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To integrate or not to integrate? Understanding B2B social media communications

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To integrate or not to integrate? Understanding B2B social media communications

B2B social
media
communications

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Abstract

Purpose – Social media communications on platforms such as Facebook and LinkedIn can allow managers to interact cost effectively with trading partners. However, although most firms have an online presence on multiple social media platforms, the question remains as to whether marketers' widespread social media investments are beneficial for firms. The paper aims to discuss this issue.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper presents competing hypotheses to explore how firms' investment in one form of social media impacts activity on another form of social media. To do so, the authors draw on a data set of 208 large Australian organizations using objective social media activity metrics that measure business-to-business (B2B) audience engagement.

Findings – The findings suggest that widespread social media activity on LinkedIn, Twitter, and YouTube negatively affects a firm's marketing activity on Facebook. The results indicate that having a social media preference whereby firms focus on a specific social media platform is more effective in forming successful inter-organizational relationships than a multiplatform approach.

Originality/value – The study contributes to the sparse research that seeks to leverage social media for audience engagement beyond a business-to-consumer context. The study's findings provide insights into the key mechanisms that underlie firms' B2B social media strategies, and in so doing, offer a fresh perspective on the importance of interactive marketing communication.

Keywords B2B engagement, Digital media integration, Quantitative large-scale empirical exploration, Social media platform preference

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The digital environment has revolutionized the way firms communicate and bond with their many audiences (Mulhern, 2009; Teng *et al.*, 2014). Widespread adoption of digital marketing techniques – particularly social media – has transformed communication channels and created the possibility to individualize marketing not just in a business-to-consumer (B2C) context, but increasingly also in a business-to-business (B2B) context (Mehmet and Clarke, 2016; Michaelidou *et al.*, 2011). More than 90 percent of B2B marketers use social media to connect and communicate with their trading partners (Holden-Bache, 2011; Nielsen, 2010; Rapp *et al.*, 2013). However, a study of 2,100 companies reveals that although over 75 percent of firms are either using or planning to use social media platforms, only 12 percent feel that they are using them effectively (Ennes, 2011). Indeed, evidence pertaining to B2B interactions not only attests to social media's potential in this context, but also suggests that it remains challenging for managers to decide how to best employ social media to communicate effectively with trading partners (Andersen, 2005; Bonson and Flores, 2011; Brennan and Croft, 2012). This challenge is exacerbated by a lack of knowledge and consensus about possible interaction effects resulting from simultaneous investments in different social media platforms including those purpose-built for business professionals (such as LinkedIn) and more generic ones (such as Facebook and Twitter) (Brennan and Croft, 2012). In fact, studies

have not only largely failed to empirically explore the effects of firms' simultaneous use of, and investment in, multiple social media platforms, but different theoretical perspectives exist on the value of a multiplatform vs a more focused social media strategy. On the one hand, signing up to many different social network platforms is challenging, but also aligned with the basic tenets of integrated marketing communications that can lead to dialoguing with many trading partner groups (Ballantyne and Aitken, 2007). On the other hand, scholars have highlighted the importance of choosing the one "right" social media platform to improve the effectiveness of social media marketing (e.g. Kumar and Mirchandani, 2012). In this study, we go some way in addressing this lack of consensus. In so doing, our main contribution is an assessment of the benefits pertaining to firm investments across multiple B2B social media platforms by increasing "understanding with respect to the best ways in which companies should organize and manage social media" (Aral *et al.*, 2013, p. 9). To achieve this goal, we empirically explore the following research question:

RQ1. How does a firm's presence on multiple social media platforms affect its communication effectiveness?

We define communication effectiveness as the frequency of relational exchanges on digital networks that aim to establish, develop, and maintain successful business partnerships (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Effective communications are paramount for B2B relationships as the economic impact of these communications within and across organizations has been estimated to exceed \$1 trillion (Kane *et al.*, 2014). Consequently, we explore our research question in a B2B context and offer a fresh perspective on how to make the most of social media platforms to build and maintain successful strategic networks (Michaelidou *et al.*, 2011; Gulati *et al.*, 2000). Our data set consists of 208 large Australian firms and their B2B social media presence on LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. We measured social media activity through the relationship between Facebook Likes – the equivalent of subscribers or followers on other social media platforms – and Facebook talking as well as comments per day. This relationship is then moderated by measures of activity on firm sites for LinkedIn, Twitter, and YouTube. The firms represent various industries, which increases the generalizability of our findings. All variables in this study are objective performance metrics based on actual measures of activity for each social media platform studied, which increases the validity and reliability of our findings (Podsakoff and Organ, 1986). Our main finding – that firms are best served with focused social media investments on only one platform (rather than multiple platforms) makes an important contribution to the literature. This finding challenges the prevailing view that firms should follow a balanced, multiplatform approach in communications, including digital and social media communications to effectively communicate and ultimately develop successful business networks (Duncan and Moriarty, 1998; Kitchen *et al.*, 2004).

Background

B2B social media activity

In recognition of the fact that "the term 'social media' simultaneously excites, confuses and taunts the minds of marketers (Mehmet and Clarke, 2016, p. 92)," many studies from different disciplines have contributed significantly to the field of social media over the past decade. In fact, according to Weller (2015, p. 281), social media research represents "a kaleidoscope based on thousands of individual pieces, originating from different perspectives and disciplines, applying different methods and establishing different assumptions about social media usage." As part of these research efforts, scholars have begun to investigate social media usage for the development of inter-firm networks (i.e. from a B2B perspective) (e.g. Gruner *et al.*, 2013). In this context, issues such as relationship building (Michaelidou *et al.*, 2011) and sales techniques (Agnihotri *et al.*, 2016) have also been explored. After all, social media facilitate

