Influencer marketing within business-to-business organisations

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This study explores the dynamics of influencer marketing in the B2B sector by drawing on employee advocacy, customer reference marketing and organisational endorsement theories, explicating the strategic application of influencer marketing in the B2B context, and revealing the challenges in influencer marketing faced by B2B organisations. We conducted twenty-two in-depth semi-structured interviews with senior management marketing professionals across different sectors. Our analysis of these narratives shows that B2B marketers advocate the concept of 'influential marketing' by differentiating it from the concept of influencer marketing in the B2C market. B2B influential marketing connotes trustworthiness, expertise, professionalism, and exchange of know-how, all of which are rooted in long-term and industry-specific relationships and business networks. This research contributes to the theorisation of B2B influential marketing by developing an integrated framework that deciphers the process of its strategic implementation. The vital managerial contributions in our study highlight the specific considerations for influential marketing in B2B organisations.

1. Introduction

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is an informal Internet-mediated communication that plays an increasingly important role in influencing consumers' behaviours, with consequences for brands' marketing practices (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004; Liu, Jayawardhena, Dibb, & Ranaweera, 2019). Influencer marketing has emerged as a unique subdomain of eWOM marketing (Zhou, Barnes, McCormick, & Cano, 2020). Influencer marketing refers to the practice whereby organisations and brands partner with selected influencers on social media (SM) to create and/or promote branded content, thus targeting both the influencers' followers and the brands' target audience (Lou & Yuan, 2019). The US influencer marketing industry was estimated to be worth $8 billion in 2019 and may reach $15 billion by the end of 2022 (Business Insider, 2021). Although most of this value is in B2C markets, some 15% of B2B brands are known to engage in influencer marketing programmes (Business Insider, 2021), which can reportedly deliver a ten-fold higher Return on Investment (ROI) than traditional forms of digital marketing (Tapinfluence, n.d.; Traacker and Altimeter, n.d.; Tribal Impact, 2020).

Whilst B2B scholars have been broadcasting that influencer marketing may be the 'next big thing' (Backaler, 2018), limited research has explicitly investigated the scope of influencer marketing in B2B. Several scholars make cursory discussion of B2B influencer marketing (e.g., Haenlein et al., 2020; Huotari, Ulkuniemi, Saraniemi, & Mäläskä, 2015), however, systematic research on the topic is slow to emerge (Cartwright, Liu, & Raddats, 2021; Salo, 2017), representing a clear gap in knowledge that requires further investigation. Research recognises that SM can reshape the dynamics between different organisations (Hartmann & Lussier, 2020; Wang, Pauleen, & Zhang, 2016) and the use of online channels has been fundamental through the COVID-19 pandemic. Given that influencers are posed to connect different organisations within business networks, B2B marketing scholars and practitioners see an emerging need to investigate how B2B organisations can best build reciprocal relationships through influencer marketing (Murphy & Sashi, 2018; Pardo, Pagani, & Savinien, 2022); yet research about influencer marketing in B2B remains extremely limited (Magno & Cassia, 2020).

In response to this knowledge gap, this paper represents one of the first empirical studies explicitly undertaken to investigate B2B influencer marketing. Specifically, we explore the influencer attributes, tactics, and strategies that organisations are using to obtain engagement with a wider range of SM users. Due to this research topic being in its early stages, our study is an important contribution to the B2B SM literature in four ways. The first contribution conceptualises B2B

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influencer marketing to determine how it differentiates from the B2C market. The second identifies the attributes of influencers that are vital for relational purposes in the B2B space. The third contribution explores the processes of B2B influencer marketing, particularly the common tactical and strategic approaches. Finally, we identify the challenges encountered in B2B influencer marketing practices that help marketers in developing influencer marketing approaches and their practical applications.

Following a review of twenty-two interviews with senior marketing professionals across different sectors in the UK, our research highlights how B2B influencer marketing differs from that of B2C influencer marketing: notably regarding influencer attributes such as professional standing, reach, and type of content. From a strategic perspective, B2B influencer marketing employs both internal and external influential actors to create endorsement-based and experience-based content, aiming at developing trusting relationships and generating meaningful engagement with a broad range of stakeholders. We also identify conservatism, lack of practical knowledge and insufficient strategic integration with the marketing strategy as challenges facing B2B organisations in practising influencer marketing. We recognise influencer marketing as a novel approach to acquiring and maintaining relationships and theorise how B2B relationship marketing in the digital age engages influencers in employee advocacy, customer reference marketing, and organisational endorsement (Andersson & Wikström, 2017; Magno & Cassia, 2020). We conclude by offering important managerial insights into the significance and critical considerations of influencer marketing for B2B organisations and suggest avenues for future research.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Influencer marketing within the B2B domain

The concept of SM influencers was first introduced in academic research by Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, and Freberg (2011). Drawing upon endorsement theories, the researchers defined SM influencers as independent third-party endorsers/spokespersons for brands, who can shape audience attitudes via blogs, tweets, and the use of other SM. Gräve (2017) asserts that influences are not merely brand endorsers who contribute to sales and brand awareness, but also opinion leaders contributing to views on SM. Influencer marketing practices in B2B are not as well researched as in B2C, yet industry reports suggest that influencer marketing has the potential to help B2B organisations to develop and maintain relationships with a wide range of stakeholders (Business Insider, 2021). Indeed, Thaichon, Liyanaarachchi, Quach, Weaven, and Bu (2020) suggest that influencer marketing has the potential to become an important driver in building relationships in the future. However, empirical research on the relational nature of SM and the use of influencer marketing for this purpose, remains at early stages (Iankova, Davies, Archer-Brown, Marder, & Yau, 2019; Magno & Cassia, 2020; Salo, 2017).

Relationship marketing in B2B comprises a network of interconnected relationships between stakeholders, which are intended to create lifetime value (Christopher, Payne, & Ballantyne, 2002; Lone, Mohd-Any, & Mohd Salleh, 2021). B2B relationships are built on trust and commitment which enable parties to co-create value, resulting in more actively engaged business partners (Sales-Vivó, Gil-Saura, & Gallarza, 2020). However, efforts to shape this engagement can "influence [the brand's] position in the network of which it is part" (Gadde, Huemer, & Håkansson, 2003, p. 358). How, then, can influencer marketing mature as a strategic tool to build meaningful online relationships that create value for all parties?

Even before the emergence of the concept of influencer marketing in the B2B domain, Huotari et al. (Huotari et al., 2015, p. 765) highlight the importance of B2B user groups in SM content creation, also going on to identify "influential users" as "those individuals who exert significant influence over members of a community". Their work identifies internal (e.g., employees) and external influential users (e.g., corporate, customer, professional, and civilian users) as members of professional and civilian SM communities. The work of Huotari et al. (2015) explores the essential natures of "who" the influential users are and "where" the content is created. In contrast to that approach, we directly examine the phenomenon of influencer marketing with a focus on "what" B2B influencer marketing entails and "how" B2B organisations currently utilise influencer marketing to develop relationships on SM. We, thus, take a more strategic approach and explore the process of B2B influencer marketing through our empirical inquiry. The inchoate state of B2B influencer marketing calls for us first to identify the attributes of actors in B2B influencer marketing and then to decipher the theoretical perspectives of this growing B2B phenomenon.

2.1.1. Internal and external influencers

Huotari et al. (2015) identify internal and external influential users as the two groups that contribute to B2B organisations' SM content creation. Internal influential users are often employees with manifest expertise in SM, which enables them to act as brand ambassadors (Drummond, O'Toole, & McGrath, 2020; Huotari et al., 2015). Furthermore, research by Cartwright, Liu, and Raddats (2021) proposes the distinction between the personal and corporate voices of SM. On one hand, influencer marketing is a personal voice, conveying the trustworthiness and expertise of the individual content creator. On the other hand, the organisation can itself be an influencer by expressing its voice via corporate SM channels (Cartwright, Davies, & Archer-Brown, 2021; Huotari et al., 2015). Employees' SM activity helps to position a strong occupational identity and generate branded content, both for their employer and themselves. However, the research on the role of influencer marketing from the employee's perspective is very limited (Tóth, Nieroda, & Koles, 2020). Employee engagement plays a vital role within B2B influencer marketing by creating relationships with internal influential SM users and, through employee advocacy, empowers employees to showcase their expertise and create relationships with existing and potential business partners (Barry & Gironda, 2019; Cartwright & Davies, 2022).

