

## **Title**

### **Managing Relationships on Social Media in Business-to-Business Organisations**

#### ***Abstract***

Social media (SM) constitutes a valuable source of market intelligence, characterised by great ease and efficiency of interactions between networked partners, and by facilitation of individual expressions of self and brand engagement. Thus, SM can enable interaction, collaboration, and networking, thereby strengthening the relationships between actors within networks. Nonetheless, research into B2B organisations' usage of SM for relationship management remains limited, fragmented and lacking strategic direction. To expand the current state of theory, we draw upon twelve case studies of SM management concerning tactics for acquiring new and potential relationships, building a reputation online, and engaging with business partners. Results show four distinct engagement strategies that organisations tend to employ when implementing SM marketing strategies. The four strategies provide an insight into current approaches to SM marketing within B2B organisations, and how organisations are structuring themselves and managing their resources to respond to this opportunity.

***Keywords:*** *Social media; B2B marketing; relationship marketing; business networks*

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## **1. Introduction**

Relationships are a central construct of competitive advantage in business-to-business (B2B) marketplaces, wherein the market undertakes an exchange between multiple network actors that require constant and continuous management (Ford, 2011; Vargo & Lusch, 2014). Organisations invest considerable resources to develop and maintain trusting and committed relationships with their business partners (e.g. customers, suppliers, subsidiaries, industry collaborators) (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Payne et al., 2005). Networks between organisations are formed when multiple organisational actors collaborate and engage with one another, share intellectual capital, and exchange resources (Batt, 2008). Relational perspectives, therefore, retain a strong influence within B2B organisations (O'Malley, 2014). However, the advent of social media (SM) has shifted power from marketing departments to individuals (e.g., influencers) and online communities, yet theories of relationship marketing (RM) remain largely rooted in the pre-digital age (Gummesson, 2017; Payne & Frow, 2017). This challenges the orthodoxy of B2B organisations' communications and engagement strategy (Archer-Brown & Kietzmann, 2018; Beckers et al., 2017; Steward et al., 2018).

To date, SM has been widely explored in business-to-consumer (B2C) research, but understanding of its impact remains more limited and under-theorised in B2B markets (Foltean et al., 2019; Iankova et al., 2019; Pitt et al., 2019). Research suggests that SM has emerged as a successful marketing tool, which organisations are exploiting to gain better access to customers' value systems (Haenlein & Libai, 2017). SM readily yields market intelligence, which improves the efficiency of interactions and broadcasts individual's self-expression and brand engagement (Juntunen et al., 2019; Swani et al., 2019; Thakur & AlSaleh, 2018). Specifically, research in B2B investigates the role of SM within the functions of sales (Agnihotri et al., 2017; Ogilvie et al., 2018), customer engagement (Drummond et al., 2020;

Hollebeek, 2019; Lashgari et al., 2018), and branding (Juntunen et al., 2019; Swani et al., 2017; Swani et al., 2019). However, other research suggests low overall engagement from B2B organisations with SM channels (Bill et al., 2020; Hollebeek, 2019, Iankova et al., 2019). The hesitancy to seize this new communications opportunity represents a major strategic conundrum within B2B sectors and highlights the need for research on the strategic options for SM engagement (Karampela et al., 2020; Nisar, Prabhakar, & Strakova, 2019). Specific research gaps are present in addressing ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions associated with the implementation of the channels, and a limited engagement with extant marketing theory (Salo, 2017; Swani et al., 2017).

Aiming to address these gaps, this paper responds to the call by Swani et al. (2014) and Iankova et al. (2019) to explore the use of SM for relationship marketing and engagement purposes. In particular, this paper draws on RM theories, and on Sashi’s (2012) customer engagement cycle, to explicate the strategic approaches that B2B companies employ when embracing SM marketing. This analysis supports a new conceptual framework for understanding the systems that B2B organisations can establish to further their objectives for SM usage. In an exploration of twelve case studies consisting of 47 interviews, we describe how B2B organisations are using SM to acquire relationships, build a reputation online, and engage with existing business partners. This, in turn, generates a theoretical framework presenting four broad strategic approaches adopted in response to the SM revolution.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. B2B Social Media within Relationship Marketing**

RM theories rooted in industrial (Levitt, 1983) and service marketing literature (Grönroos, 1984; Gummesson, 1997) offer a valuable paradigm for understanding the B2B domain. Levitt held that value is created for customers *after* the sale, using an analogy of marriage for defining RM where “*the sale merely consummates the courtship...how good the marriage depends on*

*how well the relationship is managed by the seller*” (1983, p. 111). Moreover, Fournier and Avery (2011) suggest that successful relationship development should not focus ‘narrowly on marriages’, but also on adopting strategies based on the type of relationship.

From the mid-1970s to the early 2000s there was a substantial presence of RM research in high-level academic journals, contributing greatly to the field of marketing (Gummerus et al., 2017). However, this research focus preceded the digital revolution and the emergence of the concept of Service-Dominant (SD) Logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Since then, it may be said that B2B RM theory development has stagnated (O’Malley, 2014) and may now be suffering an ‘identity crisis’ or ‘midlife crisis’ (Sheth, 2017). Technological advances offer ever-increasing points of contact between organisations, which means that RM and business network management becomes increasingly complex (O’Malley, 2014). Big data availability and advances in online communication are reshaping the way businesses develop and maintain networks (Payne & Frow, 2017). In essence, the emergence of SM platforms brings new complexity to the B2B landscape, but also promises to improve communication among networked partners (Beckers et al., 2017; Eggers et al., 2017). Today’s digital business environment, therefore, provides an ideal opportunity to reflect upon the salience of RM theory, which holds that network connections, operant resources, and on-going relationships are the essence of competitive advantage (Payne & Frow, 2017).

SM is defined as “*a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content*” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). SM channels allow individuals to create, modify, share and discuss content, which impacts organisational ‘survival’ (Kietzmann et al., 2011). From a B2B perspective, SM is defined as “*any social interaction enhancing technology that can be deployed by professionals to generate content (e.g., blogs, microblogs, wikis) and develop networks (e.g., social networks, online communities)*” (Agnihotri et al., 2012, p. 234).

As such, SM is considered a '*strategic knowledge phenomenon*' that allows organisations to communicate and engage with key stakeholders (Archer-Brown & Kietzmann, 2018, p1288).

B2B organisations utilise social networking sites both for external communication (e.g., Twitter & LinkedIn) (Drummond et al., 2018; Lacoste, 2016) and for internal collaboration and engagement (e.g., Microsoft Yammer and Facebook's Workforce) (Archer-Brown & Kietzmann, 2018; Iankova et al., 2019). SM interactions are increasingly becoming part of the process of creating customer engagement in the B2B domain (Lacoste, 2016), even preceding the initiation of more traditional modes of contact (Cortez et al., 2019). Research by Lacoste (2016) shows Key Account Managers (KAMs) are taking advantage of SM channels to expand their business networks, and Drummond et al. (2018) identifies the importance of these channels in the development of new and existing relationships, especially within entrepreneurial organisations. Thus, business professionals actively and collaboratively participate in SM networks to promote new and existing relationships through dyadic or network actor engagement (Guesalaga, 2016; Hollebeek & Macky, 2019). As such, SM contributes to the development of broader relationships than were hitherto possible, connecting professionals on a global scale (Drummond et al., 2018; Quinton & Wilson, 2016).

Levitt's marriage analogy highlights the importance of long-term outcomes (marriages) rather than simple transactions (casual relationships) (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Levitt, 1983). The relationship depends on touchpoints, whereby employees across an organisation communicate with business partners (including through SM) to develop relationships while also promoting the brand (Swani et al., 2019; Thakur & AlSaleh, 2018). The SM environment enables an extensive number of inter-organisational connections to co-exist simultaneously, building a network of relationships that are interconnected and interdependent. Furthermore, interactions within these relationships occur in the public domain, for all to see, allowing other stakeholders to observe and participate in the interactions. Consequently, SM channels are

viewed as a means to attract new buyers (Cortez et al., 2019; Tóth et al., 2019), to initiate and develop valuable B2B relationships (Foltean et al., 2019; Nisar et al., 2019), and as an alternate communication channel for distributing clear, concise and focused information from various large scale group interactions (Agnihotri et al., 2017; Juntunen et al., 2019).

In summary, SM provides a potent means for communication within, and between, organisations, leading to performance improvement and network development (Foltean et al., 2019; Lacoste, 2016). SM (theoretically) helps organisations to build stronger personal relationships, resulting in connected networks that involve multiple business interactions and conversations across various channels (Hollebeek, 2019; Mehmet & Clarke, 2016; Nisar et al., 2019). However, B2B organisations oftentimes possess limited knowledge on how best to engage and communicate with multiple business partners via SM (Lehtinen et al., 2019; Hollebeek, 2019; Pitt et al. 2019). Thus, we need to ground the development of SM relationships within a theoretical framework that can accommodate such complexity.

