Elements of strategic social media marketing: A holistic framework

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ABSTRACT

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

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1. Introduction

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

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

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

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developing and improving their strategic social media marketing activities.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Social media marketing objectives and outcomes

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

2.2. Boundary conditions of effective social media marketing

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

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

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

2.3. The need for a holistic social media marketing approach

Extant marketing research does not analyze social media marketing from an overarching, holistic perspective. Holistic, as used in this study, refers to the notion that the components of the overall construct cannot be divorced from the whole, and Brunner-Sperdin, Scholl-Grissemann, and Stokburger-Sauer (2014) define the term as the configuration of the components that ultimately determine a response to a setting, situation, or concept. The interconnectivity and complexity of social media platforms render the management or even the conceptualization of employee responsibility regarding these technologies extremely difficult. For example, Rokka et al. (2014) show that management, employees, and customers operating in social media construct meaning differently. They conclude that their investigated firms were working toward, but had not clearly developed, a framework for managing their employees' responsibilities within the social media sphere.

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

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

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

3. Methodology

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

3.1. Samples and data collection

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

direct exposure to social media marketing practices in real industry settings. Seeking depth rather than breadth, the sample size in stage 1 was commensurate with the qualitative research paradigm in which relatively small sample sizes are used to generate information-rich data (Patton, 1990). All informants agreed to audiotape the interviews (between 25 and 60 min), which resulted in 117 pages of double-spaced, verbatim transcripts.

The second stage of the data collection procedure consisted of a qualitative survey of social media marketing experts (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The survey data were used not for confirmation but as a new and independent qualitative data source with a focus on triangulating the information obtained through the depth interviews and online surveys (Jack & Raturi, 2006). Respondents came from a list of 265 social media marketing experts identified through managerially focused magazines, through interviews in business magazines, or because they were mentioned as knowledgeable and experienced experts in personal communication. E-mail requests were sent to all experts along with two reminders, which resulted in 50 returned surveys (response rate = 18.9%). Seven data sets were eliminated because of incomplete answers or because social media marketing plays a minor role in the respondents' daily work. The final sample consisted of 43 respondents (age: m = 37; SD = 9 years, 74% male; 88% European) with various backgrounds in their position and/or industry. Table 1 provides a summary of the informants, and Appendix B presents a more detailed overview.

Respondents were asked to (1) define social media marketing, (2) discuss self-selected best and worst practice examples of social media marketing, (3) discuss success factors and success metrics, and

Table 1
Summary of stage 2 informants.

Company size (employees)	
<50	14 (32.6%)
50–99	5 (11.6%)
100–499	3 (7.0%)
500–999	8 (18.6%)
1000–4999	6 (14.0%)
5000–10,000	3 (7.0%)
>10,000	4 (9.3%)
Social media marketing experience (in years)	
Average:	6.4 years
1–2	5 (11.6%)
3–5	19 (44.2%)
6–8	12 (27.9%)
9 and more	7 (16.3%)
Percentage of working time associated with social media	
Average:	52.8%
<20%	7 (16.3%)
20–39	10 (23.3%)
40–59	6 (14.0%)
60–79	3 (7%)
80–100	15 (34.9%)
n/a	2 (4.7%)
Age (in years)	
Average:	37
<30	9 (20.9%)
30–39	19 (44.2%)
40–49	10 (23.3%)
50–59	5 (11.6%)
Self-reported experience in…	Means[a]
Social Media	6.2
Social Media Marketing	5.9
Marketing	5.7
Customer Management	4.7
Advertising	5.2
Communications/Public Relations	5.6

