).

To test if CSC is a helpful tool to create customer satisfaction Elmorshidy (2011) developed The live customer service/support chat success model by adding the Dimension of E-Service Quality to Nakhi and Neves (2009) model. The new dimensions are System Quality, System Reliability, System Availability, Information Quality, Consistency of Service Quality and Online Customer Feedback. By doing this Elmorshidy (2011) suggested that the gap between the expected and perceived service of the CSC will lead to determine the service quality and then further into the degree of satisfaction of the customer. The model creates a theoretical framework for e-service quality success according to Elmorshidy (2011).
Figure 2. E-Service Quality in the Live Customer Service/Support Chat Success Model - Elmorshidy 2011
2.4 Strategies

In his Harvard Business review article The Five Competitive Forces that Shape Strategy (Porter, 2008), Michael Porter describes how companies need to be aware of the competition from as he calls the Five Forces That Shape Industry Competition.

![Fig 3. The Five Forces That Shape Industry Competition – Porter, 2008](image)

With the digital development, forces of competition are much greater today. Companies can face all the competitive forces that Porter describes on both international and global markets. One of the most common pitfalls when analysing a market is that companies look at their market too broadly or too narrowly. Which creates a false picture of the competitors which then lead to wrong strategic decisions according to Porter (2008).

To refer to what Elmorshidy (2011) said about how a customer can back out of a buying decision if they can’t find an answer to only one question on a website. This is also in line with Porters (2008) description of customer’s behaviour. He writes that customers are fickle, searching for the best deal regardless of whom they buy it from. Porter categorizes this as one of the five competitive forces and calls it The Bargaining Power of the Buyers.

He then suggests that companies should expand their services to make it harder for that customer to leave them for another competitor. This type of service is called Complementary service, and it is used as a complement to the main product or service that the company provides. The characteristics of a complementary service is that it arises the customer benefit and product value when they are combined with a main product or service. Adding a complement can affect the company’s profitability through the way they can influence the five competition forces. Porter says, “the strategic significance of complements will be best understood through the lens of the five forces” (Porter, 2008, s. 34).

For companies in the e-commerce industry it is a good strategy to have as low entry barriers for the buyer as possible. (Porter, 2008) With other words, make the buying process as straight
forward as possible and the customer support easy to access with as few clicks as possible to find the information needed.

Porter continues to talk about how a company can use their knowledge about the competitive forces in their industry to form a strategy, by building a defence against them or target a position on the market where the forces are weaker (Porter, 2008).

When having a customer support chat that is easy to access, the chat can be used as a strategic tool of great importance when it comes to the customer experience and furthermore into the customer relationship. When a company uses their customer service as a strategic tool they make better financial decisions, but leaving the financial decisions aside, many companies are not prioritizing with having a well-functioning customer service strategy that has an impact on the experience for the customer (Goodman, 2009). With a strategic approach on the CSC the company can collect data from the customers’ in form of preferences, needs and behaviour. When using this data and combining them with existing data from surveys, the data can contribute to make the company aware of how they can change the customers' experience and the relationship with the customer. When using the customer service like a source of collecting data the customer service will function as a strategic catalyst for every aspect of the company and all the processes that affect the customer and the relationship between the company and their customers' (Goodman, 2009). If a customer has a complaint or other questions, they contact customer service. At that point, it is up to the customer service agent to turn the complaint into something valuable for the company and turn the customer around to preserve a good relationship (Goodman, 2009).

“The payoff from a strategic approach to customer service is simple: more revenue, higher margins, lower costs, and positive word of mouth producing more customers at a lower marketing cost” (Goodman, 2009, p.5)

If the company, choose to have a customer support chat service, Pinto (2013) claims there are steps a company can follow to gain optimal customer satisfaction when using a customer support chat. (1) Identifying what the goals and the metrics are with the chat, since the chat is a communication channel that differs from the other communication channels. (2) When using a live chat, the company need to make sure that the chat is easy to find for the customer and simple to use. Otherwise the company risks losing that customer to another competitor. This goes in line with what Porter (2008) have said in the explanation of his five forces. (3) Make sure to use the chat to its full potential, and there is a wide range of functionalities the chat support can be used for. This can for instance be to segment the customer to make sure to avoid frustration for both agent and customer if an issue cannot be solved. (4) Have as a standard to offer special training for chat support agents. The customer approach with a customer support chat is different compared to the other support channels. (5) Make sure to do regular evaluations and improvements. By asking the customers’ questions about their impressions and experience of the chat, the company will receive data on how they can improve their customer service chat (Pinto, 2013).
2.4.1 Economic advantage

One of the live chat strategies the company can consider is that the chat gives an economic advantage. Elmorshidy (2011) mentioned in his paper that live chats save money since with using only a chat as communication channel, the company doesn’t need to pay money for an expensive customer support number. In her article, Bannan (2000) presented the costs for keeping a live chat and the costs for the customer support number.

The figures are presented per incident. By using a customer live chat a company can save $20-$26 per incident depending on what sort of program they are using and what sort of applications that are included in that particular program. In her article Bannan (2000) listed that using a live chat cost the companies somewhere between $4 and $10 whereas using a customer phone support can cost as much as $30 per incident. The usage of email as the customer support channel costs about the same as a live chat (Tezcan, 2011).

2.4.2 Customer Contact Data

“Data mining enables the analysis of large quantities of data to discover meaningful patterns and relationships (e.g., Groth 2000; Peacock 1998). More specific software application packages include analytical tools that focus on such tasks as campaign management analysis, credit scoring, and customer profiling.” (Payne & Frow, 2005, s. 173)

In his book, Strategic Customer Service, Goodman wrote about an executive that the company spend millions of dollars every year on customer surveys with getting any usable information. However, when the company realized that they were wasting money, they started to use customer contact data to add with the information they got from the surveys and then got a real-time image of the customer experience. By using this collected data on the performance and problems with their products, together with the customers' attitudes and preferences, saved the company a large amount of money and gave the possibility to improve their customer experience in the same time (Goodman, 2009).

Customer contact data is the data is gathered from when customers interact with some part of a company's service system. This interaction often occurs in real time through phone, interactive voice response systems (IVRs) and e-mail. This type of data often contains emotional content. Goodman (2009) gives an example of this by saying that playing a recording of a customer complaint to the management is far more effective than just showing statistics of customer compliance. He also mentions that customer contact data can be harder to interpretant in the larger scale due to that only a small percentage of the customers is represented as source of this data.

Goodman (2009) calls customer contact data from all service channels including call centres, internet interference and technical support, a robust data of customer experience. By this he means that when a customer contacts the company about a complaint the service
manager get the information about the problem directly, which leads to that that knowledge can be spread within the company quickly.

Goodman (2009) also points out that complaining customers can be a multiplier of their number, that can provide valuable causes of a problem. They can also include their expectations of how they would like the problem to be solved. By using these methods, the company can prevent the problems from recurring.

There are a few companies that knows the value of their customers' and know how to use their customer support to gather all information needed. The GE Answer Centre have collected data worth about 10 000 full market surveys just by using their customer support as an input (Goodman, 2009).

By locating the source of a problem, do not have to be the customer support agents’ responsibility. However, gathering the data of the general cause and to be able to direct future sources of the problem and analyse the data is an important secondary responsibility. One thing to consider is that it might not be the obvious problem that is the source of the actual problem. Because of that the analysis seems to start in the customer service department and then later be moved to a more suitable department, that can handle the source of the problem properly. To get the best data for this kind of analysis the customer support software must enable an easy data entry and integrate all data collected from all diverse types of sources, e.g. warranty claims and returns on products. When a company has a fully integrated compliant system the reported issues are gathered and then reported to the right department for analysis. Eliminating the source of the problem and prevent them from reoccurring will boost the company's productivity (Goodman, 2009).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Internal metrics</td>
<td>Credible to management and useful in problem solving (to the degree that it describes factors that are important to the customer) because it is operations data</td>
<td>Provide a limited view of the customer experience based on only the aspects of operations that management measures (such as billing errors, late deliveries, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer contacts</td>
<td>Very timely and descriptive of the actual customer experience</td>
<td>May not be the exact data you want, and the data must be extrapolated to the customer base</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surveys</td>
<td>Data can be projected to the customer base and markets (with proper sampling), and ongoing comparable measurements are possible</td>
<td>Significantly more costly and often less timely than data from internal metrics and customer contacts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig 5. Strengths and Weaknesses of Information Sources - Goodman, 2009
When the analysis has been done and the reviews of the problem has been done the analyst team set up priorities in how to prevent the problem to reoccur. This can result in three different outcomes: the problem can be prevented by 1) education, 2) adjust the process or the product or 3) respond to when the problem occurs and has been reported. By preventing a problem, the customers’ who have not made a complaint will also be able to take part of the solution (Goodman, 2009).

