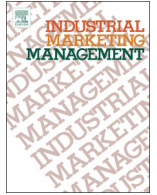




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Tensions and ties in social media networks: Towards a model of understanding business relationship development and business performance enhancement through the use of LinkedIn

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 27 February 2015

Received in revised form 28 November 2015

Accepted 10 December 2015

Available online xxxx

Keywords:

Social media networks

LinkedIn

Netnography

Business relationships

Wine industry

Business performance enhancement

ABSTRACT

The era of social media networks has created significant opportunities for business relationship development yet there exists a paucity of research in this area. To address this, this paper identifies four key tensions within the current literature: relational versus transactional exchanges, emergent versus strategic social media network development, the pace of social media network formation versus the development of trust, and the notions of sharing and reciprocity versus competitive advantage. This study draws on the principles of netnography, incorporating data from 554 LinkedIn group interactions and 12 interviews with professionals in one global industry to provide insight into business relationship development stemming from one social media network. Significant contributions to theoretical and practical knowledge are made through the recognition of tensions in the literature, the application of the notion of Granovetter's ties to a contemporary context and the novel use of netnography. Furthermore, the resultant model conceptualises the use of social media networking in building networks and relationships which lead to new business and enhance business performance.

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1. Introduction

The digital era and subsequently the emergence of social media networks has created unparalleled opportunities for businesses. However, these opportunities present tensions within the established understanding of business relationships and networks generally. Whilst social media may have eased the process of relationship building (Michaelidou, Siamagka, & Christodoulides, 2011; Jussila, Kärkkäinen, & Aramo-Immonen, 2014) it has also added further layers of complexity (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). The pace and immediacy of network formations and interactions have been hastened through the presence of social media (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011; Obal & Lancioni, 2013), so rapid relationships are being built yet importance is still attached to gradual business relational development versus rapid transactional exchanges (Achrol & Kotler, 2011). In addition, strategic rather than emergent network development has maintained prominence despite the increased volume of potential relationship opportunities (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Edelman, 2013) afforded by social media networks and their extended reach (Lee, Hwang, & Lee, 2006). Furthermore, on one hand social media networks enhance

collaboration (Hoffman & Fodor, 2010) and encourage trust and yet on the other they can also assist in identifying competitive information (Yadav & Pavlou, 2014) which can provide advantage to one organization over another.

Thus there are strains between the recognised notions of business relational development, the immediacy offered by the social media environment and the formation of ties and trust. By identifying and investigating these tensions in business relationship development, within the context of social media networks, business performance may be improved. Understanding the development of relationships through social media networks will lead to more effective use of these networks and the further creation of value (Ehret, Kashyap, & Wirtz, 2013). This paper extends the extant research on ties (Granovetter, 1983) and the evolution of business networks (Halinen, Medlin, & Törnroos, 2012; Möller & Svahn, 2009) into the social media arena, and in particular, social media networks which are currently lacking in research attention. Both in terms of resource efficiencies and optimising relationships it is important for businesses to understand further how digital technologies, including social media networks, affect relationships and networks within business to business environments (Obal & Lancioni, 2013). Thus the aim of this paper is to first identify tensions within the current literature on business relationships, network development, and ties in relation to social media networks and, second, to investigate business relationship development in one particular industry, the wine industry, within one social media network, LinkedIn. The resultant model will

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conceptualise the use of social media networks in building networks and relationships which lead to new business.

In order to assist the reader and add clarity to this paper the following key concepts are explained; networks, business networks, social media networks and ties. Networks are viewed as inter-organizational and group exchanges involving people, which prior to the advent of digital technologies, were commonly focused around geographic regions or other off-line criteria, but are now borderless and can include online groups such as social media networks. A business network has been clearly defined at a pragmatic level by Håkansson, Ford, Gadde, Snehota and Waluszewski (2009:236) as “a network consists of the tangible and intangible investments that comprise the connected relationships between two or more businesses” though this definition does not take account of how those relationships come into being nor the level of permanence of the relationship, nor the mechanisms of the exchanges that occur. Social networks have their roots within sociology, predate social media networks, and have erroneously been used synonymously with social media networks in the popular press. Social networks are concerned with the connections established between two or more actors. These connections can become beneficial for those actors and can lead to improved economic value and performance for those businesses to which those actors are connected (Stephen & Toubia, 2010). Once connections are formed different levels of inter-connectedness are possible between the actors. The connectedness can be termed ‘ties’ and ties are stronger or weaker depending on the level of inter-connectedness and span (Granovetter, 1983). The increased reach enabled by digital technologies has enhanced both the diversity of network types and subsequently the types of ties formed within those social networks as the social networks now incorporate social media networks.

The use of technology, and in particular digital communications technologies, has reshaped the working practices of multiple industries. The dispersed nature of the global wine sector, the multiple channel partners and the need for building and nurturing business relationships would indicate that LinkedIn would be a relevant social media network for the wine business community and as such, represents an appropriate lens through which to examine the nature of relationships in a complex business to business environment. For example, the expansion of wine production globally (Castaldi, Cholette, & Frederick, 2011) has led to wine makers becoming highly mobile consultants, cellar experts moving from producer to producer and distributors reaching further afield to locate new markets, all of whom and the organizations they work for requiring new and different relationships. In order to fully reflect the digitalised environment, this study employs netnography, the collection and analysis of online/social media data generated through online interactions between individuals interested in a specific topic, (Flick, 2014) as an appropriate research approach. Netnography involves immersion in relevant online communities, including social media networks, and employs unobtrusive observations made of naturally occurring online behavior such as conversations between individuals and or groups in order to glean insight into consumer and business behaviors. Digital technologies have enabled access to and the harvesting of ‘real’ content from these communities and social media networks. Netnography can be considered as the updating of fieldwork in ethnographic research to the digital era (Kozinets, 2010).

