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Authors	Drummond, Conor;O'Toole, Thomas;McGrath, Helen
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UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Digital engagement strategies and tactics in social media marketing

Abstract

Purpose - Digitalisation has increased the importance of online forms of marketing, including social media (SM) marketing, for entrepreneurial firms. The aim of this paper is to identify the digital engagement strategies and tactics in developing social media marketing capability.
Design/methodology/approach - The study uses ethnographic content analysis of an entrepreneurial firm and a network of business-to-business (B2B) actors to classify 1,248 B2B Facebook posts and Twitter tweets from a case of an artisan food producer in addition to semi-structured interviews with twenty-six networked actors.
Findings - We derive a range of digital engagement strategies (eight in total) and tactics (fifteen in total) for the four defining layers of social media marketing capability, labelled; Connect, Engage, Co-ordinate, and Collaborate.
Research limitations/implications – This research focuses on a case study and a network of B2B actors within the artisan food sector. However, the strategies and tactics are applicable to other entrepreneurial firms and contexts.
Practical implications – The digital engagement strategies and tactics are of direct practical benefit to entrepreneurial firms willing to learn and develop social media marketing capability, in interaction, with their business-to-business partners.
Originality/value – This study investigates three under-researched areas, SM as it relates to B2B relationships, and entrepreneurship, and marketing capability gaps in an era of rapid digitalisation. The definition of SM marketing capability and associated digital engagement strategies and tactics are new to the extant literature moving forward our understanding of SM business-to-business marketing in theory and practice.

Keywords Social media marketing capability, Facebook and Twitter, Digital engagement strategies, Digital engagement tactics, Business-to-business relationships.

Paper type Case study

Introduction

Social Media (SM) has a ubiquitous presence in marketing in general (Valos *et al.,* 2014), particularly in a Business-to-Consumer (B2C) context. Although Business-to-Business (B2B) SM research is still in its infancy (Bocconcelli *et al.,* 2017; Quinton and Wilson, 2016; Swani *et al.,* 2014), we know that industrial marketing practice is profiting from SM use by marketers (Salo, 2017). Yet we know surprisingly little about SM from a relationship and network marketing perspective (Bocconcelli *et al.,* 2017; Singaraju *et al.,* 2016) or within an entrepreneurial B2B context (Drummond *et al.,* 2018; Sigfusson and Chetty, 2013).

The potential benefit of SM marketing for the entrepreneurial firm lies in its ability to generate value in relationships and networks. For the entrepreneurial venture, its low resource commitment, ease of implementation and simplicity to use (Chahine and Malhotra, 2018; Georgescu and Popescul, 2015) compared to traditional marketing communications has particular appeal. SM allows participants to connect, share information and begin dialogue with one another (Leek *et al.,* 2016), mobilise resources (Drummond *et al.,* 2018), aid the sales process (Agnihotri *et al.,* 2016), and intensify relationships with existing industrial partners

(Jussila *et al.,* 2012). Additionally applicable advantages include; its marketing campaign efficiency and effectiveness (Iankova *et al.,* 2018), immediate responses (Jussila *et al.,* 2012), a place to connect with virtually no barriers to entry (Toppi *et al.,* 2012), helping to create awareness, build brand image, and share knowledge in existing B2B connections (Andzulis *et al.,* 2013).

While the benefits of SM marketing are attractive, rapid digitalisation can bring accelerated complexity for managers, firms and markets, which require new thinking about marketing capabilities (Day, 2011). Responding to marketing capability gaps, this research focuses on social media marketing capability, defined as the ability of the entrepreneurial firm to connect, engage, co-ordinate, and collaborate in interaction with business exchange partners. In interaction is significant and central to the industrial network (Håkansson and Snehota, 1989; Håkansson *et al.,* 2009) and relational exchange perspectives (Dyer and Singh, 1998; Lorenzoni and Lipparini, 1999), the theoretical lens adopted for this study. As such, the capability is positioned as being developed and fine-tuned in interaction with business customers, suppliers, distributors and competitors. In line with all capabilities, social media marketing capability is not innate or instinctive (Teece *et al.,* 1997); rather, it takes time to build (Hite, 2003; Larson and Starr, 1993), and this process is learnt and leveraged through experience gained in interaction (Dyer and Singh, 1998; Zahra, *et al.,* 2006). Capabilities, by virtue of their overriding ambition to attain competitive advantage, are heterogeneously developed and distributed (Day, 1994; Zahra *et al.* 2006). Given the increased importance of SM for the entrepreneurial venture and their underdeveloped knowledge of same (Henninger *et al.,* 2017), this paper unpacks social media marketing capability and poses the following question: What are the digital engagement strategies and tactics used in developing social media marketing capability for the entrepreneurial firm? To address this question, we empirically examine SM marketing capability employing ethnographic content analysis with an exemplar case firm complemented with interview data from the firm's network of actors.

This study responds to calls for more empirical research investigating B2B social media marketing (LaPlaca, 2013; Rapp *et al.,* 2013; Salo, 2017), capability development processes (Day, 2011; Winter, 2012) and, more specifically, in an entrepreneurial context (Autio *et al.,* 2011; Drummond *et al.,* 2018; Sigfusson and Chetty, 2013; Zahra *et al.,* 2006). However, the importance of this paper is manifold beyond the paucity of studies in the space. The entrepreneurial firm can access much needed resources through the use of SM marketing capability, overcoming the traditional limitations associated with being new and small (Baum *et al.,* 2000; Stinchcombe, 1968). Resources can be acquired from outside the firm's local network context as social media, with its open platform orientation, allows interactions from any potential new network actor, broadening the entrepreneurial firm's network horizon (Holmen and Pedersen, 2003). This can provide the firm with access to a wider pool of resources helping them to break free from an over-reliance on their initial local network. Understanding techniques of how to effectively use SM for marketing purposes are lacking (Iankova *et al.,* 2018), the literature on strategic use of SM requiring further empirical research (Salo, 2017). Providing a range of digital engagement strategies and tactics in the development of SM marketing capability breaks new ground in showing the strategic usage of SM to create new value in interaction that can be appropriated by the entrepreneurial firm and its partners. Understanding the engagement strategies and tactics can facilitate the entrepreneur in developing SM marketing capability, which is important as recent research suggests their underdeveloped appreciation of social media, which requires practical advice (Henninger *et al.,* 2017).