[a] How much experience do you have in the following areas? (1 = no experience at all; 7 = highly experienced).
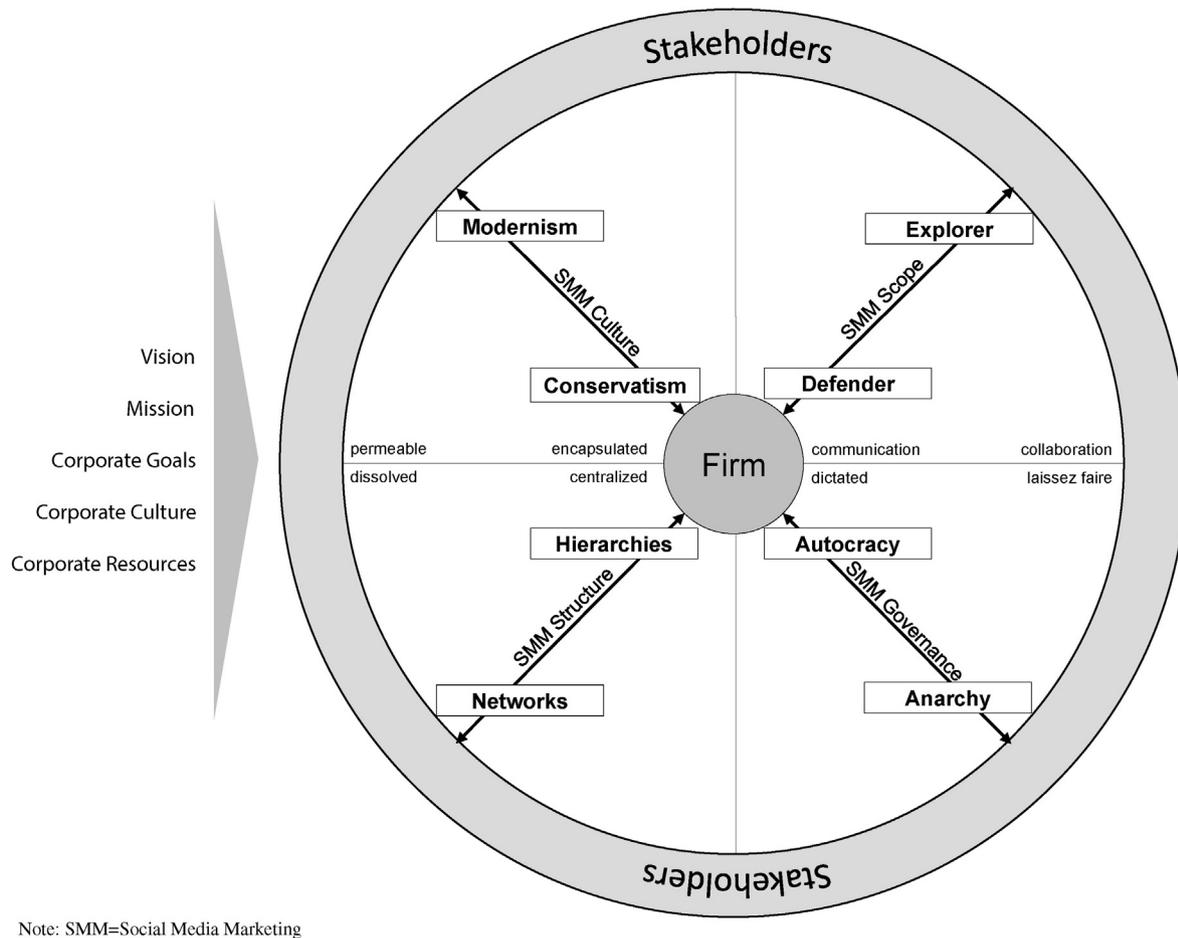
(4) describe their ideal implementation of social media marketing in a self-selected organization. The survey employed common design techniques (Smyth, Dillman, Christian, & Mcbride, 2009), such as adding large answer fields and asking respondents to be as specific as possible, to increase respondents' motivation to provide detail.

3.2. Data analysis

Because the interviews from stage 1 and the open-ended survey questions from stage 2 produced free-form, informant-driven text, identical interpretative data analysis techniques were applied to both data sets. A three-stage data coding process served to construct the theoretical framework (Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006). At stage 1, first-order concepts were uncovered through open coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994) across all interviews and survey responses (Harrison & Rouse, 2015). Stage 2 used axial coding to identify second-order themes on a higher level of abstraction. This step connected concepts that emerged from the open coding in stage 1 through a process of "compare and contrast." Finally, stage 3 iterated more frequently between data and theory to probe the patterns that materialized from the data.