For researchers, this study makes several important theoretical contributions. First, the study clearly identifies the key tensions within the literature on business relationship development, the formation of ties and the ‘real time’ notion of social media network interactions. Second, through the contemporary application of Granovetter’s concepts of ties his work is made relevant to the digital era. More practical contributions include that this study contributes to the development of a corpus of much needed research in the social media networking domain that links how businesses use social media networking with the value of doing so and identifies future research directions. Furthermore, the use of netnography within the context of business to business research

is novel and this paper demonstrates the value of netnography as a research tool. Finally, the creation of a model will explicate to practitioners the relevancy and potential value of LinkedIn as a relationship facilitator and business performance enhancer.

Having provided a rationale for the paper, stated its context and purpose, a discussion of the literature pertaining to business relationships, business networks, network development, social media network formation and development now follows.

2. Underpinning literature

2.1. Business to business relationships, relational versus transactional relationships and sharing and reciprocity in social media

The reliance on relationships in business to business environments is not new (Hadjikhani & LaPlaca, 2013), nor is the acknowledgement of the role of technology in enabling relationships (Jap & Mohr, 2002). Indeed Andersen (2005) highlighted the use of internet based communities within business relationships as places of productive dialogues and the management of business relationships is increasingly reliant on computer mediated technologies (Obal & Lancioni, 2013). The relationship between social media and business has been the subject of recent Special Issues in journals such as *The International Journal of Electronic Commerce* and *Information Systems Research*. Specifically, Aral, Dellarocas, and Godes (2013) outlined the general ‘transformative impact’ of social media and its networks on business whilst other authors have explicitly linked the use of social media and business value. For example, Culnan, McHugh, and Zubillaga (2010) highlighted how social media networks create value for firms through the voluntary interactions of community members and the meaningful relationships that are created through these links and ties, within and external, to the community over time. Paniagua and Sapena (2014) echoed the notion of community creating value but suggested that the critical mass of that community and the specific platform adopted were elements to consider for business value creation. Thus community building within social media networks is viewed as being central to building business value.

Relationships within the context of social media networks rely on people transmitting and sharing content and other people responding to, possibly augmenting and then also sharing that content (Swani, Brown, & Milne, 2014) whether in the business to business or business to consumer environments. This sharing is incorporated within the concept of reciprocity (Palmatier, 2008). Reciprocity is acknowledged as strengthening business relationships (Eklinder-Frick, Eriksson, & Hallén, 2011; Lee, Jeong, Lee, & Sung, 2008) and involves matched behaviors from those within a network or relationship for mutual benefit over a period of time. This shared content has potential value to the creator, distributor and recipient at both individual and firm level. The creator of content sees their ideas made real and available to others, the distributor of the content is afforded recognition for the finding and redistributing an item of perceived interest to others in the network, and the recipient benefits from the usefulness of the content and may add to the size of the creator’s network of contacts. However, within the competitive nature of the business environment, and particularly sharing content/information within one specific industry, it could be argued that sharing content/information could be detrimental to the sharer as it might provide increased opportunity to the recipient. Research pertaining to co-opetition has identified this tension (Bengtsson & Kock, 2015) but as yet this strain has not been explored within social media networks which is founded upon the sharing and reciprocity of participants.

The business marketing theory mapping of Möller (2013) distinguishes between relationship marketing and business networks by proposing that relationship marketing comprises lower levels of relational complexity and contextual embeddedness and higher potential for substitutability than business networks. However, despite this assertion of

the theoretical distinctions, relationship marketing and business network perspectives can be operationalized together (Gummesson & Mele, 2010) and, if integrated, can optimise the value created for businesses and thus improve performance. The relational perspective creates value through understanding; the requirements of each actor in the relationships, and the modes and tones of communication which elicit productive relationships. Whilst the network perspective creates value through understanding the types of processes and contexts which lead to interactions between actors, the types of bonds that may be created and the types of networks required to achieve the desired interactions. Both the relational and network perspective are incorporated within the present study.

Relationships within business contexts have been conceptualised as being based on exchanges that are either transactional or relational (Rajamma, Zolfagharian, & Pelton, 2011). However, increasing emphasis has been placed on the importance of relational exchanges and the IMP perspective (Achrol & Kotler, 2011; Håkansson & Ford, 2002) characterised by the ongoing creation and sharing of value between channel members of a business network. Indeed, Rajamma et al.'s (2011) meta-analysis of relationship research found that concrete results were expected in relationships that were nurtured and ongoing.

Thus the literature has illustrated existing tensions between; the increased complexity of relationships facilitated by digital technology, the centrality of sharing and reciprocity within social media relationships versus competition within an industry, and in addition, the relational as opposed to transactional nature of exchanges in business relationships. An overview of business networks, emergent versus strategic relationships and the immediacy of social media networks follows.

2.2. Business networks, emergent versus strategic relationships and the immediacy of social media networks

Having previously been involved in dyadic exchanges firms now appreciate the existence of networks within and across firms which affect relationships and firm activities (Cova, Prévot, & Spencer, 2010) and this acknowledgement has increased research interest in networks. Inter-firm relationship drivers include an aggregation of trust and commitment (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) as part of a wider multi-dimensional and holistic view of relationships (Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, & Evans, 2006). Networks between both business to business and person to person have grown in number owing to the networking potentiality brought about by the increase in computer mediated environments (Bharadwaj, El Sawy, Pavlou, & Venkatraman, 2013), such as social media networks. Networks, both digital and non-digital in origin, have significant influence in business relationships (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011), the development of new fields in business (Möller & Svahn, 2009), value creation (Gummesson & Mele, 2010; Lindgreen & Wynstra, 2005) and the creation of competitive advantage (Freytag & Young, 2014).