direct inter-organizational associations that are suited for the collection of customer data (and information) that help identify business opportunities, and facilitate dialogical communications, which, in turn, strengthen firms' B2B relationships (Berthon *et al.*, 2003; Gruner *et al.*, 2013; Michaelidou *et al.*, 2011). We define social media activity as two-way communication on firm-hosted online platforms in the form of interactions among and between firm representatives and trading partners aimed at strengthening firms' inter-organizational ties. However, despite this increasingly rich body of knowledge concerning social media platforms – and an acknowledgment of their importance in shaping B2B interactions – a majority of social media studies continues to focus on consumer activity in a B2C domain. In this context, more and more guidelines on how companies can use social media have been developed (e.g. Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Even explorations regarding the specific nature of social media posts have been made, for instance, De Vries *et al.* (2012) found vivid and interactive brand post characteristics to be more effective in generating user interest. In a B2B context, however, considerably fewer attempts to empirically explore how social media activity affects firms' inter-organizational ties and thus marketing communications success have been made. This neglect is particularly surprising given strong theoretical support for the influential nature of social media usage in a B2B environment (e.g. Wang *et al.*, 2016). For example, the social network theory conceptualizes social relationships among members as network ties (Knox *et al.*, 2006). In a business context, social networks refer to two or more connected trading partners, with social network theory assuming that these connections (ties) and their configurations have a strong impact on the nature of business relationships and thus nearly every aspect of a firm's operations (Michaelidou *et al.*, 2011). The literature on relationship marketing confirms the importance of communication between trading partners to solidify exchange processes and strengthen ties (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). For instance, buyers are often compelled to make swift decisions making it vital for salespeople to communicate in a quick and responsive manner (Mehmet and Clarke, 2016). Social media can often provide the means to achieve such quick and responsive communications. Social media also offers trading partners an opportunity to establish their credibility through more targeted one-to-one (rather than conventional broadcast) communications. Such effective communications are particularly important in a B2B context, where meaning should be co-created and ultimately lead to successful business relationships. In addition, we note that the literature overwhelmingly highlights the positive effects of social media use. Few studies have explored possible negative consequences of B2B social media use. In contrast again, in the B2C context, this issue has received considerable attention. For example, studies have been conducted on Facebook privacy violations (DeGroot and Vik, 2017), social media's role in leading to oversharing of information (Rose, 2011), and online information's negative effect on brand evaluation (Chiou *et al.*, 2013). Moreover, to our knowledge, only a handful of studies have been conducted in an Australian context (e.g. Mehmet and Clarke, 2016). Yet, the Australian economy is among the largest mixed market economies in the world: its GDP is 1.62 trillion AUD, which makes it the 12th largest national economy by nominal GDP (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2016). Even cross-country empirical studies on B2B social media typically fail to include Australia (see Brennan and Croft, 2012). Last but not least, B2B social media studies skirted the question of whether firm investments in fewer, or more, social media platforms differentially affect firms' communication effectiveness with various trading partners. In the following section, we explain the difference between these two investment approaches, what we know and do not know about them, and why this distinction matters.

Social media platform preference vs multiplatform strategy

The consequences of integrating different social media platforms and the associated risks or degree of uncertainty are unknown in their entirety *ex ante*. Social media platforms have proliferated in recent years, and many companies have more than 20 social media accounts

(Rapp *et al.*, 2013). In response to this abundant choice, some organizations choose to focus on a single social media platform such as LinkedIn (Kumar and Mirchandani, 2012). We refer to this strategy as firms' social media platform preference. Social media platform preference is based on the premise that managers regularly rely on a specific platform to engage and generate followers or subscribers. These followers or subscribers are usually loyal, involved trading partners who drive online dialogs centered around a brand. This activity can help establish social networks that are conducive to more effective B2B communications, which can lead to "value creating opportunities" (Jones *et al.*, 2013) and in turn exert a positive influence on trading partners' attitudes, opinions, and behaviors toward a firm. Nevertheless, most firms join many social networking sites simply to signal their presence on multiple platforms and build relationships with a broad range of business audiences. We refer to the nearly simultaneous use of various social media platforms as a multiplatform social media strategy.

Interestingly, little empirical evidence exists about the effect of a social media platform preference vs a multiplatform social media strategy on firms' overall social media performance. Is a single platform beneficial or detrimental (or neither) in establishing effective communications and building and maintaining important relationships between a company and its trading partners? Problematically, ample theoretical support can be found for both strategies. To account for both viewpoints, we developed and tested two competing sets of hypotheses.

Competing hypotheses

Concentrating a firm's resource investments on a single social media platform will likely trigger the normative reciprocity of talking back (Dahl *et al.*, 2005). "Customer reciprocity manifests when individualized communication increases perceived relationship quality or feelings of gratitude toward a firm" (Godfrey *et al.*, 2011, p. 95). This behavior aligns with the reciprocal action theory. Based on social norms, the reciprocal action theory describes the obligation people experience to return "good for good," in which target groups' response is proportional to what they received (Bagozzi, 1995). Customer reciprocity is particularly strong when communications are frequent and individualized, which will be more likely if firms have a preferred social media platform. These communications can increase trading partners' perceived relationship quality, enhancing the informative or interpersonal value they gain from a B2B relationship (Godfrey *et al.*, 2011). Focusing on one social media platform also allows managers to monitor conversations more regularly and thoroughly, and to initiate and maintain communications with a typically smaller (but more engaged) audience. Monitoring brand sentiment permits firms to tailor communications, products, and services to fit various trading partner needs. The smaller audience size enables organizations to respond more often to individual requests and questions, which triggers reciprocity in some trading partners (talking back and eventually trading) and generally builds stronger relational ties. Indeed, effective social media communications often depend on consistent and reliable content from the firm's end. According to behavioral theories of the firm, however, decision makers have limitations – cognitive, resource, informational, and time-related – that impose constraints on the communications they can access, evaluate, and respond to at any one time (Cyert and March, 1963). Managers can only exercise bounded rationality, and information overload arising from multiple conversations deriving from a multiplatform strategy may lead managers to ignore or neglect useful information. A trading partner may respond negatively to a multiplatform approach as it is perceived as "an ad hoc rather than a customized approach to communicate with customers" (Godfrey *et al.*, 2011, p. 98). Further, the social network theory conceptualizes social relationships among firms and its audiences as network ties. Network ties capture the formation of cliques among a group of individuals and reside at the core of social networking theory (Liu *et al.*, 2017). The theory assumes that network