4. Findings

Fig. 1 shows the strategic social media marketing framework with its four central dimensions. First, *social media marketing scope* addresses the question whether companies use social media marketing predominantly for communication with one or a few stakeholders or comprehensively (both externally and internally) as a genuine tool for collaboration. Defenders use social media marketing primarily as a one-way communication tool to entertain consumers or to inform stakeholders, rather than integrating employees or community groups. Conversely, explorers are interested in an authentic social media marketing collaboration based on reciprocal interactions with many different stakeholders such as clients, employees, suppliers, and government agents.

Second, *social media marketing culture* distinguishes between conservatism, which is represented by an encapsulated, traditional, mass-advertising approach to social media marketing, and modernism, which is characterized by a more permeable, open, and flexible social media marketing culture.

Third, *social media marketing structure* addresses the organization and departmentalization of the social media marketing assignment in the firm. Hierarchies stand for a centralized approach with a clearly defined social media marketing assignee. Networks represent an organizational structure in which all employees are responsible for social media marketing, and thus a dedicated social media marketing director is no longer necessary.

Fourth, *social media marketing governance* refers to how the company establishes rules and guidelines and how social media marketing responsibilities are controlled in the company. The extreme position of autocracy describes a situation with precise regulations on who in the company is allowed to interact on social media platforms. Conversely, anarchy represents a situation without any such rules or guidelines.

The current research focuses on the extremes of each continuum, but, in general, firms likely choose (intentionally or unintentionally) a position somewhere between the poles on each dimension. For example, companies need to find a position on social media marketing governance that neither regulates everything employees are allowed to say nor leaves them without any guidance on which to base their responsibilities or behaviors. Fig. 1 also suggests that decisions on social media marketing should indeed be guided by the firm's internal influencers (e.g., general vision, mission, corporate goals, corporate culture, available resources), which in turn should be in line with external influencers (e.g., communities, competition, government regulation).

Note: SMM=Social Media Marketing

Fig. 1. Strategic social media marketing framework.

4.1. Social media marketing scope: defenders to explorers

The informants identified several avenues to address stakeholder groups through social media marketing that fall under the dimension of social media marketing scope. On the one hand, companies use social media marketing as a pure communications tool to push content to customers, the community, or employees. This *defender* approach, which the informants did not generally recommend, typically focuses on one or a few stakeholder groups. For example, several informants used the German expression *bespassungsfunktion* (broadly translated as "entertainment function"), which refers to the current practice of uploading funny or otherwise entertaining content, as a hallmark of the defender approach. This approach offers a sharp contrast to the *explorer* approach, which centers on taking advantage of the integrative, interactive, and collaborative potential of social media technology. As one interviewee explained, with the defender approach, consumers may try to communicate with the company through social media but receive standardized answers or even no reply at all. On the other hand, "explorers" are companies that use social media marketing to create and maintain reciprocal relationships with stakeholders. Two of the informants described the latter approach as follows:

It is all about social. I do not say social media anymore, because this is too restricted [in terms of] media and messages, but I speak of social business. (Timothy, in-depth interview)

If I had an unlimited budget … I would work towards a social enterprise. Social enterprise means that you are wide open to your customers. One of our clients [an airline from Asia] thinks and lives social media and integrates it into all their processes. Not only into external communication, but also into internal communication. (Robin, in-depth interview)

Explorers focus on a collaborative approach to social media marketing that includes many of the firm's stakeholders, such as current and potential customers, current and potential employees, suppliers, or society at large. Acquiring and using the feedback provided through social media platforms from each of these disparate stakeholders is central to this approach and includes defining how different stakeholders can contribute to the firm's value creation process. For example, one informant suggested that customers can support the company by buying more at higher prices, employees can work more for less money, and banks can provide more credit at lower interest rates. Although these examples would certainly not extend to all firms, they show how companies can create value using social media marketing. Thus, depending on both the firm's online and offline image, managers should define general communication goals for these different stakeholders. A manager of a B2B firm, for example, stated that "general communication goals [need to be identified] for the most important stakeholders" to motivate them to support the organization (Rob; online survey). Likewise, a pharmaceutical manager stated that a core challenge is to motivate users to engage in a dialogue with the firm (Jean, online survey).