Previous business network research, for example, the works of Lundgren amongst others, have emphasised the complex technological requirements necessary to build networks. Möller (2013) and Gebauer, Paiola, and Saccani (2013), however, emphasise the role of social exchanges and their processes within networks as central to the creation of value. This investigation follows Möller's view of networks, one that emphasises the human element in building and sustaining networks which can be facilitated, but not driven, through the use of digital interactions such as business social media networks, e.g. LinkedIn.

Whilst Möller (2013) makes a clear distinction between intentional strategic networks and the emerging networks proposed by Håkansson and Ford (2002), these do not have to be exclusive. The immediacy afforded by social media network interactions (Kietzmann et al., 2011) can encourage the formation of both types of networks. Networks may be both emergent (for example, referrals on LinkedIn) or strategically and deliberately determined (for example, membership of professional institutional bodies on LinkedIn) and both may contribute to

value creation for the individual via co-creation (Zwass, 2010) and firm (Paniagua & Sapena, 2014). The specified strategic networks (Möller & Svahn, 2009) do not take into account the experiential and ad-hoc nature of the connectivity made possible through social media networks. These emergent networks may offer a greater potential for value creation through novel network creation as opposed to planned and thus self-limiting network creation. Social media networks may also have a fluid membership constituency depending on the purpose for and driver of the individual to contribute to a network. Indeed, how individuals see themselves as positioned in a particular network and the relationships within the network may impact on the value created (Möller, 2013).

Thus the tensions that arise here are the existence of pressures between; emergent and strategic network development and the immediacy offered by social media networks. An outline of the formation of social media networks, the types of ties and the development of trust within networks now follows.

2.3. Social media network formation, ties and trust development

The core activity of social media networking sites is the interacting and sharing of content between individuals and groups (Swani et al., 2014), thus understanding behaviors that lead individuals to interact as a member of a group is important. For example, the shared goals of a group influence the intention to be involved in a group (Katona, Zubcsek, & Sarvary, 2011) and the extent to which an individual perceives there to be value in being part of a group influences the likelihood of that individual joining and becoming involved (Levine & Moreland, 1994; Tajfel, 1978). In the case of social media networks and network choice, self-awareness of group occurs through cognition that the self-categorisation with a group and its members are similar to one's self and that they may share the same interests and goals (Chiang, Suen, & Hsiao, 2013). Within LinkedIn, members self-select the groups to which they wish to belong, it is a proactive choice that is made based upon a belief that being part of a group which shares a focus may bring benefits to the member and or their organization.

Palmatier (2008) outlines three main drivers of social network and exchange theory that can also be applied to social media networks; relationship quality, contact density and contact authority. Relationship quality is described as comprising; factors relating to commitment, trust, reciprocity norms and exchange efficiency. Contact density is explained as the number of ties with a specific other party and the level of interconnectedness between members of a network. Contact authority is likened to the social capital held by a member or members of a network who hold the skills and attractiveness to influence decisions (Burt, 2009). Connections with higher level decision makers enable opportunities for business development.

Both contact density and contact authority can be associated with the formation of ties (Granovetter, 1983). The formation of ties, both weak and strong, to individuals within and across social network groups is an antecedent to relationship development (Granovetter, 1983). Weak ties can comprise bridging individuals who link together distant acquaintances who move in slightly different but partially overlapping circles and can be formed in multiple ways. This form of access to new resources is heavily used by professionals in search of new jobs or information (Granovetter, 1983; Pool, 1980), and those professionals have higher contact authority and a larger number of weak ties. Palmatier's explanation of contact density and the desirability of a close level of interconnectedness in a network is, to some extent, at odds with Granovetter's notion of weak ties and the distance spanned by the those weak ties.

Network formation facilitated by social media sites occurs at a far faster pace than previously (Obal & Lancioni, 2013) and the wide reach of social media networks (Jussila et al., 2014) has enhanced the development of more and diverse types of networks and ties (Edelman, 2013). This faster pace brought about via digital technologies

impacts upon the formation of trust by the individuals in the networks, both of the networks and of each other. Social media networks are perceived as trustworthy by participants in those networks and consumers generally, and, owing to this, are increasingly used by firms as a set of tools with which to interact with individuals (Siamagka, Christodoulides, Michaelidou, & Valvi, *in press*; Mangold & Faulds, 2009). The established notion of trust being incremental (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Palmatier, 2008) and slow in its development may no longer hold true in the digital era as almost real time connections are made between people and organizations who have never met. Therefore, derived from the literature in this section, we can identify tensions between levels of connectivity and the creation of ties between people and organizations, and the changing speed of trust formation within the social media network context.

In summary, the review of the literature has resulted in the identification of a series of tensions that can be presented as knowledge gaps which need addressing in order to understand the role of social media networks in business to business relationships and how these interactions between firms via individuals may lead to business performance enhancement.