External influential users often have prestigious positions as technical consultants, business advisors, industry analysts, and technical experts, having obtained their expertise through the development of a network of professional connections in their specific industry (Lashgari, Sutton-Brady, Søilen, & Ulfvengren, 2018). However, existing B2B theories on the themes of customer reference marketing and organisational endorsement indicate that B2B marketers can have greater influence on their external users than initially thought (Huotari et al., 2015 - see Andersson & Wikström, 2017; Surucu-Balci, Balci, & Yuen, 2020). To develop valuable relationships with external influencers, organisations may need to leverage other factors such as customer reference marketing (Jalkala & Salminen, 2010; Terho & Jalkala, 2017) and organisational endorsement (Yuan, Moon, Kim, Wang, & Yu, 2020), rather than focusing only on paid-for content, as is commonplace in B2C influencer marketing.

2.1.2. Employee advocacy within B2B influencer marketing

In B2B marketing, internal and external relationships are of equal importance, with employee advocacy playing an important role in engaging stakeholders online (Kaufmann, Czinkota, & Zakrzewski, 2015). Employee advocacy refers to contributions from actors who are considered credible by the external public and are using their personal voice to promote positive organisational content (Lee & Kim, 2021). To create employee advocates, organisations need to enable and support their staff to engage in influencer marketing activities. This calls for employees to have a strong sense of belonging with the organisation (Cartwright, Davies, & Archer-Brown, 2021), feel an integral part of the organisational culture and be recognised as key contributors toward the goals and objectives of their employer (Shahzadi, Javed, Pirzada,

Nasreen, & Khanam, 2014). Influencer marketing has the power to enable employees to build relationships and strengthen the reputation of their organisation (Lacoste, 2016; Thakur & AlSaleh, 2018). Having employees engage with stakeholders on an emotional level has been shown to result in stronger bonds with network partners and develop robust reciprocal engagement (Cartwright, Liu, & Raddats, 2021; Swani, Brown, & Milne, 2014).

2.1.3. Customer reference marketing within B2B influencer marketing

SM networks represent significant opportunities for developing business relationships with customers (Drummond et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2016). Existing customer relationships are vital within B2B organisations, and customer references are often used to encourage the acquisition of new customers (Rose, Fandel, Saraeva, & Dibley, 2021; Terho & Jalkala, 2017). Customer reference marketing points to the tactic of leveraging existing customers to deliver marketing materials such as providing testimonials and endorsements (Jalkala & Salminen, 2010; Terho & Jalkala, 2017). However, customer references are not solely focused on the acquisition of new customers, but also aim to build a positive reputation or to act as value evidence (Jalkala & Salminen, 2010). Proper deployment of customer reference marketing showcases the expertise of organisations (Terho & Jalkala, 2017), and offers credibility to organisations while reducing the perceived risks of association (Jalkala & Salminen, 2010). Customer reference marketing lends itself to an influencer marketing strategy in B2B. Organisations can leverage influencer relationships (both internally and externally) for reference marketing purposes, creating brand awareness, promoting a positive brand image, as well as enhancing new customer acquisition. The effective use of reference marketing by influencers can help mitigate risks and uncertainty and act as an antecedent to trust (Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, & Evans, 2006). Moreover, by applying influencer marketing for reference marketing purposes, organisations are positioned to leverage references for internal development purposes and employee advocacy, and likewise leverage existing external customer references for knowledge sharing and customer-driven organisational learning (Blocker, Houston, & Flint, 2012; Sheth & Sharma, 2008; Terho & Jalkala, 2017).

2.1.4. Organisational endorsement within B2B influencer marketing

Whilst employee advocacy and customer reference theories help us interpret the natures of internal and external users as being B2B influencers, endorsement theories explain the process of influencer marketing. Endorsement theories, as first articulated in the 1960s, place a primary focus on customers' reactions to the attributes of the professional or expert sources of the marketing messages (Friedman, Termini, & Washington, 1976; Wilding & Bauer, 1968). The effectiveness of an endorsement relies on the customers' perceptions of the credibility, trustworthiness, and expertise of the endorsers; this is known as source credibility theory (Berlo, Lemert, & Mertz, 1969). Meanwhile, to obtain effective communication, the endorsement must be sensible and meaningful (McCracken, 1989), and should reflect agreement between the brand, endorser, and the target customer (Koernig & Boyd, 2009; Mowen, Brown, & Schulman, 1979). Therefore, the effectiveness of organisational endorsement depends on the credibility of the source (Yuan et al., 2020), as well as on the dynamics that the endorsement creates amongst all involved parties.

Connecting with external influencers to create endorsement content can help reduce customer uncertainty and risk perceptions (Dean & Biswas, 2001). Thus, developing valuable parasocial relationships with influencers who are external to the business network can benefit B2B organisations. For example, Ballantine & Martin (2005) show that a strong parasocial relationship is more likely to lead to purchase if it has been endorsed. According to Palmatier, Houston, Dant, & Grewal (2013), endorsement also allows organisations to access the know-how of stakeholders. Thus, influencer marketing as an endorsement strategy can create long-term, trust-based business relationships, while

generating referrals and knowledge access (Agnihotri, Dingus, Hu, & Krush, 2016; Dean & Biswas, 2001).

2.2. Research objectives

Although SM enables organisations to develop dynamic and multi-party engagement with employees (i.e., internal relationships) and with other business partners (i.e., external relationships) (Cartwright, Liu, & Raddats, 2021), research within B2B influencer marketing and how it shapes relationships remains limited. Influencer marketing can contribute to these engagement dynamics, with the caveat that industrial markets do not consist of single transactions or dyadic relationships but are rather networks of unique relationships that have developed over an extended period on the foundations of trust and commitment (Håkansson & Shenota, 1995; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Therefore, it is crucial to understand how B2B organisations implement influencer marketing for relational purposes, to understand the influencers' attributes, and what type and focus of communication are required to reach and collaborate with desirable audiences. Influencer marketing in B2C markets can be effective in facilitating sales, converting and retaining customers, and building brand image, thus having the potential to also contribute to B2B marketing in a similar manner. However, digitalised conversations are still considered to convey limited cues for B2B organisations, which poses difficulties in assessing the trustworthiness and expertise of online content (Swani, Milne, Brown, Assaf, & Donthu, 2017), and represents a clear gap in knowledge within the B2B domain.

Although academic research highlights the significance as well as the growing interest of influencer marketing in B2B (Hudders, De Jans, & De Veirman, 2020, Hyder, 2019; Tribal Impact, 2020), empirical research remains scant. The limited early studies call for undertaking empirical analysis to better understand B2B influencer marketing (Barry & Gironda, 2019; Huotari et al., 2015). Drawing upon this research gap, we address three objectives in this paper: firstly, due to the current knowledge gap, we explore the growing importance of influencer marketing in the B2B domain, conceptualise B2B influencer marketing, and identify its unique features compared to the B2C context. Secondly, expanding on the identification by Huotari et al. (2015) of broad categories of internal and external users, and taking a strategic perspective, we identify the core attributes of influencers in B2B markets (i.e., SM professionalism, attributes, reach), and explore the tactical (i.e., types of content, focus of communication) and strategic process of engaging with them (i.e., prior, new, and collaborative relationships). Finally, given the fast growth of influencer marketing in the B2B domain, we explore the challenges faced by B2B marketers in implementing this communications approach.

3. Research method

To explore the newly emerging phenomenon of B2B influencer marketing, we applied a qualitative approach, conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews at 22 organisations across the UK. We adopt an exploratory approach in keeping with the inchoate state of research within B2B influencer marketing. Our research design intends to provide vital insight into influencer marketing, its utilisation within organisations, and its current reception within the business world (Pratt, 2009; Rynes & Gephart, 2004).

3.1. Sampling and data collection

The primary criterion for our sample selection in this unexplored domain was to approach managers with exposure to high-level strategic decision-making about influencer marketing. Thus, our informants include Chief Marketing Officers, Chief Executive Officers, Managing Founders, Managing Directors, and Heads of Digital Marketing, Innovation and Communications. The key selection benchmark was influencer marketing experience in current or previous management roles.

Therefore, our research team used an intentionally theoretical sampling method (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Glaser, 1965), relying upon personal connections and networks to identify and obtain access to several prominent UK-based B2B organisations.

