



JÖNKÖPING UNIVERSITY
School of Engineering

Building backlinks with Web 2.0

Designing, implementing and evaluating a costless off-site SEO strategy with backlinks originating from Web 2.0 blogs.

MAIN FIELD: *Informatics*

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JÖNKÖPING 2020 08

This final thesis has been carried out at the School of Engineering at Jönköping University within Informatics. The authors are responsible for the presented opinions, conclusions and results.

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this thesis is contributing to the research on the efficacy of backlinks originating from Web 2.0 blogs by designing a costless method for creating controllable backlinks to a website, solely with Web 2.0 blogs as a source of backlinks. The objective is to find out if such links can provide an effect on a website's positions in the Google SERPs in 2020 and to hopefully contribute with a controllable link strategy that is available for any SEO practitioner regardless of their economic circumstances. The thesis provides answers to the two research questions:

1. What positions in the SERPs can an already existing website claim as a result of creating and implementing a link strategy that utilizes Web 2.0 blogs?

2. In context of implementing a link strategy, what practices must be considered for it to remain unpunished by Google in 2020?

Method – The choice of research method, due to the nature of the project is Design Science Research (DSR), in which the designed artefact is observationally evaluated by conducting a field study. The artefact consists of four unique Web 2.0 blogs that each sent a backlink to the target website through qualitative blog posts following Google's guidelines. Quantitative data was collected using SERPWatcher by Mangools, which tracked 29 keywords for 52 days, and was qualitatively analysed.

Conclusions – There is a distinct relation between the improvement in keyword positions and the implementation of the artefact, leaving us with the conclusion that it is reasonable to believe that Web 2.0 blog backlinks can affect a website's positions in the SERPs in the modern Google Search. More research experimenting with Web 2.0 blogs as the origin of backlinks must be conducted in order to truly affirm or deny this claim, as an evaluation on solely one website is insufficient.

It can be concluded that the target website was not punished by Google after implementation. While their search algorithm may be complex and intelligent, it was not intelligent enough to punish our intentions of manipulating another website's keyword positions via a link scheme. Passing through as legitimate may have been due to following E-A-T practices and acting natural, but this is mere speculation without comparisons with similar strategies that disregard these practices.

Limitations – Rigorous testing and evaluation of the designed artefact and its components is very important when conducting research that employs DSR as a method. Due to time constraints, the lack of data points in form of websites the artefact has been tested on, as well as the absence of iterative design, partially denies the validity of the artefact since it does not meet the criteria of being rigorously tested.

The data collected would be more impactful if keyword data were gathered many days before executing the artefact, as a pre-implementation period larger than 7 days would act as a reference point when evaluating the effect. It would also be ideal to track the effects post-implementation for a longer time period due to the slow nature of SEO.

Keywords – SEO, search engine optimization, off-page optimization, Google Search, Web 2.0, backlinks.

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1. Introduction

The chapter provides a background for the study and the problem area the study is built upon. Further, the purpose and the research questions are presented. The scope and delimitations of the study are also described. Lastly, the disposition of the thesis is outlined.

1.1 Background

As the world becomes more digitized for every passing day, more information is made available online. In a survey conducted by Netcraft [1], the number of websites on the Internet was 1,295,973,827, as of January 2020. These websites and other data uploaded to the Internet are crawled, indexed, and ranked by search engines; the information made searchable by the users [2].

At the time of writing, searching for “SEO” in Google Search presents 818 million results [3]. While this amount of data is impressive, the average user will never have time to go through all of it, likely settling for one of the first results shown. Being visible on the first result page, and even better, the top of the first page, is therefore important to attract traffic to a website. In order to be visible in the midst of all the other websites competing for visitors, it has become crucial for a website to practise good Search Engine Optimization (SEO).

Since Google’s search algorithm is closed source and everchanging to prevent exploitation [2], one cannot know exactly how it works. However, guidelines exist as outlined by the company in their “Search Engine Optimization (SEO) Starter Guide” [4]. The various methods to be employed in the optimization of a website for its position in the Search Engine Ranking Pages (SERPs) can be categorized into two groups: on-site SEO and off-site SEO. On-site optimization are technical actions which can be made in the source code of a website, such as site hierarchy, content, and mobile-friendliness [4]. Off-site optimization are actions taken outside the website, mainly through the acquisition of backlinks (receiving links from other sites) [5]. The former SEO category offers high amount of control, but the latter much less, making off-site SEO a difficult area to handle.

The off-site SEO methods commonly used involves networking with other people as a means to send links between websites, something that is not controllable as it depends on other people. One cannot create backlinks to oneself, since Google considers any links intended to manipulate search results a violation of their guidelines [6]. If one does not want to network, creating high-quality content offers another route since people naturally want to share good content, creating links in the process [5]. In “Search Quality Evaluation Guidelines” [7], Google goes into detail about how content quality is assessed through E-A-T. Sites showing *expertise*, *authoritativeness*, and *trustworthiness* achieve higher E-A-T levels.

Studies investigating the effect of SEO methods have been carried out. In a study about applying both on-page and off-page SEO methods to a new website, Ochoa concluded that implementation of SEO can have a positive impact on both site traffic and its SERPs [5]. Another study by A. Tomič & M. Šupín applied SEO methods to an already existing website and saw an increase in traffic, which they mostly contributed to all the backlinks being indexed by search engines. Their conclusion: that SEO is effective, and that link building strengthens the website domain [8].

With the advent of Web 2.0, there has come many free options for people who want to publish information on the Internet through platforms like social media, blogs, or online wikis [9]. In a research paper by C.-V. Boutet et al. [10], a net of Web 2.0 blogs was used to send backlinks to a specific keyword for a target site. These Web 2.0 backlinks were shown to have a positive impact on the keyword’s ranking. The researchers coined their approach ‘Active SEO 2.0’:

techniques that go beyond recommended methods but remain legal. However, this research paper was written in 2012, and since then Google has updated their algorithm to further detect manipulative link building practices (see 2.3.3).

This thesis investigates what possible effects a link strategy using backlinks from Web 2.0 blogs can have on a website's SERPs and what practises one must consider in a link strategy in order to remain unpunished by Google in 2020. The hope is to contribute with a controllable and costless link strategy available for any SEO practitioner to use.

1.2 Problem statement

As discussed by Ochoa [5], off-page and on-page Search Engine Optimization (SEO) are distinctively different. On-page SEO is a set of technical actions that can be studied, learned and implemented on a website. However, off-page SEO is open-ended and less controllable by an SEO practitioner as it revolves around receiving ingoing links from other websites, so called backlinks.

One can only have so much control over citations from other websites, making it a problem that revolves around finding creative ways of receiving them without violating Google's terms of service. Furthermore, the off-page spectrum of SEO is hard to overlook as proper citations may have a drastically positive effect on a website's traffic [8]. There is little existing scientific research that evaluates if there are any costless off-page actions that is as technical, controllable, and easily implemented as on-page actions. Likewise, there is an inadequacy of scientific research that evaluates the efficiency of backlinks that originate from Web 2.0 platforms other than social media platforms, specifically Web 2.0 blogs, which are of special interest due to their similarities with Web 1.0 websites while being a costless alternative. In a research paper from 2012, C.-V. Boutet et al. introduces the concept of 'active SEO 2.0', where they create a so called link farm based on Web 2.0 blogs and refer those links to a target website in order to increase its standings in the Google SERPs [10]. They found that backlinks originating from Web 2.0 blogs could indeed carry ranking power in its current time, despite the bad press and negative attitude towards such links. Furthermore, active SEO 2.0 do not conform to the recommendations of search engines and had been smeared as illegal or ineffective.

Since 2012, Google's search algorithm has come a long way in its development and has had multiple updates with purpose of detecting and punishing SEO techniques that are deemed illegal or against the guidelines (see 2.3.3). Hence, it is unknown whether backlinks from Web 2.0 blogs would have similar success in 2020.

1.3 Purpose and research questions

The purpose of this thesis is contributing to the research on the efficacy of backlinks originating from Web 2.0 blogs and active SEO 2.0, by designing a costless method for creating controllable backlinks to a website, solely with Web 2.0 blogs as a source of backlinks. The objective is to find out if such links can provide an effect on a website's positions in the Google SERPs in 2020 and to hopefully contribute with a controllable link strategy that is available for any SEO practitioner regardless of their economic circumstances.

In order to fulfil the purpose, it has been broken down into two questions. As the endeavour is to present a method for building costless ingoing backlinks to a website and discuss the viability of using Web 2.0 blogs a means to do so, the first research question is:

1. What positions in the SERPs can an already existing website claim as a result of creating and implementing a link strategy that utilizes Web 2.0 blogs?

The guidelines and rules that are put in place by Google are dynamic and changes rapidly. A successful link strategy must remain unpunished in order to have a positive effect. Therefore, the second research question is:

2. In context of implementing a link strategy, what practices must be considered for it to remain unpunished by Google in 2020?

1.4 The scope and delimitations

The scope of this thesis work is to answer the declared research questions within time schedule. In this chapter we go over the boundaries of our study as well as limitations of the chosen topic.

1.4.1 Google's search engine

There are many different search engines available on the internet and they all use an algorithm of their own in order to index and position websites and webpages. Due to this, methods for improving search engine optimization on a website will differ depending on which search engine is in focus. This thesis will focus on SEO aspects related to Google's search engine 'Google Search', due to its' overrepresentation in popularity, with a market share of 92.78% (its closest competitor is Bing, with a market share of 2.55%) [11].

1.4.2 Off-page SEO & Web 2.0 blogs

SEO is a broad topic that is generally split into two areas: on-page and off-page SEO. The former concerns optimizing anything you have direct control of, such as code and content on the website [5], while the latter revolves around uncontrollable things such as receiving backlinks from other websites. In order to answer the research questions and remaining narrow in our thesis work, we will focus on the off-page aspect of SEO and will therefore only mention and explain certain on-page aspects if it is relevant and necessary.

Web 2.0 platforms allow for accessible and free ways for people to upload content to the Internet, in contrast to the static websites of Web 1.0 [12]. Examples of Web 2.0 platforms include social media, blogs, and online encyclopaedias [9]. To fulfil the purpose and further contribute to the existing research on backlinks originating from Web 2.0 blogs, said platform will be the focus of this thesis.

1.4.3 The limitations of SEO

Doing research in the area of SEO is problematic as the environment of the topic is mostly uncontrollable. Google's algorithm is dynamic and is updated hundreds, sometimes thousands of times each year and the frequency of updates is growing with time [13]. Due to this, eventual research done in present time may become irrelevant in the future and researchers must take this into consideration when conducting studies and reviewing previous work.

While Google gives some guidelines for how website owners should manage their content in order for it to be friendly for the search engines, they are not openly and clearly stating exactly how the search algorithm works as it is intellectual property. Furthermore, such openness would make it vulnerable to abuse. SEO practitioners can therefore only make educated guesses and experiments in order to get *a good idea* of what works and what does not – and these indications may not be of any use for future work.

Another example of how SEO is an uncontrollable environment is the uniqueness of each and every website. Some methods of SEO may be objective, logical and straightforward, such as having a certain density of a selected keyword in a body text – but due to the uniqueness of the

circumstances it is impossible to declare the degree of efficiency of the method if it were to be executed on another website. Arguably it would not even be possible to declare the efficiency of the method on the website it was executed on, as it would not be possible to isolate the method as the cause of change.