First, that success of social media networks is predicated upon the notions of sharing and reciprocity (Palmatier, 2008; Swani et al., 2014) which may be at odds with established competitor behavior norms, hence this study should identify evidence of sharing and reciprocity or alternative behaviors. Second, the rise in emphasis on relational versus transactional exchanges (Achrol & Kotler, 2011; Rajamma et al., 2011) within relationship research may overlook any business value from transactional exchanges. Thus identification is needed of the types of relationships that occur within business social media networks and where value for business may originate. Both these tensions are presented in Section 2.1. Third, there exists a tension between emergent and strategic network development (Håkansson & Ford, 2002; Möller, 2013; Möller & Svahn, 2009) and the immediacy afforded by of social media networks (Kietzmann et al., 2011; Swani et al., 2014). Therefore we should investigate how social media networks are created and whether there exists pre-meditated purpose to any social media network creation. These tensions are identified in Section 2.2. Fourth, the immediacy of social media network impacts upon 'the pace of network formation' (Bharadwaj et al., 2013:477) and the types of ties established and suggests a new tension concerning the formation of trust between parties in the network (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Palmatier, 2008). This tension highlights the need to explore how trust is established in business social media networks. This final set of tensions is detailed in Section 2.3. Responding to all of these tensions will provide answers to fill both the theoretical gaps and assist in clarifying the potential business performance enhancement possible through social media networks. An outline of the method now follows.

3. Method

This paper represents a two stage qualitative research study, encompassing netnographic research principles which involved analyzing 554 dynamic interactions between professionals on selected LinkedIn wine groups in addition to 12 interviews with wine industry experts across Australia, Asia, Europe, and USA. In terms of contextual background for the present study, the wine sector is highly fragmented and despite its global reach, only one wine brand commands more than one percent of the global market (Euromonitor, 2013). Italy and France currently produce 15% of the world's wine, Spain 12%, USA 11%, China 5%, Australia 4%, South Africa 4%, Argentina 4% and Chile 4% (OIV, 2013). The global wine production for 2012 was 25,200,000,000 litres. Over 60 separate countries are registered as producing wine with a total market value of 25.7 billion Euros in 2013 (OIV, 2013). The market consists of growers, blenders, marketers, distributors, retailers and professional investment bodies, in addition to consumers. LinkedIn is the world's largest professional, business focused social media network

site, and as of August 2014 it comprised 313 million members across all continents, contained 3 million companies with individual company pages, and 2.1 million groups covering all industry sectors (LinkedIn, 2014). The group function allows individuals to create, join, manage and contribute to groups relevant to their professional role and or the industry they work in.

Research into social media networks necessitates the access to and usage of data collection methods appropriate for the task (Beckmann & Langer, 2005), thus a netnographic approach was adopted. A netnographic study incorporates the use of direct copy from computer mediated online discussions, the classification and coding of these data, the contextualisation through further direct data collection, – in this case subsequent interviews with discussion group contributors, and the provision of anonymity of participants (Kozinets, 2006). Following Kozinets's (2006) selection criteria, 8 social media network groups on LinkedIn commonly used by the wine industry were identified and anonymised for the purposes of publication, as illustrated in Table 1.

For the purposes of this research, the focus was aimed at the level of interaction between discussion group members and content of the discussions. A discussion was deemed to be interaction between at least three members of a network. Where a thread of a new discussion or post to an existing discussion thread was made and only one member replied has been omitted from the analysis. The LinkedIn content was captured and collated using Nvivo10 analytical software package using the NCapture function for social media, resulting in 93 discussions across the 8 LinkedIn networks with an average of just under 6 contributions per discussion, creating a total of 554 interactions analysed. Discussion content was coded thematically from NCapture following Gibbs's (2002) framework of open coding (description of discussion thread, e.g. climate change), axial coding (analytical themes such as patterns of activity within the discussions e.g. self-promotion) and selective coding (the broader themes linked to underpinning theory, e.g. network structures and their forms (Möller, 2013)). Thus the discussion content in the first stage contributed to understanding the formation, structuring and content of networks within LinkedIn.

The second stage involved 12 recorded Skype interviews between September 2014 and February 2015 with wine industry professionals who were also contributors within the sample LinkedIn groups. The professional roles of the interviewees included; wine producers, wine marketers and wine importers from 7 countries as illustrated in Table 2. The interview questions were derived from Palmatier's inter-firm relational drivers based on social network and exchange theory (Palmatier, 2008). Interview data was analysed following Rao and Perry's (2003) convergent interview approach. This approach is appropriate where there is a lack of a theoretical base, as is the case in the present study which seeks to explore the under researched area of social media network usage in inter-firm relationships (Hadjikhani & LaPlaca, 2013; Håkansson & Ford, 2002). The second stage contributed to a greater understanding of the initiation and development of relationships through business social media networks.

Table 1
LinkedIn groups accessed in stage 1.

Anonymised LinkedIn group wine network	Number of members at Aug. 4, 2014	Discussion threads analysed
A	2092	3
B	1906	5
C	47,292	14
D	9244	5
E	28,789	19
F	2152	2
G	66,286	21
H	15,773	24
Total		93
		554 total interactions

Table 2
Wine industry interviewee profiles for stage 2.

Profession	Country base	Key contributor LinkedIn Wine Discussion Group in stage 1
1. Marketing Consultant	USA	C
2. President, European Wine Society	France	D
3. HR Recruiter in wine industry	UK	D
4. Marketing Manager	USA	E
5. Vineyard owner and Producer	USA	A
6. Major Brand Owner	Portugal	A
7. Wine Producer and Exporter	South Africa	H
8. Broker and LinkedIn Group Moderator	USA	G
9. Regional Technical Director	Spain	A
10. Wine Management Consultant	USA	F
11. National Viticulturist	Australia	B
12. Winery Owner and Marketing Manager	Australia	B

Both stages of the data collection were piloted and adjustments made where necessary. The discussion content data and the interview data were analysed independently by both of the researchers through constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 2009; Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2005) until consistency saturation was achieved. Whilst the ethical contentions of scraping social media for research purposes are not the focus of this paper it is important to recognise that the researchers conformed to the guidelines of Association of Internet Research (AoIR) in the collection, handling and storage of the social media data. The authors adhere to the principles espoused by Paccagnella (1997) and Langer and Beckmann (2005) that it is more disruptive to social media networks, the relationships therein, and the content of the discussions to reveal the presence of a researcher and thus they remained 'invisible' to the social media network members in first stage of the data collection.