Other sampling criteria include interviewees whom 1) operate within the B2B domain, 2) work in a variety of industries to ensure rich information about the focal phenomena, 3) are senior marketing and communication professionals able to convey in-depth insights about influencer marketing, and 4) are leaders within their organisation, thus having significant knowledge about the strategic utilisation of influencer marketing. The 22 organisations consist of service providers (e.g., marketing and advertising, financial services, and insurance providers), and product providers (e.g., arts & crafts, business supplies and equipment, and electronics). Interviews lasted from 38 to 72 min and were designed to unveil a deep, contextual, and authentic understanding of interviewees' outer and inner worlds, to "reach beyond the superficial layers of their experience to generate informative, novel accounts of the phenomenon of interest" (Schultze & Avital, 2011 p. 3). To protect each organisation's commercial interests (Kirkup & Carrigan, 2000), we have anonymised the names of the businesses and key informants. Table 1 provides a detailed overview of the informants, including their current roles, as well as past positions and expertise.

3.2. Data analysis, reliability and validity

The interviews, divided into four main sections, start with generic questions intended to build rapport and put the informant at ease, such as regarding their professional experience within the marketing and communications field (e.g., description of organisational background, industry and role of the organisation and interviewee). In the second section, we ask interviewees to identify the key attributes of influencers within B2B, and to convey their impressions of the effectiveness of influencer marketing and associated organisational approaches. In the third section, we focus on the significance of influencer marketing within the B2B domain. In the final part of the interviews, we ask participants to discuss their perceptions of key issues and challenges regarding the implementation of influencer marketing. The interview process terminates when further inquiry was no longer productive of new information, or when relevant insights were seemingly exhausted. Interviews were directly transcribed and analysed, allowing the interviewer to note any additional observations arising from the interview, thus maximizing interpretive and descriptive validity. This process enables the interviewer to tackle any previously unmentioned insights in follow-up interviews (Glaser, 1965).

To ensure consistency, data collection was carried out by one researcher, but the analysis was completed collaboratively by two researchers. The interviews were analysed in NVivo (computer software package) using template analysis (King, 1998). To ensure inter-coder consistency, two researchers independently analysed and coded the interviews upon their completion to ensure construct validity, and to enable examination of the responses from various perspectives, thus achieving investigator triangulation (Denzin, 1978). The intercoder reliability was high, with coders agreeing in 98% of the cases, thus providing confidence in the classifications, and reaching the desired level of 0.96 inter-rater reliability coefficient (Rust & Cooil, 1994). The minor disagreements were resolved through discussions in the research team and resolved collaboratively. Moreover, our cross-checking of emergent themes and interpretations increased the reliability of the analyses. Throughout the data collection and analysis period, both researchers reviewed the interpretations arising during the data collection process, thus ensuring evaluative validity with multiple coders and assessment of inter-coder consistency. In case of conflicting interpretations, a consensus interpretation was reached.

Table 1
Participant's strategic role and expertise.

Interview	Current Position	Industry	Past Positions & Expertise
1	Co-Founder & Managing Director	Marketing & Advertising	Chief Strategy Officer, Global Head Brand Experience
2	Founding Managing Director	Marketing & Advertising	Client Director, Group Leadership Team
3	Founding Managing Director	Construction & Building Industry	Managing Director & Sales Director
4	Founding Managing Director	Marketing & Advertising	Global Account Director, Owner, Managing Director
5	Chief Marketing Officer	Real Estate	Founder, Head of Marketing & Comms & digital, Group Marketing Director
6	Europe Trade Marketing Director	Consumer Electronics	Chief Marketing Officer, Senor Marketing Specialist, Head of Marketing
7	Head of Marketing	Information Technology & Services	Chief Marketing Officer, Head of Operational Marketing, Strategy & Planning Director
8	Marketing Director	Business Supplies & Equipment	Comms & Marketing Director, Business Development Manager
9	Chief Marketing Officer	Information Technology & Services	Group Executive, Chief Marketing Officer, Marketing Director
10	Head of Commercial Innovation & Marketing	Financial Services	Acting Director Marketing & Comms, Head of Marketing, Director
11	Global Marketing Director	Information Services	Global Marketing Manager, Sales & Marketing
12	Head of Marketing & Comms	B2B Insurance	Head of Marketing & Digital, Head of Digital & Brand
13	Co-Founder & Managing Director	Marketing Design & Advertising	Account Director, Strategist, Account Manager
14	Head of Marketing & Comms	Marketing & Advertising	Head of Marketing, Head of Brand & Campaigns, Head of Marketing Operations
15	Marketing Director	Renewables & Environment	B2B Marketing Director, Marketing Manager, Product Marketing Manager
16	Marketing & Comms Director	Customer Services	Co-founder, Marketing Director, Client Service Manager
17	Investment Marketing Director	Investment Management	Marketing Manager, Marketing Associate, Investment Editor
18	Head of Strategic Initiatives	Financial Services	Head of Marketing, Head of Special Projects, Founders Associate
19	Marketing Director	B2B Insurance	Founder & Director, Marketing Director, Head of Marketing
20	Vice President & General Manager	Arts & Crafts	Global Director of Product Marketing, Global Marketing Manager, Senior Product Manager
21	Strategy Director	Marketing & Advertising	Lead Strategist, Senior Strategist, Senior Planner
22	Global Head of Digital Marketing	Marketing & Advertising	Global Head of Social Media & Content, Global Head of Social Media, Consultant

4. Findings

This section presents our findings on the growing importance of B2B influencer marketing and how our respondents consider it to differ from the B2C context. We also discuss the dimensions of B2B influencer

Table 2
Dimensions of B2B influential marketing.

Dimensions	Themes	B2B Influential Marketing	Interview Quotes
SM professionalism & Influentials' attributes	Expertise Trustworthiness Authenticity	Usually, industry experts not professional SM content creators Voice authenticity in the specialised market, thought leadership, trustworthiness, expertise, and knowledge	"*There are key business leaders in the community that are very well regarded and listened to in their peer group.*" (Interview 9 – CMO). "*It comes down to the futurologist that we may be talking about that we bring in, the stand of kind of provocative speakers in the industry and the followers that they have, and then from our point of view, where I found marketing works best, is being authentic; if you say something and you're authentic about it, even if it is 'this doesn't work because …', then you build a trust, you build advocacy programme after that. Whereas consumerism is about trying to catch anybody's attention on the high street*" (Interview 8 – Marketing Director).
Reach	Corporate friends & partners with credentials Micro-influencers	Targeted industry clusters	"*We have a platform we use, called Smart. It's a platform that we subscribe to, we're buying all the licences, we supply our colleagues with licences if they want them, and then we effectively curate content and post it on this platform, and the colleagues will receive an email to say there's a new content here and if they want to amplify it, they can. That would be a kind of campaign collateral or could just be interesting articles that we think may be relevant to our audiences, and then the employees can choose to share it; or not*" (Interview 13 – CEO). "*They have an audience which they build, and we want to reach that audience, so they are our way to access it*" (Interview 10 – Head of Commercial Innovation & Marketing). "*Most of my LinkedIn people are from advertising, digital marketing, so if you wanted to promote something to people from advertising or create a relationship through me, then I may be a micro-influencer that you work with; I don't have a following of half a million, I've probably got 5000 people on LinkedIn, but let's say that 80% are advertising and digital marketing people, and I'm reasonably trusted*" (Interview 1 – Managing Director).
Types of content	Endorsement-based content Experience-based content Unsponsored content	Thought leadership / thought leadership endorsement Organisational endorsement Customer reference marketing Relational / service experience Employee advocacy	"*I think the personal use* [of influential marketing] *is more influential*" (Interview 12 – Head of Marketing). "*People are buying from organisations that they know their fundamentals because of referrals or influencers*" (Interview 16 – Marketing & Comms Director). "*If you write a bad review of another company, you may make your own company look bad. Creative agencies get endorsed all the time. You want to name your clients on your website because you're proud of your work and it gives people confidence. Same thing the other way with a influencer giving a testimonial* (i.e., endorsement) *to another company*" (Interview 4 – CEO). "*It really depends on the market that we are working in, whether it's institutional or consultant, or advisor, so we have different methods for different markets that we're operating to get referrals from, really*" (Interview 17 – Investment Marketing Director).
Focus of communication	Raising brand awareness (personal & corporate voice) Focussed marketing Small audience engagement	Compliment other communications to build and strengthen relationships with other parties	"*We use our marketing budget to establish partnerships with media channels, so they're media platforms, really, but they provide content which is relevant to our audience, so one, for example, is called Global Government Forum. It's for a global audience of civil servants; not everybody's cup of tea I understand. They have a large following of senior civil servants in the UK, including the Chief Exec. of civil service and a number of other leaders in civil service. We use our marketing budget to establish relationships with them and we own a piece of streams on their site, which is to do with financial services and payments. So what we do with them is they produce content, which is relevant to that category, we use digital advertising inside their site. In addition to that, part of our agreement is that they write articles which are relevant to our audience and will feature us at least 4 times a year. Why I am telling you this is because inside these articles, we are able to make sure we are referenced and cited, and we also use them to get influencers to talk about us. So we were recently described as the government's FinTech, or open banking inside one of these articles, which is really helpful to us because the person who was quoted is the person in the UK in charge of open banking. We would find it difficult to get him to say that to us, but having a relationship with them, he speaks to them, he's able to talk about us and then we're able to use that to help others to understand, or to influence, their ideas of us as a brand*" (Interview 10 – Head of Commercial Innovation & Marketing). "*If you invest regular time in it* (influential marketing), *you can make really good use of it; then people will be genuinely interested and they will follow you, and they'll see when you've got something to announce or to say*" (Interview 4 – CEO). "*We've used influencers for a long time. The division I work for started in 2012 and one of the kind of biggest campaigns it did focused on kind of thought leaders within marketing, so whether that was brands, agencies or academic, and it kind of used those people to kind of say really positive things about (our company), to endorse us*" (Interview 14 – Head of Marketing & Comms). "*The most valued influencer transitioning is almost like a lava lamp. The statistic is that 57% of decision-making in what is considered the B2B buying journey is done now without any influence or interaction with the potential vendor, so people are doing that research from peers, from conversations, from LinkedIn, and whoever they're talking about is being pigeonholed before they even had a chance to have a conversation*" (Interview 2).
Existing relationships	Relationship strengthening Reputation building	Most often some form of existing relationship (as employee or industry partner)	"*We invest a lot of our time in communicating through them (influentials), but we see it as brand building and reputation and reinforcing, rather than a driving force for additional sales*" (Interview 3 – MD).