members can be involved in any number of ties, and focuses on the structural characteristics of these ties and their configuration among members. Depending on the nature of these ties and their configuration, social networks can exert a significant influence on its members' behaviors. Although a number of scholars have – long before the advent of social media – found that the magnitude of personal influence in such networks is often greater than that of more impersonal one-way communications (e.g. Katz, 1957), social media platforms are particularly powerful in creating networked ties between members. Importantly, however, structural characteristics of networked ties differ significantly between firms that exhibit a social media platform preference and firms that follow a multiplatform social media strategy. Firms' social media platform preference will likely generate stronger ties between firms through focused on communications and more sustained interactions (Williams and Chinn, 2010). In turn, sustained interaction are crucial in leading to contagion effects and thus social media activity (Fang *et al.*, 2013). These arguments lead us to our first hypothesis (consisting of three sub-hypotheses). This hypothesis captures the notion that having a preferred social media platform provides focus and therefore facilitates more effective social media communications. Spreading activity across too many platforms can weaken this effect. We therefore hypothesize a negative interaction effect of other social media activity (e.g. generating LinkedIn corporate followers) on the relationship between Facebook likes – the equivalent of subscribers or followers on other social media platforms – and Facebook talking as well as comments per day:

- H1a.* Generating LinkedIn corporate followers will have a significant negative moderating effect on a firm's social media activity as measured through the relationship between Facebook likes and Facebook talking and Facebook comments per day.
- H1b.* Generating Twitter followers will have a significant negative moderating effect on a firm's social media activity as measured through the relationship between Facebook likes and Facebook talking and Facebook comments per day.
- H1c.* Generating YouTube subscribers will have a significant negative moderating effect on a firm's social media activity as measured through the relationship between Facebook likes and Facebook talking and Facebook comments per day.

However, another school of thought exists. The communication-based marketing model puts interactive and integrated communication platforms at the center of a customer-focused relationship approach (Duncan and Moriarty, 1998). This model not only emphasizes two-way, but multiway communication through communications on different (ideally seamlessly integrated) platforms (Grönroos and Lindberg-Repo, 1998).

Indeed, trading partners will likely interact various social media platforms and engage with different messages that can originate with either party. According to this perspective, a firm's social media platform preference may fail to engage a broad range of business audiences including investors, vendors, suppliers, employees, and even competitors. A preferred social media strategy could dilute and thus compromise the effective coordination of firm communications in an effort to produce a unified, customer-focused promotional message (Boone and Kurtz, 2007). In contrast, a multiplatform social media strategy includes multiple audiences in communication planning. Different channels have varying characteristics and thus provide distinctive advantages to firms by reaching potentially different audiences. The interactive concept of marketing communications holds that firms must provide information that can lead to a dialog between audience groups via different communication channels (Ballantyne and Aitken, 2007; Mulhern, 2009). Trading partners increasingly expect firms to respond regardless of what they wish to communicate, and importantly, regardless of the platform they choose for their communication (Aral *et al.*, 2013). As trading partners may interact on different social media platforms, a firm's focus on one social media platform may fail to generate significant reach and contact points across different groups, and worse, turn some trading partners away as they

perceive communication to be fragmented and less credible (Rapp *et al.*, 2013). While network structures that result from firms' social media platform preference are conducive to building strong ties, weak ties are also influential (Granovetter, 1973). Weak social ties are responsible for most of the embeddedness and structure of social networks as well as the transmission of information through these networks. Firms adopting a multiplatform strategy will likely engage a broader range of trading partners, thereby considerably extending their reach and number of weak ties. Consequently, firms' use of a single social media platform will likely fail to engage all relevant trading partner groups effectively and may compromise effective digital communications. Weak ties also increase firms' ability to learn new information. For example, managers facing a decision tend to consider solutions that are readily available in the immediate environment, conducting only limited "local searches" (Katila and Ahuja, 2002). A multiplatform social media strategy could considerably extend the reach of this search to involve many weak ties, expediting the search for an optimal solution to many managerial problems and tasks. Some scholars have explored this phenomenon in the context of crowdsourcing – the process of outsourcing market research activities via social media to leverage the collective intelligence of consumers (Poetz and Schreier, 2012). Crowdsourcing advocates widening the search to include a large number of social networks to find optimal solutions and generate valuable market insights (Afuah and Tucci, 2013).

These arguments lead us to our second, competing hypothesis (consisting of three sub-hypotheses). This hypothesis captures the notion that having a preferred social media platform limits large companies' social media activity. We therefore hypothesize a positive interaction effect of other social media activity (e.g. generating LinkedIn corporate followers) on the relationship between Facebook likes – the equivalent of subscribers or followers on other social media platforms – and Facebook talking as well as comments per day:

- H2a.* Generating LinkedIn corporate followers will have a significant positive moderating effect on a firm's social media activity as measured through the relationship between Facebook likes and Facebook talking and Facebook comments per day.
- H2b.* Generating Twitter followers will have a significant positive moderating effect on a firm's social media activity as measured through the relationship between Facebook likes and Facebook talking and Facebook comments per day.
- H2c.* Generating YouTube subscribers will have a significant positive moderating effect on a firm's social media activity as measured through the relationship between Facebook likes and Facebook talking and Facebook Comments per day.

Method

Data collection

Our research design features objective secondary data collected from firms' publicly available social media platforms. In our study, objective data refer to information collected through direct observation of actual online behaviors rather than subjective measurements of scale items. Specifically, the data comprise actual numbers for the following metrics gathered from the respective sites of each firm in our sample: LinkedIn Corporate followers, Twitter followers and YouTube subscribers (moderating variables); Facebook likes (independent variable); and Facebook likes, Facebook talking, and Facebook comments per day (dependent variables). Objective data help in controlling common method variance, i.e. "variance attributed to the measurement method rather than the variables themselves," and thus reduce measurement error (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003, p. 873). The use of this objective data rather than perceptual variables also significantly reduces concerns regarding the reliability and validity of used metrics. The data were collected in late 2012 with a leading Australian B2B social media agency.