1.5 Previous research

In “Towards Active SEO (Search Engine Optimization) 2.0” [10] (by Charles-Victor Boutet, Luc Quoniam, and William Samuel Ravatua Smith) the researchers create “a giant constellation” of Web 2.0 blogs to promote one specific keyword on a main website using backlinks generated from this network. This method was coined as ‘active SEO 2.0’, being techniques that go beyond the recommended methods, while remaining legal. In a two-week period, the target site went from being several thousand ranks away from the first result in Google Search to being placed in the top twenty results for that specific keyword. Three months after the SEO campaign had concluded, the rank had remained stable. It was concluded that using the appropriate method, Web 2.0 blogs offer excellent referencing possibilities without breaking any laws set up by Google.

While there is a lack of studies specifically investigating methods for creating costless backlinks via Web 2.0 blogs like the paper above, there are studies that have implemented link strategies amongst other SEO techniques to see if there would be an effect on a target website.

The study “Increasing Website Traffic Of Woodworking Company Using Digital Marketing Methods” [8] (by Andrej Tomič and Mikuláš Šupín) applied both on-page and off-page SEO methods to an already existing woodworking website with the goal of increasing its traffic, and in turn the business’ turnover . To improve the site’s off-page SEO a link strategy involving the acquisition of backlinks from authoritative sites was implemented. The actions taken as part of this strategy were: creating high-quality content on the website, creating articles on quality websites with backlinks using relevant keywords, buying links from quality sites, and by hosting a competition on other building-related websites with backlinks. Over a three-month period, the study saw traffic to the website increase by 25.65%, with most of it coming towards the end when the backlinks from the link strategy had been indexed by search engines.

“An Analysis Of The Application Of Selected Search Engine Optimization (SEO) Techniques And Their Effectiveness On Google’s Search Ranking Algorithm” [5] (by Edgar Damian Ochoa) is a similar study to the one previously discussed, where a number of on-page and off-page SEO techniques are implemented to investigate the effect they may have on Google’s search ranking algorithm. Unlike the previous study, however, this one employs the various SEO methods to a brand-new website. The link strategy forming the off-page SEO acquired links in a gradual manner from quality content creation, networking with others in the same area, and getting backlinks from authoritative sites. The study tracked the website’s traffic for a year and saw the biggest increase in visitors (469%) during the third month. At the end of the tracking period the website had increased its traffic by 353%. The researcher stated that the implementation of SEO showed a positive effect in site traffic as well as the site’s search ranking in Google.

Since the field of SEO is fast-moving, information can get outdated quickly. Thus, in addition to the studies above who serve as the basis of this paper, what Google has written on the subject has also been taken into account since Google Search is the search engine this thesis focuses on (see 1.4.1). However, since their guides are not academic, they have only been used as an aid to the scientific literature to have up-to-date information. Google’s “Search Engine Optimization (SEO) Starter Guide” [4] details both on-page and off-page SEO methods

endorsed by the company and what to avoid. In “Search Quality Evaluation Guidelines” [7] Google lists the guidelines their search algorithm follow when determining the quality of websites and content called E-A-T, and how to best create content accordingly. Google recommends creation of quality, authoritative content that people naturally would like to share.

1.6 Disposition

This chapter has introduced the topic of the paper, covered the background, the problem, and stated the research questions. The scope of the study is determined as well. The rest of the paper is structured as follows. The next chapter is the theoretical framework, which covers relevant theory on the subject. It goes through search engines, Google’s guidelines and updates, SEO, and Web 2.0. After that, the chapter method and implementation discuss the research method DSR, and then the target website of the study. A step-by-step description of the design and implementation of the artefact is next, followed by the method for data collection. The fourth chapter, empirical data, displays the various data collected from the field study. Following, the analysis chapter attempts to answer the research questions using the collected data and relevant theory. Finally, discussion and conclusion discuss the implications of the results and their limitations. The future of SEO is considered, followed by a conclusion, and recommendation of further research. At the very end references and appendices are found.

2. Theoretical framework

The chapter presents the theoretical foundation for the DSR artefact.

2.1 Link between research questions and theory

To answer the two research questions, relevant theory is described in this chapter. The areas examined are search engines, Google's guidelines and algorithms, search engine optimization, and Web 2.0. 2.2 goes through how search engines (Google's in specific) finds, ranks, and displays websites and content. This is the basics of how search engines work today, which is necessary knowledge when doing work with them. In 2.3, what SEO methods that are allowed and disallowed by Google are made clear. A run-through of the most relevant algorithm updates concerning backlinks, quality assessment, and the fight against exploitative SEO practices are made. This information is crucial for both research questions, since for getting high positions in the SERPs and remaining unpunished by Google, one should have an understanding of the guidelines. 2.4 covers the basics in both on-page and off-page SEO, and later goes into more detail with "nofollow" in backlinks and the aspect of time is SEO. This is, again, relevant to both the research questions since SEO is applied in link strategies. Lastly, in 2.5, the costless platforms of Web 2.0 are explained. This theory regards the first research question, as it gives an understanding of what Web 2.0 is and shows the different Web 2.0 platforms available as possible options for a link strategy.

2.2 Search Engines

The Internet of today has come a long way since its inception as the ARPANET in 1969 [14]. Mainly being used by government agencies, universities, and institutions; the Internet did not become popular with the general public until the introduction of the Mosaic graphical web browser in 1993 [15]. This spike in popularity led to an explosion of new websites on the Internet, growing from a few hundred in 1993 to 2.5 million by 1998 [16]. This massive increase in the amount of information available online led to a greater demand for a simple way for users to find what they were looking for. The solution to this was the search engine.

From the first search tool in 1990; Archie [17], to today's most popular search engine; Google Search [11], there has been a great improvement in how search engines work. Google Search, as well as other modern search engines, consist of three main functions: crawling, indexing, and ranking [18].

The first step, crawling, is where crawlers (also referred to as spiders, robots, or simply bots) scour the Internet for new and updated websites and content. No matter the format, the crawlers discover content through links. This information is then stored in the search engine's index [18].

Indexing is the process in which the crawler (Googlebot in the case of Google Search) analyses the content it has crawled. The crawler will read all the text on a page, as well as looking through the attributes in the HTML tags available in the source code to determine what content it has discovered. Googlebot will analyse videos and images too, to further develop its interpretation of the page [18].

Crawling and indexing takes time and there are things that might slow down these processes. If there are a little number of backlinks leading to the site, like in the case of a newly created website, it might take a while for the crawler to find it. The crawler might have difficulty

navigating the website, in which case submitting a sitemap to Google will help the bot figure out what to crawl. If the website has violated Google's terms of service, it could have been penalized and removed deindexed from the search results [19].

The final component of search engines is ranking (also known as serving), in which the search engine determines the most relevant answer to a user's search query. Relevancy is determined by hundreds of factors [18], and there are adjustments made to the algorithm every day [2]. Some factors are controllable, and some are not when it comes to boosting the ranking of a site. User location and language are factors that a website cannot control. A website for a Swedish bike shop is not likely to show up for a French person searching for bike shops in France, no matter how good the SEO of the Swedish site is. Aside from language or location, SEO is a factor that will affect a website's ranking. The better the optimization, the better ranking the website may obtain.

2.3 Google's Guidelines

Lines must be drawn for what is deemed legal by Google and what is considered violating their terms of service. 2.3.1 addresses illegitimate tactics for backlinks while 2.3.2 outlines methods endorsed by Google for achieving backlinks. Lastly 2.3.3 discusses how Google has been able to enforce their guidelines through updates in the search algorithm.

2.3.1 Methods in violation of Google's Guidelines

Google's "Quality Guidelines" [20] includes a list of unauthorized methods used to artificially boost SEO ranking. Websites partaking in such methods abuse Google's Terms of Service and can, if caught, end up with a worse ranking than before or being removed from the search results entirely [19]. The list contains an assortment of prohibited methods concerning off-site SEO such as: link schemes, auto-generated content, and scraped content.

The act of acquiring backlinks through manipulative techniques is known as link schemes [6]. These methods include buying or exchanging links for money or other goods. Likewise, partnering with another site; giving them backlinks for links in turn. Spamming links, with the use of an automated program for example, is neither recommended [21].

Creating original quality content as a mean to improve off-page SEO takes time and effort. Hence, ways to generate content dishonestly have been developed. Often such techniques involve plagiarism. Scraped content is one such method where content is copied from another site and published on a new one, without adding anything new to it. Some try to modify it slightly, like using synonyms [22]. This is known as "spun content" [21]. Others rely on auto-generating content, stuffing the text with keywords to achieve higher SERPs. Since this content is made for tricking the search engines, it need not make sense to human readers [23].

2.3.2 Methods Google advocate

On the other side of the spectrum, there are valid SEO methods that are safe to use and encouraged by Google. Networking with sites and creators covering similar topics can generate powerful backlinks. This collaboration can take the form of guest-blogging on a blog or doing a video collaboration, to name two examples. Ochoa [5] stresses the importance of networking with sites of similar topic, claiming "links from off-topic sites do not count as much as links from sites that have content related to yours." Furthermore, it is an excellent way of marketing a website and increase its traffic. However, this method requires time and effort, and even if

one is willing to put that in, there is no guarantee someone else is willing to collaborate, thus making the method less controllable.

Perhaps the simplest method of improving off-site SEO is not by applying any special methods at all. Instead one should focus on creating good content, and in time a quality website. To determine if a website is of quality, Google has devised the acronym *E-A-T*, to demonstrate what makes a quality website [7]. E-A-T stands for *Expertise, Authoritativeness, and Trustworthiness*; all characteristics part of good quality sites. By creating high quality, accurate content, people will naturally want to share it. Doing this may demonstrate for the search algorithm that the site possesses a higher E-A-T level. Content can be published on the website the SEO is supposed to be improved upon, having people link to that content through sharing it. Another approach is publishing content on other sites such as forums and including a link back to the original website, creating a backlink oneself. The goal is to build up the site's reputation through appealing content, achieving a high E-A-T level.

2.3.3 The evolution of Google's search algorithm

As with any technology, search engines have become more complex with time. To give users search results of higher quality and of more relevance to them, search engines today implement algorithms that analyse websites. Some try to exploit the algorithm to have their site appear more relevant when, in fact, it might not be. Google has and continues to update their search algorithm to combat such behaviour. Three updates worth noting in particular are: Panda, Penguin, and Hummingbird.

The "Panda" update released in 2011 aimed to tackle the issue of low quality spammy sites. Its task was to assess the quality of a site and rank it accordingly. Like with most things concerning the algorithm, Google does not specify the exact variables of it, but they gave hints. They alluded that Panda would look at expertise, authoritativeness, trustworthiness, duplicate content, errors in spelling and facts, and the value of the content [24]. The update shifted the focus from quantity to quality [21].

The next major algorithm update came in 2012 with the name "Penguin" [25]. While its predecessor, Panda, targeted low-quality sites, Penguin aimed to identify and punish websites breaking terms of service using illegal SEO methods. This would encourage sites to "go clean" [21].

