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Title: Social media as a B2B activity integrator and creator for the entrepreneurial firm

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Abstract: Social media's (SM) importance as a communication tool has been well documented (Leek et al., 2016, Mehmet and Clarke, 2016, Swani et al., 2014), yet we know surprisingly little about SM from an interaction perspective (Singaraju et al., 2016) or within an entrepreneurial business-to-business (B2B) context (Wang et al., 2016). Given that industrial marketing practice is profiting from SM used by marketers (Salo, 2017), this research gap is salient and raises a pivotal question: In what ways can social media act as an activity integrator or creator in entrepreneurial business-to-business networks? Adopting a business network and interaction approach (Snehota and Hakansson, 1995), the authors employ a case study research design (Yin, 2003) empirically grounded in the artisan food and craft brewery industry in Ireland.

Findings suggest that case participants use SM platforms to interact with current and future potential business partners on a deeper level, moving past basic communication on Facebook and Twitter, demonstrating the ability of SM to synchronise key business activities, such as the coordination of information, the sharing of knowledge, and the mobilisation of resources among B2B partners. SM also provided a platform for the entrepreneurial firms to collaborate to create and co-create new business opportunities between current and future partners. Our contribution rests in highlighting the means through which SM can act as a valuable activity creator and integrator for entrepreneurial firms, in interaction, in B2B networks. Conceptualising SM as an activity integrator and creator holds significance for both research and practice. In this way, SM becomes part of the product/service offered by the entrepreneurs and acts as an activity integrator/creator in developing collaborations, catalysing innovations (Shaltoni, 2017) and promoting value co-creation (Andzulis et al., 2012).

Keywords: Social Media, Activity integrator, Activity creator, Entrepreneurship, Business networks

Paper type: Competitive paper

INTRODUCTION

The meteoric rise of Social Media (SM) sites like Facebook and Twitter has led to a significant shift in modern communication practices, with the business-to-consumer (B2C) marketplace in particular benefitting from their introduction (Mehmet and Clarke, 2016, Andzulis et al., 2012). However, the business-to-business (B2B) sector has lagged behind (Shaltoni, 2017). The academic landscape reflects this, with B2C studies dominating the SM research field compared to the slow uptake in B2B research (Swani et al., 2014). Despite a recent surge in B2B SM research (Shaltoni, 2017, Lacoste, 2016), it remains in its infancy (Siamagka et al., 2015), reflected in calls for more empirically grounded SM B2B research (LaPlaca, 2013, Rapp et al., 2013). A specific area of interest for the authors is that of the unique, entrepreneurial firm - another context extremely limited in terms of SM B2B research (Wang et al., 2016, Sigfusson and Chetty, 2013). SM studies using an interaction or business network perspective are also severely lacking (Singaraju et al., 2016) and an additional area where valuable contributions can be made. With these elements in mind, we adopt a business network and interaction approach (Snehota and Hakansson, 1995) to answer our exploratory research question: In what ways can social media act as an activity integrator or creator in entrepreneurial business-to-business networks?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media and the entrepreneurial firm:

For the entrepreneurial firm, creating value in relationships and networks is a necessity for surviving in a competitive marketplace given that generally, these new ventures abilities to independently exploit value by acting alone is an arduous assignment. The firms dearth of resources in addition to the unique limitations of being small and new (Baum and Amburgey, 1996, Stinchcombe, 1968), restrict the firms development greatly but can be partially overcome through B2B relationships (Hite, 2005). Ultimately, there is an increased chance of growth for the firm if a significant number of activities are initiated with other business actors (Kotha and George, 2012). For this study, we characterise activities as individual tasks or single elements that form an important component of a business process designed to reach a specific goal (Lindsay et al., 2003). These activities can materialise in various forms such as information handling, production, delivery, and administration (Ford et al., 2008). We argue that SM can jump-start and create activities, in interaction, between existing and new actors, as well as integrate existing business activities between network actors, based on how the medium is used by partners. This concept of SM developing importance for the integration and creation of business activities vital to the firm is a novel proposition.

Social media as an activity integrator and creator for the entrepreneurial firm:

The conceptualisation of SM as an *activity integrator* is concerned with activities that the platforms themselves become integrated into, either as means of facilitating the process, or enhancing it through increased speed and efficiency, greatly benefiting the firm. Business activities such as information exchange, knowledge sharing, and order processing have been highlighted in previous studies as vital for the entrepreneurial firm (Drummond et al., 2017). According to the limited literature, SM can act as a medium for information exchange, intensifies knowledge sharing, and has the potential to act as a distribution or logistical information tool (Agnihotri et al., 2016, Georgescu and Popescu, 2015, O'Leary, 2011). SM may be a means for business activity integration for the entrepreneurial firm, embedding itself in the activity links of the case firm participants and web of B2B network actors (Ford et al., 2008, Snehota and Hakansson, 1995).