Table 2 (*continued*)

Dimensions	Themes	B2B Influential Marketing	Interview Quotes
			"My client kind of co-presents and posts about a case studies and thought leadership, and in that instance is not quite the same as using the Influencer as a broadcast mechanism, but it's more an audience partner" (Interview 1 – Managing Director).
			"From marketing perspective, I'd like us to maintain the momentum that we've created with influencer marketing, continue the engagement with our customers We are focused more on our existing customers and less on the acquisition activity" (Interview 12 - Head of Marketing).
			"I've seen a lot more people using LinkedIn for thought leadership and influencer marketing and that I'm really excited about because I love LinkedIn, I've used it very actively for the whole time that we've run the business to connect and engage with exciting clients, so I definitely see a massive increase in my peers using LinkedIn which has been great because it's become much more useful to me" (Interview 13 – CEO).
Collaborative relationships (existing & new relationships)	Business development tool Corporate partnerships New relationship building Strategic collaboration	Collaborative marketing relationship strategic tool (both for acquiring and retaining relationships)	"They become media platforms in their own rights as individuals, and they spit out on LinkedIn, Twitter and create relationships that way" (Interview 1 – Managing Director).
			"What we're looking at is buyer enablement tools. We're looking at tools that support buyer to make decisions during their buying journey and influencer marketing falls in that category" (Interview 15 – Marketing Director).
			"We have influencers, people that we respect, who we refer to, who we talk to about all sort of areas and engage with them that way" (Interview 17 – Investment Marketing Director).
			"We do engage in conversations, more on Twitter than LinkedIn actually because we feel that's the right thing to do on Twitter, but it's usually when people are, you know, clients mentioning us or promote our campaigns or something else" (Interview 16 – Marketing & Comms Director).
			"The buyer journey begins before contacting the company, in the past you had the sort of marketing element and sales silo, and marketing would create a lead and you'll be pulling it over to sales (weak ties), sales would go and win the business. Now this process is also happening through influencer marketing. I mean what we're looking to do more so now is understand that process and how we can grow and maintain these partnerships." (Interview 15 – MD)

marketing and identify the processes of B2B influencer marketing by illustrating the tactical (e.g., types of content, focus of communication) and strategic use (e.g., prior, new, and collaborative relationships), and finally present the challenges experienced by B2B organisations undertaking influencer marketing (Table 2).

4.1. The growing importance of 'influential' marketing

Our results show that influencer marketing has only recently emerged as a matter of interest in B2B organisations, with each respondent organisation incorporating it to some degree: "*In my new role it's* [influencer marketing] *vital because the audience is now probably a bit more disparate, therefore, the influencer-type approach in* [our company] *is much more important now and it's about the spheres of influence that we can connect with*" (Interview 8). We see that the organisations are utilising influencer marketing to acquire new customers and expand their existing business networks beyond traditional forms of marketing: "*Influentials are key targets for our marketing strategy and the platforms we're using to connect us to desired audiences. Also, leveraging them and their connections is necessary to build relationships*" (Interview 8). As well as reaching distant others, the informants agree that influencer marketing also plays a role in maintaining existing relationships: "*I've used* [influential marketing] *very actively for the whole time that we've run the business to connect and engage with existing clients*" (Interview 13). Therefore, respondents see value in influencer marketing for both acquisitional and relational purposes and, as such, the organisations are actively implementing influencer marketing both for transactional and relational purposes, as suggested by Pardo et al. (2022).

Once organisations start engaging with influencer marketing, they identify its clear value in reaching distant others, who may be a potential source of sales revenue, but had not previously encountered the organisations. Accordingly, influencer marketing is manifestly more than simply a communication tool operating in a pre-existing network but is an instrument to "reach out beyond" the current audience (Drummond et al., 2020, p.1250). We attribute this in part to the extended networks of the influencers: "*They have an audience which they build, and we want to reach that audience, so they are our way to access it*" (Interview 10). Influencers are seen by our informants as providing a bridge to distant networks, which, through organisational endorsement, can help form new relationships between different networks: "*In the creative B2B industry, there is a lot of word of mouth and influencer marketing, if you have relationships* [with influencers]*, they have information, and it all comes down to influencers and their connections. It's not about sales anymore and processes sort of change to interactions. Many people in sales and marketing within organisations haven't twigged that that's been the change, they still think of relationships in the old ways*" (Interview 2). As respondent #2 suggested, new connections that emerge through influential partners could also become organisational endorsers facilitating the further broadening of connections (Abrahamsen, Henneberg, Huemer, & Naude, 2016).

Interviewees unanimously agree that influencer marketing is of growing significance within the B2B domain and that its principles are valid and robust. However, most respondents steer away from, or are uncomfortable with, using the term "influencer marketing". The term may have acquired a negative association engendered by its use by B2C and media representation: "*The term influencer has some negative connotations from the consumer world. If you mention it in board rooms, you'll get faces pulled and them all think 'Kim Kardashian'. I think the terminology can be problematic in itself, but the principle is really valid and really strong, and funnily enough, that is one of the social metrics that we've been most interested to look at, which is: what influential people are engaging within our social content*" (Interview 16). The negative connotation associated with "influencer marketing" derives from the over-commercialisation of certain B2C SM influencers, who focus excessively on the entertainment value of their content creation (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Zhou, Blazquez, McCormick, & Barnes, 2021). This motivation is contrary to the

norms of B2B marketing, which emphasise the special expertise and professionalism (Huotari et al., 2015): "*I think it's* [influential marketing] *more professional in B2B*" (Interview 11). The reticence of respondents about the term influencer marketing leads us to adopt the term "influential users" (Huotari et al., 2015), which designates individuals who exert significant influence over members of B2B communities. This also ties in well with some of the respondent organisations, which already use the term *influential marketing* as opposed to *influencer marketing*: "*We have called them influentials, actually; we've got ourselves over the stigma of the name*" (Interview 16).