Our paper begins by reviewing the literature on social media and Internet based marketing capabilities. Using the extant literature in the social media and entrepreneurial relationship space, we provide a robust definition of SM marketing capability. The entrepreneurial firm's profile is outlined as is the ethnographic content analysis (ECA) of the data from the Facebook and Twitter accounts of the case firm. The findings and discussion present eight engagement strategies and fifteen tactics linked to the development of social media marketing capability, contributing to the literature in this space. The strategies and tactics are concluded to have practical value for firms, as they can be directly applied in an SM relationship development campaign.

Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations

Theoretical background

Increased digitisation and the advent of social media is reshaping marketing, changing the way we communicate, collaborate, consume and create (Valos *et al.,* 2014). Rapid marketing change generates accelerated marketing complexity. The traditional view of marketing capabilities as integrative processes designed to apply the collective knowledge, skills and resources of the firm to market-related needs of the business (Day, 1994: 38) is being challenged as firms must learn to cope with, comprehend and fruitfully leverage disruptive marketing based technologies (Day, 2011). Vital marketing capabilities such as market research, pricing, product development, channels, promotion, and market management (Vorhies *et al.,* 1999) need to be complemented with new adaptive capabilities to address the marketing capabilities gap (Day, 2011).

Recently, we have witnessed an emergence of literature focused on digital based marketing capabilities. Recognising the importance of digitalisation, Bianchi and Mathews (2016) define Internet marketing capabilities as a firm's capability to use the Internet in marketing functional areas such as online advertising, online sales, online after sales, market research, purchasing/procurement to generate value for customers. Nguyen *et al.* (2015) introduce the concept of social media strategic capabilities, or the ability of firms to integrate their knowledge garnered from social media, resources, and skills with their strategic directions. The definition of SM marketing capability presented in this paper departs from, and adds to the two digital marketing capabilities found in the literature in three important ways. Firstly, social media marketing capability is not assumed as inherent, rather developed in interaction processes between the entrepreneurial actor and his/her network. It is defined using a relational exchange perspective (Dyer and Singh, 1998; Lorenzoni and Lipparini, 1999) which views competitive advantage as stemming from idiosyncratic capabilities embedded and developed in interaction in dyadic and network relationships rather than developed internally at an individual firm level. Thirdly, SM is viewed as part of the capability rather than as a communication tool for capability development.

Social Media Marketing Capability

SM marketing capability comprises four layered abilities, the ability to connect, engage, co-ordinate, and collaborate in interaction with business exchange partners. It rests on SM's ability to create activities and resources in interaction between the entrepreneurial firm and its B2B partners. Marketing activities and resources created may range from a simple connection to a new B2B customer or to the co-creation of a new service or product via interacting on SM.

The ability to connect and engage as part of SM marketing capability development are related to the way in which entrepreneurs can communicate using the technology. SM has reshaped communication methods (Mehmet and Clarke, 2016). SM is often defined, and thus confined in this way as a usage or communication tool (Leek *et al.,* 2016; Swani *et al.,* 2014) to enable other activities and resources to be activated, for example, to improve customer engagement, customer service, lead generation, and support marketing outcomes (Järvinen *et al.,* 2012; Michaelidou *et al.,* 2011). Using social media in this way, the entrepreneurial firm can reach out beyond their restricted network context or the part of the network the firm considers relevant (Anderson *et al.,* 1994) into a wider network horizon (Holmen and Pedersen, 2003), to bring new and diverse activities and resources into the firm. Few studies have focused on how entrepreneurial firms can develop relationships and networks in this way (Sigfusson and Chetty, 2013), to establish contacts with new business customers or distributors, and develop existing relationships as well as replacing older ones (Bocconcelli *et al.,* 2017; Lipiäinen, 2015).

'Connect' is defined as the ability to target and receive specific messages to sought after B2B actors outside the entrepreneurial firm's local networks. Defined in this way, SM is viewed as a connection and communication tool (Lacoste, 2016). Strategies in resource and activity interactions centre on SM as a means to initiate relationships with a wider network horizon than the local context to which they are embedded. This could include initiating relationships with business customers, distributors (Schultz *et al.,* 2012), or other network actors where the message content is and can be personalised and designed with reciprocity in mind (Toppi *et al.,* 2012). The communication has become more strategic and is designed to initiate dialogue on activities such as information handling, production, delivery, and administration (Håkansson and Johanson, 2002) which can develop towards the two-way use of SM as B2B relationships develop (Quinton and Wilson, 2016; Shih, 2009; Swani *et al.,* 2014) and the message increases in complexity (Mehmet and Clarke, 2016).

'Engage' refers to the ability to immediately communicate social and business messages between current and future B2B relational partners. SM's use as an engagement tool begins where the actors create a conversation or two-way, bilateral engagement. Message content is created in interaction, meaningful for all parties, forging deeper relational engagement (Harrigan *et al.,* 2015). Engage in the B2B relationship marketing sense moves beyond the simple notion of customer engagement as the message content is created between the partners through their interaction on SM. In engagement, the nature and atmosphere of this primarily bilateral content is unique to the interacting parties.

Coordinate and collaborate are related to how entrepreneurs can use the technology to co-create value (Frow *et al.,* 2015). Viewed in this way, SM can be bundled with other resources and, as such, be used by interacting firms to link and create activities and resources in combination with one another. That is, SM can be transformed in interaction in a strategic relationship marketing activity or resource where a degree of uniqueness is created in interaction. Viewed as a relationship and network marketing development tool, SM has the potential to be an activity and resource in its own right with wider strategic relationship marketing value, which can be harnessed to create value for network actors in interaction, and to be part of complex forms of interaction.