Just by having a lot of surveys the company is not guaranteed to get an actionable VOC (voice of customer) process. The data collected from surveys are important but they are lagging indicators that can be picked up at the customer support. By using surveys, contact data and internal metrics Goodman (2009) says that the company will have the best VOC process possible. This is a contradiction to what Elmorshidys model (2011) at the previous page was implying.

Marketers are not using this medium (CSC) as anything else than a technological source of information. This results in that the marketers seek what they assume are “cause/effect” and “action/outcome” situations that has been manipulated by the marketing communications towards an accomplishment of rationality by making the realities of the social exchange absent, which is a core component in the means of communication (Ozuem, Howell, & Lancaster, 2008).

Companies are using the personalization tools to gather and save information about their customers and therefore get better at satisfying their needs to build a personal customer relationship (Verhagen, van Nes, Feldberg, & van Dolen, 2014).

2.4.3 Efficiency

Using a customer service chat system holds a unique feature, by creating the possibility to help more than one customer at once. The number of customers’ an agent can help simultaneously depends on the skills of the agent and what kind of support the customer need (Tezcan, 2011). In a CSC system, the customer support agent can chat with multiple customers' simultaneously (Elmorshidy, 2011; Shae, Garg, Bhose, Mukherjee, & Guven, 2007), which differ from the other and more traditional customer support channels since the customers' need time to form a message and take part of the information the agent sends. This makes it also possible to have a pre-formatted response ready for the agent to reduce the responding time (Shae, Garg, Bhose, Mukherjee, & Guven, 2007).

In their research Shae et al. (2007) proves that the customer service chat system performs better than the phone customer services in the different important aspects of measuring call resolution and the customers' end satisfaction. When a support centre is only using phone calls as the only mean of communication it is not possible to have a semi-automated interaction with the customer since an automated voice is easier to detect than an automated written answer (Kim, Cavedon, & Baldwin, 2010).

Depending on what sort of CSC system a company has chosen to use, the number of helped customers varies from 3 up to 6 without compromising with the quality in the different chat conversations (Shae, Garg, Bhose, Mukherjee, & Guven, 2007; Tezcan, 2011). Shae et al.
(2007) calculated, in the system they used, that a customer support agent can handle 3 chat sessions simultaneously without a negative impact on the ASA (average speed to answer).

While conducting their research Shae et al. (2007) observed that the customers’ who use the support chat are more talkative and tends to write more sentences compared to the support agents, where the pre-formatted answers are included. Tezcan (2011) suggests that the company themselves must find out what the optimal number of customers are for their support agents so they can keep the service at a satisfactory level at all times. The level of service is measured over a long time by the average time a customer spends in the CSC system.

If the agent is serving more than one customer at once, the agent does not need to sit and wait for a response from the customer and can therefore handle more incidents in a shorter period. This is of course determined to the fact that the extra customers’ the agent is helping does not affect the given service to the already active customers’. There is a positive correlation between the number of incidents an agent is handling and the average time for response, which shortly means: the more incidents, the more time it takes for the agent to answer the questions of the customers’. After crossing the optimal number of incidents, the agent cannot longer handle the incidents simultaneously with the wanted efficiency (Tezcan, 2011).

Shae et al. (2007) compared their metrics with the ones who are similar in customer service phone calls. They discovered that the ASA for a customer phone call is 70 seconds whereas the ASA for a CSC is 20 seconds. The short ASA of the chat is a result of the agents’ possibility to multi task, which reduces the waiting time for the customer with 50 seconds. Nevertheless, the chat conversation is longer with 19.36 minutes compared with a phone calls 11.4 minutes. The chats and the phone calls have same FCR (first call resolution) at 90%, and here is counted with 3 customers’ in the live chat simultaneously. With these numbers at hand it is read that a customer support chat can reduce the costs of the customer support centre without compromising with the support quality (Shae, Garg, Bhose, Mukherjee, & Guven, 2007).

2.5 Disadvantages with using CSC

While performing their research on the chat support system Shae et al. (2007) concluded that to have a database that automatically collects solutions based on keywords from the customers’ messages saves time for the agent to find a solution for its customer. However, there is a backside with this sort of automatization. The computer can read the message wrong and pick up the wrong keywords from the customer and therefore not give the best possible solution.

Another drawback is that a chat support software can be difficult to install and manage properly. There are companies that think these software’s are designed poorly, not good enough for the complexity of the problem solution and the reason for that the management department has too big workload (Andrews, 2010).

The web based tools such as frequently asked questions and live chats are effective when it comes to help the customers to find the information needed or to get a quick answer to a question. However, there is one thing most of these channels are missing: the personal touch and the sense of social presence (Verhagen, van Nes, Feldberg, & van Dolen, 2014). Another disadvantage with just having a customer support chat is that the company now forces their customers to have some technical skills and takes away the opportunity of a natural conversation. Since its takes longer time to write and read a message for both the agent and the
customer, the conversation gets slowed down which can lead to customers abruptly quit their chat sessions due to losing patience (Tezcan, 2011).

3. Method

For this dissertation, we have chosen to do a qualitative research in form of interviews with people from different e-commerce companies, all of which have a form of customer support chat on their web page.

The companies that we have targeted in our research, have all been chosen based on certain criteria such as:

- have a customer live chat
- operating within the e-commerce business
- operating on the Swedish market.

This selection has been made due to the relevance for our research to conduct as good analysis as possible.

3.1 Participants

To gather data for this dissertation, we contacted 20 different e-commerce companies, and the following 9 respondents were interested in participating. Therefore, the selection vary naturally. All respondents that have been interviewed for this dissertation, are managers of the customer support on their company. Down below follows a brief description of each respondents’ responsibility within the company.

Respondents 1 and 2 both work for the same company, but at two different departments. Both respondents are Customer Support Manager, Respondent 1 for the B2C market and Respondent 2 for the B2B market and oversees, together with the team leader for the different support agent teams, to recruit customer support agents and make sure the chats with the customer maintain a high quality and that they run smoothly with the customers.

Respondent 3 is Customer Support Manager at Company 2. At company 2, the customer support manager is the one responsible the quality of the support communication is high and that all agents have received the same training.

Respondent 4 is the manager for one of Company 3’s five customer centres. As a Customer Service Centre Manager Respondent 4 is responsible to ensure the support agents reaches their daily targets and send out shipments from different districts.

Respondent 5 is the Project and Development Manager at the department for operative and strategic customer service at Company 4. This position includes work tasks such as being responsible all customer support agents has all the tolls and processes that they need to help the customers.

Respondent 6 is Customer Support Manager and is responsible for the operative operation at Company 5’s customer service. That means she is responsible to ensure the customer support supplier is keeping their part of the agreement and delivers the agreed KPI.

Respondent 7 is Customer Support Manager and has the overall responsibility for the contact towards the customers through phone, email, chat and Facebook for Company 6.
Respondent 8 is Head of Customer Success and is responsible for the support department that handles existing customers. This department does operative guiding and support through chat and phone. Company 7 is mainly targeting the B2B market and helps their customers’ profitable companies.

Respondent 9 is Head of Online Contact Centre and is responsible for Company 8’s seven teams that handles the client meetings for the private customers.

3.2 Programs used by participants

3.2.1 Tawk

Tawk.to is an application that provides a free live chat that can be used from both desktop or mobile devices. The application has no usage limits which makes it possible for the company to have as many agents logged in to the system as they need. The application let companies chat with their customers straight from the website or from a page the company can customize (tawk.to, u.d.).

3.2.2 Oracle RightNow Chat Cloud

Oracle RightNow Chat Cloud offers their customers a live chat where the company can chat with their customers either initiated by the customer or a session that started proactively based on triggers decided by the company using the chat (Oracle, u.d.).

3.2.3 Trio

By using a chat from Trio Enterprise, the company promises that companies can meet the customers in a way they want. Trio offers an advanced chat with several functions such as co-browsing among others. The system is handling the queuing of the customers and when an agent is available, the program gives the customer to the available agent and gather statistics at the same time (Enghouse Interactive, 2016).

3.2.4 Kana Enterprise

The live chat from Kana Enterprise is also offering a proactive chat as well as customer initiated support chats between companies and their customers. The support agents can share documents or URLs within the chat to help the customers efficiently. While chatting with the customer, an agent can change the customer-to-agent chat into a co-worker chat and ask another agent for answers that may know more about a specific question. As Trio, the Kana Enterprise program handles the queuing and rotating the customers to the right support agent. The company can also customize the chat to their liking and have a spell checker for the agents together with pre-formatted answers decided by the company (Kana Enterprise, 2017).

3.2.5 Vergic

Vergic offers different packages of support chats that have a few different features but they are all offering companies an interactive support chat integrated with co-browsing. According to
Vergic as a customer, the company gets an efficient communication tool that can help the company help their customers (Vergic, u.d.).