The explorer approach facilitates integrated, two-way communication and collaboration that is completely open, rather than simply broadcasting information. Collaboration in the context of the explorer approach refers to any of several possible types of collaboration, such as the collaboration between the firm and customers or among multiple employees, and as a tool for stakeholder management, such as social

media-driven collaborations between firms and the government or external interest groups. Many informants explained that social media should motivate people to share information; thus, contemporary social media marketing in the spirit of the explorer must involve more than quietly posting product information. Because defenders focus only on the client/customer side of social media marketing, they perceive severe limitations to its use in B2B markets. However, their more comprehensive approach enables explorers to see the potential for social media marketing in both B2C and B2B markets:

> The way we have thought about it is less from the marketing perspective, but rather based on a more holistic approach. Social media can be used for many different things, and marketing is of course quite client- or consumer-focused, so we told ourselves we have to understand and use social media in a much more holistic way. Traditionally, social media is administered by the marketing department, because companies try to entertain customers on Facebook or Twitter. However, as I mentioned before, there are many other applications for social media…. No matter what industry, social media as a collaborative approach is drastically underrated today. (Barbara, in-depth interview)

4.2. Social media marketing culture: conservatism to modernism

The informants articulated two extreme positions related to social media marketing culture. The first position, conservatism, reflects an encapsulated, internally focused, and risk-averse view of social media marketing. However, the informants intimated that successful social media marketing requires an open, permeable, authentic, and sometimes risk-taking culture. As one informant explained, "all employees and especially top management have to believe in social media and take the risk that someone may talk negatively about the company" (Dirk, online survey). Thus, a modern social media marketing culture, supported by top management, may force companies to reassess how initiatives are executed in the organization. As another respondent explained:

> That is of course the most important thing. Saying that as a first step I have to convince senior management…. I think it is important to understand what is going on, especially concerning senior management, and to attenuate rejection towards change (Florian, in-depth interview)

Because organizational culture is a relatively stable determinant of organizational effectiveness (Zheng, Yang, & McLean, 2010), firms with a more traditional corporate culture (i.e., incongruent with the openness required for successful social media marketing implementation) face a steep challenge. When contrasted with traditional media marketing, consumers can take control of many aspects of the corporate content posted in social media (Labrecque et al., 2013). Thus, companies are forced to reassess the level of ownership they claim with respect to their marketing messages on these platforms. In addition, marketers should be appreciative of users' attention to the firm's social media content, even when consumers' interactions with this content are not consistent with the company's intended message and result in transformation or even deformation of the messages:

> Yes, I believe that a different understanding and approach is needed. Of course, as a company I have to think about which of the brands or content I own will be disclosed on social media. Because I have to be aware that social media users interpret these contents in a somewhat more open way and continue to work with these contents…. When I upload a video, which should be in some way advertising for me, and users take this video and post their own version of the video as a spoof or joke, then this is first of all positive because I am getting attention. And if someone has problems with that, then this person should go back to the first question, is social media really

for me and what do I want to achieve with it.