We define 'Co-ordinate' as the ability to synchronise activities among, and to share resources between, B2B partners. Viewed in this light, the SM platform becomes part of the resource or activity in itself. At a resource level, this could involve the coordination of information and knowledge flows with multiple network partners (Agnihotri *et al.,* 2016;

Andzulis *et al.,* 2013; Leek *et al.,* 2016) that could potentially add to product and services exchanged. SM is immediate, involves real-time conversations, new dialogue and multiple discussions simultaneously (Fischer and Reuber, 2011; Iankova *et al.,* 2018). Hence, SM can be used to configure activity between partners to resolve problems and as a resource to quickly respond to partner needs.

'Collaborate' is defined as the ability to create and co-create new activities and resources between current and future partners. Of the four defining layers of SM marketing capability, it may be the most difficult for competitors to imitate. SM may offer the potential for multiple actors, in partnership with the entrepreneurial firm, to cooperate on new activities that create business opportunities for the firms. B2B relationships become more collaborative with engagement and there has been some evidence in recent years that SM can support increasingly complex forms of interaction, such as collaborative co-created activities (Lipiäinen, 2015). In this way, SM acts as a resource and activity in developing collaborations, catalysing innovations (Shaltoni, 2017) and value co-creation (Andzulis *et al.,* 2013). SM, in the context of collaboration, becomes part of the product/service offered by the entrepreneurs. For example, by using SM a group of entrepreneurial firms can cooperate to offer their produce at a co-operative event. The essence of this collaboration, that is what they are offering to the buyer, is not possible without its creation in a virtual environment. The barriers to its creation and logistics needed to make this a reality would be too great in the physical environment or using traditional marketing media. This impact is one beyond viewing SM as just a communications platform. We suggest that SM, as a collaborative network resource, enables the entrepreneurial firm and its partners to co-operate to create new products, new services and, potentially, new business networks.

Digital engagement strategies and tactics

We have defined social media marketing capability to comprise an ability of a firm and its partners to use the digital medium to co-create activity and resource layers in interaction and outlined these layers. However, for this capability to be realised in practice it needs to be cascaded from a meta-theoretical, relatively abstracted (higher-order), concept. This is achieved through translating it into digital engagement strategies and tactics. Linking capability to strategy and tactics addresses the need to develop marketing theory that is relevant and applicable to practice (Bonoma, 1984; Grönroos, 2006; Homburg *et al.,* 2017; Marcos-Cuevas *et al.,* 2016).

Digital engagement strategies represent the purposeful element of planning for implementing social media marketing capability (see, for example, Chirumulla *et al.,* 2018) who develop SM adoption strategies for the marketing-R&D interface). These strategies represent the overall approaches to guide action and, in the case of this research, will be derived from working between the data and the four capability layers. Strategies of this type represent the framework that a firm can use to set objectives and plan its social media marketing effort. Digital engagement strategies in a collaborative context necessitate thinking about how message content can be used to initiate resource and activity interaction of which SM is a part. Identifying these engagement strategies will then present an array of choices to implementation, which are interdependent on reactions and actions of partners including B2B customer, suppliers and competitors.

Tactics enable the realisation of social media marketing capability into practice. Putting the capability into effect completes a cycle of the cascade of capability to strategy to practice, which informs its next iteration. Marketing tactics are the implementation of

strategies into practice or everyday marketing actions to achieve market goals (Bonoma, 1984; Tafesse and Wien, 2018). In this research, we will be directly deriving engagement tactics from social media accounts of an entrepreneurial firm and validating them through interviews with its network of partners. This data will facilitate the grouping of tactics to match the layers of social media marketing capability. Tactics are especially attractive to the entrepreneurial firm as they are the action components of SM engagement, which suit the 'ready fire aim' agile nature of the entrepreneurial firm (Harrison and Leitch, 2005).

Methodology

Research design

This study employed a qualitative research methodology, utilising a single, embedded case study research design (Dyer and Wilkins, 1991; Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2003), and an ethnographic content approach to data analysis (Altheide, 1987; Altheide and Schneider, 2013) of an entrepreneurial firm and its network of actors to identify the digital engagement strategies and tactics employed to develop SM marketing capability. Case study research is the most popular method used in the study of business networks (Halinen and Törnroos, 2005; Easton, 2010) and suits the study of relationship engagement and interactions being built over SM platforms (Beverland and Lindgreen, 2010). This method acknowledges calls for more qualitative B2B SM research (Alves *et al.* 2016) and aligns with the theory building objectives of our research (Cope, 2011; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007; Järvinen and Taiminen, 2016).

Selecting a single case study design allows for deep understanding and rich description (Dyer and Wilkins, 1991) and can be utilised to provide a very powerful example (Siggelkow, 2007). Furthermore, the connectedness of business networks comprising multiple actors makes gaining rich insight into network processes complicated, which may render single case designs both fitting and inescapable (Halinen and Törnroos, 2005; Easton, 2010). Recognising that "richness may lie in the eye of the beholder" (Weick, 2007: 14) we sharpen the view through the use of 26 embedded cases to strengthen our study, gain further insight, and meanings (Eisenhardt, 1991; Yin, 2010) perceived as vital to understand complex business relationships (Dubois and Araujo, 2007). Case studies allow for multiple methods to be used (Baxter and Jack, 2008; Kohlbacher, 2006), leading to a more comprehensive understanding of the practices involved (Wahyuni, 2012). The three data sources selected for this study were the communications between network actors on the SM platforms frequently utilised by the case firm (Facebook and Twitter, in this instance), two in-depth interviews with the entrepreneurial case firm owner who operated its SM accounts, and one interview with 26 actors whom the case firm engaged with on SM. In total, almost 40 hours of interview data was collected.