Influential users in B2B differ in some respects from the influencers in B2C environments. Our respondents emphasise that it is dedication, impact, and esteem of influential individuals as specialists within a relatively small community that carries so much weight: "*I think of Founders Academy. That's B2B but on a very small echo chamber, rather than being a big kind of influencer, but if any of them sent me something, I would know it was worth reading*" (Interview 18). B2C influencer marketing tends to focus on the public persona of the influencer (i.e., physical appearance, degree of fame, and size of their following), as well as the influencer's knowledge in a specific field such as fashion or gaming (Audrezet, De Kerviler, & Moulard, 2018; Taillon, Mueller, Kowalczyk, & Jones, 2020). In contrast, B2B influential marketing focuses principally on the latter aspect: "*Influencers are anyone with influence; in the business world, it's people with expertise, with strong opinions and it's people who have got good knowledge. I do genuinely believe in influencer marketing, but [what] I'm really hating at the moment in B2B is the rise of the self-styled guru. I get very frustrated when these people, who are maybe about 20, care only about looks and have no experience of their own. That's where influencer marketing is very dangerous because it copies consumer thinking*" (Interview 13). Therefore, for the remainder of this paper, we shall refer to B2B influencer type marketing exclusively as *influential marketing*. The term incorporates both internal and external influential users, as our study reveals that influential marketing can incorporate employees as well as external parties, as we elaborate on in the following section.

4.2. Dimensions of influential marketing

As demonstrated in Section 4.1, influential marketing is of increasing importance in our respondent organisations, which is in keeping with industry literature showing its recent growth (Business Insider, 2021). In the consumer market, brands often hire semi-professional influencers with existing fanbases to promote their product or brand (Abidin, 2016; Campbell & Farrell, 2020). B2B influentials, however, differ from the influencers often portrayed in B2C literature (Zhou et al., 2021) as they most often are not acting as semi-professional SM content creators, but hold positions within the industry affording them influence. We thus recognise Huotari et al. (2015) two clear categories: Internal Influentials (well-connected employees) and External Influentials (external parties with influence and voice in the sector) as potential influential users. The next section will discuss the desired attributes of B2B influentials, examine the focal types of content and the relational uses of influential marketing.

4.2.1. Influential attributes

4.2.1.1. Professionalism and Influentials' attributes. B2B influentials were identified by the organisations because of their level of professionalism and some specific attributes of market relevance. Identifying external agents with desirable attributes is a major issue both in B2B influential and B2C influencer marketing. Interestingly, nearly all 22 organisations in this study discuss building capacity for internal influential marketing, by designating employees as organisational ambassadors and considering them to be thought leaders in their respective fields: "*There's a few things that we've done, like technology days, we do*

product round tables, and we invite employees in, so they feel a part of that journey when we're doing something new, whether it's a new innovation or a new territory, or whatever, and I have thought about what we need to do to support these people to become influencers*" (Interview 11). The organisations actively engage their employees and encourage them to become influential on SM. Although theoretically, this could also be an aspect of B2C marketing, the issue is not hitherto covered within that literature but is a strategic focus for many of our B2B respondents.

Much as with B2C, B2B external influentials are users identified through their commitment to contributing to the focal brand's community of stakeholders (i.e., customers, employees, shareholders) by sharing valuable content: "*[External influential marketing] is a reference point: case studies, news cases, all that sort of thing. It's not PR. They're well respected, senior people who've had a positive experience and are our brand ambassadors, they're doing our selling for us*" (Interview 11). Thus, influentials are considered experts who share their knowledge (usually voluntarily), rather than being professional content creators with a financial motivation. These external influentials could be existing customers, the trade press, or simply well-respected names in a particular industry field. This attribute of influentials differs from that of B2C influencers, who usually create professional/semi-professional SM content and are not necessarily selected for their knowledge of the industry per se, but because of their reach within a target segment (Abidin, 2016).

4.2.1.2. Reach. The reach of B2B influentials is more targeted within a specific industry compared to B2C influencer marketing (Brooks, Drenten, & Piskorski, 2021). Organisations can reach many audiences through their employees, and internal influentials are likely to be interested in representing their employer in a positive light. They are also likely to have existing relationships with key network partners such as existing and potential customers and job seekers, but some companies take further steps when trying to hire influential users: "*Companies have made strategic hires of people who have a name in the industry for whatever it may be: product, customer success, where they've spoken at quite a few events, they have a blog, they have maybe podcast appearances, and so a company acquires them because people hear about the company because of them, and I've seen it work*" (Interview 18). Considering internal influentials as a major aspect of influential marketing strategy, distinguishes B2B influential marketing from the extant B2C influencer marketing literature. The highly specialist nature of many B2B sectors makes well-connected internal influentials an especially valuable resource. This finding is consistent with the literature on the significance of employees in B2B SM management (e.g., Cartwright, Davies, & Archer-Brown, 2021; Cartwright & Davies, 2022; Tiwary, Kumar, Sarraf, Kumar, & Rana, 2021).

On the other hand, many external influentials in B2B organisations are framed as micro-influentials, who build ties for organisations with new audiences by reaching beyond the business' customer base. Respondents identified key external influentials such as people of professional standing, experts, and CEOs who are considered corporate friends or collaborators and are well-known within their respective industries.: "*B2B is more about micro-influencers. Someone who's got an audience of a couple of thousand, but they are the people you are interested in from a B2B sense. It is more about the specific traction that this person has to a particular segment or subsegment*" (Interview 1). Therefore, many B2B influentials are likely to have smaller networks than their consumer equivalents, although the value of broader-based influentials is also recognised: "*The analyst firms are one version of our influencers; they're critical influencers in our industry but not quite in the same phrase as J. Lo or Kardashians*" (Interview 9). The majority of influentials, however, occupy a specific niche, and their follower base usually comprises a correspondingly narrow audience consisting of peers, colleagues, partners, and other corporate friends.

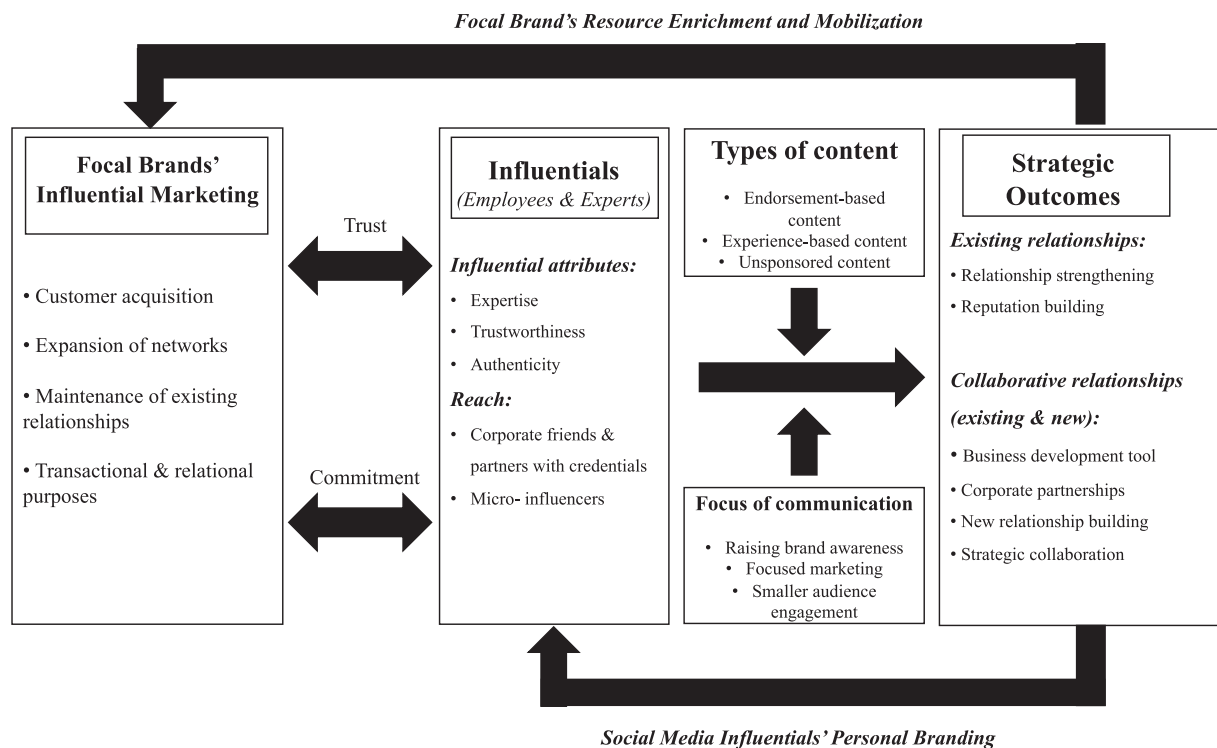B2B collaboration with influentials is often initiated by working with

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Fig. 1. Integrated framework: B2B influencer marketing.

influential figures already known to the organisation. "*If you've connections, they've information, and most people have sort of worked with each other in different capacities, or friends of friends*" (Interview 2). B2B organisations are unlikely to approach influentials who are new to the company but tend to focus on familiar individuals who can generate authentic, specialist, and credible content on SM, informed by exposure to their specific industry. This contrasts with the B2C experience, where the focus on prior/existing relationships is not necessary (Smith, Jacobson, & Rudkowski, 2021). Despite having relatively small audiences, the value of B2B influential users lies in maximizing the reach within specific industries and fostering quality engagement from community members: "*One transaction is worth a lot more* [in B2B compared to B2C]*, one connection can be worth a lot of money, whereas you need thousands and thousands of connections to make any value in the consumer space*" (Interview 5). It is the focus on quality rather than quantity of the network that drives the selection of influentials in B2B.