"Hummingbird", arriving in 2013, was the next big algorithm update. This update would again focus on quality content. It would place less significance on the volume of specific keywords, rather looking at the content as a whole. Also, distributing content through social media, like creating backlinks to new content, can affect how a site rank. Amit Vyas claims that Hummingbird has made it possible to make relatively quick improvements to a website's off-page SEO by consistently creating and hosting quality content. He goes on to say that "This could be as simple as adding a blog or news section to an existing website that allows content to be easily uploaded and found by the search engines" [26].

Simon Kloostra distils the importance of these three updates to be to create useful and relevant content for your visitors and states that the updates favour content from smaller authoritative sites rather than content from big generic ones [27]. This ties back to what Google is pushing for with E-A-T. Panda, Penguin, and Hummingbird have all been steps toward weeding out exploitative methods to instead reward high E-A-T level sites.

2.4 Search Engine Optimization

2.4.1 On-Page SEO

Since this thesis is about costless controllable off-page SEO methods, on-page SEO will not be the focus (as stated in 1.4.2). However, on-page SEO methods will still be used. Below is a brief list covering various on-page SEO methods outlined by both researcher Ochoa [5] and Google themselves [4].

- Block search engine crawling for unwanted pages through the “robots.txt” file.
- Make the website understandable through unique and accurate page titles, summarized content in description meta tags, correctly emphasise text with headings, and structured data markup.
- Make the website navigable through breadcrumb lists, logical site hierarchy, a sitemap, and simple URLs.
- Optimize the content of the website through qualitative content, demonstrating expertise and authoritativeness in the area, and having appropriate link text as well as correct use of the “nofollow” attribute.
- Optimize the images of a website by using the or <picture> HTML elements, including descriptive alt attributes, providing an image sitemap, and utilizing standard image formats such as JPEG, GIF, and PNG, to mention a few.
- Make the website mobile-friendly.

2.4.2 Off-Page SEO

While on-page SEO consists of technical actions one can make to the code of their website, off-page SEO is not as simple to control. One way to look at this kind of SEO is rather than a list of checkboxes of technical specifications a website should follow (on-page SEO), off-page SEO requires a (link) strategy to be developed.

Off-page SEO concerns the acquisition of links, also known as backlinks, leading to the website. Links are a fundamental part of what makes the World Wide Web a *web*; they connect different websites together. For search engines, links serve as reputation for websites [5]. One might assume that the more links that leads to a website, the more search engines will notice the site, thus increasing its SERPs. However, off-page SEO is far more complex than measuring only the volume of backlinks leading to a certain site. If that was the case, then the website who could spam the most links would “win”, and that approach would not make for a quality Internet.

Luckily, all links are not created equal, some having a bigger influence than others depending on what site they are coming from. Backlinks from quality sites (high E-A-T level) will carry more weight than links from low-quality spammy sites. The links should not only contain relevant keywords but should also come from websites in the same field as the target site [5], as previously discussed.

Herein lies a problem. It is not possible to control who links to a website. Backlinks to a site might come from an assortment of different sites of various quality, affecting the linked site both positively and negatively. While it is not possible to have complete control over all the incoming backlinks, there are several methods to make positive backlinks. Some of them are safe to use, but some are considered riskier (see 2.3.1 and 2.3.2). To prevent exploitation, Google lists what violates their Terms of Service. Sites using methods disregarding Google’s

Terms of Service face punitive measures such as lowered rankings or having the website deindexed (removed) from the search results [19].

2.4.3 Keywords in backlinks

When passing on backlinks to a website, the keyword included in the link text plays a big part in the backlink's effectiveness. According to Ochoa [5], Google places high importance on the anchor text and is one of the strongest signals the search engine uses in its rankings. Thereby, having multiple backlinks with the right keywords pointing to the same website has a good chance to increase the site's SERP for that keyword [5].

Keywords are an aspect of SEO which are intertwined with the content of a website. They are what makes sure that the webpages displayed in search results match the user's search query. If the user enters the keyword "Hats" into a search engine, websites with content containing that keyword will be deemed to be of the relevant topic, thus displaying in the search results.

To optimize keywords for a webpage demands the content creator of the site to look at the content they are creating. Summarizing the content, be it text, images, and videos, to a few words tells the creator what their primary keywords are. If the competition in the area is strong broad keywords, known as head keywords [28], should be avoided in favour of more specific ones, known as long-tail keywords [5]. Naturally, one will have a harder time getting good rankings for keywords a lot of sites are competing for compared to niche markets with very specific keywords.

Another property of links that is vital when creating backlinks is the "nofollow" value. Including "nofollow" in the "rel" attribute prevents the backlinked site from being affected by the reputation of the website the link came from. This can be used to combat spammers who backlink their own websites in the comment sections of a good quality sites in order to boost their off-page SEO [5]. In the absence of a "nofollow" attribute, the search engine will pass along the reputation to the backlinked site.

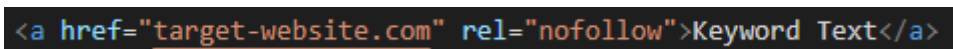
A screenshot of a code editor showing the HTML code for a link with the 'nofollow' attribute. The code is: `Keyword Text`. The text is displayed in a dark background with syntax highlighting.

Fig. 1 - What the code for a link using "nofollow" looks like.

An example of how a backlink containing the "nofollow" attribute looks like in the source code of a site is seen in fig 1. In HTML, the `<a>` tag creates a hyperlink. The "href" attribute contains the URL of the backlinked website. "Rel = nofollow" prevents the reputation from being passed along to the URL. Between the opening and closing `<a>` tags, link text should be provided, preferably a keyword [29].

2.4.4 Time in SEO

When starting to work at improving the SEO of a site it is important to know that results may not show directly. Whether one has just updated their website with improved on-page SEO or published a new high-quality article, it may take some time before any visible change to the rankings occur. This may happen for several reasons (see 2.2), with the most likely reason being that it takes time for search engines to crawl and (re-)index sites.

Furthermore, the process of employing a link-strategy and retrieving links needs to be gradual itself. According to Google, links to your site should come gradually as people discover it [4]. A site acquiring many backlinks in a short period of time will likely signal a red flag to Google [5] who might think the website is spamming links, which is considered violating their terms

of service and may worsen the site's rankings [6]. Thus, link-building needs time and cannot happen overnight.

Knowing this, when can one expect to see improvements to the SERPs of a website when employing a link strategy? In a study by Ochoa [5] the researcher implemented a gradual link-building strategy to improve off-page SEO and found that during the tracking period of a whole year, the biggest increase in the number of visitors came during the third month where it had increased by 469%.

Similarly, in a study by researchers A. Tomič and M. Šupín [8] a link strategy was applied to an already existing website and found that the biggest increase in visitors came during month three of tracking, where the traffic to the site had increased by 25.65%. They credited this to all the backlinks from the link strategy being indexed by search engines at this point. The pace at which the website in question was to gradually acquire links was five backlinks a month.

2.5 Web 2.0 - Costless alternatives for creation online

Precise definitions of what Web 2.0 is may vary from different sources. Some think the term encompasses more and some less, but the core idea remains the same. Web 2.0 is the next step, the evolution, of Web 1.0. The early days of the commercial World Wide Web mostly saw a one-way communication from web publishers to their users. The Web was mostly read-only, allowing only the owners of websites to upload content to static HTML webpages and its visitors to view it. This is known as Web 1.0 and was largely how the Web functioned during the 90's [12].

Today, the web looks much different. Having evolved from Web 1.0's (mostly) read-only information flow, the read-write relationship between the Web and its users is what defines Web 2.0. One example of this two-way communication is social media. User generated content almost exclusively makes up a social media site, making the site's substance very dynamic compared to the static HTML pages of Web 1.0, which was only editable by its owners. There is no content of interest on social media sites (as well as other Web 2.0 platforms) other than what users post, comment, and share. In other words, the users create, or, "are" the content themselves.

Another example of a Web 2.0-type website is an online encyclopaedia (wiki) such as Wikipedia, where the site consists of articles containing knowledge submitted by users. Blogs are also a Web 2.0 platform. They often come in the shape of a subdomain at a blogging hub. Fig 2 depicts how URLs of such blogs may look like. There, users may choose a style template and all the published content will fill it up, much like a social media feed or a list of articles in an online wiki [9].

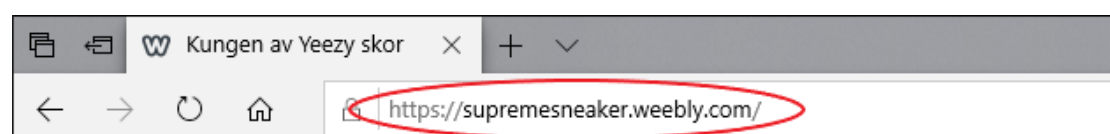


Fig 2: *Supreme Sneaker* is the subdomain at the blogging hub *Weebly*

2.5.1 Nofollow in Web 2.0

Utilizing Web 2.0 platforms, be it social media or blogs, allows the user to publish content to the web for free. However, it is important to note that many Web 2.0 platforms implement "rel

= nofollow” to prevent users from exploiting the free nature of the sites to create and publish lots of spam in an attempt to, for example, generate backlinks to a target site.

Take Wikipedia for instance, who in 2007 made the shift to implement “nofollow” on all links on the site [30]. Creating spammy backlinks on the website was a viable tactic at the time, seeing as one could easily make many of them, and perhaps more importantly, pass on the good reputation a site as big as Wikipedia likely possess. Looking at the source code of the social media giant Facebook in fig 3; “nofollow” is found as well, likely for similar reasons.



Fig 3: Inspecting the source code of a Facebook post reveals that the link uses "nofollow" (see marking in yellow.)

2.5.2 Links from social media

The enormous growth of Web 2.0 technologies in recent years has provided internet users many ways of creating free, published content on the web – such as via social media, blogs, and wikis to name a few [31]. While the mentioned alternatives are free to use and have the possibility to contain content with outgoing backlinks, it is still questionable whether such backlinks carry any significant ranking-power to the referenced website.

A survey carried out by the industry's leader in SEO marketing, the blog Moz.com, that got answered by over 150 leading search marketers, in which expert opinions on ranking factors was provided, page-level social metrics such as quantity/quality of tweeted links and Facebook shares etc. to the page was ranked as the least influential broad ranking factor amongst 9 others, with a score of 3.9/10 [32]. However, in conjunction with the survey, the Data Science team at Moz.com carried out a correlation study that suggested a positive correlation between the number of social shares accumulated by a website and its' rankings in the SERPs. Since social media is an enormous part of today's internet, it is safe to say that Google's search algorithm, to some extent, is going to take ingoing links from social media platforms into account when calculating the PageRank of a web page.

Despite the probable influence of social media citations, it is unlikely that Google's algorithm confuses social links with 'normal', relevant, and authoritative Web 1.0 links. The continual updates and additions to the algorithm has enabled a deeper understanding of context (as seen in 2.3.3), such as "Hummingbird" that was launched in 2013 with main purpose to understand content context [33], or the "Panda" update that assesses website quality by detecting content and backlinks of a spammy nature [21].

Due to the spammy nature of social media and how easily such platforms could be abused to gain ranking in the SERPs with little effort, user-generated links from social media platforms are generally "nofollow" links, making them ineffective for link-building purposes. However, as suggested in the studies by Moz.com there seem to be some correlation between the number of social links and SERPs ranking – after all, social media has grown to be extremely relevant and Google must therefore account for it as a factor for ranking. To differentiate a link from social media and a regular link from another website, people in the industry refer to them as "social signals". The consensus amongst these people is that social signals should be used for complementary purposes and not as a source of backlinks [34].