This agency provides B2B social media services to a broad range of clients in Australia from various industries, and worked with four research assistants to download publicly available data from the above mentioned social media platforms. Subsequently, the downloaded data were transferred into individual data sheets for each company including activity measures on the four social media platforms (for instance, the number of followers on Twitter, or likes on Facebook). Importantly, data were collected exclusively from the then-largest 208 Australian organizations (BRW, 2012). In the Appendix, we provide a complete list of these organizations including their industry and annual revenues. The data came from four social media platforms, namely, LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, and comprised statistics relating to the volume of traffic through these sites. Importantly, we chose these four social media platforms because they have been consistently rated as the most used in a B2B context (Content Marketing Institute, 2010-2017). Firms with exclusively or mainly B2C transactions were excluded from our sample; the primary or sole purpose of the chosen firm-hosted social networking site had to be to connect with trading partners. As has been noted, “the use of social media is no longer just for consumers; it is as important in the B2B context as it is in the B2C context” (Rapp *et al.*, 2013, p. 563).

Hypotheses testing

To test our hypotheses, we developed six models using hierarchical regression and an interaction term. Our two sets of hypotheses propose alternate scenarios for the presence of either trade-offs or complementarities when multiple social media platforms are used. To empirically test which of these scenarios, if any, are supported by our data, we first established a plausible relationship between independent and dependent variables. These relationships were that Facebook likes (IV: measure of popularity on Facebook) will be positively associated with Facebook talking (DV1: measure of ongoing and continuing interaction with the Facebook page), and with Facebook comments per day (DV2: measure of daily commentary on average about the page). These relationships needed to be robust to allow testing the change (if any) in the nature of the relationship when an interaction is created between Facebook likes and three other measures of popularity from alternate social media – LinkedIn corporate followers, twitter followers and YouTube subscribers. Our logic was that if as a result of these interactions changes emerged in the relationship between Facebook likes and these two DVs, this development would provide evidence of trade-offs or of complementarities when using multiple social media platforms. Table I presents the variables used in each of our models to test our competing hypotheses. All variables other than those used for control were

Variable	Variable definition
Facebook likes	Number of subscribers who at some point clicked the like button once, either directly on a Facebook page or on a website promoting that Facebook page
Facebook talking	Actual number of people who are engaged and interacting with that Facebook page – the people who actually come back to the page after liking the page. This number include activities such as comments, likes to a post, shares, etc., by visitors to the page
Facebook comments/day	Number of comments created on a page’s content averaged over 365 days
LinkedIn corporate followers	Number of LinkedIn users following a company by selecting the follow button on the company’s profile
Twitter followers	Number of people who have agreed to receive the company’s tweets through Twitter. By adding someone else to the list of people you read, you “follow” them
YouTube subscribers	Number of people subscribing to a company’s YouTube channel to access updates of videos from that company

Table I.
Variables used in
hypothesis testing

mean centered to reduce inflation of β values. Although it is by no means the only influential social networking site, Facebook is one of the most widely recognized platforms that allows firms to interact with customers (Luarn *et al.*, 2015). In fact, Facebook unites nearly half of the world's internet users, has the highest number of communications between firms and their audiences, and has been identified as most pertinent in the development of emotional bonds in this context (Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011; Zarkada and Polydorou, 2013). "Facebook represents a social media application that has transformed from completely customer-specific (i.e. originally developed as a peer-to-peer communication tool) to customer-centric tools that allow organizations to take part in the interactions between network members [and increasingly purely B2B interactions]" (Trainor, 2012, p. 322). Consequently, in testing our hypotheses, we used Facebook likes, talking and comments per day as a proxy for social media activity.

Control variables

For each model, results were controlled for industry sector and revenue to extract variance due to differences in firm size and in use of social media across industries.

Results

In Table II, LinkedIn corporate followers has a significant negative interaction with Facebook Likes, thus diminishing the positive influence of Facebook likes on volume of facebook Talking. Number of LinkedIn corporate followers has no significant direct effect on volume of Facebook Talking.

In Table III, LinkedIn Corporate Followers has significant and strong negative interaction with Facebook Likes, thus diminishing the positive influence of Facebook Likes on volume of Facebook Comments per day. Number of LinkedIn Corporate Followers has no significant direct effect on volume of Facebook Comments per day.

In Table IV, Twitter Followers has significant negative interaction with Facebook Likes, thus diminishing the positive influence of Facebook Likes on volume of Facebook Talking. Number of Twitter Followers has no significant direct effect on volume of Facebook Talking.

In Table V, Twitter Followers has significant negative interaction with Facebook Likes, thus diminishing the positive influence of Facebook Likes on volume of Facebook

Table II.
Interaction –
Facebook Likes and
LinkedIn corporate
followers – dependent
variable – Facebook
talking

	Adj. R^2	$R^2\Delta$	$F\Delta$	Sig. $F\Delta$	β	Sig. t
<i>Step 1 – control</i>	0.154	0.205	4.023	0.000		
Industry – FinServices					0.021	0.809
Industry – food					–0.025	0.755
Industry – transport					0.076	0.365
Industry – construction/infrastructure					–0.016	0.850
Industry – government					–0.020	0.796
Industry – IT Telco					0.445	0.000
Industry – paper/chemicals					–0.025	0.754
Industry – health/pharma					–0.020	0.797
Industry – other					–0.005	0.953
Revenue (\$)					–0.004	0.953
<i>Step 2</i>	0.322	0.166	20.253	0.000		
Facebook likes					0.447	0.000
LinkedIn corporate followers					–0.112	0.124
<i>Step 3</i>	0.352	0.033	8.343	0.004		
Facebook likes $\times$ LinkedIn corporate followers					–0.984	0.004

Table III.
Interaction –
Facebook likes and
linkedin corporate
followers – dependent
variable – Facebook
comments/day

	Adj. R^2	$R^2\Delta$	$F\Delta$	Sig. $F\Delta$	β	Sig. t
<i>Step 1 – control</i>	0.062	0.119	2.102	0.027		
Industry – FinServices					0.007	0.940
Industry – food					–0.091	0.275
Industry – transport					0.178	0.045
Industry – construction/infrastructure					–0.118	0.179
Industry – government					–0.068	0.401
Industry – IT Telco					0.168	0.041
Industry – paper/chemicals					–0.092	0.273
Industry – health/pharma					–0.065	0.421
Industry – other					–0.028	0.735
Revenue (\$)					0.080	0.304
<i>Step 2</i>	0.083	0.031	2.787	0.065		
Facebook likes					0.144	0.079
LinkedIn corporate Followers					0.086	0.311
<i>Step 3</i>	0.704	0.578	323.89	0.000		
Facebook likes × LinkedIn corporate followers					–4.144	0.000

