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Elements of strategic social media marketing: A holistic framework

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ABSTRACT

Social media marketing is an integral element of 21st-century business. However, the literature on social media marketing remains fragmented and is focused on isolated issues, such as tactics for effective communication. The current research applies a qualitative, theory-building approach to develop a strategic framework that articulates four generic dimensions of strategic social media marketing. Social media marketing scope represents a range from defenders to explorers, social media marketing culture includes the poles of conservatism and modernism, social media marketing structures fall between hierarchies and networks, and social media marketing governance ranges from autocracy to anarchy. By providing a comprehensive conceptualization and definition of strategic social media marketing, this research proposes an integrative framework that expands beyond extant marketing theory. Furthermore, managers can apply the framework to position their organizations on these four dimensions in a manner consistent with their overall corporate mission and objectives.

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1. Introduction

Understanding the role of social media in the context of marketing is critical for both researchers and managers (e.g. Fong & Burton, 2008; Kumar, Bezawada, Rishika, Janakiraman, & Kannan, 2016; Schultz & Peltier, 2013). Most existing studies focus on particular issues, such as purchase behavior (Chang, Yu, & Lu, 2015; Kumar et al., 2016; Relling, Schnittka, Sattler, & Johnen, 2016), customer relationship management (Trainor, Andzulis, Rapp, & Agnihotri, 2014), brand management (Asmussen, Harridge-March, Occhiocupo, & Farquhar, 2013), innovation management (Gebauer, Füller, & Pezzeri, 2013), and employee recruitment (Sivertzen, Nilsen, & Olafsen, 2013). While these studies detail advancements in specialized areas of social media knowledge in a marketing and management context, extant literature does not provide a holistic framework for social media marketing at the strategic level. This deficiency is surprising because both academics (Labrecque, vor dem Esche, Mathwick, Novak, & Hofacker, 2013; Schultz & Peltier, 2013; Yadav & Pavlou, 2014) and practitioners (Divol, Edelman, & Sarrazin, 2012) acknowledge new complexities accompanying these media and agree that research into social media marketing needs to be reconceptualized. In a nutshell, strategic social media marketing

remains an untested user interaction paradigm (Naylor, Lambertson, & West, 2012) with little published academic research.

The current article aims to address this theoretically and managerially important research gap by exploring the following two research questions: How is strategic social media marketing defined and conceptualized? and What factors demand consideration when constructing an organization's social media marketing strategy? Specifically, this research attempts to define the continua on which critical strategic social media marketing decisions lie and to integrate them into a holistic framework.

The theoretical contribution of this research is threefold. First, this research provides a comprehensive definition and conceptualization of strategic social media marketing. This conceptualization goes beyond an isolated focus on consumers and/or communicative aspects discussed in existing social media marketing literature. Findings, frameworks, and theories from disciplines such as Human Resources (Sivertzen et al., 2013), Organizational Management (Heller Baird & Parasnis, 2011), Public Relations (Eyrich, Padman, & Sweetser, 2008), and Communications (Linke & Zerfass, 2013) represent important elements of strategic social media marketing. Second, the current research defines a theoretical framework outlining the crucial dimensions on which strategic social media marketing decisions are made and the trade-offs involved in positioning a firm along each of the key continua. Third, this research integrates social media marketing into a more strategic marketing and management context. In sum, the findings of this research provide an advanced theoretical understanding of social media marketing that can guide managers' decision making when

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developing and improving their strategic social media marketing activities.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Social media marketing objectives and outcomes

Extant research empirically investigates specific social media marketing objectives (e.g. Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Bernoff & Li, 2008; Bianchi & Andrews, 2015; Schultz & Peltier, 2013), including stimulating sales, increasing brand awareness, improving brand image, generating traffic to online platforms, reducing marketing costs, and creating user interactivity on platforms by stimulating users to post or share content. Along with these predominantly proactive objectives, companies can use social media marketing in a more reactive way. For example, firms can monitor and analyze conversations in social media to understand how consumers view a firm or its actions (Schweidel & Moe, 2014). Many firms also try to reduce the risks of improper social media use by their employees by setting rules on how social media should be used in work-related contexts (Rokka, Karlsson, & Tienari, 2014). Indeed, specific social media marketing objectives and challenges may depend on factors such as the industry (e.g., B2B vs. B2C) and the size of the firm.

2.2. Boundary conditions of effective social media marketing

Research also investigates the fundamental elements that constitute social media to better understand potential positive and negative implications of social media for the firm (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Labrecque et al., 2013). For example, Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, and Silvestre (2011) identify seven functional building blocks common to all forms of social media: identity, conversation, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, and groups. However, social media marketers use these elements with differing emphases to create value for users.