3. Method and implementation

In the beginning of this chapter, the chosen research method is discussed, where reasoning behind the choice of method, validity factors and limitations is highlighted, which is followed by a brief description of our target website and its' circumstances. The actual design and implementation of the link strategy begins in chapter 3.3, where the artefact takes form of a step-by-step process that includes motivations behind the design choices.

3.1 Research method

3.1.1 Design Science Research (DSR) as a research method

In order to answer the research questions of this thesis and consequentially contributing to the research regarding backlinks originating from Web 2.0 blogs, a method or a framework has to be designed and evaluated. The choice of research method, due to the nature of the project is Design Science Research (DSR), in which the designed artefact is observationally evaluated by conducting a field study. The field study consists of implementing the DSR artefact (a link strategy) onto a website, where the website's keyword positions in the SERPs is tracked daily for 59 days. The gathered quantitative data is then qualitatively evaluated by observing various data visualisations.

DSR is a research method with focus on problem solving, in which the research-process revolves around the construction and evaluation of artefacts. Artefacts in context of DSR are constructs, models, methods or instantiations that solves identified problems and may result in an improvement of theory [35].

Bismandu [36] addresses that problems solved with DSR methodology in information systems may be "wicked". Two characterizations of such problems are 'complex interactions among subcomponents of the problem and its solution' and 'unstable requirements and constraints based on ill-defined environmental context'. As previously discussed in the limitations of this thesis, SEO is a challenging topic to conduct research in due to the uncontrollable environment, unknown variables and uniqueness to every situation – hence, a more practical approach such as DSR is suitable for this project. The created method cannot be perfectly replicated and research methodologies applicable to natural sciences, such as an experimental study is therefore not suitable.

3.1.2 DSR Validity and limiting factors in this project

Rigorous testing and evaluation of the designed artefact and its components is very important when conducting research that employs DSR as a method. There are many forms of evaluation techniques for DSR artefacts, such as field studies, functional tests and simulations. Due to a limitation in this projects time, resources and environment, most of the evaluation techniques proposed by Dresch, Lacerda & Antunes [35] can only be partially applied. For example; artefacts should ideally be tested onto multiple projects when conducting field studies, but this thesis project only got access to evaluate the artefact onto one previously existing website. Furthermore, an iterative design cycle where components of the artefact are analysed, optimized and re-evaluated is not attainable due to factors such as unpredictable crawl-speed by Google's spiders combined with the limitation of time.

The lack of data points in form of websites the artefact has been tested on, as well as the absence of iterative design, partially denies the validity of the artefact since it does not meet the criteria of being rigorously tested. Under these circumstances it is evident that conclusions must be carefully drawn or completely avoided.

In essence, the first model of the artefact in this thesis is also the final and the observational evaluation is based on data gathered from one test subject. According to Hevner et al. [37], the primary goal of observational evaluation is comprehensively determining the behaviour of an artefact in a real environment. While the evaluation of the artefact designed in this project may not be appropriately rigorous, indications of its behaviour in a real environment may still be assessable.

3.1.3 Other research methods

While DSR was the method used for this study, one should also take the time to discuss other possible research methods that could or could not have been used to answer the research questions at hand. As mentioned in 3.1.1, since the created method cannot be replicated perfectly, research methods applicable to natural sciences, such as an experimental study is not fitting.

Concerning the second research question, the expert interview could have been a potentially fitting research method to apply. Expert interviewing can function as an exploratory tool in qualitative and quantitative research with the expert offering exclusive knowledge derived from action and experience, something they have obtained through practise in the field [38]. Interviewing an expert within the field of SEO – querying him or her about the methods that are used by them in their field today and about what SEO practises are safe to use for Google’s algorithm – could have helped shape the way the artefact, the link strategy, was formed. However, since the focus was on applying a link strategy, this method could only have served as a potential compliment to DSR.

3.2 The circumstances of the target website

Understanding the context of the website on which the artefact will be implemented on is very important. Results from the implementation cannot be fairly evaluated if the relevant aspects of the target website’s circumstances are not declared.

3.2.1 Competition & Website background

One of the core factors that decide how difficult it may be to rank for specific keywords is competition. The reasoning behind this is simple; if the interest for a keyword is great, there is going to be great number of websites that is targeted and optimized for it. Hence, the efforts necessary to achieve a high rank for such keyword is greater than the efforts necessary to rank for a keyword with little competition.

The target website in this project, “hybriz.se” [39] is niched within the topic of sneakers, more specifically a sneaker model called “Yeezy” by adidas. Additionally, the website is in Swedish, which narrows down the competition furthermore. This means that the competition on the keywords is on the lower end of the spectrum. According to Mangools’s “KWFinder” the average keyword difficulty of the 29 keywords (see Appendix A) chosen is 15/100. Keyword difficulty or “KD” is calculated by using different metrics by Moz and Majestic, namely; Domain Authority, Page Authority, Citation Flow and Trust Flow [40]. The KD of a keyword is only an estimation of the difficulty to rank for a keyword and it is used in this project solely as a means for comparison.

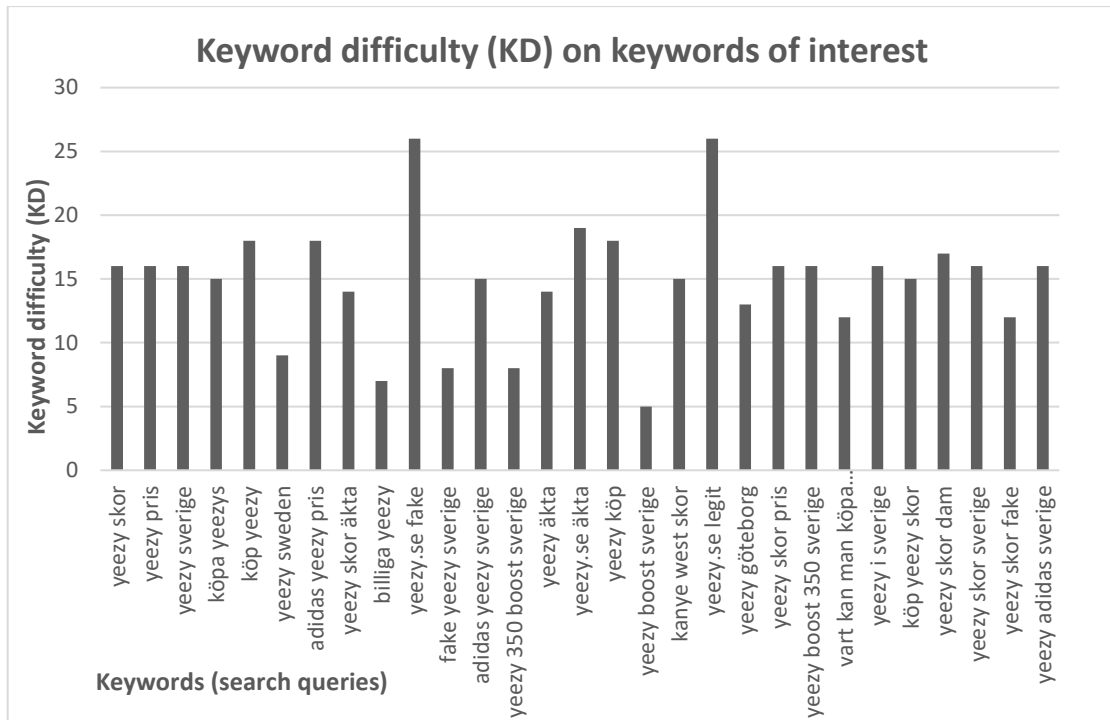


Fig.4 - KD on keywords of interest.

3.2.2 Avoiding updates to reduce noise

The target website, hybriz.se [39] has not had any updates three months prior to the testing of the artefact. This means that no content on hybriz.se has been edited or added during that time. Furthermore, no new backlinks or link strategies has been directed towards hybriz.se in the past 11 months prior to the testing of the artefact. The reasoning behind this is to reduce the noise in the data gathered while testing the artefact, which increases the probability that any fluctuations in the rankings are a result of the artefact.

3.3 Artefact design

This chapter describes the design of the artefact in a step-by-step manner and motivates the design choices taken. Details such as the Web 2.0 blog platform, content creation, and strategy for backlink publication are outlined.

3.3.1 Web 2.0 backlinks – Social Signals vs Blogs

Part of the purpose of this thesis work is designing a link-building strategy solely by utilizing Web 2.0 blogs. The major perk with such blog platforms is that they are costless and therefore available for any SEO practitioner and can be produced in any desired quantity.

It is unclear how links generated from Web 2.0 platforms other than social media are treated and categorized by Google's search algorithm in 2020. As mentioned in the problem statement, there is very little research on the efficiency of links originating from Web 2.0 blogs. This is surprising as the content structure and information architecture of a Web 2.0 blog is very similar to a "normal" Web 1.0 website, the main difference between the two is an extension in the URL (see fig. 2). As the circumstances for content creation are very similar, good on-site SEO practices on the posts where backlinks are located can be applied, which, as discussed in the theoretical framework, may strengthen the links.

3.3.2 Step 1 - Register Web 2.0 blogs

The first step of the artefact is registering four Web 2.0 blogs via a suitable, free blog platform. The Web 2.0 blog platform chosen for this artefact is Weebly. Similarities between Web 2.0 blogs and normal websites as discussed in the previous chapter as well as in the theoretical framework, is the core of why the chosen source of links in this artefact is via Web 2.0 blogs. In essence, other Web 2.0 platforms with significant domain authority, such as Wikipedia or Facebook are regulated by making their links "rel=nofollow" or via other actions to prevent link abuse.

Some Web 2.0 blog platforms, however, seem to be treated differently, as links from free blogs hosted by Weebly.com do not contain a "rel=nofollow" attribute, as seen in fig. 4. There are of course no guarantees that links from blogs created on Weebly will carry any strength to the target domain, but such links stand out as the best costless and controllable choice amongst our alternatives.



Fig 5: Inspecting the source code of a Weebly blog post reveals that backlinks lack "nofollow" (see marking in yellow.)

The steps taken to register free blogs via Weebly's platform are:

1. Registering an account on Weebly.com (only required once).
2. Choosing the option to build websites without e-commerce solution.
3. Selecting any blog theme.
4. Selecting a relevant domain name.
5. Selecting "Publish website".

At this stage of the process the blogs are empty shells without content. Decisions for the content creation and on-site SEO are covered in the following sub-chapters.

3.3.3 Step 2 - Following Google's guidelines

One of the criteria for the artefact is that the backlinks created are in line with the rules of Google and their search algorithm. The importance of this criteria is enormous as the consequences for breaking the guidelines can result in worthless links or even a SERPs rank punishment for the targeted website. If the backlinks or blogs are flagged as suspicious, abusive or of poor quality, the artefact may become counter-productive.

The artefact created in this thesis is objectively against Google's guidelines as the sole intent of creating the blogs is to increase the SERPs rank of a targeted website:

Any links intended to manipulate PageRank or a site's ranking in Google search results may be considered part of a link scheme and a violation of Google's Webmaster Guidelines. This includes any behaviour that manipulates links to your site or outgoing links from your site [6].