4. Findings

The findings are structured to reflect the tensions identified in the literature review namely; the relational/transactional nature of relationships, as well as sharing and reciprocity from Section 2.1, emergent and strategic networks and the immediacy of social media networks from Section 2.2, and social media network formation, types of ties and trust development from Section 2.3.

4.1. Relational versus transactional types of relationships

Clear differences existed between transactional exchanges and relationship development. Whilst Rajamma et al. (2011) in their meta-analysis of relationship development outlined that an action would arise from an intention and that this action was more valuable than the intention, our findings differ. We found that concrete results often occurred for network members who were transactionary in their approach, i.e. they asked for information, received it and then left the discussion group, having gained something of value. In these cases those members exhibited no emotional sense of belonging to the group and yet perceived there to be value in the group which they could extract without becoming an ongoing member of a network. The core activities of social media networking, those of participation and sharing (Swani et al., 2014) were missing in these transactional relationships.

'I am looking for smoke flavouring in wines with wood chips of devdar. Any guidance for its changes after smoking would be wonderful' (LinkedIn group E, posted 31 January 2015, 4 replies).

The original poster acknowledged the contributors, and made a subsequent request for clarification.

'Good idea for Smokey flavour... but what about the effect of the smoke component in fermentation? Do[es] it hinder the process or reverse the flavour as it contains lots of complex compounds that inhibits growth of microbes, probably flavour contributing microbes!' (LinkedIn group E, 3 Feb. 2015, one of 9 responses).

This exchange resulted in specific answers to the question and suggestions for implementing the process.

However, the initiation of a relationship through LinkedIn groups and the creation of valuable relationships (Gummesson & Mele, 2010) was frequently commented upon by the interviewees.

'It has created business and also opened up more networks to me through the new relationship with those people' and it [the group] has generated a number of business successes' (Brand Owner interviewee, Portugal).

4.2. Sharing, reciprocity and altruism

The shared content within the LinkedIn groups was perceived to contain focused material of value to the community (Swani et al., 2014) for example, new contacts, industry trends, new market information and professional level feedback on ideas and strategy. Frequent evidence of community building through interactions (Culnan et al., 2010) within and across the discussion groups were apparent. Members of the community articulated the benefits of participating and exchanging content as illustrated by,

'we have a strong group where people learn things and keep in touch' (Regional Technical Director interviewee, Spain).

'groups are useful as a sounding board for ideas and future business development' (Wine producer and exporter interviewee, South Africa).

'I come to learn and provide value to our community' (Marketing Manager interviewee, USA).

'You invest, explore, contribute, [and] determine value and relevance to your business' (Wine producer interviewee, South Africa).

Reciprocity was evidenced in group member exchanges leading to new business contract introductions, for example, a discussion on wine availability in USA between an American wine buyer and a South African producer resulted in a New York retailer agreeing to stock specified South African wines. The observed level of reciprocity and depth of information exchange in the groups lends support to the 'relationship quality' driver of Palmatier's (2008) value model in addition to endorsing Eklinder-Frick et al. (2011) view of reciprocity strengthening business relationships.

Whilst LaPlaca (2004) proposes that mutually beneficial relationships should be the end goal in business interactions, this research found numerous examples of altruistic behavior in addition to the expected reciprocal business behavior. The extent of providing valuable information when requested as an act of altruism surprised the researchers. Members with technical viticulture problems asked for and received help from members across the world with expertise in the growth of that grape varietal and from those growers who had suffered similar pest control problems. Third party referrals were often provided for functional aspects of wine businesses such as software systems for accounting or stock control.

'What is the best distribution/wholesale (not winery) accounting software for the Wine Industry. I'm still looking' (LinkedIn group B, posted 11 August 2014, 5 responses).

Thus the surprising level of sharing, reciprocity and altruism is at odds with established ideas about competition and the risks associated

with sharing material of value within a competitive sector (Bengtsson & Kock, 2015), particularly a fragmented sector such as the global wine industry where there is significant rivalry.

4.3. Emergent and strategic networks

Several of the interviewees stated that the type of wine groups joined should depend on the purpose for participating in the group and establishing a network, thus suggesting there is an element of strategic decision making (Möller & Svahn, 2009) in membership and participation. Indeed there were illustrations of cross posting of identical material to more than one network by some active and key contributors who had made a strategic decision to develop their networks and optimise the spread of their created content (Möller, 2013).

'I spread content across networks for greater exposure' (Winery owner interviewee, Australia).

Membership of multiple and interconnecting networks echoing Bharadwaj et al. (2013) was common amongst the interview participants and also identified in the discussion group interactions. Establishing a presence on more than one LinkedIn group was unanimously deemed to be worthwhile as a strategic approach (Möller & Svahn, 2009) as different aspects of the industry were emphasised across the different wine industry related groups.

'groups are different in content so it is important to be on more than one, plus to generate awareness of our firm across groups' (Wine Industry Recruiter interviewee, UK).

Furthermore the ability to influence industry policy as a result of strategic engagement with key industry influencers through LinkedIn groups was illustrated by the successful lobbying, via LinkedIn groups, to pressure an European wine industry institution to reconsider a proposed quality designation name change.