## **2.2. Relationship Marketing Schools of Thought**

The Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) Group, Anglo-Australian School, Nordic School and SD-Logic developed influential theories and approaches to conceptualize different forms and structures of value creation in B2B relationships. The IMP Group encapsulate the complexity of the modern B2B environment by integrating the notion of a relationship in their network approaches to industrial marketing (Håkansson & Ford, 2002). By viewing business units as nodes, and relationships between stakeholders as threads, the IMP approach enlists classical network theory for describing B2B markets (Håkansson & Ford, 2002). This views the interactions between B2B organisations not as isolated events, but as a continuous stream forming an interconnected network of relationships (Grönroos, 1984). Similarly, the Nordic School viewed relationships as an important factor in B2B marketing, considering marketing from a service perspective where the relationship between the parties creates value for the

customer. Yet again, in the Anglo-Australian Approach, the organisation's aim is to create customer satisfaction by operating in a cross-functional process-based manner, and is thus regarded as a holistic approach (Palmer et al., 2005). The emphasis here is to extend 'lifetime value' for customers and forge relationships with stakeholders to achieve long-term success (Christopher et al., 2002). Thus, the relationship does not have a linear or cyclical progression, but comprises a network of interconnected relationships.

The network centred model of the IMP Group highlights the importance of relationships to business success, envisioning a complex landscape of many businesses bound together (Håkansson & Ford, 2002). Vargo and Lusch (2004, 2008) developed this concept further by combining multiple B2B theories around co-creation, experiential marketing, network theories and resource theories of the firm to encapsulate an understanding of value and exchange through their development of SD-Logic. Throughout these theoretical evolutions our comprehension of actor-to-actor relationships within a B2B relational environment has developed. However, paradoxes frequently arise in these networks due to the complexity of relationships between organisations. Håkansson and Ford (2002) examined three common paradoxes: opportunities and limitations, influencing and being influenced, and controlling versus being out of control, each of which we discuss in turn.

Although joining a network may present various opportunities for business, certain limitations arise due to the network's interdependent nature. An association with other network members can hinder an individual organisation's progress, just as easily as it can be enhancing. Thus, organisations do not operate alone within the network (social or otherwise), but are mutually interdependent in their efforts to change (Håkansson & Ford, 2002).

Business networks influence, and are influenced, by other networks, with new relationships arising from multi-faceted interactions (Ford et al., 2007; Håkansson & Ford, 2002). Decisions may be based upon positions held by peers or competitors within the network, bringing both



positive and negative outcomes. An organisation's characteristics derive from its constituent business relationships, such that future development depends on how well the relationship is managed (Ford & McDowell, 1999; Håkansson & Ford, 2016). SM enables businesses to nurture their existing networks and engage with new audiences. Thus, the SM environment includes interdependent organisations whose strategies are "*interactive, evolutionary, and implemented*", in the manner of a collaboration (Håkansson & Ford, 2002, p.137).

Organisations try to control the relationships in their network to achieve their aims and objectives (Gadde et al., 2003; Håkansson & Ford, 2002). However, a paradox arises in that the more control an organisation achieves within the network, the less effective and innovative it will be. Moreover, the organisation may be obliged to act based on the dynamics and ties between other network organisations. Thus, marketers have minimal control over the conversations generated within SM, although they can influence the content that they develop. This emphasises that the process of developing online relationships cannot be simply linear or cyclical, due to non-linear effects of controlling influential positions at the main nodes and their threads.

### **2.3. Customer Engagement Cycle**

Research suggests that high customer engagement initiation in SM brings a stronger customer relationship (Beckers et al., 2017). Different types of content result in different levels of customer engagement (Leek et al., 2019; Swani et al., 2017), e.g. personalised content humanises the organisation and achieves stronger customer engagement (Barry & Gironda, 2019; Pitt et al., 2019). Employees can use their SM channels to engage with both potential and current customers (Barry & Gironda, 2019; Guesalaga, 2016), contributing to their personal work brand as well as to the corporate brand (Drummond et al., 2018; Swani et al., 2019). Despite this, research suggests that B2B organisations utilise the channels for acquiring rather than for developing relationships (Iankova et al., 2019). Similarly, Murphy and Sashi (2018)

suggest that B2B organisations use SM for the initial stages of the relationship, which is different from the strategy of their B2C counterparts, who tend to use it more relationally. However, there is limited research exploring the relationship-building strategies of the SM channels, which represents a clear gap in the extant literature (Salo, 2017). Moreover, to date very limited research has integrated SM and RM theories, and shown how this integration can be utilised for understanding relationship management within contemporary B2B organisations.

Although theoretical approaches for RM employing SM are poorly developed for B2B organizations, Sashi (2012) has explored the customer engagement cycle in B2C SM by drawing on B2B RM theory. He reiterated that the interactive nature of SM allows practitioners to engage online to build long-term relationships that create superior value through the nurturing of trust and commitment, much like in B2B RM (Sashi, 2012). Through engagement, customers commit themselves to long-lasting relationships, sometimes even becoming advocates for the supplier (Barry & Gironda, 2019; Sashi, 2012). Although developed for the B2C context, Sashi's framework is broadly generalizable to the case of SM in B2B RM theory (Iankova et al., 2019). Similarly, Sashi's model identifies 'states' of relational development, and guides people and resource allocation necessary to transition from one state to another (as per Dwyer et al., 1987).

Drawing on Sashi's work and the B2B application of the model by Iankova et al. (2019), we identify that SM can play two substantive roles in relational development. The first among these is Sashi's (2012) initial stages of the engagement cycle: *connection* and *interaction*, which Iankova et al. (2019) group as *Acquisition Orientated* usage. The later stages of the engagement cycle; grouped as *Relationship Orientated* usage by Iankova et al. (2019), include the factors of *satisfaction* (direct messaging of customers with service or delivery details), *retention* (encouraging customers to re-engage through the use of cookies and re-marketing techniques), *commitment* (generating content aimed at reminding customers to return), *advocacy*

(encouraging customers to engage in e-word-of-mouth interactions), and *engagement* (facilitating ongoing interaction between multiple stakeholders with both each other and with the supplier). Although Sashi's model could be a rough guide to the emerging online relationship, the SM landscape has changed in depth and complexity in the decade since the model's inception. Relationship-oriented usage of SM does not progress linearly but has complex growth patterns governed by a continuously developing set of inter-organisational processes (Ford et al., 2007; Håkansson & Gadde, 2018). Thus, the valence of customer engagement and RM theory within this complex environment requires further investigation.

#### **2.4. Research Objective**

Although developing customer engagement strategies on SM is said to have a positive effect on organisational performance (Kumar & Pansari, 2016), research within the B2B domain remains limited (Salo, 2017). It is crucial to understand how SM strategies are implemented to manage business relationships (Felix et al., 2017; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016), and RM theories have the potential to provide a better understanding of SM marketing implementation. Present theories do, however, require some exploration to identify if they can cope with the complexities of the contemporary organisational environment (O'Malley, 2014). Exchanges on SM are not purely dyadic or anonymous, but occur on a globally visible stage, where business professionals participate in online communities, hoping to benefit themselves and their business (Kumar et al., 2020; Quinton & Wilson, 2016). However, to date, very few papers have focussed on RM and network perspectives in a B2B SM context (Drummond et al., 2018; Hollebeek, 2019). Thus, there arises the following question: *How do organisations implement SM channels to successfully manage business relationships?* Towards answering this research question, we explore how relationships are managed in a B2B SM environment, explore the strategies that organisations employ when engaging with customers and business partners, and examine what resources and processes the organisations establish to deliver this. Throughout,

we link to the three paradoxes raised by the IMP Group, which we find remain applicable within today's digital environment.

### **3. Methodology**

We utilise a qualitative approach to address our research question, employing a multiple case study design in the UK. The qualitative approach allows us an insight into the nuances of individuals' online interactions, relationship development, and overall relational processes (Pratt, 2009; Rynes & Gephart, 2004). The UK provides a good context for exploring SM in B2B relationships because 45 million people (66% of the population) are using SM channels, averaging approximately 1 hour and 50 minutes a day on SM (Statista, 2020). 14% of the population interact with SM platforms for professional reasons, placing the UK population amongst the biggest users of SM for professional activities (Statista, 2020). According to Microsoft LinkedIn, considered the main corporate SM channel, there was a 34% increase in engagement on the platform in the UK in 2018 (Hutchinson, 2018).

The research follows an abductive approach, interweaving extant theoretical constructs (in RM and B2B SM) and the emergent findings from the data collection (Douven, 2011). This research does not privilege any one theory, but does consider the customer engagement cycle and the broader body of RM theories in its approach to design and analysis. We examine similarities and differences across the twelve cases in light of extant theories to proceed towards the generation of more context-specific theory (Eisenhardt, 1989; Ketokivi & Choi, 2014).