The *intent* behind the backlinks is disallowed, but this should not be a problem in practice if the content and SEO practices applied on the blogs follow the E-A-T guidelines. In essence; Google's search algorithm keeps getting more intelligent and has been described to effectively be able to detect and punish websites that attempts to cheat the system – it is therefore important to make the blogs look legitimate in every aspect.

3.3.4 Step 3 - Creating content

As covered in the theoretical framework (see 2.4.2), a backlink is only as strong as the context it exists within. Furthermore, one must assume that Google's search algorithm understands context well enough to identify and punish poor or irrelevant content. For the artefact to remain unpunished, each blog must contain content that is of good quality and relevant to the target website. Since the website on which the artefact will be tested and evaluated on is within the sneakers niche, the content of the Web 2.0 blogs should also have content revolving around that.

The content on the blogs is designed to look genuine to human beings in attempt to make it look genuine to the search algorithm. These are the steps and procedures taken for the content creation of the Web 2.0 blogs:

- The author of every blog is a fake persona that solely writes about sneakers.
- Each blog is differentiated by having a certain niche within the topic of sneakers (such as running, luxury or reviews).
- The blogs have a home page with a brief introduction about who they are and what they do.
- Each blog has one written blog post containing 450-650 words of original content that is relevant to the main niche of the target website.
- The blog post of each blog contains a backlink to the target website.
- The blog post of each blog mentions relevant keywords of the target website 1-4 times.

3.3.5 Step 4 - Applying on-site SEO

A very basic on-site audit is implemented on each blog and blog post. Most of the work lies within the content, such as keyword density in the body text and including important keywords in the heading. The only other on-site optimization done is setting a relevant meta-description and meta-title, as well as optimizing the anchor texts in the outgoing backlinks.

For the anchor text in the backlinks, a keyword of interest is included if it can be included naturally. Under the circumstances where it looks forced and unnatural the anchor text in the links is equal to the target website's domain name. In the case of this instance, two of the blogs' backlinks target specific keywords and two uses the target domain name "hybriz.se" as anchor text.

3.3.6 Step 5 - Publishing the backlinks in a natural manner

The final step of the artefact is publishing the Web 2.0 websites and their backlinks to our target website. The number of backlinks and Web 2.0 websites created in this artefact is four. The criteria of staying in line with Google's guidelines and assuming an efficient detection of spam

is present in this step as well. Therefore, each link is published in a natural, human manner, specifically by publishing one of our four Web 2.0 websites every second day, containing one blog post with one link to our target website. The reasoning behind this is that publishing all the links simultaneously would most likely be flagged as suspicious due to the Panda update [17], or any other official or unofficial update since then.

3.4 Data collection and method of analysis

3.4.1 Tracking with Mangools SERPWatcher

A web application called SERPWatcher, by Mangools [41] was used to track daily rankings in the SERPs of 29 specific keywords relevant to Hybriz.se (see Appendix A). The keywords were tracked over a period of 52 days, as this was the maximum timespan possible for this project due to time limitations. Ideally, the evaluation of an artefact in the realm of SEO should be as long as possible, since the time for SEO to take effect varies and it may even take more time than the 52 days tracked in this instance.

3.4.2 Quantitative data and qualitative analysis

The data gathered is quantitative, since the SERPs positions for each keyword is logged on a daily basis from a scale of 1-101+, where 1 is the highest position on Google for that specific keyword and 101+ means that it is unlisted. However, due to the unstable research environment, conclusions cannot be drawn on the quantitative data alone. The method of analysis must therefore take qualitative aspects into consideration. As declared in 3.1.1 the evaluation of the artefact is observational in form of a field-study. This also applies to the data analysis as the data and ongoing rank fluctuations are observed, tracked and interpreted based on theory and circumstances. In summary, the quantitative data gathered by tracking the keyword positions are qualitatively analysed by observing and interpreting different data visualisations (see chapter 4 & 5).

3.5 Search for literature

The scientific literature was found by searching an array of databases using different keywords. The databases searched were (in alphabetical order): Google Scholar, IEEE Xplore, Primo, Proquest, and SpringerLink.

Keywords used when searching for relevant literature include (in alphabetical order): algorithm, algorithm update, backlinks, blogs, Design Science Research, DSR, Google, Google Search, links, link strategies, methods, nofollow, off-page, on-page, off-site, on-site, search engine, Search Engine Optimization, SEO, social media, social signals, Web 2.0.

4. Empirical data

This chapter provides several visualisations of the quantitative data of the 29 keywords that was tracked in the field study. Further, a description is given of the data that has been collected.

4.1 Average keyword position

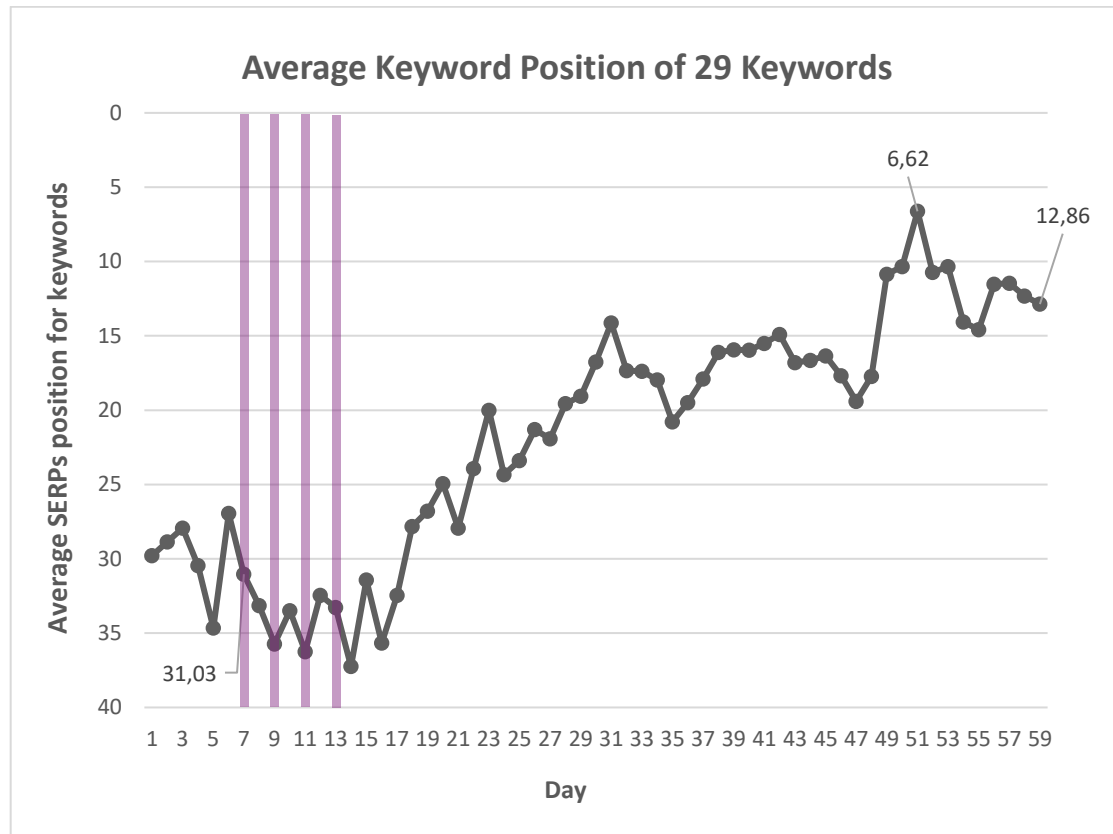


Fig. 6 - Average keyword position of the 29 tracked keywords.

The graph in fig. 6 displays the average keyword position of the 29 tracked keywords seen in Appendix A, over a period of 59 days. The purple vertical lines represent a day where a link was published – the very first link was published on day 7, on which the average position was 31.03. On day 59, the average position was 12.86, 18.17 positions higher than the average position on day 7. The average position peaked at 6.62 on day 51.

4.2 Specific keyword positions

4.2.1 Each keyword position before and after implementation

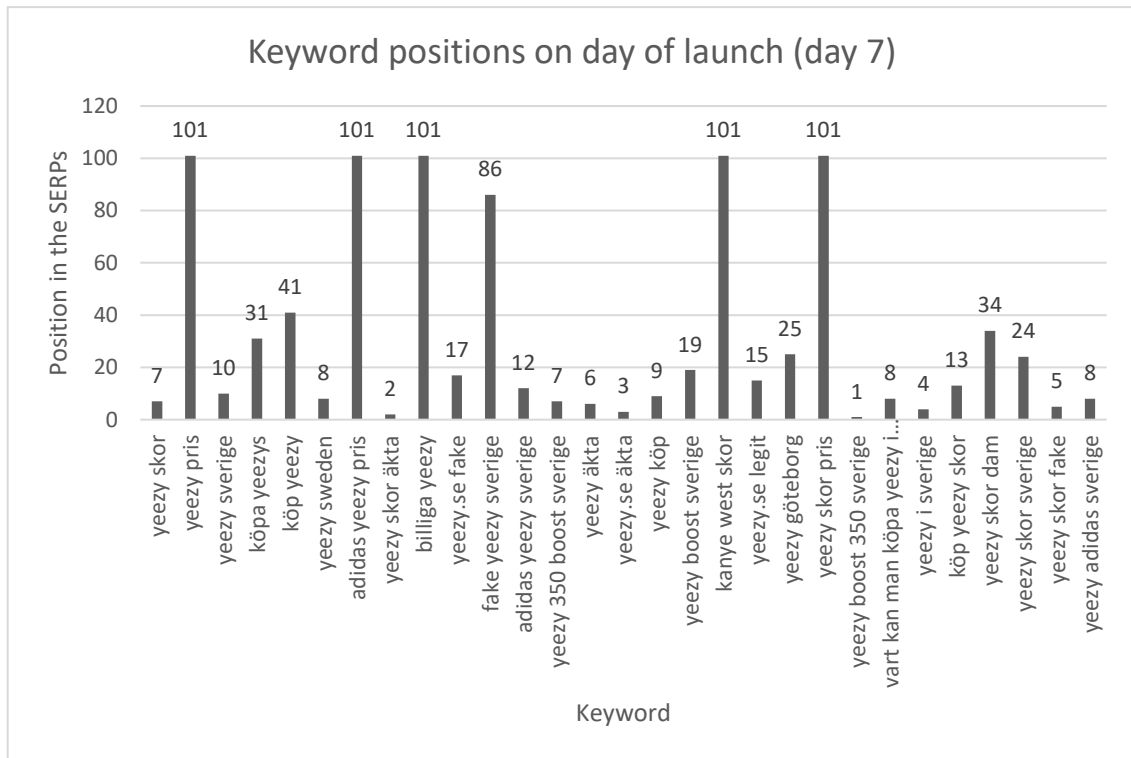


Fig. 7 – Bar chart of keyword positions on day of launch.

