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SOCIAL MEDIA IN USE: ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE IN IRISH TECHNOLOGY START-UPS

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ABSTRACT

After spectacular adoption of social media by individuals over the last decade, business use of social media has finally begun to catch up. The aim of this research is to develop a richer understanding of how Irish start-up organisations are utilising social media in order to gain sustainable competitive advantage in the global marketplace.

A sample of ten Irish high tech start-ups is interviewed to identify both organisations' primary use of social media and associated challenges. The findings from this research provide strong evidence that Irish start-ups are using social media primarily for creating brand awareness and as an alternative sales channel. An analysis of the companies' Twitter feeds also provides empirical evidence of how social media is being used by coding their tweets and developing a classification of the key functions of Twitter updates: Information, Interaction and Promotion. Our research also identifies main challenges faced by management administering social media initiatives.

In conclusion, this research suggests a "best practice" model for start-ups engaging in social media.

Keywords: Social Media, Business start-ups, Competitive Advantage, Twitter, Social Media Challenges

INTRODUCTION

From the ashes of the dot com bust in the early years of the 21st Century came Web 2.0 which moved beyond the static page metaphor and has given us rich interactive user experiences through the medium of the internet. Intrinsic to this new version of the Web has been the rise of social media and a return to seeing the web as a place for social interaction.

As social media begin to mature and the explosive user acquisition growth slows down, there are calls for reflection on the effects of these technologies on our lives and how we interact with each other (Turkle, 2011). In an organisational context, we find many examples of successful social media use; such as the Blendtec YouTube viral videos (Barwise & Meehan, 2010) or how the Grammy Awards used social media to achieve its highest TV ratings in years (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011). However, negative illustrations like the "United Breaks Guitars" viral video (Berthon, Pitt, Plangger, & Shapiro, 2012) have also become more apparent as organisations experience a learning curve in their rush to become active in social media. Amid the realisation that consumers exert ever greater influence over each other's purchase considerations (Riegner, 2007), many organisations fear the new social media savvy consumer and the massive reach possible through digital word of mouth.

Our research takes place in the context of a growing start-up culture in Ireland. Strategic government initiatives to attract Foreign Direct Investment from large technology companies like Google, Twitter and Facebook have led to Dublin being termed "Europe's Silicon Valley" and "the internet capital of Europe" (Boulden, 2011). A welcome by-product of these world class technology companies locating in Dublin is an emergent local technology start-up scene. The city has become a hub of start-up incubation and accelerator programmes such as Dogpatch Labs and the NDRC's Launchpad (Kennedy, 2011).

The overall aim of this research is to develop a richer understanding of how start-up organisations are using social media. More specifically, the key research questions are as follows:

Research Question 1: Identify how start-ups are using social media.

Research Question 2: Establish the main challenges start-ups associate with realising the espoused benefits of social media.

Research Question 3: Formulate recommendations for start-ups on the best practices for the use of social media.

Similar to previous research on non-profit organisations (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012), our research will also focus on a key feature of organisational social media activity, the actual messages sent. A tweet-level analysis from a sample of start-up companies Twitter feeds will provide empirical evidence of how social media is being used by coding the individual tweets and developing a classification of the key functions of Twitter updates. In effect, this may be considered a sub-set of research question 1:

Research Question 1: sub-question: Develop a classification of the key functions of start-up Twitter updates.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Social Media

The World Wide Web has radically altered the way we share information by lowering the barrier to publishing and accessing documents on the internet (Bizer, Heath, & Berners-Lee, 2009). From its early origin as a simple portal to publish and share data it has grown into the interactive architecture commonly referred to as Web 2.0, a term which was originally coined by Tim

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O'Reilly in 2005 and refers to a loose gathering of a wide variety of family-resembling technologies, services and products (Floridi, 2009).

The original definition shows Web 2.0 as being intrinsically social. O'Reilly (2007, p.17) links a number of concepts which all contribute to the sense of Web 2.0 "going beyond the page metaphor of Web 1.0 to deliver rich user experiences" including:

- the network as a platform
- software applications that get better the more people use them
- the consuming and remixing of data from multiple sources, (including individual users)
- the creation of network effects through an architecture of participation

The rapid diffusion of social media applications along with this evolution of the web leads to some difficulty in defining the term social media. What is or isn't social media? Indeed the web itself is now considered by some as the social web as social aspects have been integrated at the level of the design and development of websites (Porter, 2008). In fact, the Social Web is defined as the online place where people with a common interest can gather to share thoughts, comments and opinions and includes social networking sites, branded and corporate sites (Weber, 2009).