Table IV.
Interaction –
Facebook likes and
Twitter followers –
dependent variable –
Facebook talking

	Adj. R^2	$R^2\Delta$	$F\Delta$	Sig. $F\Delta$	β	Sig. t
<i>Step 1 – control</i>	0.063	0.132	1.919	0.048		
Industry – FinServices					0.037	0.703
Industry – food					–0.017	0.850
Industry – transport					0.108	0.261
Industry – construction/infrastructure					–0.004	0.967
Industry – government					–0.014	0.873
Industry – IT Telco					0.357	0.000
Industry – paper/chemicals					–0.017	0.853
Industry – health/pharma					–0.011	0.902
Industry – other					0.020	0.821
Revenue (\$)					0.005	0.952
<i>Step 2</i>	0.121	0.067	5.158	0.007		
Facebook likes					0.248	0.003
Twitter followers					–0.101	0.240
<i>Step 3</i>	0.137	0.021	3.317	0.071		
Facebook likes × Twitter followers					–0.348	0.071

Comments per day. Number of Twitter Followers has a significant direct positive effect on volume of Facebook Comments per day.

In Table VI, YouTube Subscribers has no significant interaction with Facebook Likes, thus neither amplifying nor diminishing the positive influence of Facebook Likes on volume of Facebook Talking. Number of YouTube Subscribers has a significant direct negative effect on volume of Facebook Talking (Table VII).

Our results indicate that a strong and significant positive relationship exists between Facebook likes and the two forms of traffic measured (Facebook talking and Facebook comments per day). However, they also show that most of the tests revealed a significant negative interaction of Facebook likes with measures of popularity of other social media (Twitter followers, LinkedIn corporate followers, and YouTube subscribers). In addition, the tests reflect some significant negative direct effects of popularity of YouTube subscribers and extent of Facebook talking and comments per day. Our data suggest that adopting a multiplatform social media strategy by signing up to many different social

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Table V.
Interaction –
Facebook likes and
Twitter followers –
dependent variable –
Facebook comments
per day

	Adj. R^2	$R^2\Delta$	$F\Delta$	Sig. $F\Delta$	β	Sig. t
<i>Step 1 – control</i>	0.114	0.179	2.756	0.004		
Industry – FinServices					0.080	0.398
Industry – food					–0.059	0.492
Industry – transport					0.306	0.001
Industry – construction/infrastructure					–0.084	0.358
Industry – government					–0.041	0.633
Industry – IT Telco					0.245	0.005
Industry – paper/chemicals					–0.058	0.511
Industry – health/pharma					–0.026	0.756
Industry – other					0.059	0.496
Revenue (\$)					0.078	0.347
<i>Step 2</i>	0.561	0.420	65.119	0.000		
Facebook likes					0.621	0.000
Twitter followers					0.207	0.001
<i>Step 3</i>	0.637	0.072	26.840	0.000		
Facebook likes × Twitter followers					–0.643	0.000

Table VI.
Interaction – Facebook
likes and YouTube
subscribers –
dependent variable –
Facebook talking

	Adj. R^2	$R^2\Delta$	$F\Delta$	Sig. $F\Delta$	β	Sig. t
<i>Step 1 – control</i>	0.121	0.196	2.604	0.048		
Industry – FinServices					–0.025	0.784
Industry – food					–0.020	0.862
Industry – transport					0.074	0.495
Industry – construction/infrastructure					–0.037	0.731
Industry – government					–0.029	0.757
Industry – IT Telco					0.423	0.000
Industry – paper/chemicals					–0.036	0.713
Industry – health/pharma					–0.025	0.786
Industry – other					–0.010	0.916
Revenue (\$)					–0.006	0.947
<i>Step 2</i>	0.304	0.179	15.067	0.007		
Facebook likes					0.848	0.001
YouTube subscribers					–0.470	0.055
<i>Step 3</i>	0.301	0.004	3.317	0.641		
Facebook likes × YouTube subscribers					0.453	0.425

networks can negatively affect the relationship between Facebook likes and Facebook talking and comments per day. Therefore, results support our first set of hypotheses (*H1a-H1c*), which propose a negative interaction, with the caveat that *H1c* is only partially supported. However, the neutral interaction effect of YouTube subscribers on Facebook talking contrasts with a strong negative direct effect on both DVs as well as with a strong negative interaction on Facebook comments per day. These results are consistent with the observation that “one or two high engaging platforms is much better than five sparse platforms” (Stearns, 2012). In essence, our findings suggest that hosting sites on many social media platforms can limit rather than amplify firms’ overall B2B social media communications.

Discussion

Our results yield novel insights into the possible effect of firm-initiated investments in digital communications that goes beyond consumer brand engagement. Our analyses reveal

Table VII.
Interaction – Facebook
likes and YouTube
subscribers –
dependent variable –
Facebook comments
per day

	Adj. R^2	$R^2\Delta$	$F\Delta$	Sig. $F\Delta$	β	Sig. t
<i>Step 1 – control</i>	0.056	0.136	1.690	0.092		
Industry – FinServices					–0.069	0.464
Industry – food					0.013	0.911
Industry – transport					0.239	0.035
Industry – construction/infrastructure					–0.136	0.220
Industry – government					–0.064	0.511
Industry – IT Telco					0.144	0.162
Industry – paper/chemicals					–0.083	0.412
Industry – health/pharma					–0.052	0.586
Industry – other					–0.004	0.967
Revenue (\$)					0.083	0.374
<i>Step 2</i>	0.478	0.395	44.208	0.000		
Facebook likes					1.917	0.000
YouTube subscribers					–1.914	0.000
<i>Step 3</i>	0.698	0.200	77.640	0.000		
Facebook likes × YouTube subscribers					–3.277	0.000