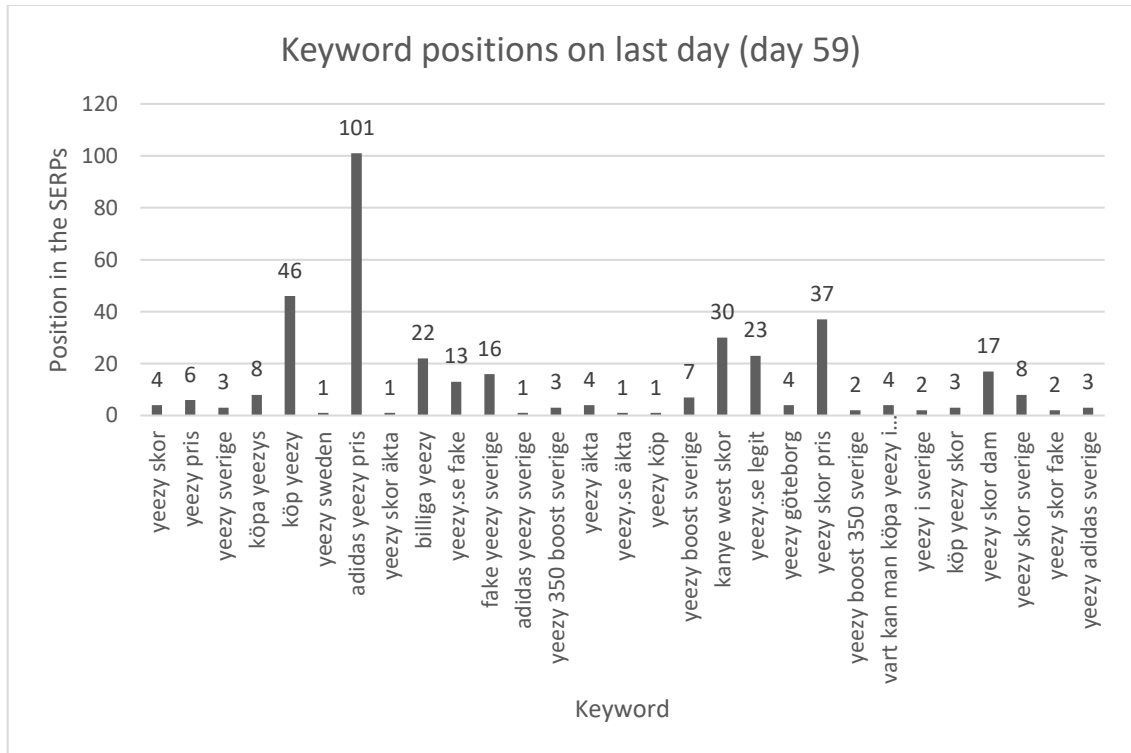


Fig. 8 – Bar chart of keyword positions on the last day of tracking.

The bar charts in fig. 7 and fig. 8 displays the SERPs position of each keyword before and after the implementation of the artefact, where a position 1 is the very first position in Google Search and a position 101 means that the website is unlisted for that keyword.

4.2.2 Distribution of keyword positions before and after implementation

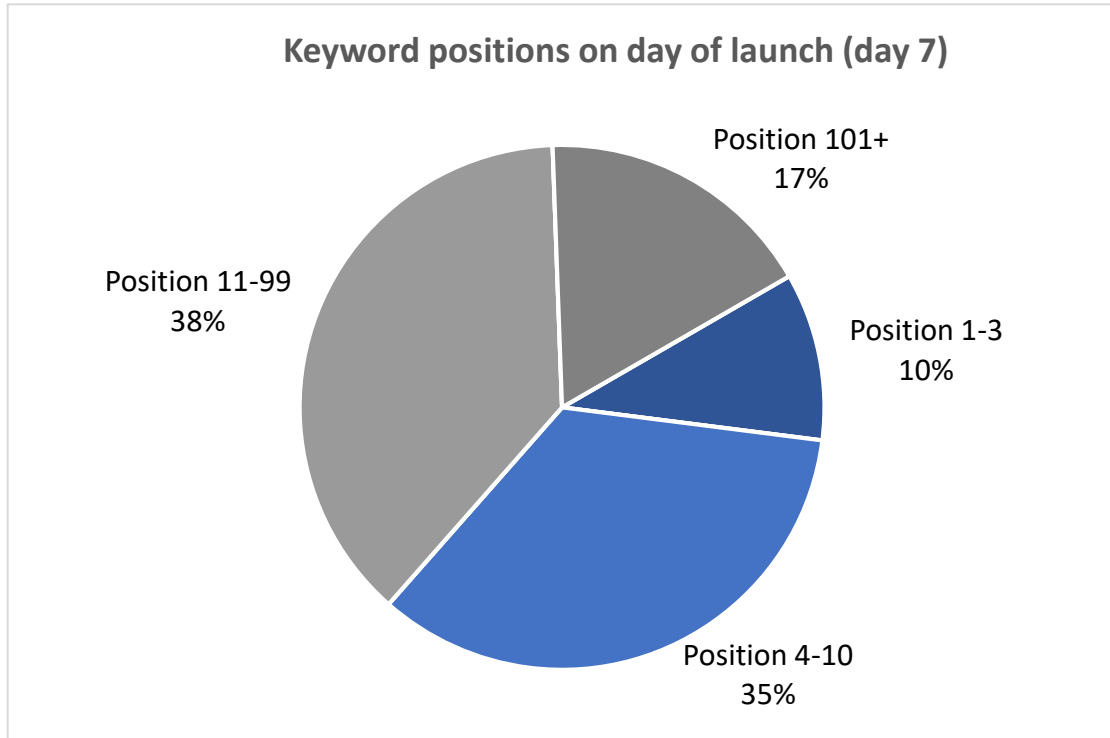


Fig. 9 – Pie chart of the distribution of keyword positions on the day of launch.

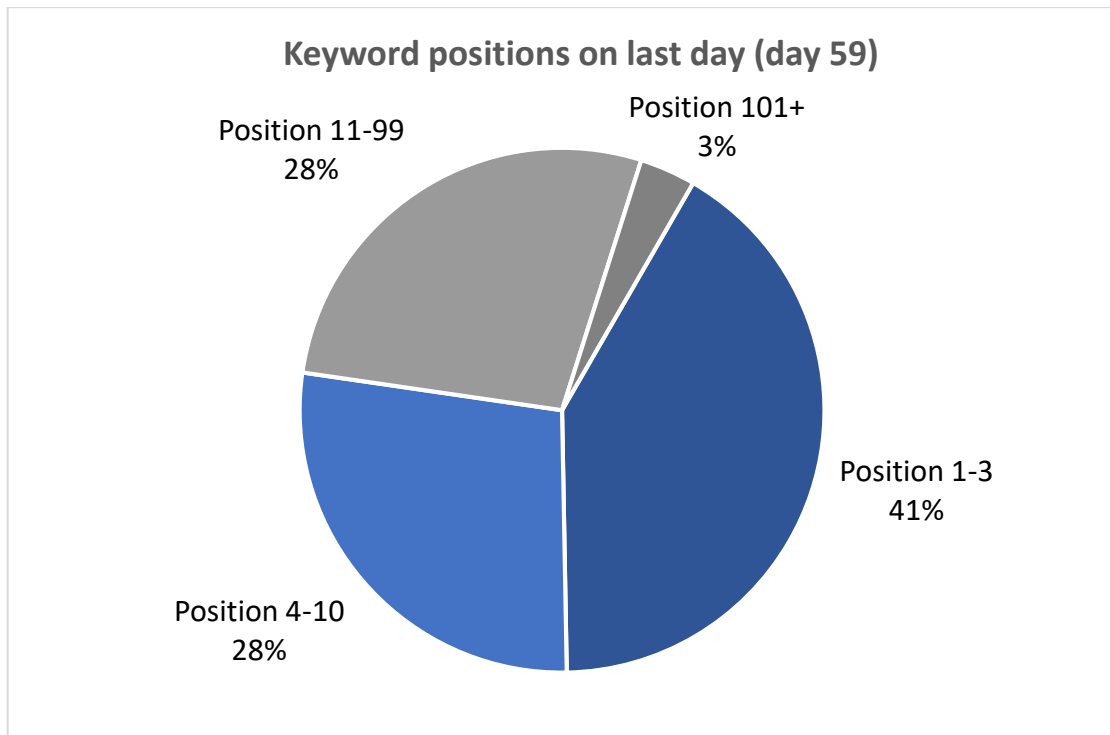


Fig. 10 – Pie chart of the distribution of keyword positions on the last day.

The pie charts in fig. 9 and fig. 10 displays the distribution of keyword positions in 4 different groups, before and after the implementation of the artefact. Position 1-3 being the most impactful group of keywords in terms of getting traffic, and the position 101+ group being the least impactful. In order to get a better visual comprehension of the impact, the most important position ranges; 1-3 and 4-10, are highlighted in two shades of blue.

5. Analysis

The chapter answers the research questions by analysing and interpreting the different visualisations of the keyword data seen in chapter 4.

5.1. What positions in the SERPs can an already existing website claim as a result of creating and implementing a link strategy that utilizes Web 2.0 blogs?

As seen by comparing fig. 7 and fig. 8, the keyword positions of the 29 tracked keywords generally improved by a surprising amount. From having most of the keywords positioned far beyond the first page of Google Search to having 69% of the keywords on the first page. In fact, 41% of the keywords made it to the top 3 results, from only 10% prior to the implementation of the artefact. It can be concluded that the results before and after implementing the artefact is *not* a result of a drastic spike or short-term fluctuation, since the day to day data of the average keyword position (see fig. 6) suggests a mostly steady uptrend. An interesting observation from fig. 6 is that the average keyword position starts increasing in cue with publishing the fourth and final backlink. Due to the timing, it is appealing to consider this event as evidence towards an increase in keyword positions as a result of the artefact. On the other hand, it is only known how the average keyword position behaved 6 days prior to the launch of the artefact which is unfavorable for that evidence. If there was an abundance of data prior to implementing the artefact, it would have been a lot easier to identify the behavior after implementation as unnormal or not.

It is despite this, still very likely that the drastic improvement of the keyword positions is a direct result of the artefact and not external factors. The target website had been, as discussed in 3.2.2, remained unedited 3 months prior to the implementation and had no new ingoing backlinks in the past 11 months. Hence, the improvement of the keyword positions is most likely not a result of previous aging SEO. Other factors that could affect the results such as an unofficial update in the algorithm, cannot be disregarded – but due to the nature of such factor, it cannot be accounted for either.

5.2. In context of implementing a link strategy, what practices must be considered for it to remain unpunished by Google in 2020?

Google states that for link strategies to not be punished they must be natural since “Any links intended to manipulate PageRank or a site's ranking in Google search results may be considered part of a link scheme and a violation of Google's Webmaster Guidelines. This includes any behaviour that manipulates links to your site or outgoing links from your site” [6]. Google's algorithm as of the year 2020 has become very advanced and will often detect attempts at gaining the system with the use of illegitimate SEO practices. Since the target site's keyword positions did not get lowered due to the application of the artefact (see 5.1), it can be concluded that the artefact did not get the target site punished by Google. In fact, the steady increase in the SERPs suggest that the artefact, and thus the practises, may have had a positive impact on its off-site SEO.