A more profound conceptualisation this study explores is the idea that SM can facilitate the *creation of activities*, becoming central to the activities created by the entrepreneurial firm and its B2B actors. This focuses on the collaborative capacity of SM - as marketing messages evolve to richer engagement communications between network actors, B2B relationships tend to become more collaborative (Hausman, 2013). As deeper engagement and collaboration are central to SM (Andzulis et al., 2012), if implemented into a marketing strategy effectively they should enhance the collaborative co-creation capabilities and activities of the novice firm. SM's unique 'trialogue' (Toppi et al., 2012) feature and ability to permit virtual co-creation (Lacka and Chong, 2016), can foster co-operation, collaboration and the formation of collaborative communities (Wang et al., 2016, Lacoste, 2016). It is these co-creation activities that ultimately increase revenue for the firm (Shaltoni, 2017, Lacka and Chong, 2016, Wang et al., 2016), a unique aspect of interaction via SM we seek to investigate.

METHODOLOGY

Our investigation is exploratory, and a qualitative methodological approach is taken as a result. The authors utilised ethnographic content analysis (ECA) (Altheide and Schneider, 2013) to collect and analyse significant amounts of SM data in the form of text and images. ECA is a reflexive form of qualitative content analysis, employing an iterative approach towards concept development, data collection, and emergent data analysis (Altheide and Schneider, 2013). This permits pre-determined categories from other studies and extant literature (Drummond et al., 2017) to be used during initial coding of content, but allows other concepts and new categories to emerge inductively during analysis (Altheide and Schneider, 2013). It is highly applicable to this study, as we examine SM communications between network actors and the case firms, investigating the development of various activities through B2B relationships. Analysing the messages exchanged in interaction holds the key to understanding this phenomenon. A case study research design was used with multiple case firms and a triangulation of data used to compare the firm's experiences of SM (Yin, 2003). Case study approaches are utilised by business networks researchers (Halinen and Törnroos, 2005) and is applicable for this investigation, directed specifically at industrial marketing using SM (He et al., 2017).

The researchers chose extreme cases through critical sampling (Patton, 2005), selecting research participants from the Irish artisan food and craft brewery sectors who exhibited high usage of SM, and a number of processes of resource mobilisation via SM (Drummond et al., 2017). Table 1 contains limited details on each case firm. Our analysis focused on two of the most popular SM platforms as data sites; Facebook and Twitter, due to their recognition for B2B marketing practices and relationship development (Leek et al., 2016), and applicability for the limited entrepreneurial venture (Swani et al., 2014, He et al., 2017, Siamagka et al., 2015, Georgescu and Popescu, 2015). The SM data is complemented by text from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the four entrepreneurial case firm owners, who operate the SM accounts of each firm. ECA (Altheide and Schneider, 2013) uncovered key categories of B2B activities developing through SM interaction. The significant amount of coding involved with this large data set, necessitated the use of NVivo, providing additional quality and rigour to the analysis (Welsh, 2002).

	<i>Case Firm A</i>	<i>Case Firm B</i>	<i>Case Firm C</i>	<i>Case Firm D</i>
Founded	2014	2010	2011	2009
Location	Cork city, Ireland	Waterford County, Ireland	Waterford city, Ireland	Waterford city, Ireland
Owner's	'Bob'	'Ciara, Tony, Conor, Jacinta'	'Gill and Terry'	'Shane and Mick'

Education	Degree	Degree	Degree	Degree
Employee's	2	6	8	7
Business Description	Artisan chilli sauce and relish producer	Craft Brewery specialising in traditional style, bottle-conditioned ales and stouts	Craft Brewery, distinguished by high quality, artisanal status	Artisan coffee producer
Case Firm's B2B relationships and network actors	Distributors, suppliers, 300 retailers and independent stores, networking organisations, government agencies, entrepreneurial firms	Distributors, suppliers, publicans, large and independent retailers, artisanal stores, and other entrepreneurial and craft brewing/artisan firms.	Distributors, suppliers, over 300 publicans & retail/off-licences, independent and artisanal stores, entrepreneurial and craft brewing/artisan firms.	Global supply network, sourcing from Brazil, Sumatra, Kenya, and Ethiopia. Distributes to 200+ large retail stores, artisan food stores and independent retailers.