The connectivity of the members globally provided a breadth of expertise and collaboration (Hoffman & Fodor, 2010) that would be hard to echo offline, as exemplified by a request for information about the suitability of wine growing in the Caribbean which was responded to by networks members from UK, Australia, Tahiti, West Coast USA, Chile and Spain.

In addition to social media networks being viewed as a strategic tool for business relationship development, individuals also commented on the personal value of social media networks such as LinkedIn groups. Membership was seen as being a valuable element in developing one's professional profile and important as a professional self-promotion tool. The interview participants demonstrated conscious self-appraisal of the value in participating in the groups of which they were members, (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and how they were positioned within a particular network (Möller, 2013).

'builds my own profile and reputation through active involvement in groups' (Wine industry recruiter interviewee, UK).

'tracking people to interact with professionally in the future' (Viticul-turist interviewee, Australia).

Nascent emerging networks (Håkansson & Ford, 2002) which contained 'productive dialogues' (Andersen, 2005) were also visible. Distinct variations in network types were evidenced across the LinkedIn groups. Networks within the specific groups contained foci such as technical information sharing, distribution channel information and lead generation based on the content focus of each group.

'Are you looking to round out your portfolio with a Rioja, Rueda, Albariño, or perhaps a Grenache? I am ready to connect you with producers who are all set to bring their wines to the US market. Go ahead,

tell me what you're looking for to enhance your current offerings! Comment here or email me at x @ xx drinks.com' (LinkedIn group H, posted 30 Sept. 2014, 3 responses).

The responses offered contact details and or assistance within the following month from Spain, China and the USA.

4.4. Social media network formation, pace of network formation, ties and the development of trust

Overall the contacts made and interacted with were from a broad spectrum of the wine industry rather than focused around the role of the individual member, thus endorsing the knowledge transfer proposed by Walker, Kogut, and Shan (1997). Illustrative role titles of wine group discussants included; Importer, Production manager, CEO, Brand Owner, Vineyard Owner and Wine Broker. Influential network members, or those contacts with authority, are considered more attractive as they can either access or directly influence business decisions (Anderson, Håkansson, & Johanson, 1994; Palmatier, 2008). Responses fell into two categories regarding contact authority and the decision making capability of members of the network. Those LinkedIn group members who did not consider whether or not those with whom they were interacting were decision makers in their own right and, those for whom interacting with known decision makers via the network was common. A small number of interviewees strategically sought out those who could influence decisions within wine industry channels, — those holding 'contact authority' (Palmatier, 2008) and thus used LinkedIn as a tool for establishing those relationships.

'In groups I seek out those who can influence and spread the word about our brand' (Wine producer interviewee, South Africa).

Cases were presented of contact details originating on LinkedIn groups being passed upwards to decision makers. For example, comments praising the French Wine Society and its courses were passed on to the Head of Education for an international firm in the hospitality industry as a recommendation to use the society as its wine training provider.

The network density, or the level of connections between members of the same social network encompasses both the number of connections and the strength of those interconnections (Palmatier, 2008). LinkedIn members interviewed were able to distinguish clearly between strong and weak ties (Granovetter, 1983) within their networks. Strong ties comprised a much smaller number but the interactions and exchanges were far more regular in frequency, and could be across several social media platforms, in addition to LinkedIn. Weaker ties were considered by the interviewees to be approximately 70% of connections, and could be defined as slow responses to postings with sometimes several days' time lapse, and often second or third tier connections.

Also highlighted by the research was a relationship between the level of involvement and the level of perceived value (Levine & Moreland, 1994) to be gained from the various wine groups. Greater levels of interactions led to more connections in the social media networks, and the creation of both weak and strong ties and thus illustrated evidence of increasing contact density (Palmatier, 2008) and the perceived value of contact density. An example of increasing contact density was evidenced in the discussion group A, where a post was generated on a technical issue of interest to the audience.

'Do you filter your wines? How do you decide?' (LinkedIn group A, posted 17 August 2014, 7 Responses).

Over the duration of the discussion, four unique contributors posted to the discussion topic. One contributor replied three times, using increasingly technical terminology.

The development of trust was found to be hastened by membership of one or more LinkedIn groups, which appear to act as a pre-filter

which enhances the relevancy and authenticity for members. The networks act as a short cut for businesses on whom to trust and engage with, particularly within groups which are actively moderated and where membership is restricted. The ability to connect quickly with screened, trusted others was a repeated theme throughout the study, endorsing Mangold and Faulds (2009) and Siamagka et al. (in press) premises of networks as trustworthy. Several heuristics were used to informally evaluate someone's trustworthiness. A group member's profile was often checked for clear linkages with the wine industry, the shared connections between that member and the member interacting was also evaluated, the greater the shared number of connections the higher the informal trust indicator. The content of what was posted was also viewed as being influential in determining the level of expertise and thus trustworthiness.

'Trustworthiness is determined by credentials in profile, plus the connections held in common with me, plus the content of their comments' (Wine Broker interviewee, USA),

'whom they know, their connections and the content of their postings' (European Wine Society President, interviewee).

References were made as to the incremental nature of trust that was built up in developing a business relationship: 'a gradual courtship' (Wine Broker interviewee, USA). Early business activity might involve fairly rapid, small transactions with lower risks with international members to learn about their norms of working over a period of weeks or months, before commencing higher value contracts. Trust as gradually developed (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) was still apparent but the compression of time via social media networks shortened the relationship development period. In addition, trust that had been initiated online in social media networks was also transferred into offline and subsequent multi-channel inter-firm relationships.

'We move LinkedIn online to offline with drinks at Director level' (Wine Industry Recruiter interviewee, UK),

'An Australian company I met via LinkedIn I have now done business with and we meet up to continue business' (Winery owner interviewee, Australia).