An ethnographic content analysis (ECA) approach (Altheide, 1987; Altheide and Schneider, 2013) was utilised to analyse the substantial volume of textual data generated (Bernhard *et al.,* 2010). ECA is used to gather and analyse content of text (Weber, 1990) which is then codified into various categories depending on selected criteria and specific content characteristics (Opoku *et al.,* 2008). ECA differs from traditional quantitative content analysis in a number of ways. Firstly, the researcher is central to the process (Altheide and Schneider, 2013) as the approach is essentially a recursive and abductive movement between concept development, coding, analysis, and interpretation (Bryman, 2012). Secondly, although there is initial categorisation applied to the data (our four layers of SM marketing capability in this study), the expectation is for the boundaries of these to evolve during the course of analysis.

ECA is a more reflexive approach that allows concepts and categories to emerge iteratively during analysis, rather than depending on predetermined and rigid categories associated with a more deductive study (Altheide, 1987).

We limited the unit of analysis to be measured by examining B2B marketing engagements made through two social media sites, Facebook and Twitter. This choice was mainly an outcome of the empirical data collected, as the entrepreneurial case firm rarely used or mentioned the use of other social media sites. This approach has been used in other studies in the same area of research (Lacoste, 2016). Additionally, entrepreneurs that use SM sites on a personal level, with Facebook and Twitter tending to be the most commonly used (Harrigan *et al.,* 2015; Leek *et al.,* 2016), predictably tend to use the same platforms for their business ventures and potentially in a similar manner (Keinänen *et al.,* 2015). As a result, SM communications were analysed from Facebook and Twitter only.

Case description and selection

The Case Firm 'Artisan' is an entrepreneurial venture, established in 2014 by 'Bob'. The firm is based in the South of Ireland and currently employs one person. It produces a range of artisan sauces distinguished from the competitors in the market by their high quality taste and artisanal status. Currently, the business is undergoing rapid expansion having attained a listing in one of Ireland's largest grocery retail chains and is now available in 300 of its stores. The case firm is distributing to independent retail stores in the UK and Dubai with the firm's UK exports, in particular, growing substantially in the past 12 months. Case selection commenced with an in-depth analysis of our outcome of interest, the social media activities of eight entrepreneurial firms (Dubois and Araujo, 2007). The case firm was chosen as an exemplar, purposive case from among the researchers' data bank of eight cases in the industry sector to meet our study's theoretical aims (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2003). This decision was based on the owners expertise in SM and the firm's extensive and sophistication of its use of SM (Felix *et al.,* 2016), in comparison to the other cases analysed and its use of same to build its B2B relationships and networks. 'Artisan' was deemed an information rich case (Patton, 1990), allowing the researchers to gain insights that the alternative entrepreneurial firms would not be able to provide (Siggelkow, 2007) due to their less collaborative use of SM.

The researchers were able to gather data from the firm's SM accounts from when they were set-up, which included the period prior to the firm commencing trading. The social media accounts are controlled by the firm's owner manager, which provided a baseline of consistent interaction with network partners and more strategic use of SM. In addition, the firm facilitated the researchers in making contact with all of its B2B network actors that it engages on SM, which allowed us to collect rich interview data in addition to having access to the content of the SM accounts of the entrepreneur. The firm has a number of vital business actors in its network, including two main distributors, multiple suppliers, numerous independent stores and other entrepreneurial firms with whom the case firm has built and maintained relationships.

Data sources

The data sources for the analysis were from the SM accounts of the entrepreneur and from interviews. The researchers analysed data from two of the case firm's SM accounts, Facebook and Twitter. SM platforms such as Facebook and Twitter facilitate communication in several specific ways (Macnamara, 2012). For example, you can 'post' comments on other user's

communications (A 'status update' on Facebook, or 'Tweet' on Twitter), 'like' Facebook pages, 'follow' Twitter pages, and 'Tweet' or 'Re-tweet' to Twitter users. For this study, Facebook 'Posts' and Twitter 'Tweets' were analysed. These communications were gathered from when the firm created the Facebook and Twitter accounts, in 2011 and 2010 respectively, up until January of 2017 - the study's data collection end period. Of note, the accounts were set-up when the entrepreneur viewed the business as a hobby, with the majority of content posted from the end of 2013. The SM data was collected using image capture software (the snipping tool function in word was used and the resultant Jpeg images were uploaded to NVivo), as many of them included images, video, links to external internet sites/pages, and interactions among actors. In total, 920 Facebook posts and 1,152 tweets were collected. The analysis of the two SM data was supported by two in-depth interviews (lasting approximately 1.5h each) with the entrepreneurial firm's owner in order to gather his perspective, experiences and opinions (Bryman, 2012) on SM for B2B relationship and network engagement. We also interviewed 26 actors with whom the case firm engaged on SM. The interview data was used to solidify and validate the capability layers and tactics, and to identify the strategies developed from the ECA.

Data analysis and coding strategy

To cope with the large amount of data generated, the ECA was complemented by using CAQDAS software, NVivo, to ensure accuracy in the coding procedure, making the data handling easier and transparent (Ryan, 2009). The first stage of data classification was to reduce the SM data to B2B posts and tweets only. The unit of analysis focused solely on B2B marketing engagements between actors using SM. Given the theory development objectives of the paper, the ECA method permits analysis to move recursively between data and theory. The second stage of analysis was to link the SM posts and tweets to the four layers of SM marketing capability. As these were loosely defined at the start of the process from the extant literature, an open coding procedure was followed (Miles and Huberman, 1994), and this coding process iteratively made the boundaries of the layers of capability clear. We relied heavily on NVivo codes or verbatim chunks of data to categorise SM engagements. The third stage of coding was again limited to the SM data and coding the data assigned to each of the capability layers into groups and labelling each of the resultant digital engagement tactical categories. The fourth stage of data analysis and coding, which also acted as a validity check on the process to date, classified the interview data from the entrepreneur and his network of SM actors into the tactical categories. The overall amount of data classified to this stage is presented in Table 1 in numeric format (1,248 posts and tweets, and 596 pieces of interview data). Once the digital engagement tactical categories were finalised and the definitions of the four layers of the SM marketing capability bounded, the researchers worked between these two classifications and the interview data to derive the digital engagement strategies. The details of each of the coding stages are presented in the next section and linked to sample SM and interview data in appendices A and B.