While Berthon et al. (2012) state that social media comprise both the conduits and the content disseminated through interactions between individuals and organizations. The key concept is that anyone can create, comment on and add to social media content unlike traditional one-directional mainstream media (Meerman Scott, 2011).

It is important to make a distinction between two similar terms which are commonly interchanged (particularly in business media), i.e. social media and social networking sites. Social network sites are web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Social Media, in the meantime, can be regarded as the underlying infrastructure defining its key principles, such as User Generated Content (UGC).

This research is based on the following social media applications:

Blog - a blog is a web page that serves as a publicly accessible personal journal for an individual (Webopedia, 2012). Entries are normally listed in chronological order, are tagged by subject matter, and usually have the functionality for readers to post comments. Corporate use of blogs has increased as organisations seek another channel of communication with their audience.

Micro-blogging / Twitter - Twitter is a real-time information network that uses short bursts of information called Tweets up to 140 characters long. Many users tweet directly from the twitter website or mobile application or use one of the many third party management tools available.

Facebook - Facebook is the most used social networking service with over 955 million worldwide monthly active users (Facebook.com, 2012). Organisations can operate branded pages to interact with their customers as well as through Facebook's targeted advertising products.

LinkedIn - LinkedIn is a business orientated social network site which offers individuals and organisations the facility to create and interact with individuals of similar interests in Groups. Organisations can create company pages, engage with followers and target advertisements on the network using the LinkedIn advertising platform.

Google+ - Google's social network platform which is becoming increasingly important due to its link to search engine results.

Content Communities - These online platforms allow for the sharing of particular types of media within a community (e.g. Slideshare - presentations or YouTube - videos).

2.2 Espoused Ways of Utilising Social Media in Business

Much of the literature refers to the benefits of different ways of using social media. This section of the literature review will examine the most common ways described in the literature.

Customer Engagement - Online platforms and social media are offering new ways to engage with customers and the world at large (Giamanco & Gregoire, 2012). It is clear that customers can now interact with an organization in multiple ways across multiple platforms, often in real time. This interaction is no longer one way, broadcast for the customer to view but rather is multi-directional with customers able to view, generate and share content themselves.

Reach - Comparing the social media audience to word of mouth, Gillin (2009) suggest that individuals with a negative experience to share now have the potential word of mouth to reach 10 million people not just the 10 individuals previously thought possible.

Cost - Related to the benefit of being able to reach such a huge audience is the relatively low cost of being able to reach this audience.

Brand Building - Individuals sharing, resharing and commenting on brand content creates an amplification effect around a brand's reputation (Barwise & Meehan, 2010). Social media provides a platform for brands to have a considerable impact, by starting and steering conversations with their customer communities (Beuker & Abbing, 2010).

Sales - Social media can be described as a sales channel. Giamanco & Gregoire (2012, p. 91) quote a sales blogger who describes it thus: "a lead today can be a complaint on Twitter, a question on LinkedIn or a discussion on a Facebook page.". There are many tools which allow organisations to monitor social media content and conversations to identify potential customers. Hunt (2009) also claims that having the high social capital generated through social media activity will help win customers and sell more.

Feedback & Customer Insights - Social Media is seen as an opportunity for an organization to receive feedback from its customers. According to Qualman (2011) good companies view negative feedback as an opportunity to act and adjust whereas

bad companies view it as a nuisance. The tracking and analysis of communications mediated through social media also give organisations the ability to gain rich insight directly from their customers (Barwise & Meehan, 2010).

2.3 Social Media Challenges for Business

Although many organisations recognize the need to be active in social media, they are not confident in the details of exactly how to do it effectively or indeed how to measure its effectiveness. The challenges of using social media can be broadly categorized into 3 areas: Content, Control, and Complexity.