In essence, employees with expertise and reputation in their field are predisposed to act as ambassadors for their B2B brand (Andersson & Wikström, 2017). External influentials are also recruited from a wide range of stakeholders, often those with a previous connection with the focal organisation and having some recognised authority in the community due to their expertise and knowledge (Barry & Gironda, 2019; Huotari et al., 2015). Yet, external influentials with a narrow network can still generate high value commensurate with their voice within the community.

4.2.2. Preferred forms of influential marketing content

The informants highlight the perceived quality of content created by B2B influentials as more important than the quantity: "*People who speak too often and say too little aren't listened to*" (Interview 10). In other words, influentials can reach audiences by creating different types of content (i.e., endorsement-based, experience-based and unsponsored content) and different types of communication (i.e., raising brand awareness, focused messages regarding a new innovation, and engaging with small audiences using personal voices). Thus, in B2B influential marketing, the quality is more important than the quantity of the

content compared to B2B influencer marketing.

4.2.2.1. Types of content. Much as in B2C, B2B influential marketing entails two dominant types of content: experience-based and endorsement-based. Experience-based content is created by an influential to convey their direct experience of working with or within the focal organisation. In most cases, experience-based content is shared by customers as per customer reference marketing but is conveyed through SM channels: "*LinkedIn has definitely become a bit more of an advocacy channel than it was, where we share experiences and opinions*" (Interview 19). "*The ownership of the* (experience-based) *content is on the client to do it, and I can share what the client says. Positive reviews are the ones where you get this lovely anecdotal feedback… if the customers say they're happy, they will tell others what a great job you're doing, so that's really important because it's actually linked to the revenue*" (Interview 11). The content could focus on any phase of the experience between two parties, but is always based on a positive shared experience, where stakeholders act as endorsers helping the focal organisation to reach a wider audience: "*It could be seen as endorsement of your services. We collect a lot of feedback from clients and then we ask permission to use it and ask the client to share it*" (Interview 5).

Conversely, endorsement-based content is often shared by influentials who are recognised authorities in the community, thus well positioned to present specialised knowledge associated with the focal brand. Endorsement-based content may be generated by internal and external influentials, with the common element of portraying what is special about the brand. Endorsement-based content can take diverse forms extending beyond SM posts: "*One of the things that we are very accountable for is reference-ability from clients or influencers. If we have a prospective client that wants to come and work with us, we would provide references as a part of the sales cycle, to provide reassurance that we are a good partner and a partner to be trusted*" (Interview 9). Influentials act not only as a reference but are properly considered as business partners (Agnihotri et al., 2016; Dean & Biswas, 2001). "*Doing joint webinars with them where it's not just about paying someone to share a message, is about co-hosting an event online with their audience, so they act as like an audience partner*" (Interview 1). Meanwhile, the collaborative approach between

the focal brand and the influential allows the brand to reach a wider range of audiences, whilst also enabling the influential to develop their personal brand on SM: "[Influential marketing] *is all about trust and reputation both ways, thinking about your organisation's brand in terms of how do people perceive us, are we trustworthy, what sort of power does the brand impart in terms of people and they* (customers and potential customers) *know we're gonna be reliable and also that they can trust the recommendation of that person*" (Interview 16*)*. Therefore, the reciprocal relationship between the focal brand and the B2B influential allows both parties to become strategic partners or peers.

4.2.2.2. Focus of communication. The focus of influential marketing content is mainly on building trust and reputation, with little aim on hard selling: "*One of the most fundamentally important parts of the way the world is going is on trust and I think certain organisations will talk about brand* [through influential marketing content]*, but others won't mention the word brand, it's all about trust and reputation*" (Interview 16). Disseminating professional knowledge and developing meaningful engagement with the audience are the objectives: "*We are trying to build credibility and become front-of-mind so that when someone asks them* [the influential] *who should they be working with, they immediately say you should go and talk to* [our company] *and see this person*" (Interview 9). Influentials' trust in the focal brand may be reflected in their content and engagement, which creates credibility amongst the audience, which in turn lowers customer uncertainty and risk perception (Dean & Biswas, 2001).

B2B influentials have a focused network, which allows them to convey content authenticity as well as expertise and trustworthiness: "*The influencer marketing that works best is being authentic; if you say something and you're authentic about it, then you build trust, you build advocacy programmes after that. In B2B there isn't a silver bullet, but it is simpler than you may think because verticals* [customer groups] *are very small markets*" (Interview 8). Authenticity can be achieved by producing valuable content (Haenlein et al., 2020) that is amply supported by a relevant community of influentials.

Content created by the focal brand that is promoted by external influentials is often effective in creating meaningful engagement and forming trusting relationships: "*I think, as far as our business strategy and relationships go with influencers, it's our hashtag and direct or @ message strategy where we might either retweet or reshare content, because it's genuinely useful for our audience, but also sometimes in a hope that we'll get some kind of recognition, endorsement or resharing from the person that we've shared or tagged in a post*" (Interview 12). In line with previous research (Pitt, Plangger, Botha, Kietzmann, & Pitt, 2019; Swani et al., 2014), the greater the self-disclosure in the content created by the influentials (e.g., personal thoughts, views, feelings), the more engaging it becomes, by showing the 'human face' of the influentials in addition to their technical expertise: "*It's about adding human emotion to it and kind of brand love; how people perceive it*" (Interview 21). Greater self-disclosure by the influential encourages higher perceived authenticity of their content, enabling more effective contact with the audience.

To sum up, we see that influential marketing in B2B entails engendering authenticity, expertise, and trustworthiness. These attributes are initially developed between the focal brand and the influential and are subsequently conveyed to a wider range of audiences through the influentials' content creation. In B2B influential marketing, an influential within a specific market may act as the brand's corporate friend in a campaign that features positive information communicated through experience or endorsement-based content. This content creation focuses on generating valuable content that is disseminated to a tailored audience.

4.2.3. Relational nature of influential marketing

Influential marketing is used as a strategic relational approach, both for acquiring and maintaining relationships, ultimately resulting in strategic outcomes for the brand. In this section, we address the relational aspects of B2B influential marketing by examining existing, new and collaborative relationships (Håkansson & Ford, 2002).

4.2.3.1. Existing relationships. Relationships within B2B organisations are vital, and organisations are increasingly utilising online approaches for building customer relationships (e.g., through endorsement), and for building reputation (e.g., through reference marketing) (Rose et al., 2021; Terho & Jalkala, 2017). Our analysis suggests that the first steps to successfully developing influential marketing campaigns are through leveraging existing relationships and identifying the key influentials within the business networks: "*We spend a lot of time listening to our clients, understanding their peer groups and understanding whom they talk to, who influences them*" (Interview 9). Therefore, when strategically planning influential marketing, B2B organisations invest time and effort in network analysis to identify the key individuals across the network. Success in these efforts enables organisations to build their relationship with influentials, whilst considering how best to showcase their expertise: "*So one of the things I've been thinking for a long time is how do we support our advocates, and there are a lot of them. These are the ones that are posting positively on LinkedIn*" (Interview 1). Therefore, understanding the reach and networks of an influential is an important first step toward strategic utilisation of influential marketing in B2B.