#### **3.1. Sampling**

We apply a literal and theoretical replication logic, with case selection based on their fitness to inform about the research phenomena (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). This approach is particularly "*suitable for illuminating and extending relationships and logic among constructs*" (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007, p.27). The twelve case studies represent varying degrees of organisational similarity. The initial cases (A + B) were selected due to their objective similarity

regarding size, sector (digital marketing) and advanced engagement in SM. Case C is a similar but much larger company, whereas cases D, E & F are different types of business service providers. Cases G – L are product providers encompassing a variety of industries. The stepwise increase in complexity in our series allows a transition from a literal replication logic focusing on the identification of similar patterns of behaviours between case studies, to a more theoretical context replication involving contrary results between cases (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Hill & Brown, 2007). Using a multiple case design allows for a cross-case analysis and phenomenological comparison (Darke et al., 1998). This sampling structure yields common results (literal replication) as well as distinct results (theoretical replication) (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Furthermore, using literal and theoretical replication logic enriches and increases the robustness of the results, increasing their subsequent theoretical applicability (Eisenhardt, 1989). Finally, to address the lack of research on broader industry sectors regarding relationship and network development within the SM environment, we probe new contextual areas to provide an enriched cross-case comparison.

### **3.2. Interview Development and Data Analysis**

47 in-depth interviews were carried out across the twelve case studies (see Table 1). To yield valuable insights, participants were all associated with their organisations' SM strategy, but viewed SM from diverse perspectives (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). All participants worked within marketing and/or sales departments, mostly in upper and middle management positions. The interviewees were considered as “informants” because they not only provided insights into SM as a relational tool, but also suggested sources of corroboratory evidence (Yin, 2018).

>>Insert Table 1 about here<<

The interviews began with the posing of generic questions intended to put the informant at ease. The main interview questions focused on the organisational approaches to SM, and how the SM channels were used to engage different types of network partner with different types of

the existing relationship. The questions were developed drawing on the extant B2B SM and RM literature. To avoid missing relevant theoretical and conceptual foundational data, we explored all four RM schools of thought when developing the interview questions. Specifically, we utilised a question on “relationship-oriented SM usage” (derived from Iankova et al., 2019; Guesalaga, 2016), SM network development (Quinton & Wilson, 2016), and the maintenance of relationships and networks (Drummond et al., 2018; Lacoste, 2016).

The interviewing process in each case continued until the interviews were no longer productive of new information, or when the number of relevant respondents was exhausted, as in cases E & L. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed onto 501 double-spaced text pages. Interviews were transcribed and analysed straight away, allowing the interviewer to note any additional observations and thoughts made during the interview. This allowed the interviewer to tackle any previously unmentioned insights in future interviews (Glaser, 1965).

### **3.3. Ensuring data quality**

To ensure high-quality data, the study followed the four criteria for case data quality as discussed by Yin (2018) and Beverland & Lindgreen (2010): 1. Construct validity, 2. Reliability, 3. Internal validity, and 4. External validity. The data was collected by one researcher and the analysis was completed collaboratively between two researchers. According to Dubois and Gibbert (2010, p.132), construct validity in research refers to “*the extent to which a study investigates what it claims to investigate*”. To achieve construct validity, two researchers independently analysed and coded the interviews after each interview was completed. Thus, examining the research phenomenon from various angles allows us to achieve investigator triangulation (Denzin, 1978). Throughout the data collection and analysis, both researchers reviewed the interpretations arising from the data during various phases of the collection process. In case of conflicting interpretations, the interviews were collaboratively discussed and reanalysed until both researchers reached a consensus agreement.

To achieve reliability, in accordance to our abductive approach, each of the questions was defined and grounded in the extant literature (Beverland & Lindgreen, 2010). The initial interview questions were discussed with a team of three researchers and piloted with two practitioners working in the field of marketing (Yin, 2018). A summary of the results was sent to the participating organisations to verify the validity of the results and to avoid any errors in the data. To ensure internal validity, a constant comparative method was utilised (Barnes, 1996), where the responses of multiple respondents within the same case were compared with each other and with secondary sources such as websites and SM feeds. Finally, to ensure external validity, we carried out a cross-case comparison. References back to the cases were developed (e.g., through label or code) to report multiple different cases within the analysis, thus, revealing the extent of saturation within the data (Beverland & Lindgreen, 2010).

Rich quotes were extracted and used for argumentation, thus alleviating potential concerns about lack of specificity (Johnsen & Ford, 2000). Whilst responses and memos were coded and recorded, they were simultaneously compared with previous responses in the same category, resulting in the generation of theoretical constructs. Initial categories emerged through constant comparison of the incidents reported by the interviewees, and their properties were then integrated into the emerging themes. The final theory was delimited as major new modifications became sparser, allowing a reduction of terminology and generalisation of the results (Figure 1) (Boeije, 2002; Glaser, 1965). After completing the process of coding and attaining theoretical saturation, the conceptual model was developed.

>>Insert Fig. 1 about here<<

#### **4. Results**

Our use of multi-case design reveals divergent approaches to SM utilisation across different cases. Some cases primarily created simple one-way SM communications and rarely interacted with network partners, thus not engaging in committed B2B relationships or advocacy (Sashi,

2012). Other cases show a much stronger focus on developing existing relationships through extensive interactional dialogue, as in Sashi's (2012) final stage of engagement, attaining a high level of interaction rarely explored in B2B SM. Here, cases target SM content at selected and committed partnerships, to create a dialogue helping to attain a better position in the marketplace. However, contrary to the concept of Sashi's customer engagement cycle, where one form of activity leads to the next, our results show these organisations implementing SM strategies targeting very specific customer engagement activities, without undertaking the full cycle. In particular, their orientation was focussed either on acquiring new customers (*connection* and *interaction*) or developing existing relationships (*retention* and *engagement*), but rarely both: "It is about positioning us as thought leaders, essentially" (C6) versus "It's trying to get people to participate and communicate with the company. It's about getting people engaged, even if it is down the road, that's the ultimate goal." (I3).

Figure 2 shows the predominantly strategies that organisations adopted based on two dominant emerging drivers for this strategic approach. The y-axis portrays the degree of control over SM strategies. Some cases (following clear guidelines, training and policies) delegated SM content creation and dissemination to a broad spectrum of their workforce. Other cases centralised control of SM content to a division within the organisation, usually the marketing department. Thus, if a dedicated in-house team had control over SM content, we termed this "centralised". Conversely, where the content was generated by a wider pool of organisational actors, we categorised this as "decentralised". The x-axis in Figure 2 depicts the diverging strategic aim of SM marketing as explained in the preceding paragraph. Our cases had diverging dominant strategic aims focussing on either relationship-oriented or acquisition-oriented aims.

The analysis identified four distinct approaches to SM RM strategy (Call-to-action, Dissemination, Thought Leadership, and Cocreation) (Figure 2), which we have organised across these two constructs. The identification of engagement strategies does not imply that a



given organisation remains permanently fixed in its approach, but shows the general positioning that organisations take when implementing a SM marketing strategy. Interestingly, the size of the organisation did not influence SM maturity. Despite larger organisations possessing a greater amount of resources, they faced similar challenges to those experienced by smaller organisations when implementing SM.

We found no consistent pattern of strategic aim or degree of control in the product-service divide in the cross-case analysis. We only identified service companies as following a dominantly Thought Leadership approach, and all our Dissemination dominant cases were product manufactures. Nevertheless, we see no reason that these strategies could not be employed by differing organisations (e.g. engineering manufacturers aiming to demonstrate thought leadership) and consider this result an artefact of the limited number of cases available for the study. The sections below and Table 2 explore each of the different strategic approaches, focusing particularly on the emergent themes of content activities, target audiences and challenges faced by organisations undertaking each approach. This is followed by a discussion of how approaches relate to RM theory.

>>Insert Fig. 2 about here<<

>>Insert Table 2 about here<<

#### **4.1. Call to Action Strategy**

Organisations pursuing a call to action strategy utilise a centralised approach to acquire new customers (e.g. high centralisation and high acquisition-orientated usage). Organisations utilise SM as a relatively blunt instrument, placing focus on generating sharable content: *“That’s where we’re trying to use social media, to share live info. Kind of live feed information coming through. That information would be shared anyway but it’s sharing it quicker (via SM)”* (D1). This rapidly sharable content allows organisations to gain the attention of potential customers. Such organisations highlight the benefits of generating and posting content quickly: *“I’m trying*

*to re-educate senior management about how quickly we need to get these pieces of work on our channels. Because if the time has gone, it's pointless talking about it and its already old news. So, it's helping people to understand the real-time content"* (B2). They aim to target the largest audience possible, to raise awareness and encourage recipients to follow the content back to other channels such as websites, brochures, or telephone. The tactic is to create attention-grabbing, but potentially nonspecific content. For instance, organisations develop content linked to a current and much-discussed event, such as the new iPhone release or Brexit.