3.2.6 Cention
With the live chat from Cention companies can help, track and interact with their customers in real time (Cention, 2017).

3.2.7 Telia CallGuide
Telia CallGuide the customer can initiate a chat with a support agent, or the chat can be initiated interactively. The chat program can either be stored at the cloud or as an on-premises system. The program does not provide a chat between agents like Kana without installing an extra CallGuide chat just for the agents (Telia Sonera, 2016).

3.3 Material
The questions we have chosen to use for our interviews are originated from the dimensions of E-Service Quality in the Live Customer Service/Support Chat Success Model by Elmorshidy (2011). All the dimensions have been considered when developing the questions. Please see Appendix 1 for the interview questions.

3.3.1 Searched words
When doing research for the frame of references, certain phases were used to find previous research in this area. To choose relevant research, we put focus on research that in their turn had focus on companies within e-commerce. The papers also showed that it is a strategic benefit to have a customer live chat. Several papers also presented how a customer live chat works and how the chat programmes are built. The database used to find all these papers were Google Scholar.

Phases that were used to find these papers are following:
- Customer support chat
- Data mining: building competitive advantage
- Customer service chat
- Instant messaging system
- Strategic customer service
- Economical benefits live chat
- Customer live chat strategies
- Customer service chat
- Online Customer Service Chat

The usage of these particular search words has been used due to the fact that they presented us with the most relevant papers for our frame of references.
3.4 Design

For this dissertation, we have chosen to do a qualitative form of research. The group of companies that we have focused on do not fall under a particular industry. Instead, we have chosen to put focus on companies that are using their websites as a mean of communication with their customers for support. The reason why we have chosen to have this broad field is to see if our research question can be used in different industries and therefore not bound to a particular industry.

The advantage of having a cross industrial research is that by only target companies that use their online chat as one of their main communications channels we think that we can find results that show what is beneficial with this tool from a strategical point of view.

A broad area of industries gives us a variety of answers and gives us a view over the different chat programs that are being used. With a wide range of companies, we might be able to interpret the results and see if there is any connection between a good relationship and using the chat as a strategic benefit.

The biggest disadvantage of having this wide range of companies is that the data can be too varied and therefore hard to analyse and get a conclusion.

3.4.1 Variables

The variables we have chosen to put focus on for this dissertation are whether the companies are using a digital customer support chat, as well as all dimensions from the model developed by Elmorshidy (2011). This model was set a foundation for building a good relationship with the customer online and is then build up with strategic advantages such as the efficiency, possibility to gather data from the customers and finally if there are any economic advantages.

3.4.2 Delimitations

We have chosen to only look at medium sized and large companies that are interacting on the Swedish market. The definition of a large company in Sweden is a company with 50 or more employees or have net sales that are 80 million SEK or more (Bolagsverket, 2017). We have chosen to do so because after some research we saw that smaller companies usually do not use support chats for their customer service, which makes them uninteresting for this research.

In this research, we have chosen to only look at companies that mainly use their Online Chat as a customer support channel.

We have not included companies without a chat since they are not relevant for this dissertation because we are looking into the strategic benefits of using an Online Chat as customer support chat.

We are only looking at the benefits from the companies point of view, because we want to investigate how the company is building a stronger relationship with their customers through the chat and therefore, getting a strategic benefit in form of returning and loyal customers.
3.5 Procedure

The conducted interviews were done by phone, where the average interview was 30 minutes. Due to shortage of time for some of the Managers, emails were then used as a mean of the interview. Even though email were used, the written answers held the same quality as the phone answers collected in the telephone interviews and if there was any unclarity in the answers we send out a new email and got a clearer answer that could be used for the research.

We chose to do phone interviews and email contact since we were under the impression that this was the best way to collect our data since all the companies are on different geographical locations and there was no possibility to arrange personal meetings. Wärneryd et al. (1990), says that using phone interviews, gives the researcher a practical and economical advantage due to the selection of respondents nor the researchers need to travel. By using phone interviews, we could still have a good interview and build a connection with the respondent.

3.5.1 Validity and reliability

While conducting research, the researcher need to critically review in the reliability and validity of the collected data. The reliability is measured by investigating if the approach on the research is giving the same results when tested at different times under the same circumstances. The validity measures how accurately a question is measuring or describing the research question (Bell J., 2009)

The conducted telephone interviews were all recorded and then written down straight after the interview was made but there is always a risk for misunderstandings and misinterpretations that can influence the reliability of the dissertation. The emailed answers were all read instantly as they came in and was asked to be explained if there was any unclarity, here the risk can be that any information can have been left out or forgotten while the respondent wrote the answers.

In the book Att Fråga (Wärneryd et al., 1990), says that having questions that requires the respondent to remember information might have an impact on the reliability. To avoid this, we send out the interview question before hand so give the participant to look up the needed information. By doing phone interviews, we limited the effects of the interviewer since we did not meet the respondents, they could not be affected by our appearances such as clothes and body language (Jacobsen, 2002).

Since the support managers only belongs to a small share of the Swedish e-commerce market the results made in the dissertation might be inaccurate due to difference in opinions from the unasked companies. This is a factor that might affect the reliability.

The interview questions in Appendix 1 are the questions that were asked during the interviews.
4. Empirical findings

In this section, you will find all the information that we have collected during over interviews with the eight companies that has participated in this study.

4.1 Company 1

Company 1 is using the free software Tawk, as mentioned before we have interviewed two managers at this company. One that work with the B2B clients and one that works with B2C clients, but both on the European market.

First, we interviewed the B2C manager. She is very satisfied with Tawk because they can have an unlimited number of users from the staff working in the chat at the same time. Each member of the staff team can read every chat and see and add documents if needed. She is also very satisfied that they can send email direct from the chat if they need to. When we asked her to rate her overall satisfaction from 1-5 were 1 is not satisfied and 5 is very satisfied, she answered 5.

When we interviewed the B2B Manager his answers were a little different from the B2C Manager. He is satisfied with Tawk because it’s free but he is unsatisfied that they can’t export reports from the software. He rates the overall satisfaction of Tawk to a 3.

Company 1 choose Tawk because it’s free, modern, with the benefits to use multi user options and the ability for customers to send in “proof” in form of photos and other media if they need to.

When asked if they have experienced any problem with the software. The B2C manager said no and the B2B manager said that they can experience some down time, but that it’s goes back relatively quick to normal again.

When the chat agents write to the customers they have a few pre-formatted phrases that they can use. This are general phrases as “How can I help”. The rest of the written text in the chats is live and manual.

The B2C manager informs us that they have been using Live Chat as a customer service channel form the beginning on the B2C market. On the B2B market they started with phone and then started using chat as the primary channel 2007. The B2C manager explains that the primary communication channel varies between the markets in which they operate on. She says, that for example they have found that Italy and Spain require more phone support compared to other markets by far. Northern Europe tend to prefer email over phone. And this is how it still is today even though they have the live chat in most of our e-commerce websites.

On the question about if they have any variables that they measure to see if the live chat is profitable. Here the B2B manager replied that they look at first response time and the B2C manager is adding that the quality of the answers is good.

As mentioned above Company 1 stared using live chat as a communication channel 2007. They took the decision to start using chat because they saw that it was starting to become a competitive advantage from their competitors, who at that time did not use chat.

Another reason to invest in this channel were that they wanted to be able to communicate with their customers in real time and therefore have the ability to deal with any sale objectives at the point of the purchase.
When it comes to availability Company 1 has a policy that states that they should answer every customer within 23 seconds, just by writing “Hi, how can I help”, to live up to this policy they staff the chat channel with the same amount of agent throughout the day, to be able to answer the customers as soon as possible according to the B2C manager.

Both managers confirmed that this is in line with their customers need and that they analyse this to make sure that they meet the customers need on all their target markets in every country. And the primary customer need that they have found is that their customers want quick answers on their orders, information about shipping and information about the products.

Both managers think that the chat is easy to find for the customers because it is located on the homepage of the website and is marked with a distinct button for the customer to click on and then they are connected with an agent that is waiting to help them.

The support agents that work with the B2C customers can chat with up to five to six customers at the same time. This depends on how busy it is, but the program makes it possible to have several chats open at the same time and makes it easy to switch between the active chats.

The B2B manager informs us that they have a team of 50 or more agents so they can answer 100 chats at the same time this means the agents average is handling two chats per agent at the same time. And the average chat-session time is for the B2C market 15 minutes and about 5 min for the B2B market by this time can be longer is the customer asks about products and the agent is trying to sell the product through the chat.

Company 1 have found strategical advantages since they started to use the chat program. The advantages have been that they can help more customers at the same time and there is nothing that blocks the customers as the que in the phone channel. They have also seen a decrease in phone calls and email since they started using chat. The have also been doing some data mining from the data collected from the chats. This information is used to analyse who their target customer is and what their need is. And this has also led to an economical advantage according to the B2C manager.