Our analysis further indicates that influential marketing is considered by respondents to be a relational tool: "*I'm really keen to stop calling it influencer marketing because I think it's on wider business development (BD) kind of relationship effort. So, every [PowerPoint] deck I see, my little trick at the minute is to change the language from 'influencer marketing' to 'relationship' or 'BD', just keep trying to embed that because I think it's really important from a behavioural point of view*" (Interview 19). Organisations often leverage existing relationships to engage, communicate and collaborate with clients, suppliers, or other stakeholders. Thus, influential marketing is considered to be a business development tool, as well as being an acquisition tool that opens new opportunities for organisations.

4.2.3.2. Collaborative relationships (existing & new). B2B influential marketing is seen by our respondents to be a continuous process of developing collaborative relationships between internal and external influentials and other network actors. As such, organisations that utilise influential marketing consider creating engagement between influentials and business partners to be a fundamental objective of their strategy. The focal organisation's perspective seeks to engage new customers and develop existing connections through the influentials' endorsement and engagement with their audience: "*What we are looking at now is buyer enablement, thought leadership, white papers. It's high-value content that we would publish. A high-profile person from the industry writes or supports a white paper that you wrote; that sort of thing*" (Interview 15). Therefore, the B2B organisation expects the influentials not only to create content that attracts their audience, but also supposes that they will play mediating roles in connecting to the audience (Barry & Gironda, 2019; Cartwright & Davies, 2022). This ongoing relationship enables both parties to be influential and requires them to invest in content creation, engagement, and endorsement of each other.

As discussed in Section 4.2.1.2, external influentials are especially valuable to the focal business in raising brand awareness amongst people with no previous exposure to the brand. In this case, influentials help the focal brand to develop new connections with potential business partners (e.g., customers, suppliers and other stakeholders in the community). "*We see that B2B buying journey starts now through influencers leading to interaction with the potential vendors (i.e., connecting suppliers and acquiring partners), so people are doing that research from peers, from conversations with influencers, from LinkedIn, and that has increased and supports the buying journey*" (Interview 2). Such connections may be considered as weak ties in the initial stage (Watanabe, Kim, & Park,

2021). However, with the ongoing collaboration with influentials, the repeated exposure of the focal brand helps the new audience gain knowledge about the brand, create positive customer experience and enhance their trust in the brand. "*I think functionally (influential marketing), that's providing support for us and the customers and is useful, it is enhancing the customer experience. It's less of a gut feel, there may be one or two spots that you are getting on that, but I think it's less of an ability to influence but a strategic process.*" (Interview 4). After all, it may take time and require multiple exposures to develop weak ties into successful business collaboration, thus develop a successful strategic influential marketing process (Meire, Ballings, & Van den Poel, 2017).

In addition to acquiring new customers and new networks, the endorsement by influentials also strengthens existing relationships when there is overlap between audience groups of the focal organisation and the influential (Rose et al., 2021; Terho & Jalkala, 2017). "*We have influencers, people that we respect, whom we refer to, whom we talk to about all sort of areas and engage with them that way*" (Interview 17). To leverage the relationships online through influential marketing, organisations create designated teams charged with connecting with the influentials and creating engagement: "*We specifically have a part of our business development process that identifies influencers; these are people who establish government policy or who are thought leaders in payment and open banking, for example. Those people are identified and then we specifically set up to follow them on Twitter and LinkedIn*" (Interview 10). Once the connection is established, be it through an employee or external influentials, engagement can coordinate and encourage content creation by the influential.

To sum up, the strategic implementation of influential marketing requires B2B organisations to carefully analyse, select, and collaborate with connected influentials. These influentials act as referrals for experience-based content and/or endorsers to spread positive and reliable depictions of the focal brand on SM. The influential can act as a mediator to connect the brand with their followers, thereby promoting brand reach and recognition within the specific market. Meanwhile, collaborating with a brand also allows the B2B influential to demonstrate their expertise and impact within the specific market, which additionally promotes their personal branding on SM. Therefore, influential marketing enables reciprocal value creation between B2B brands and influentials.

4.3. Challenges in influential marketing

Due to the novelty value of the question and limited research of influential marketing within the B2B domain, organisations face various challenges and barriers to its implementation. One of the major obstacles lies in the prevalent mindset in many B2B organisations about the nature of relationship management: "*We are just delighted about* [influential marketing] *because we're very passionate about it as a marketing function, we're very keen on showing its value and I think we have done it, but you know, for a traditional organisation it's really hard to get them* [management] *thinking about it*" (Interview 19). Thus, we find instances of resistance toward influential marketing due to the unfamiliarity of the phenomenon prevailing outside of the marketing department (as per Haenlein et al., 2020). "*I think there is still that sort of disparity between the C-suite understanding some of this stuff and putting it as part of a business plan*" (Interview 2). As a result, many B2B companies have been slow to embrace influential marketing: "*I think it will be important in the future. At the moment, influencer marketing, it's not something that the financial sector has got into yet, but I think possibly the next generation*" (Interview 17); "*I think that's gonna be massive in the next 5 years, but I don't think, as an industry, we've quite embraced really how big that could be*" (Interview 2). Indeed, our analysis shows acceptance of the value of influential marketing in B2B, but also reveals that organisations have not fully embraced the approach.

Due to the complex buying cycles in B2B, purchasing decisions are unlikely to be solely dependent on influential marketing, as may be the case in B2C: "*The buying decision is more complicated because it's not just one person and it's a bigger risk by committing*" (Interview 11). Organisations try to leverage customer reference marketing and organisational endorsement through influential marketing within their network, but they often struggle to identify the optimal influential to represent their industry, given the complexity of the environment: "*When you find those people who're truly experts in what they did, they add a huge amount of value, a huge amount of knowledge*" (Interview 13). Meanwhile, organisations are also struggling to leverage these relationships effectively due to their limited knowledge and experience in the domain: "*We benefit from a good network, and we probably don't leverage them as much as we should, although we're trying to work out how we could leverage the power of our members to get what we're doing more and more*" (Interview 16).

The implementation of influential marketing requires resources and strategic planning, but B2B brands' understanding of the effective implementation of influential marketing is still under development: "*How do we actually socially transform the business using influencer marketing? A part of that is looking at how do we use our people to tell our story of the brand, which is basically what social is all about, people to people, not brand to people. How do we get our people to do that for us in an effective way?*" (Interview 22). Influencer marketing in B2C organisations is based on a mature business model that often pays for brand endorsement content in cash or through product "gifting". In contrast, B2B has various, usually unpaid, engagement activities, which can include customer referencing, employee advocacy, and endorsement, such that it remains a challenge to understand what content to deploy, when to deploy it, and how much is needed. "*It's* [influential marketing] *growing and becoming so big at such a fast rate that staying up to speed with it is challenging*" (Interview 20).

The analysis suggests that employees should be considered credible individuals who can promote the focal brand (Lee & Kim, 2021). However, we note the persistence of traditional thinking that employees present a barrier to implementing influential marketing. "*They* [employees] *can be a frustration, don't get me wrong, and I tried to develop their skills and whatever, but they were just very traditional and just couldn't get their heads around it, and actually I ended up parting company with them. Business can quickly get left behind, you've got to have the right people and the right approach to the digital marketing or you're gonna get left behind*" (Interview 20). This calls for repositioning the role that employees play within the organisation as a necessary condition to begin to appreciate and leverage the approach.

To conclude, despite its potential for positive impact, implementing influential marketing presents various challenges in terms of resource allocation and planning, influential development and selection, and its integration with other marketing strategies. Such challenges highlight that influential marketing must be carefully planned, strategically implemented, and regularly monitored, thereby ensuring that it supports the overall marketing objective.

5. Discussion

In this paper, we explore how the emerging phenomenon of influential marketing operates in the B2B domain. Analysis of our interviews suggests that influential marketing research is of growing importance, despite its inchoate state in B2B literature. To better understand the way organisations are strategically implementing influential marketing, we utilise a theories-in-use approach, with an emphasis on employee advocacy, customer reference marketing, and organisational endorsement. These constructs help us understand how organisations create relationships using the expertise of their employees (internal influentials) and experts outside of the organisation (external influentials), to develop existing relationships while also connecting with new audiences. Although Huotari et al. (2015) identify some distinct attributes in their analysis of SM users, their results emphasise how B2B organisations can influence SM content through managing their employees' SM behaviour and by training their employees to create content with a

positive influence. Our study expands upon the identification by Huotari et al. (2015) of broad categories of internal and external users by casting light on the attributes of effective influentials, as well as documenting the strategic and tactical approaches to the implementation of influential marketing.