#### *4.1.1. Content Activities*

SM channels are numerous and offer a variety of functions across platforms. Because channels serve as tools to create and promote content, they are considered resources at the organisations' disposal. LinkedIn and Twitter were the most commonly used channels in all four strategic approaches, but we also see Facebook, Pinterest, YouTube, and Instagram widely used among those pursuing a call to action strategy. *"We're using Facebook to share cultural stuff, Easter, Halloween, whatever it might be. We're using a bit of Instagram to show people what it's like to work in the building. Although the content is not high enough quality to be Instagram worthy. It kind of fades short. We're using LinkedIn and Twitter to promote our work predominantly and also new hires. We've limited resources to create content, so we tend to share all of that content on most platforms"* (B1). We see that a broad range of SM is used in parallel in the call to action approach. Such cases often cross-post quickly developed, highly similar content or links to the main piece of content in pursuing the call to action strategy: *"We know it's not right, but it's easier to do a quick picture and a headline than writing 1000 words on a topic"* (D1).

#### *4.1.2. Target Audience*

Organisations pursuing a call to action strategy view SM as an additional channel to support their overall communication strategy: *"It's very much been a repurposing existing content. Our role is to support everybody. It's mainly been talking about successes that have happened or congratulating different teams, things like that, also things that have been in the media, we*

*report that*” (D6). Target audiences can be varied and fairly non-specific: “*We do have some idea about who our audiences are on each channel. That helps us to tailor the content, but we need to think about how we can grow each channel for the future and whom do we want to be targeting on each channel.* (B3). “*We want to reach the financial community because we want to attract investors... the university community because we want to attract either people to research with our product or we want to attract licensing opportunities and new product ideas from people who are coming out of university...there are whole rafts of people that we want to engage with.*” (J1). Our results suggest that the cases understand that SM could help in terms of targeting specific stakeholders, but are still uncertain of how best to achieve this. Therefore, they focus on reaching a wide audience of non-specific stakeholders with sharable content.

#### *4.1.3. Challenges*

The broad aim of a call to action strategy is to reach as many people as possible, but the quality of the content may admittedly require some improvement: “*We will need to get better content that we’re sharing on each channel and it’s more appropriate. We need to dig more in terms of finding out who is most engaging on the channels*” (B3). This broad approach reaches a wide audience that could consist of potential customers; but, there is a challenge in reaching a specific target audience. Organisations typically re-post content from customers, hoping to stimulate interaction: “*It’s more following our customers on SM, supporting them if they have for example a new TV add coming up. Making them know if theirs has been a great campaign*” (D3). This suggests that the organisations are not sufficiently knowledgeable to execute successful SM strategies, and their lack of clear strategy brings a risk of over-using SM to little benefit.

#### *4.1.4. Summary*

Call to action organisations focus on centrally controlled content that consists of re-posting existing content to a wider non-specific target audience. They are reluctant to allow employees to post on their own SM pages because they fear damage to the organisations’ image and reputation, possibly extending to degrading the existing bonds between actors: “*The danger is*

*when people start using it, they don't use it correctly. For the corporate identity, we need to work the channels lots better.*" (J3); *"Mike is quite nervous (CEO) if we put too much out there (on our private channels) about what we do, someone is going to incorporate it and steal it* (F1). As such, a small clique of employees generates content for a very broad spectrum of audiences: *"I make sure our digital channels are attractive to potential clients, to prospect clients. I would use website and Twitter and LinkedIn to keep ensuring that we're reaching a wider audience, people that might not know us yet"* (D2). However, unlike the three other strategies, the call to action strategy is not aiming at creating a dialogue between actors through SM, but to encourage the connection of the wider public, ultimately resulting in acquiring potential customers.

#### **4.2. Dissemination Strategy**

Dissemination strategies are centralised and relationship-oriented, as distinct from the acquisition-oriented call to action approach (e.g., high centralisation and high relationship-orientated usage). Dissemination relates to creating somewhat tailored (often informational) content targeting key (usually pre-existing) audiences. The strategy aims to provide valuable content to stakeholders, rather than simply increasing attention. Dissemination organisations do, however, retain a focus on mass-communication to target broad audiences rather than creating a dialogue amongst existing relationships. As such, the focus remains on centrally produced content.

##### *4.2.1. Content Activities*

Organisations tend to create content that is considered rich and engaging, targeting a broad spectrum of partners: *"It's about making sure that content is engaging. It creates an attachment, so the user feels like 'I want to use that product'"* (G5). Humour is often incorporated in SM content allowing organisations to connect with partners: *"I think the humour bit breaks the monotony of the day for a lot of people who are used to seeing the same type of message. We'll say funny things and that reinforces the message"* (I1). These organisations post richer content,

with more planning than is undertaken in a typical call to action approach. The richness of content derives from the investment in developing tailored content focused on the user's requirements: *"For the industry, SM is a relatively new channel, but increasingly it's a channel that we no longer can ignore because the way that you as an individual, as a consumer, or as a business observe information. It's all online, it's all visual. Historically, we have had SM accounts that have been active for 5 or 6 years on Facebook. We've got very active Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest and YouTube accounts. We're just developing a LinkedIn account. What we do is we operate them all slightly different but with a common purpose"* (H1).

Content is created by the marketing department (a centralised approach), and employees' SM pages are considered as private channels. These cases may feel uncomfortable if employees agitate publicly for corporate goals: *"We're the only people [the marketing department] that post on behalf of the business. The sales team will all have their private accounts... I'm discouraging it at the moment a little bit because I think it could be quite dangerous. Unless they're putting it together with the right context, they could badly damage how information gets portrayed"* (H1); *"We need to be careful what we post there because your customers see it"* (G4). The cases are hesitant to promote the organisation through employees' private feeds, fearing the potentially negative impact this could have on the organisation's reputation: *"I'm a bit 50/50 because, whilst they (employees) need to appear to be topical and relevant and understand the impact of SM within their business environment, I'm uncomfortable about them posting for the business alongside posting a picture of their child having tea, or what they are doing privately"* (H1); *"As soon as you put anything in that space you are never going to take it back"* (I1).

#### 4.2.2. Target Audiences

With a dissemination strategy, there is much clearer targeting of the audience than in a call to action strategy e.g., office product manufacturers would tend to engage specifically with dealers and retailers, whereas a pottery manufacturer would target a sector as specific as the hospitality

industry: *“Our re-sellers are the dealers. I spend a lot more money than we do with our distributors. But our end-user does message us. But we don’t necessarily promote to end-user. We forward promotions, but we would go through our distributor”* (G3). Thus, specific targets are time-stamped to ensure that objectives are met throughout the year: *“I set a target at the beginning of the year and what we want to achieve every month on all platforms to ensure we’ve continued growth”* (H1). Different SM channels enable organisations to reach different stakeholders, thus calling for appropriate adjustment of targeting strategies: *“We will post things about specific products and how it can benefit you and in your workspace. It’s just down the audience of Facebook vs. on LinkedIn. Someone on Facebook will be looking at it for their home office and on LinkedIn, we are targeting IT managers and directors who make big decisions who buy 1000 pieces of equipment”* (G4). Target audience organisations also design their content with specific business partners in mind, such that their content is tailored to engage the target audience.

#### *4.2.3. Challenges*

Organisations often face challenges in settling upon an SM channel that is most appropriate for them and in developing the correct content that will reach the desired audience: *“It’s hard to have a PAN- European template that fits. We are PAN European and responsible also for the Middle East and Africa, so SM has a stronger role within the UK and some other countries, Germany, Benelux, but there are the different channels in those markets and there are the different equivalent of LinkedIn.”* (G7). Although organisations consider that choosing the correct platform for posting content is of paramount importance, the content must be specifically tailored to the organisational objectives, and this is often not a simple process: *“What we do is to have the strategic objectives and we understand what kind of digital tactics are going to achieve that... to have clear objectives and what you’re going to spend where. Sometimes it won’t be social at all, and sometimes it comes into play. If it’s around generating awareness or driving [search engine optimisation], we would use SM”* (G4). Although

organisations see benefits in using the SM channels, especially in communicating with customers through online networks, some cases feel driven to this approach by the nature of their market: *“Because of the nature of the industry, it’s so niche, it’s a niche within a niche. You’ve the metal industry, copper-based (metals) are only 0.01% of that. And that’s us. SM tends to be the opposite approach: it’s a static, mass marketing tool”* (I1). Due to restrictions arising from the specific nature of their products, some organisations have to exercise caution in consideration of the permanency of content on SM. They have to consider what role SM plays in the wider customer engagement strategy, and how it complements, rather than replaces, existing communications channels such as sales.