To make sure the service provided by the support agents Company 1 has a set of policies on how to write answers to every type of question. One of these policies is that the agent always must answer the written question but also give more information that is useful for the customer.

To control that the quality of the service is maintained at the expected level the support agent supervisor uses a quality sheet review to make sure the agents is following the policies. If the policies are not followed in a satisfactory way the agent will receive new training. The testing of the quality is done every 2nd week per agent were the supervisor review 10 live chats.

Equal training is provided to all support agent but the training is focused on which country they will be working with, so that the service provided is in line with what the customer want.

The support agents work as freelancers and are using their own computers the so company provides them with a tech agent that provides them with all the tools they need.

After a chat session has ended that customer is given a choice to rate the service that were provided. The feedback tool is two buttons that the customer can click which is thumbs up for good service and thumbs down for bad service. This information is then used to evaluate the support agent on the weekly evaluation.

The average score given from the chat customers is on a rate of 1-5 an 4-5 according to that managers.
When asked questions about if they see any development for their chat software in the future, like using AI or VR in their support software, the company answered that they might do that in the future but the most important criteria are that it would be able to provide a personal touch in the chat. So, for now they prefer humans answering the questions.

4.2 Company 2

The company is using the chat program from Oracle and is called Oracle RightNow and the overall satisfaction of the program was ranked to a 4 with the motivation that questions that are asked within the program can be ranked and used as analytical data for improvements of the company. The thing that the manager think Oracle is missing is the possibilities within the program and small details that would make the program more modern would be nice to have different.

The reason why Oracle was chosen as the provider of the chat service, was because the company needed a system that worked globally. All the FAQ sites together with the emails and phone calls goes through the system. Upon the decision of which provider to be used the decision makers based the decision on Oracles reputation and the fact that some of the decision makers had previous experience of the interface of Oracle. They already knew that Oracle could deliver what the company needed and the quality of the program was good.

When having technical difficulties, they most often occur when there is an update of the Oracle program. There have also been times when the support agents are not able to answer an incoming chat. When this problem has occurred, the company need to contact Oracle and create a so-called ticket and wait for Oracle to fix the problem. The manager thinks that Oracle provides the help that is needed and they fix the problems relatively fast.

Depending on the country, the primary support channel is different, but the overall primary support channel has been email. On the Swedish market the phone has been replaced with chat. They noticed that Swedes preferred to get the support via phone instead of writing an email, something that changed when the chat function was launched the customers started using that more.

Since customers in different countries have various needs when it comes to service and what is expected from the company. This has led to that the chat is not that profitable. According to the manager, the company saw that Swedish customers expects a company to have a service phone, while in Italy, the customers are mostly using chat because they are more impatient and are very sensitive to costs. Since every market requires different communication channels, the chat is not yet profitable on all markets. If the company is very small on a certain market, the chat is more efficient since a support agent can help more than one customer at once than only have phone as a support channel.

The company started using their customer support chat about ten years ago, to follow the digital development. When asked if the manager had anything to add to this interview she said, that not using a customer support chat is a little bit like shooting yourself in the foot since the customers are online so much of their time, they expect the company to be the same. The customers also have an opportunity to get fast answers if the FAQ questions are not enough.

To cover all the incoming support cases, the company have chosen to staff their chat differently during the day. They have noticed that most customers want to contact them in the
mornings, while the Swedes like to get help during lunch. Even though there are peaks throughout the day, the incoming support cases have shown to be more of a seasonal character. This means that during Christmas and in spring, the service support agents get more to do since the products are very popular as Christmas gifts and when it is time for weddings and graduations.

The chat on the website is not easy to find, and this is done deliberately. The company recently changed the look of the support portal and this change is done to consider working for all the different cultures the company have a market in. The manager explains this by saying that in France, for instance, a company want the customer to find the answers themselves before contacting the company. In the Nordics, Germany and Holland, where the customers have another culture, they expect to find the chat easily and not having to go through several choices to get to talk to the right customer support agent. By having this new structure, the customers first get to read through the FAQ site and if not finding the answer the customer is looking for, then get through to the support chat.

To deliver a good quality to their customers, the chat support agents are helping three customers simultaneously during low season. In the high season, some of the agents can get to handle four or five chats simultaneously. To qualify to do that the agent need to be able to handle the stress and still deliver a good quality on the answers towards all customers. Since most of incoming issues to the chat is of a longer character the average chat session is somewhere between 15-18 minutes. This is a result of customers that need help designing their products.

Ever since starting with the chat, the biggest strategic advantage is that the chat is a live channel that makes the company able to help their customers when the problem occurs, which have led to a greater customer satisfaction. The other advantage with using chat is that customers can upload image files in the chat can ask questions specific about that image. No other of the communication channels can do that. The data about the customers using the chat are today not used as a source for data mining or used for marketing purposes.

When giving answers to their customers, a support agent has a few pre-formatted answers to use. These answers are usually the greeting phrase or when giving out an answer that is more of an informational character. The pre-formatted answers serve as an informational database, and the company strives to give their customers as personal service as possible. To give out this personal service, the pre-formatted answers are quite short and are usually modified of the support agent, depending of the support the customer need.

To still give that personal service the company strives, there is no clear dialogue structure of how an agent is supposed to talk to a customer or answer the questions in a certain way. This means that a customer can get the right answer but in different way, depending on which agent the customer gets.

Even though there is no clear structure all the support agents have gotten the same training and education how to manage the chat. The company want all agents to be able to answer any question that might come to them. When sitting with the chat, all agents have access to the same tools so they have the possibility to answer any question.

After every terminated chat session, a service evaluation is sent out to the customers and the results on this evaluation, the manager said the customer satisfaction is a 4 on a 5-degree
scale. When given a bad score on the evaluation there is no follow up today. The company is currently working on this and they want to get better at following up bad scores.

When asked if they see any development of the chat in form of robotics, the manager says that there have been tests made for this already, but the technology did not work as good as they would have wanted. AI or robotics is something that might happen in the future when the technology has evolved more. The most important factor when having this sort of technology is that the robotics is in line with the expectations of the company. WhatsApp have been up for consideration as a support channel, but this is nothing that will be used in the close future, maybe in a few years.

4.3 Company 3

This company have chosen to use a phone system called Trio and the support chat is integrated in the same system. The system does not function the most optimal way so the chat program only gets rated with a 2 when asked how satisfied the company is with the chat program. The reason why the program gets such a low score is because it is hard to have many chats simultaneously and if the company need support with technological issues within the program, it is only certain employees that have access to create tickets and the support time is too long. Trio have been used since the company first started with customer support chat at 2013 and the system was decided on a central level.

The chat is still a small channel within the customer support system and the phone is still the biggest communication channel that is used. The reason the company started with the chat was to develop the customer support and try to find another way to meet the customers since more customers had started to ask for a chat.

To plan the staffing of the chat, the company is daily looking how the support agents have been available to take calls and chat sessions and is received through Trios phone system. They have chosen this sort of system since they think this works the easiest way and has shown to be in line with the customers’ needs. The most common questions the customers have when chatting to the support agents is questions about delivery and their orders. An average chat is usually between three to five minutes, in April the average chat was 3 minutes and 57 seconds.

A customer support agent has the possibility to chat with eight customers simultaneously but it is a lot to handle for one agent so there is not many that can do it. The Trio system is not optimal for keeping many chats active at once. In the chat the agents have pre-formatted answers that works as a guide for how the agents can answer and the agents have a possibility to insert those answers in the chat.

Even though it is hard for an agent to keep multiple chats open simultaneously, the efficiency of the chat makes the agents able to help more customers at the same time. The company is measuring their efficiency based on how many chats a support agent have completed during an hour and how long customers had to wait to get help. To find the chat, the customers need to go to the contact page together with the rest of the contact information to the other channels, so the customer easily can choose which channel they want to contact the company with.

When chatting with a customer, and the customer have a question about the shipment of their products, there are a few standards the support agents must follow. The customer need to
provide with their transmission number. Without the number the customer cannot get any information about the shipment since the support agents must be sure they are giving out the information to the right person.

Today the company does not have a system for following up if the support agents have a good quality on their answers, but they are regularly working with coaching to increase the standard of the chat agents. When asked why there is no control system the support manager did not have an answer.

All agents that are sitting with the chat are receiving the same training in form of sitting with agents that have worked with the chat for some time. It starts with just sitting next to the senior agent to see how the system works. After that the new agent get to handle chats of their own, with the supervision of the senior agent and eventually handling the chat on their own. To be able to give the same quality on all chats the agents have access to the same tools within the program.

After finishing a chat, the customers do not have the possibility to leave feedback on the experienced service that was received in the chat session. Instead the company is sending out yearly surveys of what the customers thinks of the company. The results of the customer satisfaction in this survey, based on a 5-degree scale is a 4.