Finally whilst commencing social media network interactions and relationships is not resource hungry, the ongoing management of social media interaction was mentioned as needing time.

'interaction needs management, it [social media networking] is time hungry' (Winery owner interviewee, Australia).

To summarise, the findings provided new insight into behavior demonstrated by wine professionals within LinkedIn. Altruism was exhibited in addition to the sharing of information and the expected reciprocal business relationship interactions. Value was gained by individuals and businesses through transactional as well as relational exchanges. The engagement with social media networking provides new avenues for opportunistic emergent networks to develop. Both strong and weak ties are in evidence within LinkedIn groups but weak ties are far more numerous even within one industry sector. Trust within potential business partners is being established via social media networks and membership of these professional networks acts as a trust filter mechanism. The development of relationships remains incremental but time has been compressed into shorter periods for relationship initiation and development.

5. Discussion leading to model development

The model created in Fig. 1 explicitly acknowledges the tensions in the literature and integrates the central findings into a practical application for business. The four elements of the model; behaviors exhibited in business social media networks, network creation opportunities, relationship types that create value, and business performance enhancement, are now outlined.

5.1. Behaviors exhibited in business social media networks

Membership of and participation in a business social media network provides a trusted environment with a potentially global reach through which nearly immediate contacts can be formed as a base for future business collaboration. Trust is established between parties by evaluating both the content created by the contributor for relevancy and depth of knowledge, and the profile of that contributor on LinkedIn. The ability to quickly assess the credentials and extent of the weak ties of a potential contact expedites the relationship initiation. The professional grouping within LinkedIn itself acts as trusted filter which members perceive as a screening mechanism. The establishment of trust in social media networks though incremental, requires less time to develop than in other environments. The acceptance of others' credibility encourages the sharing of industry focused information and the value placed in

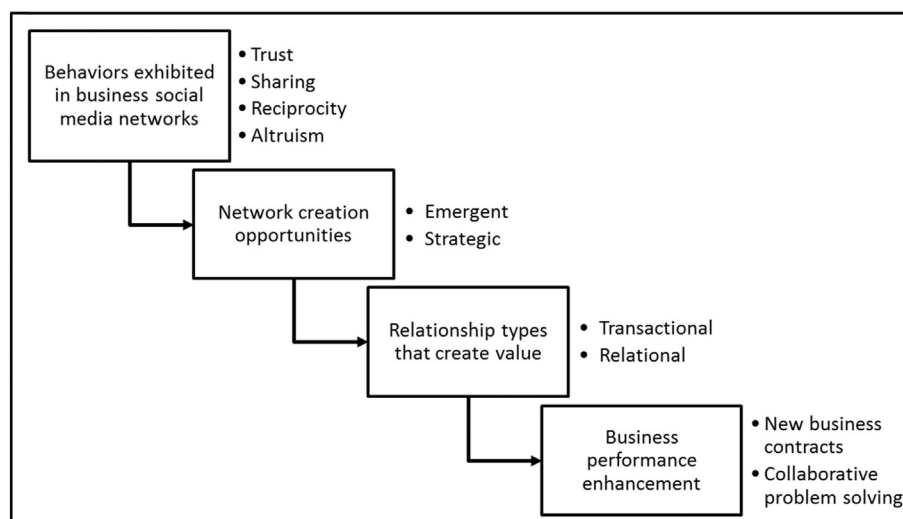


Fig. 1. Proposed model of how social media networks contribute to business performance enhancement. Source: Authors' construction.

the community is indicated by the propensity to act in a reciprocal and/or altruistic fashion. The motivation for altruistic behavior is not clear but perhaps relates to the perceived importance of providing benefit to the industry or the social media network community.

5.2. Network creation opportunities

Individuals participating in business social media network groups often have predetermined strategic intentions for network development. The focus of participation may be specifically to develop new business through collaboration to benefit the firm or to develop their personal professional profile to benefit themselves. In addition, an individual may be searching for information to solve a business issue and use the social media network as a professional help portal. Both strong and weak ties can be used strategically for a planned purpose. Moreover, emergent networks may result from the expansion of contacts generally through weak ties and via 'happy co-incidence' of referrals onwards. Thus both different network types may still result in business relationship development.

5.3. Relationship types that create value

The purpose of network membership and participation will impact upon the type of relationship developed, either transitory and purely transactional or ongoing and relational. The evidence from the research suggests that a social media network such as LinkedIn acts as an effective initiator of a relationship. On one hand filtered contacts are established, interactions occur and potential is seen by members to continue the dialogues and interactions. The development of an ongoing relationship is then moved beyond social media networks to multi-channel (both on and offline) and private communication modes. On the other hand, transactional relationships occur rapidly via social media networks, usually based on a specific, focused need of one member. A potential solution is provided within the network and the member then leaves the discussion. The success of this transactional approach depends on the altruism of one or more members. This study has outlined that creation of value can occur through both transactional and relational exchanges, and thus the potential for transactional relationships should not be ignored.

5.4. Business performance enhancement

Finally, the research has illustrated that business performance can be enhanced as a result of social media networks, the extent to which may depend on the type of relationship formed and the purpose of the membership and participation. Our study has indicated that business performance is enhanced through; collaborative problem solving of technical or specific issues which will improve resource efficiencies, the co-creation of ideas which enhances the credibility of the business in the marketplace, and furthermore the establishment of new business contracts through the social media networks of individuals which will increase revenue generation and profit. The proposed new model is visualised in Fig. 1 above.