#### *4.2.4. Summary*

In our sample, cases pursuing a dissemination strategy were generally slower to adopt SM than thought leader or call to action organisations. Although they understand who their target audiences are, they often struggle to engage with them. This could be due to the type of content that they develop (e.g., informational), which reaches wider audiences but does not create a dialogue with existing stakeholders. Moreover, organisations seem to be implementing SM channels out of necessity or from some sense of obligation. This could be due to their self-perception as purely B2B organisations: *“In the past, we’ve been sceptical to use SM platforms for us as a B2B company”* (G7), such that they feel no urgency to adopt SM.

### **4.3. Thought Leadership Strategy**

Thought leadership approaches were mostly undertaken by the service organisations in our sample, although it seems plausible that product organisations might also choose to follow this strategy. A thought leadership strategy aims to utilise the knowledge and expertise of the staff within the business, to broadcast the organisation’s capabilities to a wide audience: *“We’re an open company so it’s more what we’re saying that will show to others that we’re thought leaders”* (A4). Thought leaders use SM channels as a marketing tool that enables them to reach broad audiences that may be interested in getting a somewhat personalised introduction to their

offerings. The thought leadership strategy is decentralised (e.g., a wider pool of organisational actors) and focusses mainly on an acquisition-orientated strategy.

#### 4.1.3. Content Activities

Content is often developed with the overarching goal to portray the organisation as an expert in the field: *“Content creation on SM goes back to our communication strategy. We have our overarching goal to be known as the experts for marketing effectiveness in the digital age”* (C6). Thought leaders are often deriving advantage from their employees as (surrogate) SM voices to develop valuable content: *“If we’re trying to push a story out we could push the story through our global accounts, but it’s arguably more powerful where every individual of the business is sharing content because you reach a wider audience in doing so”* (A1). Employees are treated as experts in their field, who create esteemed content that is widely re-shared on SM within the industry, thus, reaching large audiences of potential customers. Indeed, the aim is to reach as many potential partners as possible to showcase the organisations’ expertise, thus, *“being the embodiment of the digital economy”* (C6). Furthermore, making use of employees’ online networks attains greater reach for very little or no cost, thus, expanding the formal networks existing within the business. By engaging employees in SM as an organisational strategy, thought leaders see individual success as a success within the networks: *“Whether that’s driving internal engagement, awareness, education around how to use social as an employee, how to use it to better build their personal profile and their career as well as the brand”* (A1). SM is seen as a collaborative tool, used by employees at their initiative to broadcast their expertise, with content marketing being one of the major drivers to developing relationships and networks.

#### 4.2.3. Target Audience

Organisations that implement the thought leadership strategy monitor engagement of SM activities and target broad audiences and also individuals who are expressing interest in their content: *“Social, in general, will be a big focus for us. That means creating the content for social, engaging audiences, but before we engage that audience, we have to find the audience,*



*we will have to know whom we want to be talking to. This is how we choose, usually based on interests of followers” (A4). The process of targeting an audience is two-pronged: first, valuable content is developed, and once individuals express interest in it of their own accord, they are specifically targeted with that content: “The first point is about data and insight. It’s about industry trends, business strategy, our brand, and real-time relevance, from a savings point of view as well. Finding new business revenue, how can we use social to target our existing and prospective clients with the appropriate material as a pitch or during our relationship” (C6). Moreover, organisations carefully monitor the engagement levels on SM and specifically encourage further collaborations through the use of their thought leadership content. Their target audiences, therefore, are returning and continuously engaging with SM content. However, the level of engagement between content creators and audiences is somewhat limited due to a high number of followers, which prevents the organisations to engage in a dialogue.*

#### *4.3.3. Challenges*

The major challenge when pursuing thought leadership strategy is the constant development of highly beneficial and value-adding content. Organisations create content that helps to draw the attention of potential customers by its portrayal of industry expertise, but the focus here extends beyond simply attracting attention: *“It’s mostly about thought leadership. We do a lot of content marketing and there are certain areas where we want to be seen as leaders in the market, whether that is a certain type of technology or certain areas of business. We produce content like white papers and infographics that then we distribute through all of our digital channels” (A3). However, the specificity of thought leaders’ posts is noticeably lower than that of co-creators or disseminators, with less detail about specific offerings and less directly marketing-related content. Nonetheless, SM activities are created with a strategic focus in mind, getting creative input and contribution from a range of individuals in the process of content production: “SM in the business is dependent on the business strategy and all departments work collaboratively to create content that focuses on thought leadership and present the*

*organisation as digitally savvy” (C4). Thought leaders also tend to present original content that targets broad audiences more frequently than is typical for the other three strategic approaches. Thus, the larger the audience, the higher the risk of negative comments on SM: “I think you can’t control what people are going to say about you. You need to monitor and be aware of that. It is important to research and to know what that person is about. There is always an element of risk. We try to get more followers, but we also make sure that we share the right content at the right frequency” (A3). Their aim is to present themselves at the forefront within their industry and to lead current conversations, which is a challenging task. This aspiration frequently drives them to produce content that is a social commentary, but at the expense of considerable investment of time.*

#### *4.3.4. Summary*

Being a thought leader has its challenges, such as keeping up with content pieces that are timely, relevant and especially add value. With SM development and innovation changing fast in today’s landscape, thought leaders need to keep up with change and maintain value-adding activities such as content development, if they want to position themselves as an expert in the field. Moreover, it is crucial to monitor engagement online; the higher the level of engagement with large audiences, the higher the risk of losing control of the conversation. Thought leaders transform SM into a new space by out-competing other organisations, rather than leaving SM as a medium only for enhancing their current marketing activity. However, thought leaders realise that, despite having had some measure of success, there is no definitive end-point to how far they should go in this direction: *“Externally we’re doing very well in terms of our competitors. We’re beating them all in terms of our organic growth. But there is that need to drive growth in visibility and building a profile and through social it’s a great way of doing that” (A6).*

#### **4.4. Co-creation Strategy**

Some cases in our study appeared to focus their SM activities neither on acquiring new

stakeholders, nor disseminating information, but rather on developing strong relational links within multiple but highly specific audience networks (e.g., high relationship-orientated usage). These networks will (hopefully) collaborate in the on-going co-creation of value. Due to the complexity of B2B relationships, organisations in our sample pursuing co-creation strategy are well aware that the pace of their adoption of SM is slower compared to their B2C counterparts. Co-creators prefer to research the market environment before developing strategic plans and set objectives for launching the channel: *“We’re relatively late starters on SM in comparison to some of the consumer businesses. We did a lot of listening before we started. We spent a long time mapping the market and trying to understand it from an end-user perspective, who are the influencers in SM, what type of people were the right type of people to connect to and think about how we will form our strategy before we started putting some activity into the marketplace”* (K3). This cautious approach also demonstrates that SM users within the B2B domain do not necessarily operate in a strictly cyclical process (as per Sashi, 2012) but require taking various considered steps before and during the relationship development process.

#### *4.4.1. Content Activities*

Co-creators are utilising three main SM channels within their business strategy, namely Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter: *“We’re putting effort in the three main channels that are Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. LinkedIn is more from a recruitment angle. We look at Facebook and Twitter as the balance of communication to the rest of our stakeholders”* (L2). Different platforms have varying significance across the cases, but all agree that their content needs to deliver value for the brand, business, or business partner. Co-creators set objectives before developing the content and they generally avoid promotional or product orientated content due to low engagement rates: *“We spent some time to understand what got high levels of engagement. We looked at what other people were doing, at how different audiences respond. What we didn’t want to do is send out promotional sales orientated messages because we saw the engagement will be very low”* (K3). The co-creation strategy entails posting relevant content

of interest to network partners (e.g. new product developments), to initiate a dialogue, where network partners from a range of organisations discuss and develop intellectual capital through SM. In other words, rather than utilising the channels as an additional sales platform, organisations target their content to further strengthen their existing relationships.

#### *4.4.2. Target Audience*

Co-creators' SM activities are targeted to a well-defined audience that relates naturally to their industry. Due to the variety of network partners involved, the relationship acquisition and subsequent communication and creation of bonds between partners is inherently complex and requires well-defined and targeted content on SM channels: *“Our target audiences are effectively radiologist on the MRI side and people involved in the hospital management. On the corrections or prison side of things, it tends to be state-level departments or correctional officers at the ground level. It's a varied audience and because of that the approach on social is to have separate channels for each of those audiences”* (L1); *“We are very focussed on who our stakeholders are, and therefore you need to do research otherwise you are just posting (content). Then you have to ask yourself what value it is adding to the brand”* (L2).