that having a corporate presence on multiple social media platforms simultaneously can exert a negative moderating effect on the levels of activity on a specific social media platform. For example, what a firm may gain from investing in a strong Facebook presence may, in fact, be devalued (rather than complemented) by having a presence on other social media platforms simultaneously. The implication is that if firms have a presence on multiple social media, they need to be cognizant of possible trade-offs. Firms could easily assume that more exposure through social media is by definition better, or that synergies and network effects may occur. However, our data suggest that a multiplatform presence is not enough to engage business audiences. These findings challenge the value of merely using multiple platforms without truly integrated these to create synergistic effects as per the tenets of integrated marketing communications (Kitchen *et al.*, 2004). One possible explanation for this is that, in line with the communication-based marketing model (Duncan and Moriarty, 1998), trading partners expect two-way communication (and thus the co-creation of meaning) through improved listening and communicating, which may not be feasible on multiple social media platforms (Peppers and Rogers, 1993). In fact, according to integrated marketing communication models, a multiplatform strategy should only be used if managers can ensure that synergistic and complementary media effects can be created whereby one platform's weakness is offset by another platform's strength (Kitchen *et al.*, 2004). However, decision makers often have limitations (cognitive, resource, informational, and time related) that impose constraints on the communications they can manage at any one point in time (Cyert and March, 1963). Additionally, the social media sites in our study are discrete corporate entities and may not be open to facilitating cross-postings and linking with each other to create more effective communications that result in successful business networks. To make the most of these digital platforms and use them to build and maintain strategic networks (Morgan and Hunt, 1994), organizations may feel under pressure to augment their presence in the social media sphere by subscribing to many (new and emerging) social media platforms. Our data suggest that this behavior can backfire. We do not suggest that a truly balanced, integrated multiplatform approach is detrimental in establishing firm networks. However, without a sufficient firm commitment to a judicious integration of digital marketing communications that truly address audiences' needs, focusing on a preferred platform seems more effective in establishing and maintaining relationships with trading partners than having a presence on multiple social media platforms (Andersen, 2005; Brennan and Croft, 2012).

Implications

Our findings indicate that the presence on multiple social media platforms for B2B purposes can be counter-productive. Thus, our study makes an important contribution by challenging the prevailing belief that more presence on more platforms is beneficial in this context (Ballantyne and Aitken, 2007; Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Firms may be better off focusing on one or a few social media platforms to provide users with relevant content (instead of diluting their efforts through a multiplatform strategy). This finding supports previous B2B research that claims that integrating media channels does not automatically lead to the co-creation of meaning through dialogs (Ballantyne and Aitken, 2007). Second, some studies' emphasis on online brand community research (e.g. Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005) may have "unwittingly resulted in the misconception that businesses can only passively react [to social media communications]" (Goh *et al.*, 2013, p. 103). We applaud scholars' efforts to shift the prevailing view of marketing communications from one of outbound "call to action" messaging to a perspective in which marketers are no longer in control of the media environment and what is being said about their brands (Tellis and Franses, 2006). However, by exploring firm-initiated social media strategies and their effects, we show that organizations still play a pivotal role in determining the scope, direction, and effect of digital communications. This is especially the case in a B2B context, where industry partners are typically more motivated than end users to exchange product-related information and communicate effectively to establish strong and long-standing relationships (Andersen, 2005). Third, our study contributes to the sparse research that seeks to leverage social media for audience engagement beyond end users (Rapp *et al.*, 2013). This contribution is important, given that the literature on how companies use social media in a B2B context is still in its infancy. Most social media models in the literature continue to focus on user- and marketer-generated content directed at consumers and their product-related decisions. Although scholars increasingly herald the advantages and importance of social media in a B2B context (Ballantyne and Aitken, 2007), theory and research provide few guidelines into the mechanisms that underlie firms' successful B2B social media strategies. Our investigation of an Australian sample of objective B2B social media measures helps advance this emerging field. We also hope that our findings will act as an impetus for future research on social media's role in shaping inter-organizational networks. Our study also makes practical contributions. Indeed, our data indicate that managers should decide when to use which platform to transfer valuable information from firms to trading partners and vice versa. Our study thus goes some way in helping managers understand how B2B social media platforms are interrelated. This interrelationship may be particularly important for firms that choose to channel their communication budgets to some platforms but not others. As firms face more and more communication channels, conversations become increasingly fragmented and less credible (Rapp *et al.*, 2013). Social media offers trading partners an opportunity to establish their credibility through more targeted one-to-one (rather than conventional broadcast) communications. The B2B marketing logic is clear that relationships are indispensable for generating trust and commitment across the supply chain (Ballantyne and Aitken, 2007), and our research makes a practical contribution that can help firms achieve this goal. Specifically, our study illustrates that firms should take note of whether they invest in a combination of social media platforms, and if so, consider whether they would be better off investing in a preferred social media platform. Our results also indicate that managers should invest judiciously in social media to avoid cannibalization. Investment decisions are important because social media platforms such as Facebook may promise access and reach to crowds of potential clients (and charge for media space accordingly) while a firm may be limiting its potential reach through its presence on other media. Indeed, Facebook's value proposition – access to many different target groups who can be individually addressed – may be significantly undermined by the proliferation of alternate social media platforms.

Limitations and future research

Future studies should replicate and extend our findings. In particular, due to the rapid pace of digital change, further studies need to be conducted – ideally longitudinal studies – to assess how these relationships are changing over time. Further, many interesting research questions remain largely unexplored. For example, how do relational communications on publicly available platforms differ from conversations on more private networks? We suspect that the answers to these and related questions depend on factors such as a firm's size, its industry, the confidentiality of the information that is being exchanged, and the nature of business relationships. The cross-industry nature of our quantitative sample makes some level of generalization possible. However, as with any sample, questions as to the representativeness of our data remain. As shown in the Appendix, our data set focuses on large companies and their B2B social media activities in an Australian context. While this is by design, it still has implications for the generalizability of this study. Findings should thus be tested internationally. Moreover, to test and compare our findings, subjective performance data should be collected. The correlations between subjective and objective performance measures (the latter used in this study) are often not particularly strong (e.g. Wall *et al.*, 2004). Further studies could also look at what content should be shared on what platform and how best to create synergies as social media activity becomes increasingly based on image and video content rather than text (DeMers, 2013). While our findings suggest that firms should focus their social media investments on one platform (i.e. not even signing up to other platforms), future research should test whether a single platform approach remains superior over a multiple one if firms truly follow the premises of integrated marketing communications (where one platform can offset the weakness of another) (Kitchen *et al.*, 2004). Even though integrated marketing communications are challenging to research (involving both concepts and processes as well as variations in implementation between firms; Kitchen *et al.*, 2008), future studies should explore the performance differences between truly integrated marketing communications and a multiplatform approach in a B2B social media context. Moreover, our findings are based on measures such as the numbers of likes and followers. Who the interacting members are and the reasons they interact with the hosting firm and one another lie beyond the scope of this study. Whereas end users may often be intrinsically motivated to interact with firms on various social media (Gruner *et al.*, 2014), we suspect that motivation in the B2B space may be different. We expect qualitative research efforts, such as online ethnographies, to be particularly well suited to explore these phenomena (Gruner *et al.*, 2014). Finally, our study of social media effects is limited to the moderating impact of LinkedIn corporate followers, Twitter corporate followers, and YouTube subscribers on the relationship between Facebook likes and Facebook talking. Although Facebook has the highest number of communications between firms and their audiences and lends itself to being a proxy for firms' overall social media activity and effectiveness for businesses and consumers, future research should extend our findings to other variables (Darwell, 2012).