The effectiveness of social media marketing may also depend on the specific role consumers assign to companies and brands within the social media sphere. Consumers may perceive companies and brands as “interlopers,” “party crashers” (Fournier & Avery, 2011), or unwanted guests in the interactive space (Schultz & Peltier, 2013). In contrast, extant research (e.g. Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Canhoto & Clark, 2013) suggests that many users expect firms to participate in social media and may even purposely pull firms into the social media conversation by either mentioning the brand or “hashtagging” the firm. This discrepancy may reflect a heterogeneous consumer base, in which one group of consumers is comfortable with proactive and engaged firms while another rejects the corporate invasion of social media space.

Finally, research suggests that both the type of industry and the type of product influence the impact of social media marketing. For example, Corstjens and Umblijs (2012) show that the competitive nature of the firm’s primary industry moderates the effect of social media marketing and that in the hotel industry, firm reputation impacts the effectiveness of social media efforts. Moore, Raymond, and Hopkins (2015) find that both B2B and B2C sales personnel use relationship-oriented social media marketing to accomplish similar selling process tasks. In summary, the marketing literature identifies factors that influence the effectiveness of social media marketing efforts. Required, therefore, is a social media marketing framework that goes beyond firm or market-specific characteristics to show the general dimensions on which managers make firm or situation-specific social media marketing decisions.

2.3. The need for a holistic social media marketing approach

Extant marketing research does not analyze social media marketing from an overarching, holistic perspective. Holistic, as used in this study, refers to the notion that the components of the overall construct cannot be divorced from the whole, and Brunner-Sperdin, Scholl-Grissemann, and Stokburger-Sauer (2014) define the term as the configuration of

the components that ultimately determine a response to a setting, situation, or concept. The interconnectivity and complexity of social media platforms render the management or even the conceptualization of employee responsibility regarding these technologies extremely difficult. For example, Rokka et al. (2014) show that management, employees, and customers operating in social media construct meaning differently. They conclude that their investigated firms were working toward, but had not clearly developed, a framework for managing their employees’ responsibilities within the social media sphere.

Quinton (2013, p. 913) suggests that the “linear, relational, exchange-based partnership” that firms have been using to explain their relationships with consumers is no longer valid. The rise of social media has changed the balance of power with respect to both the control of a shared reality and the individual’s ability to express a brand narrative. Quinton proposes a move from a relational orientation to an interactional orientation focusing on multilayered interactions that can cross both venues and media. Whereas the relational orientation focuses on one-to-one communication, the interactional orientation emphasizes multifaceted relationships based on sharing within and between digitally enabled communities (Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007). Thus, in an expansion similar to the transformation from advertising to integrated marketing communication, social media marketers must be aware of the abundance of possible moderations and consequences arising from participation in social media venues.

De Swaan Arons, van den Driest, and Weed (2014) highlight the extreme dynamism accompanying marketing in the digital age. They remark that “[t]ools and strategies that were cutting-edge just a few years ago are fast becoming obsolete, and new approaches are appearing every day” (p. 56). Thus, marketers must continuously manage new challenges along with organizational and philosophical changes, such as the inclusion of other departments or employees in the execution of marketing actions. In short, De Swaan Arons et al. (2014, p. 59) conclude that “[m]arketing has become too important to be left just to the marketers.”

Finally, the marketing literature does not address other social media challenges, such as the responsibilities of social media marketers (e.g., defining the employees who are responsible for managing social media marketing) and the role of internal and external stakeholders (e.g., defining rules and recommendations for the governance of the firm’s social media presence). Thus, both scholars and practitioners perceive the need for a holistic and interdisciplinary framework for the conceptualization of strategic social media marketing.

3. Methodology

Because previous knowledge pertaining to strategic social media marketing is sparse and fragmented, the current research employs a discovery-oriented, theories-in-use approach (Argyris & Schön, 1978). This perspective allows for the capture of important facets, meanings, and motivations associated with social media marketing based on the voices of the informants, who all have professional social media marketing expertise as managers and/or consultants. These insights are difficult or impossible to detect through conventional quantitative research methods (Corbin & Straus, 2008). Rather than focusing on statistical generalizability, the current approach is based on whether the findings from the study could be meaningfully transferred to other contexts (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

3.1. Samples and data collection

The study employed a two-stage research design. The first stage consisted of in-depth interviews (Fontana & Frey, 1998) with seven European social media marketing experts who possess both national and international experience in social media marketing (see Appendix A). Following a purposive sampling strategy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), experts were recruited according to their job position, experience, and

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