> (Barbara, in-depth interview)

4.3. Social media marketing structure: hierarchies to networks

The current research identifies two extreme positions for social media marketing structure: hierarchies (representing a centralized and concentrated social media marketing structure) and networks (i.e., in which control of social media marketing is fragmented, decentralized, dissolved, and cross-functional). Hierarchies represent firms with a high need for control and a quasi-military organization. Although none of the interviewees advocated for firms to adopt the extreme end of this dimension, some perceived advantages in a more hierarchical social media marketing structure:

> It is my strong opinion that the ownership of content and the maintenance of social media in general should be assigned to one department only. And in case someone wants to upload or update something, for example, human resources wants to run applications through Twitter, then they have to contact the social media department. (George, in-depth interview)

Conversely, some informants advocated for networks, the other extreme of the structure dimension. The idea of a networked structure for social media marketing implies that social media activities are a common responsibility for all employees regardless of the department to which they are assigned. This idea is similar to the concept of modern quality management in which quality is the job of every employee in the firm, not simply the purview of a "quality department" (Lai & Cheng, 2005). This perspective suggests that social media marketing should be a function that permeates all processes and departments of the organization, and thus a social media marketing director or specialist would take the role of directing, rather than executing, a firm's social media marketing efforts, if his or her services are required at all:

> In the last step, the social media representative does not exist anymore, because social media has been incorporated into the DNA of the company. Of course, this may take five or ten years, but eventually there won't be any social media specialist, because it has been incorporated into the subareas of the company…. It will be normal that [customer relationship management] includes social, that marketing includes social, this will be a normal basic skill…. I see many companies that I perceive as leading, where people go back from a competence center to their departments, maybe stay there for some time as contact person and enough knowledge transfer happens so that it becomes the norm, and everybody can deal with this reality. Then you don't need specialists for social media anymore, this will be just a part of the corresponding job description. (Timothy, in-depth interview)

A preference for networks (vs. hierarchies) is also present in the responses from the online surveys. For example, respondents emphasized the importance of "flat hierarchies" (Barry and Lee, online survey) and the belief that "social media works best as a cross-departmental structure" (Dirk, online survey).

4.4. Social media marketing governance: autocracy to anarchy

The fourth dimension refers to how social media marketing is governed in the firm. Several informants emphasized the importance of guidelines and policies for employees to determine who in the company is empowered to provide which type of content in which social media application. The continuum of possibilities suggests two extreme positions termed "autocracy" and "anarchy." In autocracy, a single

department centralizes and administers control of social media communication. Conversely, anarchy is represented by a laissez-faire mentality in which no such rules exist and departments/employees are free to communicate at will on social media platforms. As the organizational culture and structure become more open, the definition of clear social media guidelines becomes increasingly important. For example, clear guidelines are critical for a company positioned on the network side of the "social media marketing structure" continuum (i.e., in which any employee in any department, instead of a single individual or department, can execute social media marketing) and less so for firms with a hierarchical social media marketing structure. The interviewees revealed a *paradox of social media marketing governance* in which the number of employees with authority to execute social media communication is inversely related to the need for rules and guidelines articulated by senior management. They also discussed how companies can attenuate the indurating and formalizing effect of social media guidelines by involving employees in the generation of these guidelines and thus motivate their internalization (vs. a mere acceptance).

> The company should have something like social media guidelines that determine certain basic principles and make non-compliant behavior punishable. If this is not defined, it becomes very difficult to deduce the consequences of misbehavior, because the employee can say that he did not know the consequences. However, when he or she acknowledged the guidelines when signing the employment agreement, it is different. This is not meant to be malicious, but if one wants to maintain control, one should safeguard against what the employees write about the company on the web. (Timothy, in-depth interview)

Finally, the informants emphasized the importance of training employees to enhance the effectiveness of social media guidelines. Social media training may move the firm closer to the "autocracy" pole of the social media marketing governance dimension, but informants generally agreed that without adequate training, the quality and professionalism of social media marketing would suffer. One informant noted that training may actually provide employees with more freedom and autonomy because their knowledge of company processes enables them to make their own decisions.

> I don't see this problem in the service field – training is common there. Thus, the practice of taking care of customer satisfaction should be there. If one strives for an open and transparent service organization, this restores the service employee's freedom, and they can be "themselves" in their work. (Timothy, in-depth interview)

5. Discussion and implications

This research addresses the absence of a holistic framework for strategic social media marketing. A review of the marketing literature reveals several approaches regarding aspects of strategic marketing such as customer relationship management (e.g., Payne & Frow, 2005) or marketing organization (Workman, Homburg, & Gruner, 1998). However, few articles address the strategic marketing of social media, and none put forth a holistic social media marketing framework.