Data coding process

The first stage of analysis resulted in the SM data being condensed to business-to-business (B2B) interactions only – included were business actors such as suppliers, distributors, retailers, other entrepreneurial or larger firms, as well as various other business interest groups such as local enterprise groups, independent media, and food bloggers. This was achieved by noting all user names/social media aliases of those who interacted with, or were

interacted with by, the firm and determining whether they were a business (B2B) actor or a consumer actor (B2C). This was verified by checking each individual SM profile of the relevant interaction which took place ensuring they were a B2B actor. Upon completion of this task, the B2B communications reached a combined total of 1,258 Facebook posts and Twitter tweets (10 communications could not be classified leaving 1,248 for further analysis). The reasons for the excluded posts were due to duplicated posts, an incorrect B2B network actor identification, and a B2B entity named in a business-to-consumer engagement.

The second stage of data analysis involved the researchers coding the large quantity of social media B2B data captured. This commenced by linking the posts and tweets to one of the four layers of SM marketing capability. This enabled the researchers to develop the initial boundaries between the four layers further. Appendix A provides 77 key examples of the SM data from this process related to the four defining layers.

The next stage in data analysis concentrated on grouping each post and tweet in the capability layers and labelling the resultant categories (see, Table 1). This data analysis began by first categorising the Facebook posts and Twitter tweets that were assigned to our four categories based on social activities or behaviours of the network actors, and the type of interaction. For example, the engagement may have been in relation to a potential supplier wanting contact information, classified as 'potential partner post', or a discussion on or promotion of an upcoming food festival, classified as 'food festival post'. The analysis was completed by generating common groups around the identified activities or topic of the engagement. The researchers employed a similar process to Zubiaga *et al.* (2015), in their study of SM trends, grouping the tweets or posts under categories based upon the type of activity or communication employed by the network actor, and completed with the discretion of the researchers in terms of which category was appropriate for each engagement. For example, the case firm would send 'feeler posts and tweets' to other business actors to try and instigate a conversation for the first time. This was reciprocated as an activity by other business actors to the case firm. In total, 54 of the Facebook posts and Twitter Tweets fell under this tactics grouping. Another example was the grouping of collaborative elements of the case firm's SM activities. The announcement and promotion of tasting events, food festivals, or farmers markets that were held in conjunction with other network actors would fall under the same category heading of 'collaborative events and pop-up post and tweets' – this yielded 385 Facebook posts and Twitter tweets. In total, 1,248 posts and tweets were grouped under 15 different SM relationship marketing tactics groupings. At the end of this stage of data analysis 15 tactics categories were finalised and linked to the four layers of SM marketing capability (see, Table 1), and their development solidified further the boundaries and the definition of the layers in line with our abductive theory building research process.

The final stage of data analysis used NVivo to link the interview data to the layers of SM marketing capability and to the 15 digital engagement strategies. This was conducted using codes in NVivo from the capability layers and the labels of the digital engagement tactics to classify the data. Sample data from the interviews is presented in Appendix B and Tables 2-5. The researchers also manually coded some interviews to validate the coding process. In overall terms the interview data confirmed the categories from the earlier stages of coding with very little change at this final stage. To complete the process of linking digital engagement tactics to SM marketing capability, the researchers compiled a set of SM digital engagement strategies for each of the layers. These reflect the strategic rationale behind the digital engagement tactics groupings the case firm employed for building B2B SM marketing capability. We identified eight SM digital engagement strategies in total (see, Table 6) by

working back and forth between the boundaries of the four layers of SM marketing capability and the tactics and using some data from the interviews where we were able to ask about the rationale for using various SM engagements (see, Appendix B, for some data examples from this process).

(INSERT TABLE 1 HERE)

Data authentication

The NVivo coding was completed by one of the researchers. At each stage of the data coding process peer debriefing was extensively used by the researchers (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Although one researcher led the coding activity and conducted the physical coding practice, a group debriefing session was held at each stage with all researchers present to discuss the codes. Sample data was drawn for each category developed to debate the robustness of its classifications. The final boundary definitions of the SM marketing capabilities, the labels of the tactics grouping and the strategies were agreed by all the researchers. Disagreements were resolved through further iterations of coding until each member of the research team was satisfied with the finalised categories for each stage of the coding process. A codebook was used, iteratively developed over this entire process, and is reflected in the definitions of each tactic category. For example, Table 3 outlines a detailed description for each tactic grouping in the connect layer of our SM marketing capability. Use of a codebook also ensured a level of inter-coder reliability and reduced the bias that may be attributed to a sole coder. Validation of the data using two sources of data (Smith *et al.,* 1994) – SM data and interviews - in addition to a suitable audit trail through the use of NVivo, completed the rigour of the research process.

Findings

The theory development objectives of our paper were developed through a recursive cycle of abductive analysis. Our findings are summarised as follows: Table 1 summarises the results of our ECA data quantitatively and aligns it to the layers of SM marketing capability and to the 15 tactical groups that emerged from our SM data analysis. It also presents the number of interview data pieces aligned to each tactical grouping for the case study firm and its 26 SM partners. In each section of the findings we make reference to appendices which contain sample raw data for SM posts and tweets (Appendix A) and interviews (Appendix B) which backed up our classification of the SM data. Tables 2-5 present the post-analysis descriptions of the 15 SM digital engagement tactics groupings that an entrepreneurial firm can use to implement its SM digital engagement strategies (8 identified) in the development of SM marketing capability. While our findings are presented for the case firm, supporting evidence from the 26 embedded network actors for each of the digital engagement strategies and tactics is provided in Tables 2-5 and Appendix B. Our findings are organised around the four layers of SM marketing capability: connect, engage, coordinate, and collaborate.