When asked if the company have any plans for the chat in the future in form of robotics, we got the answer that the chat is used in such a small amount that the company first wants to find a better chat solution before thinking of developing it with robotics.

4.4 Company 4

Company 4 is using an Enterprise information system called Kana that handles all their customer support communication. They are using phone, email and chat. The manager thinks it is a benefit to have one system for almost everything so that they can work efficiently.

When the Communicating manager at Company 4 were asked to rate their software between 1-5 and he gave it a 4 with the explanation that there is always room for improvement.

Due to that Kana is an enterprise system the modules that they provide is built as one package, Therefore, it could take a bit longer before some function in the chat module will be developed. One development they are waiting for is to have the ability to block unwanted chats from people that only write to them and asking non-relevant questions only to take up the support agents time.

When Company 4 decided to start using Kana they wanted a unified desktop for their support agents to make their work easier. The manager also informs us that there is lot of knowledge about their customer when they contact them because all purchases and service orders are collected in a separate database. This makes it easy for the support agent to be more proactive in the interaction with the customer in the chat.

They experience some technical problems from time to time, but no more than the manger thinks are normal, and he is pleased that there is noting that completely block the sytem. If there is any problem the turnout time is quite fast and he is happy with the support that they get from Kana.

When asked if the software gives them the opportunity to work with pre-formatted answers and phrases, the manager informs us that they have a knowledgebase that gives the agents
routines and quick answers. He thinks that it’s especially good for the agents that have recently started working with the customer support and working with that chat software. Most of their experienced agents have most of the information in their heads and can therefore reply quickly in a good manner.

Company 4’s primary support channel has and still is phone. But the Manager says that they can see that the chat is a useful tool for the customers who have quick questions. They have also seen that many of the customers that use the chat are new customers that visit their web store. He tells us that he thinks that these customers would not call or email for support, they would probably look some ware else for answers or as he expresses himself – even worse, leave their page.

To evaluated if the chat is a profitable tool, Company 4 is measuring the average handling time and how many interactions the agent can handle at the same time. The company think this is important to reduce the cost for handling the chat channel.

They started using chat June 2015 on their Norwegian and Danish E-stores. After the summer 2015, they implemented chat on all their e-store markets. The Communication manager thinks that they should have started using chat several years ago but he says that the process took a long time. He also adds that he feels that it is a necessity to have a chat today to be successful in giving the customer a great experience while shopping online and need support.

When asked how they think when it comes to availability, the manager says that they have an agreement with all their chain managers to have the same opening hours as the phone support. He adds that they are looking to see if they can expand the chat support in the future. But they think it’s hard to do a perfect forecast of the needs for the chat.

To see to that they have the staffed their chat effectively, Company 4 uses a program called Telepti. This program creates a schedule after a forecast and actual chat interactions they have had during the year, and by using Telepti they see that they need 5 agents between 9-10 and probably more at lunch time.

By staffing like this and have the same opening hours as the phone channel he feels that Company 4 have the availability that matches most of their customer’s needs, because most customers contact them during the day. They have seen an increase in traffic after 19:00 and are now investigating to expand the opening hours in next years’ budget.

He continues to say that their customer want a reply whenever they are online. And their goal is to always try to have an answer for them. Either at chat or on a FAQ page.

During opening hours, the chat is easy to find for the customers since it is a floating box on all their sites. The manager says that they can also use a proactive or reactive way of starting a chat if they see that that will work better.

Most of the support agents chat with three three customers at the same time, but the most experienced ones can handle up to five customers. The average active chat session time is 2-4 minutes but their total interaction time can be up to 20 minutes because sometimes the customers do other things while they are chatting with the support agent. If the customer becomes inactive the system put this chat in an idle state until it becomes active again.

The communication manager tells us that they have seen several strategical advantages since started using chat. The chat is a more efficient channel since they can help up to 5 customers per agent at once. But it is important to schedule the right amount of staff, so that the
agents always have something to do. When there’s less chat interactions they can add a blend in the system so that the agents can work on email as well.

They are using some of the data that they receive from the chat today. This is mostly to analyse that they follow their KPIs (Key Performance Indicator). They have the possibility to print reports and see the knowledge that they are lacking, by doing GAP analyses. When they decided to start using chat they thought that it would take traffic from their other channels phone and email. But this has not been the case, most of the customers that use the chat channel are new customers. This has led to that the cost for the customer service has increased but so have also the quality on the service according to the communication manager.

To control the quality of the supports chats they use the same standards that they have for the phone and email channels. They also have the possibility to monitor the chat sessions for training purpose. The supervisors can cut in or even help the agent without the customer’s knowledge. Since the chat is a module in Kana Enterprise they can follow up all interactions in the chat. All data is saved and each month supervisors listen to calls, read emails and chat interactions.

This is then part of their feedback meetings with the agents together with a Happy or Not rating that the customers can give after each ended session.

All supervisors and agents have access to the same tools. Therefore, they can provide the same service. As mentioned above the customer can rate the received service by click if they are Happy or Not after a chat session.

The Manager informs us that they get a lot of positive feedback. Most of the bad feedback is about too long waiting time.

Looking to the future they are interested in the new technology that is available and are doing tests with AI and the manager is hopeful that they will have a test ready during 2017. He continues to speak about that this is something that everyone is talking about but not many will implement until the price is low enough. Luckily for Company 4 they have several persons at their digital team that are specialists in this area. And the manager is impressed with what he has seen so far of their work.

4.5 Company 5

This company is using the chat program from Vergic, and when asked how satisfied they are with the program the manager answers 4 on a 5-degree scale. When asked to develop the answer she says that Vergic is good overall and is easy to use, especially for statistics and reporting. The reason why the company is using this program is because when the company was owned by the government there was a procurement and Vergic was the company that won the settlement. The chat started to be a communication channel about four years ago and the company had the hopes chat would replace the email support, which is has. The primary support channel has been and still is phone. The company started using chat because the customers required an efficient channel that can be used during work hours.

So far, the company has faced minor technical problems, but they have a personal contact at Vergic that can help them fast when needed, something the company is very satisfied with.

When chatting with customers, an agent can help three customers simultaneously, when helping four or more the company noticed the customers had to wait too long time for an answer
and the quality on the answers decreased. During a chat session, the agent has pre-formatted answers they can use in form of greeting phrases or answers that are of a more technological character.

The variables that the company is considering when counting efficiency and profitability is customer satisfaction, the answer frequency and the language the agents are using. When the company started to use the chat, they had the expectation to help more than one customer at the same time and that the chat was going to be faster than email. These expectations were met together with the possibilities to see what the customers think of the chat and if there are any developments among the company products. The chat has also shown to be more cost efficient than the email which the company is very pleased about.

To make sure the agents are using the correct language in the chat, everyone has gotten the same training. The training is first class based and after all the classes are done, the new agent get to tail another agent with more experience. By having it like this, together with the access to same tools within the program, the agents have the possibility to give the same service to all incoming chat customers. The agents have also a clear dialogue structure with pre-formatted answers to make sure the customers get the same quality on the answers to their questions. To make sure the standards are followed, there is a person that monitors a support agent a certain amount of times per month and reads a random sample to make sure that the agent is keeping the expected quality.

To match the customers’ needs for availability, the company have long opening hours on the chat since most of their customers either needs help in the morning or in the evening after work. They have chosen to match these peaks by having more staff available during these times of the day. The most common issues that the support agents get to handle is to help the customers get the TV and the channels to function. With these types of issues on the chat, the average chat session is eight to nine minutes. The customers can access the chat through the help portal where it pops up automatically, otherwise it is a bit harder to find.

To measure the customer satisfaction, the company sends out a survey that comes out at the end of the chat. The overall customer satisfaction is 4 on a 5-degree scale. The manager says that there are always things that the company can do better. When receiving a bad review on the service, that answer is saved in a database. A staff member is then calling out to these customers to find out why they gave the support agent a low score and is then trying to turn the customer and make them more satisfied.

When asked if there are any possibilities to develop the chat with more advanced technologies the manager answers that the chatbots are not at the same level as their needs and the bots are not able to provide with the answers that is required. When this technology was tested the chatbot send the customer to a real support agent in the end since the bot could not answer the question.

4.6 Company 6

Company 6 is in the lottery business and have chosen to use a chat program from Cention. When asked how satisfied the company is with the chat program the customer support manager answered with a 3 on the 5-degree scale. The reason why Cention get that rate is due to the simplicity of the program. It is easy to use for both customer and support agent but sometimes
the program feels a bit too easy. It was also because of the simplicity Cention was decided to be the program of the chat. Since the start of the chat in late 2015 the company have not had any technical difficulties so support have not yet been needed. The chat is today the communication channel that is used the least, phone is still the primary channel.