Table 1: Case Firm Overview

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

The analysis of the case firm's SM and interview data provided significant insights, with clear evidence of the influence SM has had upon the B2B activities of the case firms (See Table 2). Information exchange and knowledge sharing activities were integrated into the SM platforms by all of the case firms, as Facebook and Twitter especially, proved to be popular mediums for the transfer of useful information (mostly in the form of external site links or event details) between the entrepreneurial firms and its web of network actors (See Table 2: 1). Specific knowledge regarding the products of the entrepreneurial firms, how best to utilise them, or raw materials availability in a particular industry were poignant examples of the entrepreneurial firms utilising SM for knowledge sharing activities (See Table 2: 2). These findings reflect the suggestions by the literature that SM acts as a vehicle for heightened information access, exchange and knowledge sharing (Agnihotri et al., 2016, Leek et al., 2016, Georgescu and Popescu, 2015), increasing the novice firms B2B activities and relationship development (Quinton and Wilson, 2016).

Case firm A's owner suggested SM's pervasive nature has expanded into vital business activities such as order processing and the day-to-day operational processes of the entrepreneurial firm: *"Butcher I use Twitter. Private messaging they'd use, contact me and ask for X amount of jars, and I'd reply...deliver to them then...If any shop contacts me on Facebook or Twitter, then that's grand, I'm happy with that because it's a sale at the end of the day..."*. Case firm B and C also used SM to receive orders from their B2B partners, predominantly from off-licences or publicans (See Table 2: 3 & 4), while orders were also placed by the case firms regarding raw materials needed from suppliers (See Table 2: 5). The literature suggested SM as a means for lead generation, with the potential for use as a logistical information tool and distribution platform (O'Leary, 2011). However, the study goes beyond these propositions, highlighting the manner in which SM platforms can be integrated by the limited entrepreneurial firm, into its B2B activities of order processing and the logistical distribution of its products.

As an activity creator, both Facebook and Twitter allowed for the intuitive collaborative trait ingrained within the entrepreneurial firm's and other innovative B2B partners, to evolve rapidly when compared to traditional collaborative mediums for these types of interactions i.e. craft brewing and artisan food festivals. Case firm B and C have both collaborated internationally with other breweries (See Table 2: 6), using SM for collaborative communication and promotional purposes. In one particular instance, Case firm A disclosed how the use of SM permitted the new venture and other entrepreneurial firms to combine resources and develop a joint sales promotion concerning the firm's products: *"Myself and 14 other businesses...Each one of us had a hamper to give away, and we posted them up and tagged all the other businesses in the posts to give them away. That got a great reaction..."*.

This entire episode was conducted through SM platforms, without having formal or casual face-to-face interaction – the platforms became not only focal elements regarding the collaborative promotion activity (See Table 2: 7), but the communication, organisation and execution of the collaboration itself. SM gave the traditionally geographically restricted entrepreneurial firm a means of making these collaborations possible virtually, and became a focal part of the collaborative activities themselves, vital to their creation.

Further collaborative interactions between network actors appeared to spark initial ideas regarding the creation of innovative joint product developments, or new product ideas at the very least (See Table 2: 8 & 9). The use of SM platforms gave the novice venture a better platform for embarking on potential collaborative opportunities, as SM mitigated the fact that entrepreneurial firms are usually restricted to the periphery of the relevant network (Sigfusson and Chetty, 2013). Again, SM became a pivotal piece of the activity puzzle, creating the opportunity for the case firms to interact with network actors in relation to new ideas or collaborative products. SM also allowed for the speedy creation of new networks and potentially collaborative communities, specifically on Twitter through platform-wide hashtags, such as ‘#FF’ (See Table 2: 10). These symbols connected SM users together instantly, forming a relevant community of industry participants and developing a potentially collaborative network of B2B actors for the entrepreneurial firm to interact with to create value in its B2B relationships. This inimitable ‘trialogue’ aspect of SM (Toppi et al., 2012), fosters co-operation, collaboration and the formation of collaborative communities (Wang et al., 2016, Lacoste, 2016), demonstrating SM’s vast potential as an activity creator for the limited, entrepreneurial firm. These fascinating elements of SM, reflecting the ability to create and integrate activities between the entrepreneurial case firm and its network of B2B partners, were mirrored by multiple case firms.