Connect: Digital engagement strategies and tactics

The case firm demonstrated the use of both SM platforms to target messages strategically with reciprocal engagement in mind and to connect with sought after business actors outside its local networks. For example, network actors would try and reach out to the case firm to establish contact (Appendix A, data examples 1 and 2 (AA, 1&2)), while the case firm, in turn, would do the same with possible business partners or entities it viewed as having the potential to add value to it (AA, 3). Appendix A data examples 1-9 are of feeler posts and tweets tactics used to initiate relational dialogue (Appendix B has sample interview data for

actors, 7, 16, and 26 that also illustrate feeler posts). This tactic grouping was also evident in the interview with the case entrepreneur, Bob, for example: *"…It's also good for contacting people, articles and publishing...More and more I see people saying 'I saw you on Twitter'. So I see it as a good way of generating, or at least initiating a relationship."*

The case firm attempted to establish online connections with its retailers through delivery announcement tactics (AA, 10-14) of new stockists on a regular basis (AA, 10&11), in addition to deliveries being made to restock retailers (AA, 12), and enquiring as to how a new stockist was finding the case firm's produce (AA, 14). Potential network actors also left rating, reviews and recommendation posts and tweets (AA, 15-18) regarding the quality of the case firm's product or service (AA, 15&16). This was reciprocated by the case firm in many instances towards similar entrepreneurial ventures or local restaurants (AA, 17&18), explained in the interviews: "*I would put up stuff as well that say - Oh can't wait to try out this new product from X company or I just tried out Y company's new product, it was savage*" (Bob).

Finally, the case firm would share content (AA, 19-22) from network actor's profiles in order to try and commence a new relationship with that network actor (AA, 19), while current network actors such as suppliers or retailers would have their content shared by the entrepreneurial firm to promote the existing offline relationship (AA, 20&21). Business actors would reciprocate with, for example, a firm sharing the case firm's new website (AA, 22) (see, additional examples for interviews for actors 3 and 10 in Appendix B). The post-data analysis description of the digital engagement tactic category, connect, is presented in Table 2.

(INSERT TABLE 2 HERE)

Engage: Digital engagement strategies and tactics

The message content in this category depends on reciprocity and is created in interaction between the case firm and network actors. The message content involves social and resource communication in a primarily bilateral engagement on a dyadic level but also on a multi-actor level.

Dyadic bilateral conversations posts and tweet tactics (AA, 23-28) on general topics were common which facilitate the case firm and responding network actors to develop their business relationship further. The level of engagement and further reciprocation varied: "*Some will just like the post, others will comment back and say oh glad you enjoyed it, love your products too. Most would say something like that or that they can't wait to try Case Firm A! Most would reciprocate in that way yeah. If they haven't tried our product then they tend to, and will put up a post*" (Bob). New network actors commended the firm on its recent appearance at an event, awards won in industry competitions, or recent expansion of the business (AA, 24&25). Existing relationships with network actors were also maintained through holiday greetings (AA, 26), thanking a firm for its help (AA, 27), or interaction around seeing each other at some event or gathering (AA, 28).

Many posts and tweets regarding the acknowledgement of a network actor's first interaction (reciprocation and new partner posts and tweets tactics grouping data AA, 29-33) were also common. Network actors engaged with the case firm by 'following' their Twitter account or 'liking' their Facebook page. The case firm engaged with multiple new businesses through SM, many making enquiries into whether they could be considered as stockists of their sauces (AA, 30&31). Posted and tweeted tactics centred on ratings, recommendations and conversations were evident (AA, 34-38). For example, the case firm receiving and

responding to praise and official reviews from various network actors via SM (AA, 34&35). The primary difference between this grouping and the similarly named 'rating, review and recommendation posts and tweets' grouping in our 'Connect' category of our framework is that these posts were often reciprocated. An example of this tactic from the interview transcript is as follows: *"I put up a post a while back for Salad-Store1 inside in town, saying that I'd stopped off for lunch and that their stuff was great… another place up in Dublin called Lunch-Store1 posted a picture of their food when I had lunch there.…some will just like the post, others will comment back and say oh glad you enjoyed it, love your products too...."* (Bob).

Finally, evidence of multi actor or multilateral conversations posts or tweets tactics between multiple network actors was present throughout the SM data. These multi-thread communications (conversations with multiple 'comments' on Facebook or response 'Tweets' on Twitter, around the same, initial interaction) showed that both platforms support the case firm and its network of business partners to engage successfully in a public setting with content created through interaction on many topics (see, examples, AA, 39-42). Back up interview data with the case firm's network of SM partners for each of the tactical groupings in this section are in Appendix B (eight sample pieces of data presented for the engage layer from a total of 103 pieces from the 26 interviews (see, Table 1)). The description of the engage tactic category is presented in Table 3.

(INSERT TABLE 3 HERE)

Co-ordinate: Digital engagement strategies and tactics

The case firm used both SM platforms to respond quickly to its B2B partner needs, to action and create activity with its partners. The firm was also able to use SM to share knowledge and information that adds to product and services exchanged in the network.