While extant research related to social media marketing investigates social media mostly through the lens of a particular marketing problem (e.g. Fong & Burton, 2008; Kim & Ko, 2012; Kumar et al., 2016) or with a focus on customers and communication (e.g., Chang et al., 2015), the findings of this study reveal four general social media marketing dimensions that firms should address when conceptualizing or managing their strategic social media marketing approach. As the findings indicate, these dimensions are interdependent, and companies should strive to position themselves on the four dimensions in an integrated way, rather than treating them as isolated, independent decisions.

5.1. A new definition of social media marketing

This research suggests a new definition of social media marketing: Social media marketing is an interdisciplinary and cross-functional concept that uses social media (often in combination with other communications channels) to achieve organizational goals by creating value for stakeholders. On a strategic level, social media marketing covers an organization's decisions about social media marketing scope (ranging from defenders to explorers), culture (ranging from conservatism to modernism), structure (ranging from hierarchies to networks), and governance (ranging from autocracy to anarchy).

5.2. Implications for social media marketing scope

Social media marketing provides firms with an opportunity to use social media to build relationships with customers, employees, communities, and other stakeholders (i.e., when they act as explorers). At the same time, firms may choose to view social media as simply another communications channel through which they can push information to customers (i.e., when they act as defenders). Though potentially creating value for customers, the defender approach does not take advantage of the opportunities for building real relationships within the network of customers, employees, interest groups, the government, and other stakeholders, as propagated by modern relationship marketing (Payne & Frow, 2005). However, the explorer approach may require firms to redefine the role of different stakeholders in the organization.

5.3. Implications for social media marketing culture

Management and organizational behavior researchers (Zheng et al., 2010) as well as marketing academics and practitioners (Deshpandé & Farley, 2004) recognize the importance of culture and organizational climate for financial and non-financial firm performance. The current research emphasizes the importance of culture for social media marketing. Companies engaging in social media marketing must acknowledge that stakeholders can take control of and manipulate social media content (Labrecque et al., 2013). Thus, companies should contemplate the trade-offs between an encapsulated social media marketing culture (conservatism), which provides more control of important brand constructs, and consumers' desire to connect and engage with firms displaying a more progressive, permeable culture (i.e., modernism).

5.4. Implications for social media marketing structure

Extant marketing research investigates how the elements of marketing should be organized according to a firm's structural characteristics, such as formalization, centralization, and specialization (e.g., Olson, Slater, & Hult, 2005). Consequently, social media marketing structure focuses on responsibilities and organizational hierarchies employed to configure social media marketing. Whereas social media marketing governance pertains to who can or should say what in social media, social media marketing structure focuses on who has the responsibility to post and interact in these media. As the informants emphasized, firms should integrate social media marketing in a way that fits with their overarching strategies. The informants identified different sets of benefits that can emerge from either a hierarchical or a networked structure. However, they recommended that specific decisions about who has the responsibility to interact online with customers, activists, and pundits should be formally discussed in the organization.

5.5. Implications for social media marketing governance

Research on governance usually investigates the structures, rights, and responsibilities among different employees in organizations (Freeman & Reed, 1983). Information technology (IT) governance, as a sub-discipline of corporate governance, focuses on specifying which