#	Social media data examples from case firm's A-D
1	'Did you see this @CaseFirm? {LINK to info}' 'Thank you! @*****'
2	'Hey, does anyone know where you can get Masa Harina – maze treated with lime, for tortillas – in Cork? @CaseFirm@*****@*****' '@***** @CaseFirm @***** not sure bout Cork, Mark bt @***** sells online @***** Irish masa marina soon' '@***** yep, we stock Mexican masa-harina at @*****' '@***** is the best place to get it' 'Thanks guys'
3	'Hi guys. Can you send me 24 bottles of Comeragh, 12 Helvic and 12 Black rock. Thanks, Kevin.'
4	'Can we please order 2 cases please' 'Sure, can we drop them in tomorrow? What time is someone there from' '2 pm onwards! Thank you' 'No problem! Do you guys have Heatsink yet, our smoked chilli porter?' 'We'll take a case of that too!'
5	'@***** howya lads, we'll have another box of beans next time you're passing please #fuelledbycaffeine' '@CaseFirm no problem lads, I'll get to you first thing in the morning'
6	'Collaborative St.Patricks Day brew with [Brewery] for [Pub chain].'
7	'We've teamed up with lots of our Supervalu Food Academy friends to giveaway over €1500 worth of Irish Artisan food. Each day over 12 days one of our food academy friends will host a giveaway to win a hamper full of tasty treats for Christmas! Today [business] are hosting the competition on their Facebook page. Check them out here...'
8	'Have you guys ever thought about collaborating with a brewery to make a coffee beer?' 'Funnily enough we had a brief char with @***** we must follow up with them' '@CaseFirm let's do it!' '@***** @***** sounds good we will have to oragnise a meet up to get sampling'
9	'@CaseFirm Hey guys, hope you're well. Thanks for following back and welcome to our #tortillarevolution' '@***** hey guys sounds good. Chilli and tortillas is gooooo' '@CaseFirm That's what I was thinking, would love to partner up at some stage' '@***** sounds good. Get onto us when suits!'
10	'#FF to some fav foodies - @***** @CaseFirm @***** @***** @*****' '@*****@CaseFirm @*****@*****@***** cheers Lisa! #FF right back'

Table 2: Social Media Quotes

Table Legend: Case Firm, *Network Actor 1*, *Network Actor 2*, *Network Actor 3*.

CONCLUSION

In an overall sense, as an activity integrator, SM holds significant potential for the firms to create value for the network actors in interaction, and construct part of complex forms of interaction. These findings suggest that entrepreneurial firms use SM platforms to synchronise activities and share resources between B2B partners, involving the coordination of information and knowledge flows with multiple network partners (Agnihotri et al., 2016; Andzulis et al., 2012; Hausman, 2013; Leek et al., 2016) that could add to products and services exchanged. Most importantly, this study produces evidence that SM can become a new, alternative supply chain and order processing mechanism for the novice organisation (O'Leary, 2011), bypassing traditional or other online logistical methods, and at the very least becoming integrated with an existing distribution system. SM provide a platform for the entrepreneurial firms to collaborate - to create and co-create new business opportunities between current and future partners. In this way, SM becomes part of the product/service offered by the entrepreneurs and acts as an activity creator in developing collaborative communities, collaborations, catalysing innovations, and promoting value co-creation (Shaltoni, 2017; Lacoste, 2016; Andzulis et al., 2012).

Our study responds to calls for more empirical research investigating B2B marketing and SM (LaPlaca, 2013; Rapp et al., 2013; Salo, 2017) and, more specifically, in an entrepreneurial context (Drummond et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2016). We add to the entrepreneurship, social media and business network literature by revealing how SM technologies can integrate seamlessly into key business activities and processes of the entrepreneurial firm, such as; information exchange, knowledge sharing and operational order processing, as well as being central to the creation of collaborative, entrepreneurial community network, and co-creation activities (Lacka and Chong, 2016; Wang et al., 2016; Lacoste, 2016). This is important as, in practice, the low cost and simplicity in use associated with SM (Siamagka et al., 2015; Georgescu and Popescul, 2015) make it an attractive medium for entrepreneurial firms to utilise business relationships for the integration and creation of new key business activities, overcoming the difficulties associated with being a new venture (Baum and Amburgey, 1996, Stinchcombe, 1968). Larger firms are already realising B2B benefits from using SM (Wiersema, 2013) and this research adds to a rapidly evolving area (Shaltoni, 2017; Agnihotri et al., 2016), highlighting SM's ability to level the business playing field for novice firms when competing in the industrial marketplace (Mohajerani et al., 2015).

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