Organisations pursuing a co-creation strategy often need to trial their content before becoming confident of its potential for success. This observation shows that SM should not be mistaken as an automated communication platform, but one that requires careful planning and consideration: *“It's difficult and it's a lot of trial and error. No one has all of the answers, we try our best to understand the audiences and go from experience. It's very much a learning curve for everyone”* (E1). They may, therefore, employ external agencies to develop SM content around a core area of focus, who disseminate it in the name of the organisation. By doing so, the network of the organisations expands without utilising their resources, resulting in an expanded network consisting of current and potential customers (e.g. pre-set targets with the external agency). By continuously engaging within the networks through decentralised approaches, relationships are being nurtured and relationships developed.

#### 4.4.3. Challenges

The challenge for co-creators is in managing the hesitation of implementing SM as a strategic tool. The continuous trial and error and time-consuming content development for a well-defined audience are taxing: *“There is a huge gap between the realities of what can be achieved for a niche B2B business on social. It’s a reality check what can be achieved and how quickly”* (L1). This often positions the organisations behind the competition in terms of content volume because of limited overall communication online. Moreover, organisations will adopt SM only if they view the channels as worthwhile and beneficial: *“It’s about the adoption of technology and seeing the advantage of SM and that they have opportunities for us”* (K3). However, this could potentially conflict with their customers’ preferences. Furthermore, dialogue occurs online, even if you are not actively part of it, which could be detrimental to organisations that do not participate in SM network communications. Finally, the laborious, continuous monitoring of the competition and careful development of strategic actions often results in outdated communication on SM due to the fast pace of change. As such, given the continuously evolving SM environment, organisations pursuing co-creation strategies need to be flexible in their strategic approach and reacting to trends rather than lagging.

#### 4.4.4. Summary

To achieve the balance of highly targeted, well-defined content creation, co-creators have to be certain of the behaviours and preferences of their key network partners on SM, which is often very challenging. Rather than struggling to stay ahead of the competition in terms of content (in the manner of thought leaders), these organisations monitor the competition’s activities on SM and try to augment their existing marketing activity, not so much proactively but in a defensive manner: *“We analyse what competitors are doing...It helps us to set out our campaigns and our own targets. I set our targets to what we have done previously and what the competitors have achieved. We look not only at direct competitors but also companies that are in the same sector”* (L1). Thus, themes of listening, reflecting, and reacting also lie at the core

of their central notion of SM strategy. Being part of a network online is not just a matter of content generation, but also monitoring and responding to the online activities of other actors.

## **5. Discussion**

The main limitation of existing RM theory is that it largely focuses on B2B buyer-seller relationships in an offline environment, with little consideration of the increasing role of online interactions between users (Foltean et al., 2019; Nisar et al., 2019). However, marketing communication channels are changing rapidly, as is the way industrial organisations communicate with their wider network or business partners (Karjaluoto et al., 2015; Payne & Frow, 2017). The results of this study show that as B2B organisations start to engage in relational development via SM, a plethora of approaches and styles emerge, which influence the way the relationships and business networks become established. Emerging from this sample of B2B organisations is the construction of a new model defining four types of SM engagement strategy. This identification of prevailing strategies does not infer that organisations are static, but allows later transition through different approaches. The identification of four strategies along the axes of strategic aim (relationship/acquisition orientation), and degree of control (centralized/decentralized approach) brings a new perspective to the field of B2B SM marketing theory.

In particular, we highlight the importance of revisiting the IMP school of RM, in light of its focus on network interaction as opposed to cyclical or linear relational development (Håkansson & Ford, 2002). The IMP approach appears to be more in keeping with properties of the dynamic and complex SM environment, and we see strong evidence that all three network marketing paradoxes occur in this online (SM) environment (Håkansson & Ford, 2002).

In terms of the paradox of opportunities and limitations in networks, SM provides businesses with multiple opportunities for relationship development, albeit that these opportunities require reciprocal engagement from network partners if they are to create value. We see evidence in the data that B2B organisations encounter problems when treating SM as a mass-communication

system, rather than a platform for dialogue, which appears to limit the degree of interaction from network partners. Even though in its infancy, our knowledge of how marketing departments use SM exceeds our present grasp of how purchasing, supply, and operations departments do so (Lam et al., 2016; Tóth et al., 2019). Therefore, our understanding of the value that SM creates for users is limited, and this lack of knowledge could limit the value accessible through SM engagement.

The paradox of influencing and being influenced is highly visible in SM networks. There is a strong desire in the case organisations to have influence, but little consideration (except in the co-creation strategy) of how to reckon the ‘being influenced by’ part of the equation. However, perceptions of network partners and the value creation they experience will be shaped by a plethora of network interactions extending beyond the suppliers’ produced SM content.

Finally, the balance between controlling and being out of control in networks is evident in the data. The call-to-action and dissemination strategies attempt to exert control over the SM channel, at the ultimate cost of limiting actor-to-actor relational development and interfering with original SM content creation and innovation. Conversely, the thought leader and co-creation strategies seek to decentralise control, thus enabling a wider spectrum of SM interaction, with greater value creation capability, but at the cost of reduced control over the conversation.

The contribution of this research is encapsulated by three themes that intersect with existing RM theories in the SM environment. These themes are engagement strategies, strategic alignment and content marketing. The separation into three themes emphasises that organisations need to extend their immediate business network to encompass a much broader ecosystem that builds upon collaborative relationships with various stakeholders (Payne & Frow, 2017). RM is an established and valuable tool for gaining customer loyalty for organisations (Agarwal et al., 2008; Gupta et al., 2015), and its use is by no means outmoded

within the online environment, but can act as a guide towards the appropriate implementation of SM as an additional marketing channel (Achen, 2017). The following discussion frames the three themes concerning the overall research question of *How do organisations implement SM channels to successfully manage business relationships?*

### **5.1. Engagement Strategies**

Engagement strategies are vital for ensuring an organisations' competitive advantage, and the management of resultant interactions lies at the heart of RM (Grönroos, 2004). Through the use of SM and customers' cognitive, emotional, and behavioural investments with the corporate brand, we witness active network partner participation towards value co-creation (Hollebeek et al., 2019; Swani et al., 2019; Kumar et al., 2016). In other words, SM enables employees to build strong relational ties (Lacoste, 2016) by participating in content development and dialogue to support the establishment of a strong reputation for the organisation (Thakur & AlSaleh, 2018; Drummond et al., 2018). Although engagement interactions have been extensively studied and investigated, research is limited about the engagement strategies for managing relationships on SM channels within the B2B sector (Hollebeek, 2019; Wilson, 2019), which we have partially addressed in this paper.

In line with previous research (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016; Sheth, 2017), the present study shows that bonding with network partners on an emotional level, and not simply offering economic value, results in stronger engagement online. We see this particularly with co-creator and thought leaders' steering away from "hard-selling" through SM, as these organisations have experienced that heavy-handed touting tends to limit engagement. This is also in line with previous research (Brennan & Croft, 2012; Barry & Gironda, 2019), which shows that dissemination of thought leadership content portrays the employees as knowledgeable advocates, resulting in increased network partner engagement. However, the present study also shows that to successfully engage with stakeholders, employees need to continuously develop value-adding content, not simply by making noise online. Similarly, in line with previous



research (Chen et al., 2020), our results show that organisations that aim to successfully engage with network partners need to encourage knowledge-sharing through their employees and avoid knowledge hiding on SM channels.

Furthermore, we see that SM gives businesses a new opportunity to develop dynamic and multi-party engagement with various business partners, such as investment partners and customers. However, it is targeted and thoughtfully crafted SM content that, according to our case organisations, seem to be the most powerful tool for engagement. This is especially true when content is created and disseminated in collaboration with employees, who engage directly with the target audience. This is also in line with research by Barry and Girona (2019, p.138) who suggest that “*B2B marketers should galvanize their online communities to widely disseminate and endorse the marketer's content for its superior insights*”. Therefore, utilising SM to enhance relationships between organisations has great potential. Even when it comes to engaging with, and acquiring new, partners (acquisition-orientated usage), targeting and careful crafting of messages is still viewed as vital by the more successful organisations.

Call to action strategies, in particular, appear somewhat haphazard and, indeed, were identified by many organisations as being a weak form of engagement. This perception holds especially for organisations that overly constrain the employee engagement and resource pools, leading to a reliance on the reposting of another organisation’s content. In line with previous research (Guesalaga, 2016; Lacoste, 2016), only when organisations have a clear SM strategy focusing on engagement can employees successfully engage with business partners. Organisations recognise that they often lack objective evidence about the correctness of their strategic approaches and are thus cognisant of their need to learn how to better amplify SM. This insight shows that engaging with customers is not as simple as often portrayed and indeed that SM is not a panacea for problems in contemporary marketing communication.