6. Conclusions

This paper has focused on the identification and subsequent investigation of tensions in current marketing literature between the opportunities presented by social media networks and established thinking on business relationships and network development. In doing so this research makes the following contributions.

6.1. Theoretical contributions

First, the explicit identification of multiple tensions between the practice of social media networking and business relationship development

and the established academic thinking concerning business networks and ties is important to recognise. These tensions are: a) Social media networks such as LinkedIn afford the opportunity to share industry specific insight yet this is counter-intuitive to competitive activity, b) The reach and spread of social media networks encourage the rapid formation of relationships and exchanges which may be transitory yet ongoing relationships are upheld in the literature as desirable, c) Pursuant to that, the immediacy of social media networks allows emergent connections and ties to form as opposed to purely strategic relationship development which has taken precedence in many research publications, d) Trust is still incremental in the social media network environment, but membership of a professional social media network acts as a trustworthiness heuristic and in addition, the compression of time within the digital environment has reduced the period of establishing trust and the 'warming-up' of relationships.

Second, the application of Granovetter's concept of strong and weak ties to business social media networks suggests that his work continues to have resonance and value in the digital era. Both strong and weak ties have business value, both can enable new business relationships, though weak ties provided considerable transactional exchange value.

6.2. Management contributions

The model created justifies the relevancy of social media network participation for developing business relationships and demonstrates how participation in these networks can lead to enhanced business performance. The research underpinning the model adds to new knowledge of networks and business relationships in the following ways. First, emerging social media networks (Håkansson & Ford, 2002) created via experiential connectivity are important. Second, and pertaining to that, social media networks appear to have particular relevance at the point of finding and initiating a new business relationship. However, strategic networks (Möller & Svahn, 2009) can still be relevant in optimising potential relationships and can contribute to the forward momentum of the firm. Within strategically planned social media network development, contact authority (Palmatier, 2008) is important as an indicator of personal credibility and perceived value of the individual to both a non-digital and social media network. This credibility may be transferred through recommendations outside the immediate social media network to the broader industry. Third, transactional relationships (Rajamma et al., 2011) based on the altruism of one or more members of the social media network can be of business value even though these exhibit no reciprocity (LaPlaca, 2004). Collaborative problem solving, as identified in the proposed model in Fig. 1, occurs through the altruistic sharing of information within transactional relationships enabled by business social media networks such as LinkedIn. Fourth, this research extends Culnan et al.'s (2010) notion of the importance of community building via social media network participation for firms wishing to optimize value creation, by identifying specific and concrete routes through which business performance and value can be enhanced.

Specifically, in relation to LinkedIn, this research has illustrated that membership of and participation in a social media network group can initiate concrete international relationships that would otherwise be highly unlikely. The increasingly competitive global marketplace for industries such as wine creates pressure to identify, screen and interact with potential business partners and social media networking shortens the time taken to initiate a relationship. In addition, transactional exchanges that do not lead to ongoing relationships can be valuable and timely for businesses. The repeated use of LinkedIn groups as a trusted source of third party referrals by professionals in business should also not be ignored. Furthermore, professional social media networks such as LinkedIn allow individual members direct access to firms. Social media networks operate as a short cut through the established gatekeepers and bottle necks occurring in traditional inter-firm and inter-professional communications. In terms of business performance

enhancement not only are new contacts created, but also new business contracts are initiated through social media networks.

6.3. Research approach contributions

The utilisation of netnography as a novel yet relevant research approach should be recognised as a contribution. Employing research approaches that mirror the digital life as lived enables the collection of data that represents actual social media behavior and generated content rather than reported behavior. Whilst netnography is no more or no less flawless than other research approaches this study has demonstrated its potential for the generation of sufficient, relevant and meaningful research data. As such this paper can be considered an illustrative example of netnography which other researchers may wish to refer to.

In summary, this research has contributed valuable theoretical, practical and methodological insights into an emerging but under-researched field of business marketing.

6.4. Limitations and future research

The limitations of this study should be acknowledged. Whilst criticism could be given of the broad nature of this research and the breadth of literature drawn upon, as an early paper in this subject domain, the inclusivity is necessary in order to delineate the social media landscape within the business context. This exploratory work has limited itself to only one social media network, LinkedIn and there may be network behaviors shown on this social media network that are not replicated elsewhere, in which case a comparative study would create insight. Only one specific industry was investigated, that of the wine industry and this industry may have context specific factors which impact upon the nature and content of LinkedIn group networks. In addition, the current relative openness and sharing of information that has business value to the wine industry may be as a result of the stage of evolution of this rapidly globalising industry. There may be other industries at similar stages of global development which might share the network member behavior exhibited in this research, for example, the oil and gas exploration industry. The high perception of value within the groups, the different levels of engagement in the groups, the initiation of concrete business relationships and contracts stemming from initial interactions on LinkedIn, and the co-creation of problem solving may be illustrated elsewhere in different industries and this would be a fruitful research avenue to explore. Thus, a study focusing on stage of development of industries in relation to the use of social media networks, may assist in collaborating these early findings.

A further avenue for research may be a more detailed examination of the specific value of weak ties within social media networks with reference to Granovetter's work. Our findings emphasised the value placed on strong ties by members of the professional networks, whilst also demonstrating how weak ties could result in new business. Understanding the role of weak ties and the conversion of weak to stronger ties within relationship development would add to our understanding of the layered nature and complexities of these relationship forms and are therefore worthwhile areas into which to extend the research. Finally, researching the inter-relationship between the development of a personal professional profile on LinkedIn and the credence afforded to the firm which a person is representing through that profile, and the interactions between group members as a result, could be constructive in clarifying employee, brand identity and trust development.

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