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Appendix. Company details – name, social network focus, revenue, and industry
(ordered alphabetically)

B2B social
media
communications

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Company Name	B2B/M	Rev (\$m)	Industry
Accident Compensation Corporation	M	6,626	Insurance
AGL Energy	M	7,120	Energy
Air New Zealand	M	4,388	Airline
Alcoa World Alumina Australia	B2B	3,564	Mining
Allianz Australia	M	4,246	Insurance
Amcor	M	12,689	Paper & Packaging
American Express Australia	M	1,492	Financial Services
AMP	M	7,664	Financial Services
Anglo American Australia	B2B	3,949	Mining
ANL Container Line	B2B	1,285	Transport
ANZ Banking Group	M	35,381	Banks
AP Eagers	M	1,811	Motor Vehicles
Apache Energy	B2B	1,671	Mining
Apple Australia	M	3,599	IT
Asciano Group	B2B	3,113	Infrastructure
AstraZeneca Australia	M	1,395	Chemicals & Allied Products
Aurora Oil and Gas Ltd.	M	1,384	Energy
AUSCOAL Super	M	1,302	Insurance
Ausgrid	B2B	3,980	Energy
Australia Post	M	4,986	Transport
Australian Pharmaceutical Industries	M	3,441	Pharmaceuticals
Australian Taxation Office	M	3,103	Government
BAE Systems Australia	B2B	1,848	Electronics
Bank of Queensland	M	2,817	Banks
Barrick (PD) Australia	B2B	1,794	Metal
Bendigo & Adelaide Bank	M	3,679	Banks
BGC	M	2,233	Infrastructure
BHP Billiton	B2B	68,432	Mining
Bidvest Australia	B2B	2,411	Transport
BlueScope Steel	B2B	9,154	Steel
BMW Australia	M	1,299	Motor Vehicles
Boart Longyear	B2B	1,460	Metal
Boral	B2B	4,781	Construction
Brambles	B2B	4,553	Transport
BrisConnections Group	B2B	1,320	Infrastructure
Brookfield Multiplex	B2B	2,602	Construction
BUPA Asia Pacific	B2B	4,384	Health
Caltex Australia	M	18,960	Petroleum and Gas
Cargill	B2B	1,691	Foods Wholesale
CBH Group	B2B	2,081	Foods Wholesale
Centro Properties Group	B2B	4,201	Property
Chevron Australia	B2B	2,864	Mining
Citic Resources Australia	B2B	3,725	Mining
Citigroup	M	2,474	Banks
City of Brisbane	M	1,931	Government
Cliffs Natural Resources	B2B	1,483	Mining
Commonwealth Bank of Australia	M	46,215	Banks
Commonwealth Scientific & Industrial Research Organisat	B2B	1,218	Other
Computershare	B2B	1,527	Financial Services
ConocoPhillips Australasia	B2B	2,782	Mining
CSL	B2B	4,322	Chemicals & Allied Products
CSR	M	1,945	Other

(continued)

Company Name	B2B/M	Rev (\$m)	Industry
Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu	B2B	935	Accounting
Downer EDI	B2B	6,656	Construction
DUET	B2B	1,322	Energy
Ebos Group	B2B	1,344	Health
Elders	M	2,322	Agriculture
Endeavour Energy	M	2,871	Energy
Energex	M	1,736	Construction
Ergon Energy	M	2,539	Energy
Ernst & Young	B2B	1,053	Accounting
Essential Energy	B2B	2,649	Energy
ExxonMobil Australia	M	7,069	Petroleum and Gas
Fairfax Media	M	2,477	Media
Fletcher Building	B2B	7,434	Construction
Flight Centre	M	1,862	Sundry Consumer
Fonterra Co-op Group	M	20,068	Foods Wholesale
Food Investments	M	2,200	Foods Wholesale
Ford Australia	M	3,454	Motor Vehicles
Fortescue Metals Group	B2B	5,206	Mining
Foster's Group	M	2,565	Sundry Consumer
Funds SA	B2B	1,628	Government Finance
Genesis Energy	M	1,839	Energy
GlaxoSmithKline Australia	M	1,628	Chemicals & Allied Products
GM Holden	M	4,549	Motor Vehicles
GrainCorp	B2B	2,905	Foods Wholesale
Hancock Prospecting	B2B	1,472	Mining
Hansen Yuncken	B2B	1,210	Infrastructure
Hanson Australia	B2B	1,577	Construction
Hastings Deering Australia	M	1,974	Construction Equipment
Healthscope	M	1,432	Health
Hewlett-Packard Australia	B2B	3,332	IT
Holcim Australia	B2B	1,661	Construction
HSBC Bank Australia	M	1,389	Banks
Hyundai Motor Company Australia	M	1,590	Motor Vehicles
IBM A/NZ Holdings	B2B	4,607	IT
Inchcape Australia	M	1,694	Transport
InciTec Pivot	B2B	3,953	Chemicals & Allied Products
Infratil	B2B	1,440	Energy
ING Bank	M	2,914	Banks
Inghams Enterprises	M	1,840	Foods Wholesale
Ingram Micro Holdings Australia	B2B	2,100	Metal
Insurance Australia Group	M	12,256	Insurance
International Power Australia	B2B	1,708	Electronics
Itochu Minerals & Energy of Australia	B2B	2,632	Other
JBS Australia	M	2,775	Foods Wholesale
Jemena	B2B	1,636	Energy
Kimberly-Clark Pacific Holdings	M	1,281	Paper & Packaging
Komatsu Marketing	B2B	1,314	Construction Equipment
KPMG	B2B	1,064	Accounting
Laing O'Rourke Australia	B2B	1,619	Construction
Leighton Holdings	M	15,886	Construction
Lend Lease Group	B2B	9,196	Construction
LGSS NSW	M	1,611	Insurance