Our interviewees often consider the term "*influencer marketing*" as having strong negative connotations in the B2C domain, and as such, we concur in preferring the term "*influential marketing*". The essence of B2B influential marketing emerging from our study resembles influencer marketing in consumer markets but differs in several aspects. As illustrated in Table 2, B2B influential marketing more often involves specific or niche industries. Within B2B, individuals come from a particular area and usually operate within smaller audiences (i.e., niches) compared to B2C influencer marketing. Relationships within business networks may either be pre-existing with the focal brand, which can be strengthened by influencer marketing activities, or new relationships could be fostered through the influentials' network, to expand the focal brands network reach through influencer marketing activities. With this paper, we contribute to the understanding of the relational nature of influential marketing in B2B, with employees playing a vital role as key connectors with potential and current customers within their respective specific/ niche industry. Meanwhile, the higher involvement of employees in influential marketing is closely related to SM-mediated employee advocacy, which has a distinct lack of representation in the B2C influencer marketing literature (Smith et al., 2021).

We propose a theoretical conceptualisation of influential marketing as it applies within the B2B sectors, which is hitherto scarcely documented in the literature. Our conceptualisation shows that internal and external influentials both contribute to influential marketing through 1) employee advocacy, 2) organisational endorsement, and 3) customer referencing marketing. Specifically, by creating endorsement-based and experience-based content and generating engagement, influentials enable communication with pre-existing and new audiences. In our conceptualisation of influential marketing, the goal is to create lifetime value through inter-connected relations in a broadening customer-base, as promoted by influentials.

Relationships in the B2B domain are developed and sustained through the content of their activities (Håkansson & Shenota, 1995), with influential marketing being an emerging component of these activities. Organisations are connected by activity links (Pagani & Pardo, 2017), such that employee engagement, organisational endorsement, and customer references, help to extend relationships between individual influentials and the organisation's potential customers and partners. Furthermore, the influentials' SM activities include promoting the focal company by broadcasting experience-based content and creating authentic, specialised content related to the brand, known as endorsement-based content. This entails the reposting of corporate content or engaging in online conversations with other actors and SM audiences. Following this path can result in the formation of various connections that shape the network relationships (Blocker et al., 2012). Whilst such relationships are linked by activities as diverse as an endorsement, references, and content creation, they can grow over time, effective development calls for coordination between the personal and corporate voices (Cartwright, Davies, & Archer-Brown, 2021). It is, therefore, important that B2B organisations develop specific tactical and strategic approaches toward the management and monitoring of influential marketing activities.

B2B networks consist of actors who create dyadic bonds ranging in intensity from weak to strong (Raskovic, 2015). Ties between actors are simply the pattern of network connections (Kane, Palmer, Phillips, Kiron, & Buckley, 2014), with weak ties often being associated with information advantages, and strong ties more characterised by commitment and trust (Granovetter, 1983). Strategic implementation of influential marketing has the potential to build strong ties with internal and external influentials and other network partners. This can be done by developing specific tactics (i.e., types of content; focus of communication) and/or strategic approaches (i.e., existing, new or collaborative relationships) as outlined in Table 2. Internal influentials enable the organisation to develop their existing business networks, as they often have strong ties with committed and trusting partners (including with external influentials), whereas external influentials can provide a channel to connect with either weak or newly developed ties within the network for the focal brand, as well as supporting exiting strong relationships through endorsement. Meanwhile, influential marketing allows the focal organisation and influentials to benefit from collaboration, strengthening their ongoing ties.

Based on our exploration, we develop an integrated framework that demonstrates the strategic process of influential marketing in the B2B domain (see Fig. 1). In implementing influential marketing, the focal brand can acquire new customers, thus expand current networks, whilst also maintaining existing relationships within their specific/niche industry. The active engagement between the influential (both employees and experts) and the focal brands' influential marketing strategy, results in higher trust and commitment due to the influentials' attributes and reach. By leveraging such relationships, the B2B organisation can link up, and collaborate, with internal and external influentials (Terho & Jalkala, 2017; Yuan et al., 2020). Therefore, the effectiveness of influential collaboration relies on trust and commitment between the parties involved in the collaboration. B2B brands can choose to collaborate with employees and/or industrial experts within their business networks who are authentic, knowledgeable, and influential within the community. Influentials act as mediators who create or share different types of SM content about a focal brand and engage with their followers (i.e., focus of communication) and help the focal brand to grow its online presence and business network. Such practices can result in strengthening existing relationships with customers, business partners and suppliers. Additionally, influential marketing can be leveraged for collaborative relationships such as business development tool and partnership tool. Such strategic outcomes enrich the focal brand's resources and allow them to effectively mobilise different resources and create ties and bonds amongst actors to support their influential marketing strategy. Meanwhile, the collaboration between the brand and influentials contributes to the influentials' personal branding and enhances their influence in the online environment.

6. Managerial implications

Our research proposes several important implications for B2B organisations. First, managers may get a general introduction to the emerging role of influential marketing in developing and sustaining relationships beyond the immediate customer base. The ever-changing digital landscape requires frequent updates and reassessment of strategic relational approaches on SM channels (Liu, Jayawardhena, Osburg, Yoganathan, & Cartwright, 2021). Based on the findings, we urge B2B organisations to be ever mindful of the relationships in B2B influential marketing, which differ from corresponding influencer relationships in the purchase-focused strategy of consumer markets. Therefore, "copy and paste" of a successful B2C influencer marketing model may not benefit B2B organisations. In the planning stage of selecting influentials, organisations must consider both their expertise and social presence. Influentials who are already well-recognised experts in the community can act better with a credible referral or endorsement of the focal brand, while their SM presence helps the focal brand to develop new relationships. When implementing influential marketing campaigns, B2B organisations must also ensure an active alignment between their corporate voice with the influential's voice if they are to sustain the engagement and relationships initiated by SM content sharing. Additionally, organisations need to closely monitor and measure both the short-term (e.g., online metrics) and long-term (e.g., sales and collaborations) effectiveness of different influential marketing campaigns, thereby developing sustainable influential marketing strategies.

Another conclusion arising from this study is that B2B organisations should endeavour to align their influential marketing approach with other marketing strategies and aspects of their organisational culture (e. g., digital orientation) to jointly fulfil the organisation's marketing objectives (also see Cartwright, Liu, & Raddats, 2021). We recommend that a B2B organisation deciding to incorporate influential marketing into its marketing strategy should strategically plan and allocate resources to support its implementation, which can entail a considerable financial investment and demand for human capital and employee engagement training. Other expenses arise from the need to coordinate between different departments such as marketing, human resource, and operations. Furthermore, due to the inherent complexity of B2B relationships, developing and maintaining corporate friendships with influential individuals requires a significant time investment; given the relational nature of influential marketing, the benefits may not be immediate but call for long-term investment and commitment.

Our third suggestion concerns the significance of internal and external influentials. Whilst internal influentials may present a trade-off between lesser demand of coordination effort with a penalty in lower persuasiveness, for external influentials the trade-off is rather between wider reach vs. lesser control of the content. We note that internal and external influentials are not mutually exclusive but should complement each other. Rather than making a binary choice, B2B organisations can collaborate with employees through employee advocacy programmes while working with external industrial experts who provide endorsement and referencing. This hybrid approach can maximise the reach and coverage of the concerted effort to build wider online business networks. Furthermore, B2B influential marketing calls for collaboration whereby the B2B organisation allows its influentials to feature exclusive news about the organisation, therefore favouring the self-interest of the influentials to develop their personal brands on SM. This kind of mutual support enables sustainable relationships between the brand and the influential.

7. Limitations and future research directions

We must acknowledge certain limitations of the present study that can pose implications for future research. First, the important challenges in implementing B2B influential marketing call for further research aiming to develop a full picture of the drivers for, and barriers against, the adoption of influential marketing. Our research assumes a corporate brand's perspective, which does not accommodate the dynamics and processes from the influentials' or audiences' perspective. Future research from reciprocal perspectives could bring a better understanding of ways to manage the relationship triangle between the focal brand, followers, and the influential in a most effective way, as well as clarifying the dynamics of developing influential content, engaging with followers, and building personal brands on SM. Finally, our research consists of cross-sectional, semi-structured interviews with a relatively small sample; our suggestion for future research is to improve the generalisability of the findings by collecting narratives from a larger sample and conducting longitudinal studies to track the iterative process of adopting and adapting the influential strategy across time.

Acknowledgements

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