## **5.2. Content Marketing**

Content marketing is considered to be a substantial and often critical factor for business

relationships (Håkansson & Gadde, 2018). Research shows that the type of content on SM, such as information sharing, problem-solving and public relations, influences the levels of engagement (Leek et al., 2019). Digital personal communication of content marketing may be the best method for social interaction online (Murphy & Sashi, 2018). According to Sashi's (2012) customer engagement cycle, content can enhance customer satisfaction and build loyalty, such that customers can become co-creators of value. Our results show that within B2B organisations, content creation and management are complicated, and with varying approaches between organisations. This could be due to the more complex nature of B2B networks and relationships compared to Sashi's B2C context.

Content is a resource that targets various partners and is broadcast across SM channels. Although the general perception amongst our participants was that SM provides an opportunity to engage with partners, the reality is that organisations often recognise that their content strategy is ineffective and acknowledge that they do not (sufficiently) understand their target audience. This finding is in line with previous research (Mitussis et al., 2006; Michaelidou et al., 2011), showing that organisations face barriers and difficulties in automating processes that are somewhat mysterious to them, thus somewhat in defiance of the cyclical process (Sashi, 2012), where different employees provide content at different stages of relational development.

Organisations often face various barriers when implementing SM, such as unfamiliarity with the channels, limited resources, and generally the overwhelming diversity of available platforms (Järvinen et al., 2012). The most used channels were LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook, but the cases placed various degrees of emphasis on these channels, depending on which best meets their planned objective. Employees create content for a target audience, but the broadness of this target audience may depend on the strategic approach of the organisation. One of the key benefits of SM for the business is held to be that the audience helps to create value by becoming a content co-creator (Agnihotri et al., 2016; Breidbach & Maglio, 2016). Interestingly, most of

our cases were creating content targeted for dissemination as opposed to dialogue, again in contrast to Sashi's model. Call to action strategies "live feed" of repost content to encourage engagement via other media, thought leadership strategies focus more on positioning their organisation than on establishing dialogue, and dissemination strategies are more apt to keep people informed, rather than seeking value co-creation. Only a few organisations pursuing co-creation strategies in our sample were trying to engage network partners in a long-term process of ongoing dialogue and engagement. This may be surprising, considering the suggestion that dominance of engagement (many-to-many interactions) is the key to B2B market success (Payne & Frow, 2017), whereas we see a dominance of one-to-many B2B usage in our sample. However, we note that with active engagement on SM, target audiences become co-creators of value and the content then becomes a higher-order resource.

### **5.3. Aligning Strategic Approaches**

The third theme that emerges from this study is the importance of having a strategic approach when implementing SM relationship marketing. No matter if SM strategy is centralised or decentralised, organisations need to have specific goals and objectives in mind. Our sample of organisations either develop strategies collaboratively throughout the entire organisation, or they manage strategies only within the marketing department. In line with previous research (Sheth, 2017), seeking a purposeful, driven relationship on SM successfully adds value to the product or service compared to traditional marketing strategies. To implement SM successfully for co-creation of value, organisations need to align their strategic approaches internally, starting by setting up guidelines and policies and by providing media training for employees. In line with previous research (Kleinaltenkamp et al., 2019), organisations require a 'collaborative engagement', or, based on our analysis, strategic alignment within the entire organisation to understand the dispositions and behaviours of individuals. Contrary to some previous findings (Sashi, 2012), B2B organisations require a well thought out strategic alignment process, rather than a simple cyclical approach to engage with customers and other

business partners.

For organisations to derive benefits from relationships, they need to be cognisant of their independence and dynamics (Håkansson & Shenota, 1995), especially in today's digitalised environment. A potential link could be made with the Actors, Resources and Activities (ARA) model for strategically aligning SM processes. The ARA model, introduced by Håkansson and Shenota (1995), helps in understanding how organisations strategically align themselves to profit from RM strategies. The ARA model is based on the empirical studies of the IMP Group's research stream, which describes the mechanisms by which the three layers relate to one another (Lenney & Easton, 2009). These three layers add to the development of a relationship as well as to its outcome. Therefore, the more layers in the relationship, the more complex it becomes (Håkansson & Shenota, 1995). Similarly, as in the ARA layers, the three themes emerging from this study are interconnected, with the content creator (Actor A) having to consider a target audience (Actor B) in designing content (Resource), they will post (Activity) on the SM (Resource) platform of their choice. Thus, organisations need to link their offline activities with online activities and develop bonds on social networks through resource ties. In other words, organisations link together engagement strategies, content marketing, and strategic approaches to maintain a mutually beneficial relationship. These layers are interconnected and affected by one another, their interplay determines an organisation's success.

## **6. Conclusion**

Despite the growing importance of SM within the B2B domain, prior research in different sectors is fragmentary and requires consolidation. This paper endeavours to address this state of affairs by investigating how contemporary organisations are using SM to manage relationships with business partners. Specifically, we review the strategic approaches that organisations use to engage with SM. This research is based on the understanding that SM is progressively transforming B2B organisations, although it remains unclear how relationships are being managed in the digital space (Beckers et al., 2017; Nisar et al., 2019; Siamagka et al.,

2015). Drawing upon RM theories, we seek to bring some clarity around the SM strategies used by B2B organisations. Deriving an integrative conceptualisation of SM, the analysis identifies four engagement strategies for implementing the channels (Figure 2). By integrating Sashi's (2012) customer engagement cycle with RM theory, we see how employees use SM to develop relationships with existing and potential business partners. We identify that SM is not simply an autonomous tool, and show that organisations are often aware of the ineffectiveness of their approaches, having an inadequate understanding of their online target audience. Furthermore, we identify from this research three core themes for organisations to explore concerning SM usage: (1) Defining their engagement strategies, (2) investing in quality content marketing, and (3) aligning their actors, resources, and activities into strategic approaches for its delivery.

## **7. Managerial Implications**

This study reveals the importance of a coordinated and collaborative approach to SM implementation, but identifies that implementation of this varies across organisations. With the conceptualisation of four distinct SM engagement strategies, along with the identification of content activities, target audience, benefits and challenges, we provide guidance for B2B marketers. By outlining the four engagement strategies, we provide a framework for B2B organisations for managing relationships with business partners (e.g., current and potential customers, suppliers, and industry collaborators). The outlined strategies should enable managers to identify which approach is most relevant for managing their relationships (Fournier & Avery, 2011), and how this aligns with their overall marketing strategy. Although SM research may seem uncoordinated and fragmented, the study indicates a direction towards strategic SM implementation and enables better understanding of how to manage relationships within an online environment. We show that engaging customers, creating valuable content and aligning actors, resources, and activities, results in successful relationship management. For instance, Harley-Davidson applied a co-creation strategy by viewing their customers as friends, thus equals, resulting in strong brand loyalty and persistent relationships (Fournier & Avery,

2011). This example demonstrates that managers need to engage and communicate with their business partners, either in a marriage or friendship analogy, to be able to develop valuable relationships. Content, therefore, plays a significant role when managing relationships on SM (e.g. thought leadership content, incorporation of corporate brand names rather than product brand names). As another example, the recent Volvo Trucks campaign was one of the most successful within the B2B sector due to the provision of valuable content about the use of their products and practical know-how (Pagani & Pardo, 2017; Iankova et al., 2019). Therefore, strategic SM content development and alignment is crucial for relational management. Aligning activities, resources and actors within strategic approaches allows marketers to successfully manage relational bonds with existing and potential actors. Thus, SM is not simply a tool that operates autonomously once set up, but requires ongoing integration and interplay between employees and organisations.

## **8. Limitations and Avenues for Future Research**

We note several limitations of the present study. It took a considerable time and effort to collect, transcribe and analyse the data, which recorded hundreds of pages of transcripts. Thus, continuous investigation of the channels is vital due to the dynamic nature of SM. This study also lacks statistical generalisability. The sample size is small (six product and six service providers), such that two of the identified strategies were populated with only product or service companies. Although we saw no reason that both types (e.g., product and service organisation) of organisations could not harness any of the four strategies, this remains a limitation of the current study. It is therefore important to inspect SM prospectively through a broader empirical lens to establish the generalisability of the present results. Collecting more cases of B2B organisations' strategic approaches to SM strategy could further enhance the validity of the schema in Figure 2, especially across additional dimensions and industrial spaces. Moreover, our study consists, by design, of case studies, which are heavily reliant on individual

interpretations from organisational members. Future research, therefore, should empirically investigate different levels of engagement on various platforms from a) an external perspective (e.g., through LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook), and from b) an internal perspective (e.g., through Facebook Workforce, Yammer, and Slack). Thus, by investigating different types of content and its impact on B2B relationships, we would enhance the generalisability of the model. There is also a lack of research investigating *how* organisations implement and embed SM within their organisations, and towards deidentifying the resources and capabilities needed to make it successful. Future research should therefore explore the implementation of SM in B2B.