The content created for the artefact practised the E-A-T guidelines described by Google in “Search Quality Evaluation Guidelines” [7]. All four blog posts were constructed with the goal of providing value to the reader. The personas were made to look like real people who are experts in their field, providing quality content that people can trust. Furthermore, all the blogs were in the same field as the target site and backlinks were included in a natural looking manner, which made it look like the websites were networking with or recommending the target site rather than exchanging links. Since the content was original and not of a spammy nature, Google may not have seen the backlinks as suspicious since they originated from websites with satisfactory E-A-T levels.

This suggests that there is still one factor the algorithm cannot determine fully: intent. Intent is the user’s motivation behind the actions taken. The artefact was made as natural as possible and followed what was deemed acceptable behaviour by Google. However, the artefact still violated Google’s terms of service since the *intent* of the artefact was to manipulate and produce artificial backlinks leading to the site, which makes the artefact, by their own definition [6], a link scheme. Yet, the data gathered suggests that the algorithm saw the artefact as organic and so the links had, if not a positive impact, a non-punishable one. It can be concluded that as long as a link strategy is natural and follows the guidelines set, no matter the intent behind it, it will remain unpunished by Google and might even contribute with a positive impact to off-page SEO.

6. Discussion and conclusion

This chapter summarizes the results of the DSR artefact and its' evaluation. Further, it describes the implications and limitations of the study. It also describes the conclusions and recommendations of the study. Suggestions for further research are given at the end of the chapter.

6.1 Findings & Implications

It is impossible to *conclude* that the artefact is successful based solely on our data, but the evidence supporting that case is suggestive. This means that there is suggestive evidence that successful off-site SEO can be as costless and controllable as on-site SEO, and ultimately, that Web 2.0 blogs can carry significant ranking power to another website in 2020. This is interesting as it reinforces some of the conclusions from the work of C.-V. Boutet et al. [10]; it is possible to position a website on the forefront of the SERPs with links originating from Web 2.0 blogs, and further that doing so is possible despite the fact that it does not conform to the recommendations of the search engine. Although, it is important to note that there are big differences between their work and the work done in this thesis project, so stating that their concept of active SEO 2.0 is still as viable of a method today would not be fair.

The active SEO 2.0 can be defined as a set of postures aimed at achieving maximum effectiveness, which goes beyond the acclaimed voting techniques of search engines without breaking the law [10].

The aim of the artefact designed in this thesis project has not been to achieve maximum effectiveness in SEO, but rather to evaluate if there still is effectiveness in off-site SEO that is based on Web 2.0 blogs. The method used by C.-V. Boutet et al. is focused on enormous constellations and massive quantities of links, where the key lies within automation. In the case of this thesis, the focus has been on the quality of each link in terms of content, which has led to small quantities of links instead, mainly due to time limitations. What the methods truly have in common is the use of Web 2.0 blogs as backlinks and the emphasis on following the technical guidelines of the search engine. An interesting finding related to this, as described in 5.2, is that the artefact technically violates the guidelines since it is a form of a link scheme with the *intent* of manipulating the keyword positions for a website, but did not get punished for it. Google's search algorithm may be very intelligent, but not intelligent enough today to figure out the ill intent behind the manufactured backlinks in this thesis project. When designing link schemes or link strategies in 2020, it seems as if following the E-A-T principles as described by Google and acting real can be enough to remain unpunished. However, it would be interesting to investigate this further by attempting a similar field-study where E-A-T is disregarded in combination with large quantities of links in order to prove or disprove that theory.

When evaluating results of an SEO method, it is important to take circumstances into consideration, specifically the difficulty of the competition on the keywords. Put in perspective; finding success with an SEO method under circumstances where there is literally no competition for the keywords is not impressive as it is bound to succeed. In the case of the target website in this thesis work, the keyword difficulty (see 3.2.1) is in the lower end of the spectrum, hence, it cannot be disregarded that the artefact may have been successful due to the low-competition environment it was implemented in. While the results may vary a lot depending on the circumstances of the target website, it is still an interesting strategy that is relevant for SEO practitioners due to its availability. It is costless and controllable by the creator, which makes it a good potential complementary off-site approach that can be experimented with.

6.2 Limitations

A big challenge encountered while working on this thesis project has been avoiding conducting pseudo-science. Research in the environment of Google Search is tricky as it is uncontrollable and dynamic, with many unknown factors that cannot be taken into consideration when analyzing data or drawing conclusions. Due to the dynamic nature of the search engine, old research is not as valuable as new research and the results in this project may or may not be relevant in the future. Outdated research and a lack of research related specifically to the efficiency of Web 2.0 backlinks is one of the limitations in this thesis work, as it is difficult to draw parallels and conclusions without multiple points of reference.

Limitations regarding our research methodology was briefly mentioned in 3.1.2, where the lack of data points in terms of test subjects was discussed. As mentioned in that chapter, an essential part of conducting DSR is rigorous testing of the artefact. In context of this project, this would mean testing the artefact on multiple different websites as well as iterating the implementation and tweaking parameters. Such evaluation did not take place as there simply was not enough time. Automating a large part of the process is surely possible, but out of our competence. This made an iterative design process and rigorous testing hard to achieve with our limitation in time.

The data collected would be more impactful if keyword data were gathered many days before executing the artefact, as a pre-implementation period larger than 7 days would act as a reference point when evaluating the effect. It would also be ideal to track the effects post-implementation for a longer time period due to the slow nature of SEO.

6.3 The possible future of SEO

“SEO is a moving target. The search engines are constantly adjusting their algorithms and practitioners are constantly trying new strategies and modifying their approach.”, said Ric Shreves in 2012 about the ephemeral nature of SEO [42]. The same rings true to this day. SEO methods have come and gone as the search algorithms have become smarter in order to stop illegitimate tactics (see 2.3.3). What worked yesterday is not guaranteed to work tomorrow.

Looking at Google’s updates to their search algorithm (2.3.3), it seems as they are pushing for a change in how SEO should be thought of. With the search algorithms becoming smarter for each passing day, the use of sneaky illegitimate methods become less fruitful [21]. In the past, users were awarded by search engines for partaking in terms-of-service-breaking behaviour. Whether it involved hiding keywords in the background of a website or spamming backlinks in online forums, it worked, and that encouraged thinking about SEO methods in these ways.

Google’s updates seem to imply a shift that is about the lesser importance of applying certain methods to a site in order to increase its SEO, and the bigger emphasis on creating value. Websites that contribute with knowledge, trustworthy information, and demonstrates authoritativeness in the area should be awarded for the value they provide the users of the Internet.

This is what Google is pushing for with E-A-T. One should not have to think about how they are going to adjust the creation of their content to maximize its attractiveness to the search algorithms to in turn reach a bigger audience. Rather, the only thing one should have to focus on is whether the content is good and informative: content free from exploits and tactics, content where the author should not need to worry about an article containing “X” amount of links.

When one only needs to think about the quality of the content and not the inclusion of SEO methods of various degrees of legitimacy, the quality of the Internet will improve for everybody.

This may soon start being enforced thanks to the algorithms reaching the level of sophistication they have reached. When all illegitimate methods are weeded out by the search algorithms, the only thing left is to create good content and collaborate with the community (see 2.3.2).

6.4 Conclusions and recommendations

There is a distinct relation between the improvement in keyword positions and the implementation of the artefact, leaving us with the conclusion that it is reasonable to believe that Web 2.0 blog backlinks can affect a website's positions in the SERPs in the modern Google Search. More research experimenting with Web 2.0 blogs as the origin of backlinks must be conducted in order to truly affirm or deny this claim, as an evaluation on solely one website is insufficient.

It can be concluded that the target website was not punished by Google after implementation. While their search algorithm may be complex and intelligent, it was not intelligent enough to punish our intentions of manipulating another website's keyword positions via a link scheme. Passing through as legitimate may have been due to following E-A-T practices and acting natural, but this is mere speculation without comparisons with similar strategies that disregard these practices.

We recommend that SEO practitioners experiment with link strategies similar to our artefact as a complementary approach to off-site SEO, since it is costless and available to anyone.

6.5 Further research

To corroborate the results of this study further research on the artefact needs to be conducted to contribute with more data. To get more reliable data from the artefact it needs to be tested on more websites. These tests could send more or fewer backlinks to the target website to see how the quantity of links affect the results. Competition on keywords vary wildly, so testing the artefact on websites with different topics and keywords would show more clearly the actual affect the artefact can have on target sites. Having a longer tracking period on the keywords both before and after the backlinks are sent could help iron out random fluctuations in the data to make the artefact's effect on the target website more evident. Lastly, in order to evaluate if the E-A-T practices are the reason for not being punished by Google, more research must be made where a similar link strategy that disregards E-A-T is implemented and evaluated.

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Appendices

Appendix A – The 29 tracked keywords

Appendix A includes a table of the 29 keywords that are tracked in this project, along with the average monthly search volume of these keywords.

Keyword	Avg. Search Volume
yeezy skor	2300
yeezy pris	720
yeezy sverige	620
köpa yeezys	290
köp yeezy	290
yeezy sweden	280
adidas yeezy pris	240
yeezy skor äkta	240
billiga yeezy	210
yeezy.se fake	210
fake yeezy sverige	200
adidas yeezy sverige	160
yeezy 350 boost sverige	140
yeezy äkta	90
yeezy.se äkta	90
yeezy köp	80
yeezy boost sverige	70
kanye west skor	70
yeezy.se legit	60
yeezy göteborg	60
yeezy skor pris	60
yeezy boost 350 sverige	40
vart kan man köpa yeezy i sverige	40
yeezy i sverige	40
köp yeezy skor	40
yeezy skor dam	30
yeezy skor sverige	30
yeezy skor fake	20
yeezy adidas sverige	20

Appendix B – Spring i Sneakers

Below, *Appendix B* shows the text of the blog entry containing the first link of the artefact.

Tar en nöjestur i Yeezy Boost 350 V2 - Sneaker Recension

3/27/2020

För två veckor sen hade jag turen att vinna ett par Yeezy Boost 350 V2 på en online auktion. Jag hade haft utkik på dem ett tag och när chansen kom kunde jag inte låta bli. Så när skorna kom till min dörr för två veckor sen släppte jag allt jag gjorde just då och tog mig en springtur för att testa dessa snyggingar. Genom veckan har jag testat och övervägt skorna genom några springpass och presenterar nu resultatet i denna recension.

Utseende

Paret jag lyckades få tag på var grå med accenter av orange, vilket enligt mig är det fränaste färgschemat man kan hitta modellen i. Textilen har en digital, nästan pixellik streckad texture, som är i en mörkare nyans av grå. Jag tycker det är ett snyggt sätt att få in ett mönster utan att det är ”för mycket”. Yeezy Boost 350 V2 mår kanske vara den mest sportliknande skon av alla Yeezy modeller som finns. Det var också skälet till att det var just den jag ville testa. Det genomskinliga hölje av silikon som täcker den nedre och undre sidan av skon är vad som får den att stå ut mest. När man ser igenom höljet ser man den riktiga botten av skon inuti. Att den är innesluten så där får det att se ut som att Yeezyn ger lite extra studs i varje steg, en look jag gillar i springskor.

Mobilitet

Med en rask promenad som uppvärmning till min springtur kände jag direkt det extra stödet dessa Yeezys gav mig i varje steg. Det kanske var någon sorts placeboeffekt jag kände av eftersom skon såg studsigare ut, men det kändes faktiskt studsigare. När jag övergick till att springa blev effekten bara större. På slutet av passet var jag inte lika slut som jag brukar vara om jag hade sprungit i andra sneakers.