The chat first started to be used because the company thought it was a good way to give the customers the opportunity to reach them through one more communication channel. The chat is open for the customers during the day, but closes one hour earlier than the phone service in the evening. The manager says that this might not be in line with the customers need for availability, but this is how the company have decided to use the chat for now. When asked what she think the customers would change about the availability, the manager answers that the customers might like if the chat was open longer hours.

A customer support agent can chat with between six and ten customers simultaneously, depending on the agents experience and ability to handle stress. The agents that are handling the chat sit with just the chat and is not doing customer service through any of the other channels. When chatting with a customer the agent is using their own manually written answers but can choose to use pre-formatted if they want. The average chat is 1 minute and 22 seconds due to the questions that comes to the chat only requires short answers.

When measuring efficiency of the chat and its profitability the company is measuring by the variables of answering time and customer satisfaction. The company is measuring the customer satisfaction every month and put together the statistics to an index. The customer satisfaction index has the latest months has stayed at a relatively constant level at 95%. The manager think the reason why the index is that high is due to the personal service the agents are providing and the fact that the chat is so easy to find. When entering the company website, the chat pops up right away and stays in the corner if the customer needs help. To ensure the customer get the right help with their issues, the customer needs to identify themselves with their social security number or a customer number. This is controlled manually by the agent so sensitive information is not given out to the wrong person.

To make sure all agents are providing the same good service to the customers, all agents that are handling the chat are provided with the same training and have access to same tools within the program.

After an ended chat session, the customer get to evaluate the support agent based on experienced service and the treatment. If given a low score there is staff that follows up and talks to the customer to see what the low score is based on and talks to the support agent as well.

Since the support chat is the least used channel for customer support today, the company do not see any development of the chat in the near future.

4.7 Company 7

Company 7 recently changed their chat system and is today using Telia CallGuide. Because the company recently changed system they are still learning the program, but are so far satisfied and gives Telia CallGuide a 4 on the 5-degree scale. The manager thinks that the program is at the forefront of the chat technology, and the company see that there is a possibility to develop the website together with the chat. The chat is easy to use for the agents, which is the most
important factor for the company. Since the start of Telia CallGuide there have not been any bigger technical issues, and when they have occurred the company receives help fast.

Company 7 started using chat as a communication channel about four years ago since that felt like a natural step. “The world is getting more digital so we needed to be that too” the manager says. The company wanted to provide a chat for the customers who required it. Before the chat, phone was the biggest communication channel with the customers and today the chat has grown and is taking about 50% of the support issues.

The company have chosen to put their priorities with the chat since they noticed that the customers’ expectations of fast responds are high. For their phone support, the company have a call-back solution which means that the customer does not need to wait on the phone till it is their turn. Thanks to the fact that the chat is more efficient than phone, the company can now keep their customer support open longer and therefore be more available to the customers. To make sure the company is filling customers need for availability, the company is working with a force management team daily. There are over 100 employees working as customer support agents with the more than 40 products and it is the customers’ expectations of availability that is steering how the chat is staffed. Therefore, the chat is available at the needs of their customers.

While chatting with the customers, there are a few pre-formatted answers but the agent is using them to a minimum since the company want the chat to be as personal as a phone call. The pre-formatted answers are greeting phrases and specific information that takes time to write. The agents can chat with at most three customers at the same time, but can if the issue is big enough, just have one customer simultaneously and an average session is between 15-20 minutes since the questions the customers has are quite complex.

In many of the products, the chat is already integrated so the customer does not need to go to a different place to get help, but in the older products the customer need to go to the support site. When being on the customer support site the chat comes up automatically so the customer can start chatting right away.

The company have chosen to measure profitability and efficiency by the variables of how many chats an agent can handle by the hour and how long each chat is. The company have noticed that since they started with the chat the support can help up to six customers per hour, when just using phone the support agent helped about four customers per hour. By helping more customers, the company can now keep the support open longer hours with the same amount of staff. The chat has also provided with more various tasks for the support agents. All incoming data from the chat is stored at a database that the company owns themselves. When a customer is having problems with a product the support agents reports this to the development department to work on.

To keep the chat personal, there is no strict structure how an agent should talk to a customer. There is however, an overall structure how the tone towards the customer should be and the agent need to make sure there is a clear structure in the provided answers so the customer is not confused.

To be able to provide good service in the customer support the agents need to have knowledge about the products the company is selling. This is provided during training by a product specialist. When the agents have enough knowledge about the products, a team manager is conducting the next phase of the training; communication skills. These are two big parts that a vital the agents has right to provide the best possible service. The team manager
also has the possibility to sit alongside the chat support agent if s/he is feeling unsure about some parts of the support tasks. To ensure all agents can provide the same service, all has access to the same tools within the program.

After a finished session, the customer can evaluate the experienced service. This comes up automatically when the agent has left the chat. The company also send out a survey regularly to all customers. This survey is more about the satisfaction about the company in general based on individual, team and company level. It is the team managers’ responsibilities to follow up all evaluations to ensure the service is as good as the company wants it to be. The results from both survey and support evaluation is anonymous so when giving a bad evaluation or a low score, the company cannot follow up with a customer to see what was done wrong or try to get the customer satisfied. Even though there is no possibility for follow ups the customer satisfaction score varies between 4.3 – 4.4 on a 5-degree scale.

Development of the chat is already an ongoing project and the company is considering a chatbot or similar technology. The company have already much data, but for this type of technology they still require more. This is due to the complexity of the chat questions that comes in which requires more data. The company hopes to know how to use the data best during 2017 and therefore carry the project further.

4.8 Company 8

This company is using the same software as company 7, which is Telia CallGuide. At this company, we have talked to the Senior Partner Manager and Head of Partner Relations. When we asked him to rate their software between 1-5 he gave it a 3 with the explanation that it’s a good system to handle text and find information easily which makes it easy to use. But it lacks the possibility to share or receive media or video, which he sees as a tool that could be useful and therefore he thinks there is big development potential for this software.

The Software is developed by a subsidiary to Company 8, so the positive is that they have very close contact with the developer and therefore gets full attention if something is wrong or if there are any technical issues that that need to be handled.

The manager tells us that the agents use several pre-formatted answers as a standard. Each agent has their own set of phrases that they use frequently and there are some answers that can be used with shortcuts on the keypad. But he adds that the most important thing is that the dialogue has a personal touch and that Company 8 have a very strict dialogue structure on how they want the chat session between the customer and the agent to work.

The phone channel is still their primary support channel. About 10-12% of all their customer sessions gets through the chat-software, the company have about 8 million customer sessions per year.

They measure everything that can be measured the manager says. AHT (Average Handling Time) which he says is a common variable to measure in contact centres. Other important factors are related with to profitability, such as measuring the hit rate they have on the different channels. Here they are analysing to see if it is easier or more difficult to sell product through the chat than over the phone.

He tries to remember back to when they stared using chat and says that it was between 2008-2010, they first started in a small scale that led to that they started using it more in 2010.
In 2014, they did a re-organization and created a unit that have 100% focus on digital customer interaction. This led to that they could take more chats than before. During this time, Company 8 have noticed that there is a larger variety in the age of the customer that uses the chat today then than in 2014, today everyone wants to chat he explains.

The reason Company 8 started to use chat was because they saw clearly that the customers expected them to have a chat, so he claims that there was not any alternative than to start using it.

As of today, the chat channel has the same opening hours as the phone channel. This is something that they evaluated for the past year and are starting to investigate the possibility to have the chat open when the phone is closed. But as of now the chat is open when then the phone is open so the customer can choose how they want to get in contact with the support.

To staff the support, they use a schedule planning system that is based on prognoses maid every 15 minutes. Chat and phone uses the same staff. This practically means the company have an agent staring every 15 minutes.

The variables that they are measuring to track profitability is waiting time. The manager says that they think it’s interesting to measure how long a customer is willing to wait.

To find the chat on Company 8s webpage the customers need to click on to the support pages called Contact us. On this page, the customer get several different types of choices to make regarding what the problem is. Then they are guides to a self-help section that will take them the chat and phone line at the end if they have not been able to solve their problem. The manager thinks this is a good system and that it is relatively easy to find that chat. The self-help section guides the customer to the right agent so that they will get the right help without being connected.

They also have proactive customer support on various places on their webpage. This makes the chat pop up with a question if the customer has stayed for a long time on that page. This service still needs some development according to the manager but he feels confident that they will get to where they want to be.

Today the agent is only chatting with one customer at the time. This is ineffective thinks the manager due to that a chat session often takes longer time than a phone call. An average chat session is around 1000 seconds. This is also depending on the technical qualifications that they have in Telia CallGuide. They are working with so called blending at the support centre. This means that the agents both answer phone calls, emails and chats depending on where there is a que. The agent is always helping the customer that has been waiting the longest. This system blocks the opportunity to chat with more than one at the time.

When they had staff that were only working with the chat, they were helping up to four customers at the time. But due to capacity they saw that it was better to have full blending between all three communication channels.