The present focus on SM does not explore the strategic potential of other channels available to marketers for relationship and network development. Future research should investigate the roles for SM marketing as part of the broader integrated marketing communications offerings, thus identifying how bonding with new actors, resource ties, and activity links are created inclusive of SM, rather than through SM. Specifically, future avenues for research should investigate B2B relationships in terms of developing relational bonds with potential customers and managing relationships with current customers. This could improve our understand of how ‘collaborative engagement’ or alignment, both internally and externally, is achieved through the use of social networking sites. Various applications of SM are assuming an ever greater value for B2B organisations, but deeper qualitative work in this field could help to build a robust theoretical space affording a better understanding of the role of SM in B2B relationship management.

A final point of note is that this study (as with many on B2B SM utilisation) focuses on the suppliers’ perspectives. We are only beginning to appreciate the value suppliers can gain from developing a co-creative dialogue with customers, but it is not yet clear what value the customer themselves may derive from this. Future research needs to take a customer perspective, to investigate how supply, purchasing, and operational functions utilise SM, and reveal the value

creation potential of the channels for the customer organisation.



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**Table 1: Case Study Information**

<b>Company</b>	<b>Employees</b>	<b>Sector</b>	<b>Interview</b>	<b>Interviewee Details</b>
A	200	Mobile marketing	4	Chief Business Officer, Senior Product Owner, Director of Business Development, Social Media Manager
B	850	Digital customer engagement	3	Head of Marketing, Social Engagement Manager, Client Development Partner
C	23,000	Digital communications	6	Global Head of Digital Marketing, Global Director, Marketing & Comms Director, Senior Comms Manager, Marketing Manager, Head of Corporate Comms
D	1,338	Corporate communication	5	Senior PR & Comms Manager, Head of New Business & Marketing, Associate Director, Marketing & New Business Director, Marketing Executive
E	10	Consultancy	2	Senior PR & Social Media Manager, Managing Director
F	30	Digital advertising	3	Account Director, Account Manager, Social Media Manager
G	250	Office product manufacturer	7	Head of Marketing, Digital Marketing Director, VP & General Manager, Senior EMEA Marketing, Senior Director Brand Marketing, Digital Marketing Executive, Regional Marketing Director
H	450	Potteries manufacturer	6	Head of Marketing, Marketing Assistant, Customer Service Manager, Graphic Designer Social Media, Key Account Executive, Social Media Manager
I	50	Raw material manufacturer	3	Marketing Director, Systems Manager, Operations Manager
J	30	Pharmaceutical machinery manufacturer	3	Chief Scientific Officer, Global Brand Director, Digital Marketing Consultant
K	800	Catering supplier	3	National Account Manager, Social Media Executive, Digital Marketing Director
L	150	Electronics manufacturer	2	Digital Marketing Director, Strategic Marketing Leader

**Table 2: Exposition of B2B social media strategies**

Strategy	Activities	Target Audience	Benefits	Challenges	Company
<b>Call to Action</b> <i>Centralised and acquisition-orientated</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cross-post highly similar content</li> <li>• Raise awareness and encourage recipients to follow the content</li> <li>• Attention grabbing, but potentially nonspecific content</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wide range of non-specific target audience (e.g., connection of the wider public)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reach of a wider audience</li> <li>• Ability to generate content quickly (e.g., by re-posting relevant and timely content)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No specific channel strategy (e.g., social media are used in parallel)</li> <li>• Uncertainty about target audiences</li> <li>• Low quality of content that is not engaging</li> </ul>	B, D, J, F
<b>Dissemination Strategy</b> <i>Centralised and relationship oriented</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tailored (often informational) content</li> <li>• Some focus on mass-communication to target broad audiences</li> <li>• Development of valuable content</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Key but usually pre-existing audiences (e.g., specific key stakeholders and customers)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Higher engagement with existing target audiences</li> <li>• Known target audience resulting in better communication and engagement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of dialogue amongst existing relationship partners</li> <li>• Restrictions within the market</li> <li>• Difficulty in choosing the correct platform for very specific audiences</li> </ul>	I, H, G
<b>Thought Leadership Strategy</b> <i>Decentralised and acquisition-orientated</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employees generate thought leadership content</li> <li>• Relevant and timely content</li> <li>• Personalised content</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Audience targeted based on their preferred content</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Content highly valuable and engaging</li> <li>• High levels of engagement on social media</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time-consuming creation of thought leadership content</li> <li>• Difficultly to continuously generate thought leadership content</li> <li>• Engaging broad audiences increases risk in negative comments</li> </ul>	A, C
<b>Co-creation Strategy</b> <i>Decentralised and relationship-orientated</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Well defined and targeted content</li> <li>• Monitoring and responding to online activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Well-defined audience that relates naturally to their industry</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong online relationships due to well-defined audiences</li> <li>• High levels of engagement between existing connections</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trial and error process</li> <li>• Long period of time to develop beneficial content</li> <li>• Relationships usually very complex that require consistent nurturing</li> </ul>	L, E, K

## Figures

Figure 1 – Coding Diagram

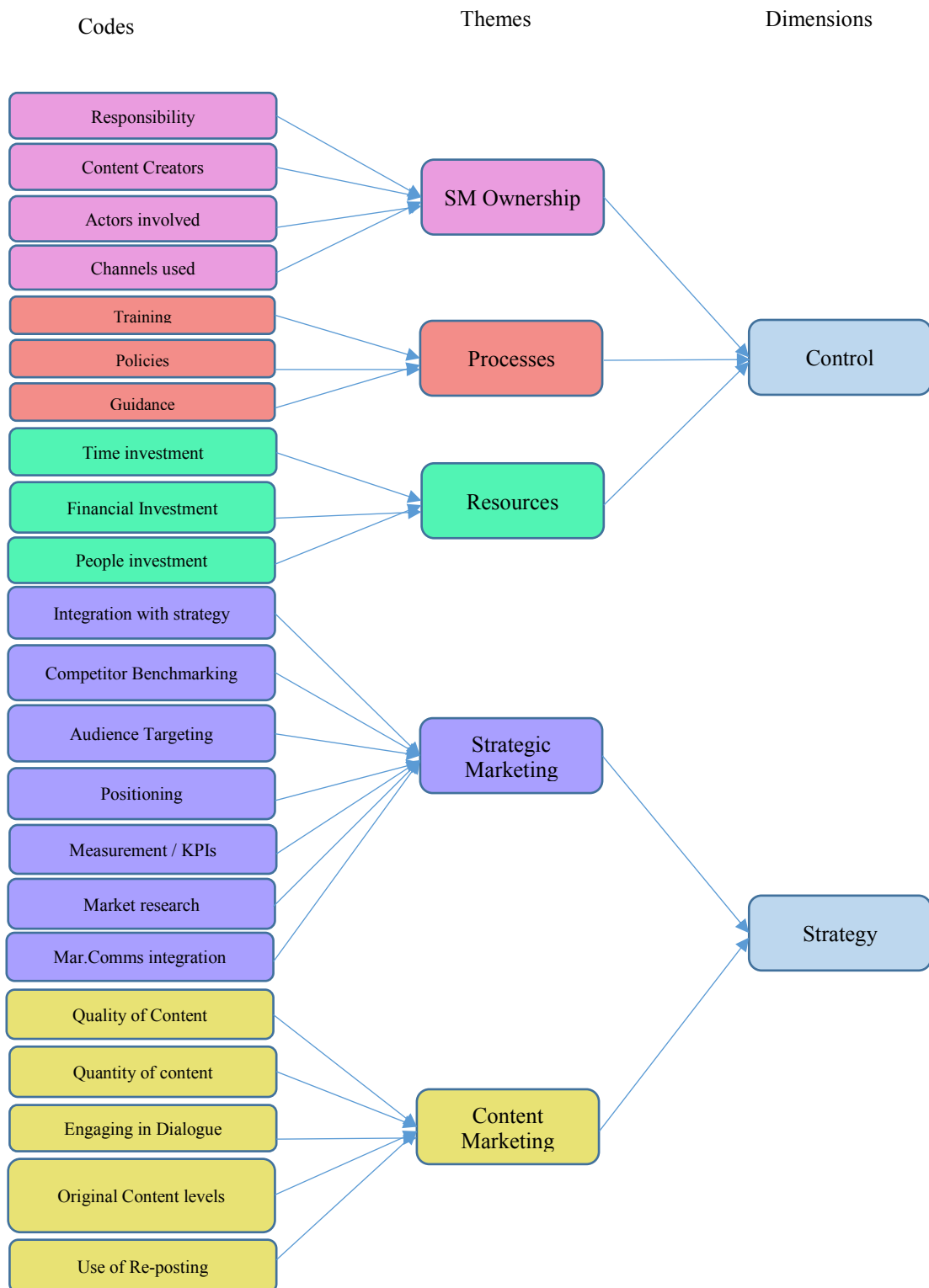


Figure 2 : Customer Engagement Strategies