individuals have the responsibility for making decisions on the use of IT (Brown & Grant, 2005). Whereas IT governance traditionally focuses on the use of IT for work-related purposes, social media can potentially be used by any employee in either official (company-granted access) or unofficial (personal account access) capacities. Therefore, the applicability of IT governance research is of limited use when extended to social media marketing. Some companies have developed the idea of educating employees about the personal and firm-related consequences of "undesirable" social media use through social media marketing guidelines (Linke & Zerfass, 2013). However, building social media guidelines and governance into a holistic framework for social media marketing is novel. The role of employees in promoting brands in other contexts (and thus increasing firm value) is well represented in the academic literature (Morhart, Herzog, & Tomczak, 2009). Weber Shandwick's (2014) recent study reveals an emerging movement termed "employee activism" in which one-third of the surveyed respondents were social media activists who defended their employers and advocated for the firm online. Employees may be better able to understand the needs of consumers and products that can meet those needs, and they can effectively advocate and promote the firm online. These technologies have allowed virtually all employees to champion the firm. For example, the fashion retailer Nordstrom has policies to provide employees with knowledge, direction, and expectations. This application of social media marketing governance can increase the overall social media marketing success of the firm (Nordstrom, 2015; Ross, Beath, & Sebastian, 2015).

6. Limitations and future research

Several limitations to the current study suggest potentially fruitful avenues for future research. First, the qualitative approach reveals four dimensions of strategic social media marketing and identifies the extreme points of each dimension. However, future research could use quantitative approaches to identify the impact of different positions on each of these dimensions. Research could also investigate the influence of each dimension on firm or social media marketing performance. For example, studies could try to isolate the effect of each dimension on outcome variables such as consumer–brand engagement (Schultz & Peltier, 2013) or, more specifically, new media brand engagement (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010). A second limitation is the over-representation of European (especially German) informants in the analyses. Prior research discusses cross-cultural differences in consumers' use of social media (Bernoff & Li, 2008; World Newsmedia Network, 2015). Furthermore, extant research advocates for the adaptation of social media content to the targeted culture based on differing consumer profiles (Tsai & Men, 2012). Thus, caution should be taken in extrapolating the framework to other cultural contexts. Future research might determine whether aspects of cultural or economic context add dimensions to the proposed framework or whether they simply require different approaches regarding the four dimensions.

Future research should also investigate how other characteristics, such as culture, the type of firm (e.g., B2B vs. B2C), the industry (e.g., financial services vs. advertising agency), company size, or available resources, influence a firm's "ideal position" on each of the dimensions of strategic social media marketing. Finally, future research could investigate the role of regulatory or self-regulatory bodies (e.g., Word of Mouth Marketing Association) on social media marketing governance and how firms can create value and form core competencies by superseding these requirements.

7. Conclusion

This study sheds light on the complex nature of strategic social media marketing. Social media marketing, in practice, is too complex to be managed and executed exclusively by a single individual or even department. Cross-functional collaborations along the four dimensions of social media marketing are necessary to successfully navigate in this dynamic arena.

Appendix A. Informants of in-depth interviews

Pseudonym	Occupation	Demographics	Degree	Background/experience
Timothy	Social Media Manager, Consultancy	Germany (m/30)	Media/Communication Management	• Social media manager (B2B) for a consulting firm for more than five years • Before that, he worked as a social media editor.
Barbara	Engagement Manager, Consultancy	Germany/USA (33/w)	PhD, Marketing	• More than two years of international experience in one of the largest top management consulting firms. • Involved in projects on social media marketing, viral marketing, technology, and strategy. • Involved in various social media marketing research projects with (social media) marketing executives.
Florian	Social Media Marketing Expert, Consultancy	Austria (m/30)	Electronic Media	• Social media marketing experience in various positions, such as specialist, consultant, and manager, for more than seven years, in one of the largest consulting firms worldwide • Ran an agency for integrated communications before that.
George	Senior Consultant, Consultancy	Germany (33/m)	Business/Marketing	• Social media marketing, strategy, and branding experience in a large European consulting firm for more than two years. • Prior positions include a brand consultant in another consulting company and in-house consulting in a financial institution.
Max	Director Corporate Communications. Media Company	Germany (33/m)	Sociology/Public Relations	• Responsible for corporate communications and marketing services at a large media company with more than 50 brands. • Prior experience in various industries (consulting, agency, research institute, and publisher) for more than six years.
Robin	Managing Partner, Media Agency	Germany (45/m)	Business	• Responsible for various strategic social media marketing projects in an international agency network. • Social media experience in various positions and industries with focus on strategy and metrics for more than seven years.