(continued)

Company Name	B2B/M	Rev (\$m)	Industry
Linfox	B2B	2,600	Transport
Lloyds International	M	1,970	Insurance
Macquarie Group	M	11,494	Financial Services
Mainfreight	B2B	1,342	Transport
McConnell Dowell	B2B	1,959	Metal
Meridian Energy	B2B	2,230	Energy
Metcash	M	12,462	Other
Mitsubishi Development	M	6,209	Mining
Mitsubishi Motors Australia	M	1,898	Motor Vehicles
Mitsui Iron Ore Development	B2B	2,555	Mining
MML Holdings	B2B	2,805	Metal
Monadelphous	M	1,451	Engineering & Construction
Murray Goulburn Co-op	M	2,374	Foods Wholesale
National Australia Bank	M	40,568	Banks
New Zealand Post	M	1,833	Transport
Newcrest Mining	B2B	4,112	Mining
Newmont Australia Holdings	B2B	1,312	Mining
News Australia Holdings	M	2,982	Media
Nine Entertainment Co	M	1,960	Media
Nissan Motor Company Australia	M	2,100	Motor Vehicles
NSW Health	M	2,180	Government
Nufarm	B2B	2,104	Chemicals & Allied Products
Nuplex Industries	B2B	1,580	Chemicals & Allied Products
Olam Investments Australia	B2B	3,340	Agriculture
OneSteel	B2B	7,177	Steel
Orica	M	6,300	Chemicals & Allied Products
Origin Energy	M	10,389	Energy
Orrcon	B2B	n.d.	Steel
Pacific Brands	M	1,628	Sundry Consumer
PaperlinX	B2B	4,666	Paper & Packaging
Peabody Energy	B2B	2,778	Mining
Perth Mint	M	5,488	Other
PFD Food Services	B2B	1,282	Foods Wholesale
Pfizer Australia	M	1,458	Chemicals & Allied Products
PGG Wrightson	B2B	1,244	Agriculture
PMP	B2B	1,206	Paper & Packaging
PricewaterhouseCoopers	B2B	1,429	Accounting
Primary Health Care	B2B	1,322	Health
Programmed Maintenance Services	B2B	1,224	Labor Hire
Qantas	M	15,086	Airline
QBE Insurance Group	M	14,969	Insurance
QR National	B2B	3,294	Transport
Queensland Rail	M	1,843	Transport
Queensland Sugar	B2B	1,733	Foods Wholesale
Queensland Treasury Corporation	B2B	7,535	Government Finance
Rabobank Australia & New Zealand Group	M	2,310	Insurance
RailCorp	M	2,570	Transport
Ramsay Health Care	M	3,725	Health
Rio Tinto	B2B	57,862	Mining
Roads and Traffic Authority NSW	M	2,467	Government
SA Government Financing Authority	M	1,395	Government Finance
Samsung Electronics Australia	M	1,544	Electronics

(continued)

Company Name	B2B/M	Rev (\$m)	Industry
Santos	B2B	2,790	Mining
Seven Group	M	3,294	Transport
Shell Australia	M	18,459	Petroleum and Gas
Shell Energy Holdings Australia	B2B	4,370	Energy
Sigma Pharmaceuticals	B2B	2,952	Pharmaceuticals
Sims Metal Management	B2B	8,895	Steel
SingTel Optus	M	9,372	Telco
Skilled Group	B2B	1,877	Labor Hire
Sonic Healthcare	B2B	3,096	Health
SP AusNet	M	1,498	Energy
Spotless Group	B2B	2,794	Other
Stockland	B2B	2,925	Insurance
Sucrogen	B2B	1,754	Agriculture
Sunsuper	M	4,363	Insurance
Sydney Water	M	2,187	Utilities
Synergy	M	2,674	Energy
Synnex Australia	B2B	1,233	IT
TAL	M	1,359	Infrastructure
Tatts Group	M	3,674	Sundry Consumer
Tcorp	B2B	4,173	Government Finance
Telecom NZ	M	5,137	Telco
Telstra	M	25,431	Telco
Toll Holdings	B2B	8,278	Transport
Toyota Motor Corporation Australia	M	8,394	Motor Vehicles
Transfield Services	B2B	2,765	Engineering & Construction
Transpacific Industries	B2B	2,191	Other
Transurban Group	B2B	1,307	Infrastructure
Treasury Corporation Victoria	B2B	1,706	Government Finance
TRUenergy	M	3,509	Energy
UGL	B2B	4,293	Engineering & Construction
Verve Energy	M	1,314	Energy
VicSuper	M	2,081	Financial Services
Virgin Australia	M	3,307	Airline
Visy Industries	B2B	3,800	Paper & Packaging
Viterra	B2B	2,300	Foods Wholesale
Vodafone Hutchison Australia	M	4,822	Telco
Volkswagen Group Australia	M	1,399	Motor Vehicles
Washington H. Soul Pattinson	M	1,326	Other
Water Corporation WA	M	2,003	Utilities
Watpac	B2B	1,319	Infrastructure
Western Power	M	1,376	Infrastructure
Westfield Group	B2B	3,639	Property
Westpac Banking Corporation	M	43,015	Banks
Woodside Petroleum	B2B	4,467	Mining
WorkCover Queensland	M	1,502	Insurance
WorkSafe Victoria	M	3,054	Government
WorleyParsons	M	5,683	Infrastructure
Xstrata Coal Investments Australia	B2B	3,961	Mining
Xstrata Holdings	B2B	23,226	Mining
Zuellig Healthcare Holdings Australia	B2B	3,745	Health
Zurich Financial Services Australia	M	2,030	Insurance

Note: M=Mixed B2B and B2C

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