Sample data for the information sharing tactics grouping is presented in the sample data in appendix A (AA, 43-47). Other entrepreneurs shared external links and information they believe the case firm might find useful (AA, 43&44), retailers shared information regarding the availability of the firm's produce in their stores (AA, 45), with the case firm sharing listing information as well (AA, 46), and blogs/recent reviews would be shared by bloggers or industry leaders (AA, 47). Knowledge sharing (AA, 48-53) was also disseminated between the case firm and its network of business actors in an effort to create additional value. Businesses enquired as to how best to use the sauces provided by the case firm with their own products (AA, 48), with the firm making suggestions for food pairings in multiple conversations (AA, 49&50). Other entrepreneurs, restaurant owners and chefs consistently asked the case firm regarding the availability of raw materials in Ireland (AA, 51&52), with others requesting the official heat level of certain sauces (AA, 53). Six piece of data from the interviews with the case firm's network actors is presented in Appendix B for these two co-ordinate tactic groupings.

Another co-ordinate category use of SM by the entrepreneurial firm was in relation to order processing and fulfilment (AA, 54-58). The case firm and its network actors utilised SM to conduct activities such as; ordering products (AA, 54&55), re-stocking existing retailers (AA, 56), altering order or delivery details (AA, 57), while it would also share details regarding delivery times and dates with some retailers on occasion (AA, 58). The Case Firm owner explained how one of his longest serving retailers used Twitter solely to re-order products, while Facebook was also used by a number of retailers and restaurants: *"Yeah, Butcher1 use*

Twitter. Private messaging they'd use, contact me and ask for X amount of jars, and I'd reply…deliver to them then. …The odd time shops would do it, but mainly them. Restaurant1, I know the manager…he uses Facebook to contact me about the same thing...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…Places have contacted me directly asking for samples…."(Bob). The final description of the co-ordinate tactic category is presented in Table 4.

(INSERT TABLE 4 HERE)

Collaboration: Digital engagement strategies and tactics

In the collaborate category, the case firm demonstrated the ability to use its SM platforms as an activity integrator between one to many partners and to co-create new resources between one or many partners. The case firm and its network actors engaged in activities surrounding the promotion and execution of collaborative events and pop-up posts (AA, 59-65) where multiple network actors took part such as food markets or food and drink festivals (AA, 59&60). The case firm also used SM as an outlet to promote collaborative events with retailers such as food tastings (AA, 61), and the firm actively engaged in specific entrepreneurial events, workshops, and boot camps that utilised SM as the primary promotion tool and communication throughout the event (AA, 62-64).

SM was utilised by the case firm for product adaptations and collaborative food pairing posts and tweets (AA, 66-70). New product partnerships and collaborative food projects were announced via both platforms for the first time (AA, 66&67), while other network actors such as chefs, bloggers, and even some other businesses, would create and post to SM their use of the case firm's products in new recipes or in combinations of a variety of artisan products (AA, 68-70). As the case owner commented: *"There has been people who have used the sauces to do stuff, I know Pub1 are using them and Restaurant1 are using them for burgers, that's them making something using my sauce so quite happy about that.... Blogger1 would do lots of recipes and would post that she is using Case Firm's sauces in them…."* (Bob).

Joint or group efforts were also made via SM for the purpose of collaborative sales promotional posts and tweets (AA, 71-73), especially in the form of collaborative competitions or giveaways – many of which were initiated and fully executed over either Facebook or Twitter without offline interactions taking place. The firm cooperated with many firms via SM for the creation of competitions where produce from multiple network actors would be combined to give away (AA, 72&73). An example from the owner's interview was as follows: *"…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…Some of the traction you got online…was crazy, which was great. The reach organically was massive."*(Bob).

Finally, SM made it possible for the entrepreneurial firm and multiple networks actors to collaborate on new activities and resources. This was evidenced in the collaborative networking posts and tweets (AA, 74-77) between the case firm and its network of business actors. SM enabled the entrepreneurial firm and its partners to collaborate more easily on events such as farmers' markets, festivals (AA, 74), and potentially develop new networks through #FF (Follow Friday) (AA, 75&76). This #FF function made it possible for one network actor to publicly connect multiple businesses using one tweet. Sample data from the interviews with the case firm's network of actors is presented in Appendix B for all of the

tactical categories of the collaborative layer of SM marketing capability. The description of the digital engagement tactical grouping is presented in Table 5.

(INSERT TABLE 5 HERE)

Discussion and conclusions

The aim of this research was to identify the digital engagement strategies and tactics aligned to a business network approach to SM marketing capability of the entrepreneurial firm. In the literature review we proposed a definition of SM marketing capability comprising four layers of digital engagement. These layers were theoretically bounded and defined, and their associated digital engagement strategies and tactics were derived from the SM data of an entrepreneurial firm complemented by interviews with its owner and 26 of its network partners. The final definitions of the four layers and their associated digital engagement strategies (a total of 8) and tactics (a total of 15) are presented in Table 6. The contribution of this research is its development of a definition of SM marketing capability and its identification of digital engagement strategies and tactics for the entrepreneurial firm linked to this definition. From a theoretical standpoint, SM marketing capability is translated into practice via the strategies and tactics, and this cycle is recursive.

(INSERT TABLE 6 HERE)

Our contribution is significant in the light of the entrepreneurship and capability based literatures remaining largely silent when it comes to the study of capability development in entrepreneurial firms (Autio *et al.,* 2011; Zahra *et al.,* 2006). Our definition of SM marketing capability adds to this limited literature and further addresses the marketing capability gap in an era of change and digitalisation (Day, 2011). SM marketing capability and the associated digital engagement strategies and tactics also contributes to the literature by focusing on SM from an entrepreneurship and business network perspective (La Rocca *et al.,* 2013; McGrath and O'Toole, 2018; Shepherd, 2015). The dearth of published work in this area is surprising given the importance of networks for entrepreneurs to overcome their liabilities of newness and smallness by providing a conduit to external resources.