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(*continued*)

Pseudonym	Occupation	Demographics	Degree	Background/experience
Anastasia	Researcher, University	Austria (w/33)	PhD, Marketing	• Served as a chairman for communication in a leading industry association for media companies. • Research experience in marketing, particularly brand management and multi-stakeholder management. • Industry and consulting experience in branding, strategy consulting, and sales

Appendix B. Informants of online survey

	Name	Country	Occupation	Age/gender	Industry	Professional experience with social media in years	Percentage of working time dealing with social media (marketing)
1	Susan	USA	Writer/Developer	49/f	Agency	3	10
2	Matt	Germany	Advertising Consultant	47/m	Advertising Agency	6	10
3	Michael	USA	Professor	53/m	University	7	20
4	Chris	Sweden	Professor	32/m	University	5	80
5	Nina	Germany	Social Media Consultant	27/f	Advertising Agency	1	100
6	Adrian	Japan	Coach/Researcher	35/m	Consulting/Research Institute	7	10
7	Mike	USA	Professor	48/m	University	18	80
8	Jane	Germany	Marketing Manager	28/f	Healthcare	4	35
9	Barry	Switzerland	CEO/PR Division	37/m	Advertising Agency	6	40
10	Jerry	Germany	Social Media Manager	32/m	Food	3	70
11	Judy	Germany	Communication Manager	26/f	TIME	1	90
12	Nick	Germany	VP/Social Media	34/m	TIME	8	90
13	Jens	Germany	CEO	45/m	Social Media Service Provider	7	80
14	Tim	Germany	Marketing Manager	34/m	Sports	9	25
15	Adam	Germany	VP/Social Media Manager	46/m	Sports	6	50
16	Heike	Germany	Senior Social Media Manager	45/f	Retail	5	100
17	Nila	Germany	VP/Social Media	32/f	Advertising Agency	4	100
18	Dennis	Switzerland	Marketing Manager	57/m	Technology (B2B)	5	10
19	Ben	Germany	VP/Research	44/m	Publisher	4	5
20	Charles	Germany	Social Media Manager	40/m	Advertising Agency	5	10
21	Karen	Germany	Social Media Manager	27/f	Automotive (B2B)	3	100
22	Alex	Germany	Social Media Consultant	28/m	Advertising Agency	2	80
23	Brian	Germany	VP/Marketing	33/m	Food	3	20
24	Marc	Germany	VP/Social Media Manager	33/m	TIME	3	50
25	Janice	Germany	e-Commerce Manager	31/f	Tourism	5	20
26	John	USA	Communication Manager	30/m	University	8	30
27	Martin	Germany	VP Social Media	29/m	Advertising Agency	6	90
28	Christina	France	professor	39/f	University	15	n/a
29	Klaus	Germany	Researcher	30/m	University	3	50
30	Dave	Switzerland	CEO	54/m	Advertising Agency	18	30
31	Marcel	Germany	Researcher	29/m	Research	4	40
32	Rob	Germany	VP/Social Media	33/m	Advertising Agency	14	90
33	Whitney	Germany	Creative Director	33/f	Finance	2	60
34	Tom	Germany	VP/Social Media Manager	33/m	Tourism	5	100
35	Stuart	Germany	Professor	41/m	University	8	n/a
36	Rene	Switzerland	Executive Officer	53/m	Consulting	4	20
37	Aaron	Germany	Public Relations	38/m	Sports	3	30
38	Lee	Switzerland	CEO/Creative Director	52/m	Advertising Agency	15	20
39	Tobias	Germany	CEO	47/m	Consulting	16	5
40	Kirk	Germany	Social Media Manager	31/m	Automotive (B2B)	7	100
41	Andy	Switzerland	Researcher	28/m	Research	5	75
42	Lora	Germany	Consultant	41/f	Consulting	8	40
43	Dirk	Switzerland	Social Media Manager	26/m	TIME	2	100

TIME = Telecommunication, Internet, Media, Entertainment.

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