The manager sees that there have been strategical advantages in using a chat channel. The data that they collect from the chat is much easier to handle since it is written instead of verbal. The response from surveys that they have send out on the chat have had a high response rate and the data that it provides is very stable to work from.

Other advantages that he can see is that the availability towards the customer is better. The manager says that they during his time at the company have read a lot of customer comments, just to work out what improvements that they should do in the company. This has led to that
the company now meet the customer on the way that the customer want to be met instead of making them use the channel that Company 8 thinks is the most profitable. The fact that the waiting time is so short for the chat, is their biggest win to get high customer satisfaction states the Manager.

To make sure that the quality of the service is good, it is in the team leaders job to read and sit with the agent, as well as work with feedback and coaching for their team to maintain the quality. The chat sessions are saved for 30 days so they read them regularly.

All support staff is provided with the same training and they use competence coaches that consider the way of working and knowledge among the agents. The coaches’ role is to lead the big part of the training that includes technology and the systems they work with, then the team leaders’ role is to provide knowledge about sales and the company’ values and the strict dialogue structure.

All the staff has the same tools at the customer support. But to become a chat agent the employee first need to start off by only answer the phone until they have developed enough skills to work with the chat. They use a skill test to evaluate if an agent is ready to work on the chat channel.

To test to customer satisfaction, all customers are asked to rate their experienced service after a closed chat session. They are provided with a short amount of questions regarding how they experienced the service, the attitude of the agent and if the problem was solved. To end the questions, they are asked if they would recommend the company to anyone.

When asked how he would rate the overall satisfaction of the customer using the chat between 1-5, he think it’s difficult to rate but he says that the customers in the chat is usually more satisfied and the solution degree is generally higher in the chat channel. He thinks this depends on that there is less room for misunderstandings because of the written conversations instead of the verbal and that the customer is connected to an agent directly without all the chooses they have to make in the phone channel.

If there is bad feedback from a customer Company 8 evaluates the reason why and if they see that it is a good idea to contact the customer again. The support agents are updated on their overall score every 5 minute and they are also given the possibility to read their own conversations afterwards so that they can work on how to develop their own replies.

Looking to the future and the innovative technology that is available, the company is not using any robotics today, but is considering how to develop this so that they can help more customers at once. They are working on a solution but the last he heard about it they were not close to a pilot yet, so they are looking into what company that can deliver that kind of robotics that they require without losing the human touch in the service provided.

The most recent development in their software he thinks will be that they will be able to share media and video thru the chat channel. He says that they just need to decide what to do first, be able to share media or chat with more the one customer at once.
5. Results and Analysis

To receive a good level of customer satisfaction, Elmorshidys model (*E-Service Quality in the Live Customer Service/Support Chat Success Model*) have been set as a foundation in this paper, to later build up on how to make that customer satisfaction into a strategic advantage for E-commerce companies that are using customer live support chat.

5.1 Elmorshidys model

5.1.1 System quality

As can be seen from fig. 7, most companies are quite satisfied with the chat programs that are used today. If putting a mean on this that score results 3.11. The companies that gave a low satisfaction score are the companies that are using a chat program that is not fulfilling their needs or are difficult in some other way. This can be a result that the company is not following one of Pintos advise to use the chat to its full potential or that the program have been too difficult to integrate in the system properly (Andrews, 2010). The companies that are satisfied still see that the program have a few flaws but have found a way to work around it and still make the chat program work to their advantage and satisfaction.

5.1.2 Reliability

Of the eight companies that were interviewed in this report there is one that is dissatisfied with the program that they use. Company 3 experience technical problems from time to time and feel that the support from the vendor is not working as good as they would like. Handling time is long and only a few people at the company can report problems to the vendor. This is one of the disadvantages with using a support software according to Andrews (2010). If the company experience problem in the communication program and it do not provide enough problem solution for them, then they will be reluctant to use the software and therefore will not find the advantages by using a chat channel.
By not having a software that works for the company, they are missing out of the important data that can be collected from the channel. This can make them less prepared when the market changes (Gilan & Hammarberg, 2016).

The other participants feel that the software that they use is reliable. If there are any technical problems they feel that they receive fast and good support from their vendor. Company 8 even owns their vendor, which gives them full attention when there is a problem with the software.

5.1.3 Availability

To match the customers’ needs for availability most of the companies have chosen to always have the chat visible for the customer, so when having a question, the customer does not need to leave the page they are on. This goes in line with what both Pinto (2013) and Elmorshidy (2013), and by reassuring the customers that there is an agent ready to help them if needed previous results shows that this will help the customer to feel safer than if there was no chat. Based on this research, by making the customers feel safe they will contact the company if there are any questions. As been seen for these various companies, there is no customer that have the same question, there seems to be a slight difference even if the core problem is the same.

Since customers today have become more impatient and do not want to wait too long for an answer (Elmorshidy, 2011), the companies need to adjust to fill the customers’ needs for availability and having a support chat is one way to meet the needs. Previous research has shown that by not taking the next step in the digitalization (Gilan & Hammarberg, 2016), a company will not survive on the market. By using their chat to meet the customers when they need, and in the way they want to be met, the companies have seen that using live support chat have given them the possibility to help more customers than before and still have a high customer satisfaction score.

5.1.4 Information Quality

According to (Elmorshidy, 2011) and (Yin & Straub, 2002) the quality and standard of the information given to the customer is one of the significant parts of creating customer satisfaction. Here we have found that at the respondents use policies and knowledge bases for the support agents to use. This way the company know that the quality of the information is up to a satisfactory standard when it reaches the customer.

All the companies provide their agents with the same tools in the chat channel. By doing so, the company see to the quality of the information given to a customer is the same regardless of which support agent in the support chat they write to.

As Kim et al. (2010) says, having a live chat channel gives the customer support service an advantage over the traditional phone based channel. The advantage is that the chat is semi-automated in some of the interaction with the customer without them being aware of it.

But as Andrews (2010) add, the personal touch has proven to be the important factor when communication comes to internet based technology.

This is something that the participants in this study agree with. Seven of the companies use pre-formatted answers in some degree. Mostly it is a welcome phrase like “Hi, How can I help you?”, which is the one that Company 1 is using. The pre-formatted phrases are used to give
the customer quick and consistent answers. The company that only write the chats manually is Company 6, but they say that they do have the choice to use pre-formatted answers. Most of the managers thinks that it is better the agents write most of the text by themselves in the chat sessions, since do not want to lose the personal touch in the dialogue with their customers.

“there are a few phrases that we have manually put into the program and you can reach these phases with shortcuts on the keypad. The phrases work more as an informational database, but we strive to have as personal support as possible. It’s nicer to have a more personal touch and not just blurt out pre-typed answers”
(Respondent 3)

5.1.5 Consistency of Service Quality

By providing all support agents with the same training, the companies have assured that all customer support agents are giving the same support quality. Since the language of communication is a bit different in the chat, Pinto (2013) recommends the chat agents receives a special training to optimize their work in the chat.

In the research Ghose & Dou (1998) have done, the chat need to have a high quality and good interactivity to make sure the customers will return. Therefore, five of the interviewed companies have chosen to do evaluations on their support agents to make sure they are keeping the required quality on their answers to the customers. One of the companies even sends the agents back to training if the quality standards are not met. When comparing this to previous research, the results from the interviews says that more than half of the interviewed companies have understood the importance of having a quality measurement on the chat.

To be able to give good quality, all companies have chosen to put a maximum of simultaneous chats a support agent can have without compromising the quality of the service. These numbers vary depending on what program the companies are using, and even the ones that are using the same program have different maximum amount of chats. Research made by Tezcan (2011) have shown that there is a correlation of how many chats a support agent can have and the quality of the provided service. He means that if the agent has to many chats going on simultaneously the service quality is affected negatively. The fact that the companies have different maximum chats can be a result of the human factor or restrictions within the program.

Six of the eight companies have intentions to develop the customer support chat with robotics or chatbots. The two companies that does not have intention to do so, are the companies where the chat is a small percentage of the communication with the customers so they do not see the need of development soon. There is already some form of automatization within the chats today in form of pre-formatted answers, this can be a form of AJAX, which is an interactive web building tool (Shae, Garg, Bhose, Mukherjee, & Guven, 2007) developed to give the chat programs a part of their automatization. By using chatbots, the company will take automatization to the next level and are keeping them up to date with the digitalization that Gilan & Hammarberg (2016) are talking about in their book.

To consider using a chatbot all companies have the same demands on the robotics: that it will still be personal and that the customers will not notice that they are talking to a robot. There is still more data needed to get the wanted automatization done, but two of the companies are
hoping that they will have some form of chatbot by the end of the year, if the technology is good enough.

5.1.6 Online Customer Feedback
By having a chat channel and using it as a source to collect data from the customers Goodman (2009) thinks that companies can gain valuable information from the customers which otherwise wouldn’t be gathered.