Sammanfattning

Är studsens på riktigt eller hade jag bara en extra bra dag? Det vet jag inte, men det jag kan säga är att om din dag redan inte var bra så kommer den bli det med Yeezy Boost 350 V2. Att springa i dem var ett rent nöje och det snygga utseendet gjorde bara saken bättre. Det här är definitivt ett av de bättre par sneakers jag har sprungit i!

Slutligen vill jag dela en resurs med er läsare. När jag var i processen att köpa ett par Yeezes ville jag se till att de var äkta. Det finns många fejkade versioner ute på marknaden och det kan ibland vara svårt att veta om de är äkta eller inte om man inte vet vad man ska kolla efter. Det är därför jag tipsar om [Hybriz.se](https://hybriz.se). Det är en sida med massor av information om Yeezys. Mer

specifikt i mitt fall så har de en guide som jag nyttjade när för att se till att skorna jag köpte var av äkta vara.



Porträtt foto av Jason.

Hej! Jag heter Jason.

Jag jobbar som en personlig tränare i Linköping.

När jag inte coachar andra bloggar jag om mina två passioner, springa och sneakers. Enligt mig går de två ihop som jordnötssmör och sylt.

Här på min blogg ser du mig skriva om konsten att springa, även recensioner om att springa i vissa sneakers.

Oavsett om du är en maratonlöpare eller någon som gillar att ta en promenad runt kvarteret så är den här bloggen för dig. Viktigast av allt hoppas jag att du kan lära dig en sak eller två.

Börja läs nu. Eller ut och spring. Gör bara inte båda samtidigt!

Fig. 11 - The 'About' page of *Spring i Sneakers*

Appendix C – Supreme Sneaker

Below, *Appendix C* shows the text of the blog entry containing the second link of the artefact.

Kanye och Sneakers – Yeezy skor föds

3/30/2020

Här om dagen surfade jag runt på Internet som vanligt och hittade en intervju gjord av Complex med Kanye West från 2015. I en bit snackar de om Kanye's stora kunskap om mode när märket Supreme kom på tal. Hans kommentar? "Legendary. Street standard.". Nu handlar ju inte denna blogg om det märket, utan om sneakers. Dock så fick det mig att tänka på Kanye's version av den all älskade skon kände som sneakern. Det här mina vänner, är historian om Yeezy skor.

Kanye började doppa sina fötter i skodesign genom samarbeten som började 2006. Det dröjde dock ända till 2009 innan den första Yeezy skon föddes. I ett samarbete med Nike kom de två första modellerna av Yeezys ut. Den första var Air Yeezy som kom 2009, och den andra, Air Yeezy II, som den passande hette, kom 2012.

Sorgligt nog kommer alla bra saker i livet till ett slut till slut. 2013 uppstod dispyter mellan Kanye och Nike som ledde till att de gjorde slut på deras samarbete. West beskrev händelsen som "hjärtkrossande", vilket jag måste hålla med om. Vid denna tidpunkt frågade sig sneaker fans (och inte minst Yeezy freaks) hela världen över samma fråga: "Är detta slutet för Yeezyn?"

Som tur var kom ett svar på denna nagelbitande fråga redan samma år, tackolov. Som en Fenix som reste sig från askan meddelade Adidas att de har ingått i ett samarbete med Kanye West för att designa skor, och den skon (du gissade rätt) var vår kära Yeezy. Denna gång hette den dock Yeezy Boost.

Sedan dess har världen blivit välsignad med så många som fem säsonger av Yeezys. Den första släpptes 2013 och den senaste (vid skrivande stund) kom 2017. Såklart kan en vänta sig fler i framtiden. Under dessa fem säsonger kom totalt åtta modeller i en rad olika färger ut. Listade i kronologisk ordning är dem: Yeezy Boost 750, Yeezy Boost 350, Yeezy 950, Yeezy 350 Cleat, Yeezy Boost 350 V2, Yeezy Powerphase, Yeezy Boost 700, Yeezy 500.

Till sist vill jag ge ett shout out till folket på Hybriz.se för att de hjälpte mig med en del fakta för det här inlägget. Hybriz är en sida som skriver om allt rörande [Yeezy skor](#) and lär dig hur du får tag i ett äkta par. Det skulle vara väldigt uppskattat om du kolla in dem och sa hej från mig. Det skulle tillochmed vara, om jag får låna ett ord av vår protagonist, legendariskt.



Två Yeezy skor

DET HÄR ÄR BLOGGEN SOM HANDLAR OM THE SUPREME SNEAKER

Luta dig tillbaka och slappna av (med dina doxor på såklart), och läs om allt som har att göra med sneakers! Den här bloggen snackar om allt från Yeezy skor till Vans. Beväpna dig med supreme sneaker skills som du kan skryta med för dina vänner med.

Fig. 12 - The 'About' page of *Supreme Sneaker*

Appendix D – Sneaker Ekonomi

Below, *Appendix D* shows the text of the blog entry containing the third link of the artefact.

Kostar de för mycket? – Ett inlägg om Yeezy pris

4/3/2020

Det är den uråldriga frågan man alltid står inför när det är dags att köpa ett par Yeezys. Marknaden för märkessneakers och minst sagt Yeezy skor är för en nybörjare svår att navigera oskadd. Ofta hör vi här på bloggen mardrömshistorier om folk som betalat så mycket i överpris för ett par så att de i resten av månaden får leva på snabbnudlar. Kära läsare, låt oss hjälpa dig undvika detta. Gillar du snabbnudlar kommer du kunna köpa hur mycket du vill efter du undvikt betala ett mastodontisk Yeezy pris.

Låt oss börja med att kolla på YEEZY Boost 350 V2 “Glow”. Dess färgschema får den att se ut som att den kommit från en annan värld, och så kan dess priser också uppfattas. Om man skummar igenom diverse online butiker ser man dem lätt kosta €300 till €400. Men detta är bara de som syns först. Är man villig att gräva lite djupare kan de gå för priser så låga som €200. Det är ett bra Yeezy pris om du frågar mig, hugg definitivt till!

Dagens nästa par är YEEZY Slides. Många kritiker till denna modell menar att man betalar för privilegiet att ha på sig flip-flops som ser ut som en bensåg på varsin fot (speciellt Bone colorwayen). För att svara dessa kritiker kollade jag upp priset för en faktisk bensåg och den kommer att kosta dig så mycket som \$49,95. Och då måste jag påminna dig om att du behöver två, en för varje fot. Kollar man på försäljningssidor för Yeezys ser du att... Ah, okej, ett par kostar lika mycket som två bensågar. Men, de kostar åtminstone inte mer (oftast), så personerna som hävdar att de är överprisdade gentemot bensågar får ändra sina argument. Har du tur kan du hitta par som går för lite under en \$100, men vill du ha ännu billigare får du gå ned till barnstorlek.

Jag tror faktiskt att inlägget får sluta där. Blev lite avtänd av att inte kunna hitta ett bättre pris för det sista paret. Det var ett dyrt Yeezy pris. Din läsning på denna blogg må vara slut för nu, men jag rekommenderar att läsa vidare på [Hybriz.se](https://hybriz.se) om din aptit för diverse Yeezy pris inte mättats av mig. Där hittar du guides för att se om dina Yeezys är autentiska, vilket är viktigt att kolla när Yeezy pris kan vara så höga som dem är.

OM BLOGGEN

När är priset rätt? När bör man hugga till och köpa de där sneaker skorna? Denna blogg handlar om sneaker ekonomi (sneakeromics som slangen lyder på gatan) och är till för att hjälpa personer som är i nöd av att köpa märkessneaker, men inte vet om priset på skorna är det rätta. Ingen vill trots allt betala för mycket!

Det är därför vi här på Sneaker Ekonomi står här till er tjänst! Läs bloggen som uppdaterar er på de senaste värdeutvecklingarna inom sneakersvärlden. Få koll på allt från Yeezy pris till vad du kan sälja dina gamla Vans för.

Fig. 13 - The 'About' page of *Sneaker Ekonomi*

Appendix E – DIY Sneaker

Below, *Appendix E* shows the text of the blog entry containing the fourth link of the artefact.

Ger Yeezy 950 en ny nyans

4/5/2020

Nyligen närmade sig en klient mig och bad om att få deras Yeezy 950 pimpade. Eller rättare sagt, de bad mig få deras Yeezy sko pimpad. Alltså vill de bara att jag ska måla den ena Yeezyn och ha den andra kvar i originalskick.

Utav de fyra färgerna Yeezy 950 kan komma i var min klients skor i Chocolate färgen (de andra färgerna för modellen är Peyote, Moonrock, och Pirate Black för er som undrar). Eftersom ena skon skulle förbli mörkbrun ville jag ge den andra en snyggt kontrasterande färg. Denna färg blev då turkos. Jag målade på denna färg i spiraler som klättrade uppför benet. Ned mot botten av skon har jag täckt den med turkosa cirklar i varierande storlek.

Olika delar av Yeezyn gick olika bra att måla på. Den övre halvan bestod av ett textilt material som var lätt att måla på. Ytan täcker smalbenet och där fastnade färgen utan problem. Det var dock den lägre halvan som kom med trubbel...

Denna halva omsluter foten och var gjord i mocka. Jag som älskar att måla på sneakers har såklart en stor samling av färger för textil, men oavsett vilket märke av färg jag använde var det svårt att få mockan att absorbera färgen. Mocka är helt enkelt bara ett jobbigt material att arbeta med och det får man bara acceptera, men när man målar på dyra Yeezys finns det inte stort utrymme för misstag, vilket gjorde upplevelsen minst sagt nervkittlande.

Men men. Lyckades jag till slut! Efter lite om och men fick jag färgen att sitta fint på mockan och stod då med en extra uppiffad Yeezy 950 framför mig. Jag skulle verkligen vilja visa er hur den blev, men min klient lät mig inte ta några foton 😞 Som tröst tänkte jag att jag kunde komma på ett fint namn till mitt nyuppfunna färgschema till Yeezyn som jag kan kalla mitt eget. Hm, vad sägs om Karibisk Choklad? Turkos påminner mig för mycket om tropiska ljusblå hav för att kunna låta bli!

Återigen, ledsen att jag inte kunna fixa en bild, men så är det bara ibland... I gengäld tänkte jag att jag kunde tipsa om en resurs jag använde för det här projektet. För att se alla färgscheman som fanns för Yeezy 950 och även andra modeller för att få inspiration kollade jag in de kompressiva guiderna som finns på [Hybriz.se](https://hybriz.se). Gillar ni att se på fina Yeezys i alla möjliga färger de kommer i så rekommenderar jag er att ta en titt där.

VI hörs nästa gång! 😊



Hallå där! Jag heter Jesse :)

Hur är det? Så trevligt att du har hittat din väg till min blogg!
Jag är en 23-årig konstnär som bor i Göteborg. Jag har rest lite hit och lite dit i världen för att måla. Mina kanvas kan skilja sig stort; bland målar jag väggmålningar, ibland tavlor, men det jag är mest känd för är att måla sneakers.
På denna blogg hittar du mina sneaker-verk!
Ha ett trevligt besök! :)

Fig. 14 - The 'About' page of *DIY Sneaker*