The definition of SM marketing capability comprising four layers of engagement fits the action orientation of the entrepreneurial firm (Davidsson, 2015; McMullen and Shepherd, 2006) by focusing on how SM is used in interaction with its business partners. The definitional layers are based on a business network view of marketing in relationships and networks (Ford *et al.,* 2003; Håkansson and Snehota, 1995) which focuses its unit of analysis on the interaction and interdependence among business actors. Whilst there are other views of how business-to-business relationships might be coordinated (Felix *et al.,* 2017), it would be difficult for an entrepreneurial firm with a limited network power base, influence, and marketing knowledge to use these approaches to build marketing capability. Layers of capability classifications are ideally thickly bounded (Durand and Paolella, 2013) and are presented as such in Table 6. The use of each ability is not mutually exclusive, meaning the available combinations of strategies and tactics emerging from the layers are wider than in categorisations based on multiple theories or either or options, albeit our ability labelled 'collaborate' does require the most sophisticated SM ability to use effectively. Our defining layers are based on an interactive, collaborative SM position and integrated around this thematically (Finch *et al.,* 2012; Fjeldstad *et al.,* 2012) rather than presenting SM use along

opposing marketing strategies or within a singular typology (Homburg *et al.,* 2004; Woodside *et al.,* 1999). The four layers presented in Table 6 are thus an integrated SM B2B engagement resource for the development of SM marketing capability for the entrepreneurial firm.

The eight strategies presented to digitally enhance interaction in relationships and networks using SM are defined in Table 6. Our eight strategies comprise message content, message reach, message co-creation, SM as a problem solving activity, as an activity structure, as a resource provider, and as a resource. There are few SM strategies in the empirical literature for B2B marketing and those that exist tend to be for established firms, see, for example, Lacoste's (2016) strategies for how key account managers use SM, or Schultz *et al. (*2012) profiling of salespersons' use of SM. In addition, extant strategies tend to be developed for the single actor delivering an autonomous strategy, for example, a larger B2B actor building its brand, rather than in combination with other actors as in this paper. They are therefore inclined to define SM strategy in a more limited way, predominantly as a communication and engagement tool (Quinton and Wilson, 2016; Rapp *et al.,* 2013) rather than as being part of a potential resource and activity in a relationship (Baraldi *et al.,* 2012; Drummond *et al.,* 2018; Gadde *et al.,* 2012). Therefore, we advanced the literature by identifying the value in defining SM, in addition to its use as a communications tool, as a resource engaged in interaction with B2B network partners.

Table 6 defines the fifteen SM tactics categories derived from our case analysis and aligns them to the to the four capability layers and to the engagement strategies. Tables 2-5 provide detailed descriptions of each tactic category. The tactics represent the action or practice part of our capability. Each of the four layers of capability has a prescriptive set of tactics available to the entrepreneurial firm to enable them to implement SM engagement strategies and to learn in interaction with their partners. Our tactics groupings extend the work on the assessment of B2B SM usage in prior studies by Lacka and Chong (2016), Michaelidou *et al.* (2011) and Swani *et al.* (2014) by delving into the actual tactics, which includes the content of the messages, and by using an interactive relationship marketing approach to present an array of such tactics. We further develop ideas on content sharing by adding the element of co-created content and messages in an interactive space. Our tactics are also specific to the entrepreneurial firm context, which is underrepresented in industrial marketing research (Drummond *et al.,* 2018, Sigfusson and Chetty, 2013).

Whilst it is difficult to draw analogues between the business network approach to digital engagement and relational approaches taken in consumer marketing it is useful to provide a perspective on how both canons converge and diverge. In terms of the work outlined in this paper, the assumptions and motives of the collaborating partners are unlikely to have a parallel in SM consumer relationship marketing as firms aim to manage the interaction with consumers to a considerable degree regardless of their level of involvement (Iankova, 2018; Roberts *et al.,* 2014; Trainor *et al.,* 2014). Cooperation of the type outlined in this paper is more apparent where consumer self-organise their own SM communities (Goh *et al.,* 2013). We have tried to adhere to a common nomenclature for the layers of SM marketing capability and do find similar SM strategies in consumer marketing to our connect and engage layers (see, Kao *et al.,* 2016). However, as our co-ordinate and collaborate categories involve the co-sharing and creation of resources in interaction it is difficult to find similar processes in SM relationship consumer research. Indeed, SM marketing capability is not divisible by a single layer but in the totality of engagement with network partners without which it does not adhere to the strategic nature of possessing a capability.

In practice, for entrepreneurial firms, our definition and associated digital engagement strategies and tactics groupings enable firms to develop a more planned approach to SM B2B relationship marketing, right through to implementation. However, to exploit SM in this way requires a partnering mind-set which may have to be learned. SM communication is transparent, and goals and motives are visible to partners, which makes pursuing our strategies risky without a co-creation or co-sharing agenda in mind. Nonetheless, we present tactics groupings which can be easily applied to other entrepreneurial firms. The SM message content and how the medium can be used are defined for each tactic grouping which makes the practical implication of this part of our research very direct. The tactics and strategies are the stepping stones to SM marketing capability development and bridge the theory building practice divide evident in much research.

Our paper is based on a single case study and its network of B2B actors with researcher access being facilitated to the SM communications of the firm. Thus, the findings are limited by the context of our case firm and their associated network. The case firm's use of SM developed over time with a level of sophistication of network engagement which enabled this research to derive the capability building process. Whilst the specific value co-created by the cooperating network of firms has not been analysed in our research, interviewing 26 network actors lends significant support to the findings. An opportunity for further research is to explore the SM marketing capability development process in the context of other networked actors or across a different sector. Additionally, two communication platforms were selected for analysis, Facebook and Twitter, as they were the ones used by the case firm. Further research could, however, examine alternative SM sites such as Instagram, not analysed in this paper. Our tactical groupings may be bounded by the technologies we analysed and including other SM platforms might expand the range of engagement tactics notwithstanding the validation of our approach through the use of the interview data. Finally, the results of our study were not evaluated at the level of the technology platform but each type, given its design, is more useful at performing certain tasks, and inter-actor communication for certain activities may gravitate towards a particular platform. We used the interaction among actors as the unit of analysis of the study but the technology itself could also become a unit of analysis in a future study.

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