Seven of the companies collect customer feedback from the chats. But there is no consistency on how they use the information that they receive. Company 1 and 3 only measure the satisfaction on the service provided. They use this rate to control the quality of the support agents work. Company 2,5,7 and 8 send surveys to customers after the end of the session, where they measure customer satisfaction bases on the overall feeling of the company and the received service from their customer support.

In his book, Goodman (2009) talks about that is important for the customer support at companies to preserve good relationship with the customer. According to Goodman this can be done by using the information from the customer into something valuable for the company. Company 1 and 8 inform us that they use the data received from the support for product and support development. Company 5,6 and 8 have routines where they follow up the bad feedback from the customers by contacting them and try to turn them and solve their problem.

5.2 Strategic advantages
By understanding the marketing approach (Tucker, 1994) and realizing the impact of digitalization (Gilan & Hammarberg, 2016) and how the changes in the customers’ behaviour that Ozeum et al. (2008) mentions in their article, the interviewed companies have started to store data. As Wessel (2016) wrote in his article, it is vital that the stored data is the right data, otherwise the information analysis from these data will be misleading. Company 8 said in the interview that the data that they have gathered from the support chat have proved to be stable to work from.

Today it is important to analyse the stored data correctly, since there are other forces on the market that have created products solely based on analysing gathered data (Wessel, 2016). Due to the digitalization, a company can no longer look at the lower end of the market to predict the shift in on the market. As can be seen from Company 7 and 8, they have started to store all incoming data from the customer support channels on their own databases. This means that these two companies own the data and can use it to detect changes and analyse their customers’ needs and expectations. Company 8 have noticed an advantage in handling and analysing written data when comparing it to the analysis of verbal feedback.

Porter (2008) calls the customers fickle and is constantly trying to find the best deal, no matter the distributor. Elmorshidy (2011) supports this theory by saying that customers can back out of the buying decision if they cannot find an answer to their question. Company 4 have noticed that most of the chatting customers are new customers, and the old ones are still using the more traditional communication channels. Respondent 1 said that the reason why Company 1 started to use their chat was to meet their customers at the point of purchase. Other answers
to this question was that the companies wanted to meet their customers’ expectations of having a functioning customer support chat.
By making the chat easily available and well-functioning for their customers, the companies have an important strategic tool (Goodman 2009) that appears to have resulted in a high KPI. The managers perceive that the rated customer satisfaction is higher when the customer has chosen to get support through the chat instead of the other support channels.

“I think you shoot yourself in the foot a little bit if a company is not using a chat, since when the customer is online already the customer most likely expects the company to be online as well.” (Respondent 3)

According to the research Tezcan (2011) made it is important that a company find what is the optimal number of chats a customer support agent can handle simultaneously and still give good service. Therefore, the interviewed companies have different amount of chats an agent can handle simultaneously. Company 1 have different restrictions depending on which market the support agent is on. Most companies have chosen to put maximum of ongoing chats to three, if the issues are not too advanced some agents can have four chats simultaneously. Since Company 8 have chosen to use full blending they can only help one at the time, but the efficiency since starting to use chat is still better.

The benefit of helping more customers simultaneously is that the support agents does not need to sit and wait while the customer is typing a message, but can help someone else at the same time. In Tawk the agent can see the message a customer is typing before it has been sent, making it possible for the agent too look up an answer, reducing the waiting time for the customer. Even if the other companies cannot see what the customer is writing they are able to help more customers than before the chat. Since starting using chat Company 7 are now able to help 50% more customers per hour, their efficiency has therefore made them more available to their customers.

When writing their research Shae et al. (2007), had an average chat time at 19,36 minutes. In the interviews made for this dissertation, the overall average chat time is 9,46 minutes, where the shortest chat session is made at Company 6 (1,22 minutes) and the longest session is at Company 7 (15-20 minutes).
6. Conclusion

*Can companies use their online support chat as a strategic tool to maintain a good customer relationship?*

To answer our research question, we have combined theory with empirical facts in form of interviews with companies in the e-commerce industry, by using *E-Service Quality in the Live Customer Service/Support Chat Success Model* (Elmorshidy, 2011) as a starting point to measure customer satisfaction within the customer support chat.

We have found that a support chat can be used as a tool to improve the relationship with customers, both old and new. Based on the information from the interviews, the mean satisfaction of the chats system quality was 3.11 on a 5-degree scale. This can be a sign of reliability within the programs from the company's point of view. Today the companies have the same availability for their customers on the chat compared to the other support communication channels. Most companies are investigating on prolonging the opening hours of the chat to meet the customer's expectations on availability. By having a clear dialogue structure and regular training of the support agents, the companies can ensure the customers a high quality on the chat sessions, and by having regular evaluations on the agents the companies ensure that the quality of the information and its service consistently meets the expectations. To see that the agents meets the quality requirements, most companies have made it possible for their customers to evaluate the expected service.

To measure strategic advantage, we have used Porter (2008), Goodman (2009) and Wessel (2016). While doing our research, we have not been able to prove that there is an economic advantage when a company is using a customer support chat. This can be a result that the companies are still using their phones as a primary communication channel.

We have seen that not all companies are using their chat as a mean to gather data from their customers that later can be used for marketing purposes. To be successful with the chat, a company need to use the chat as more than a channel for communication, therefore it is important to have clear communication strategy and how to use the incoming data. By regularly reading feedback and evaluate the service of the support agents, some of the interviewed companies see that they can gain more customer satisfaction by using a customer support chat.

Since the companies started to use their chat, the level of efficiency has risen. The research made by Tezcan (2011) and Shae et al. (2007) said while using the chat, an agent can help more than one customer simultaneously. This is something all companies but one in our research is doing today. The company that is just chatting with one customer at the time have recently changed to full blending but are still more efficient than before. The length of the companies chat sessions today are shorter than the average session Shae et al. (2007) had in their research, this be a result that the chats have developed and that the chat has become a more efficient communication tool.

In this research, we have seen that chat is not a quick fix, but a tool that can improve the relationship with the customers. To do so, the companies need to work with the chat as one tool in the company’s communication plan. We have seen by doing this study that it is important to
maintain the chat and to have a clear plan of how to use it to make the chat function the most optimal way for both the customer support service and customer.

As we have seen, companies can use their chat to build and maintain a good relationship with their customers.

7. Recommendations for further research

While having customers all over Europe, some of the companies we interviewed said the customers had different needs for the chat. Therefore, it can be interesting to see if customers from different countries have different preferences on using the chat.

Due to digitalization, more people are online today. An interesting point of view for further research is to see in which age groups the chat is most commonly used.

Since we have not been able to find evidence that using a live chat is an economic advantage, we welcome others to investigate this matter further.

Companies we have interviewed has already started to consider using robotics and chatbots for their customer support chat. The usage of robotics seems to be the next step of the development in the support chat, we think an investigation on how to implement and analyse the advantages from robotics can be of interest something for future research.
References


Appendix

Appendix 1- Interview questions

- What sort of chat program are you using today?
  - How satisfied are you with the program? Rate 1-5, where 5 is very satisfied and 1 is not satisfied
    - If not satisfied, what do you think this program is missing?
  - Why did you choose that program?
  - Have you experienced any problems with the program such as bugs or lack of support when needed?

- In the program you are using, is the support agent using pre-formatted answers?

- What was your primary support channel before the chat? Phone/ Mail/ others

- What are the variables you are considering when counting efficiency and profitability? (for the chat program)

- When did you start using the support chat?
  - Why did you decide to start using it?

- How do you look at availability?
  - How do you choose to staff your chat?
    - Why like this?
  - Is this in line with the customers’ needs for availability?
    - If yes, what are you customers’ primary needs?
    - If no, why not?
  - Can the customers reach your chat easily?
    - In what way is it easy to find?
    - In what way is it hard to find?

- How many customers can you assist at the same time?
  - How long is an average session?

- Have you noticed any strategic advantages since you started using your support chat?
  E.g. help more customers, every session doesn't take as long time as emails or phone calls
  - Efficiency
  - T2R
  - Data mining
  - Economical
  - Or other

- What are the standards for giving out information to the customers?
  - Do you have any form of control system to make sure these standards are followed?
    - If yes, what is the control system?
    - If no, why don’t you have any control system?

- Do you provide equal training for all customer support agents?
  - If yes, how is the training provided?
- If no, why not?
- Does all of them have access to the same tools and programs?
  - If no, why not?
- Can the customers leave feedback on their experienced service?
  - How would you rate the satisfaction of the experienced service? Rate 1-5, where 5 is very satisfied and 1 is not satisfied
  - How has the follow up process looked like?
- Do you see any form of development with using a support chat? E.g. AI or similar things
  - If yes, what are the developments and why?
- Is there anything you would like to add?