Content - The new creative consumer produces much of the content in the social media ecosystem (Berthon et al., 2012). In this environment, it is a real challenge for organisations to be authentic and engaging over a sustained period of time. Even if the organization heeds advice to be active, interesting and more honest, consumers are quick to point out when brands are not welcome on social media (Fournier & Avery, 2011). To quote Nigel Gilbert, CMO of Virgin Mobile:

“You can’t say one thing and do another, and then be a credible brand...it’s about reputation” (Howard, 2011, p. 18).

Control - By definition, social media allows for the creation and exchange of content and it is this freedom to create and share which gives rise to an interesting paradox. Fournier & Avery (2011) point out that in order to achieve their aim to gain traction or resonance with their audience, the organization must actually give up control of its message. The risk with ceding control of content is that it can be used and re-used in ways unintended by the organization, many of them negative. Facebook pages can be used as a forum for protest or content can be parodied in inappropriate ways. Employees charged with social media communications may also produce content or interact in ways which aren’t acceptable. Another obvious loss of control is that which media companies experience when their copyrighted content features on content communities such as YouTube.

Complexity - The fragmented and global social media landscape gives organisations a difficult task in getting the right message to the right audience at the right time on the right platform (Howard, 2011). It takes time and effort to understand where the organisations audience is and how best to engage with them there. Engaging on multiple platforms and managing multiple authors and audiences is an onerous task. It is also a challenge to integrate an organisations social media activity with its other marketing activities in order to avoid sending out contradictory or competing messages (Hanna et al., 2011; Kietzmann et al., 2011; Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

Finally, there is the issue of measurement of success and return on investment for organisations engaging in social media. Traditional media metrics like reach and frequency can be used but don’t provide a deep understanding of the value of dynamic social media activity. While Hoffman & Fodor (2010) argue that the social web is a highly measurable environment (e.g. number of clicks, blog posts, likes etc.); creating a link between these actions, the value to the organisation and the amount of time and money invested is still problematic to many organisations. However, the complexity of the social media environment leads to difficulty in identifying the specific metrics needed by the organisation for each particular activity and social media platform.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is based on grounded theory which is attained by a series of qualitative interviews with Irish start-up organisations and by quantitative research of the same sample of start-ups actual social media activity. According to Strauss (2008) grounded theory is extracted from data, which is gathered in a systematic manner in the process of research. Bryman and Bell (2007) emphasise that data collection and research design should be driven by research questions. As such an effort has been made to design the interview questions to accommodate the relevant research questions and objectives. The purpose of this research is exploratory research; therefore the authors choose not to develop any hypothesis. As exploratory research, the purpose is to “build theory” i.e. to generate a richer understanding of how start-ups use social media and to propose a framework for best practices.

3.1 Data Collection

All third party data sources were carefully evaluated by the research authors to ensure the relevance and validity of the data. The authors of this research started collecting the secondary data in January 2012. Sources that are used in this research are generally available in UCD’s digital and physical libraries. In addition a variety of external literature as well as reputable online materials were used in order to ensure the comprehensiveness of literature review. The objective of the literature review is to define social media, outline the focus of the social media literature that is available and demonstrate the clear justification for our research question as to how start-up companies use social media.

For the purpose of this research the authors chose to adopt a pluralistic data collection method. The primary data for this research was collected through qualitative and quantitative methods. The reasons for the choice of this method are that the research in question is of an exploratory nature and the authors are aiming to build a rich understanding of the use of social media channels for start-up organisations.

The authors of this research executed data collection in two different ways:

1. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten Irish start-ups. The aim of the interviews was to gather data on a number of themed topics related to the research questions.
2. Twitter feed analysis was conducted in order to find out how start-ups are using social media and develop a classification of the key functions of start-up Twitter updates.

DATA ANALYSIS

The primary research shows that well known social media channels such as YouTube, Vimeo, SlideShare, Google+, Pinterest or Tumblr are much less utilised by the start-ups surveyed. Two key factors which influence the choice of social media channel are apparent from the responses given by our interviewees. Firstly, the use of a particular social media channel depends on the type of content they intend producing (e.g. photos, videos, text, etc.) and secondly, the appropriateness of the social media channel for reaching the companies' target audience. For example, one of the start-ups indicated that they are using a lesser known social media channel called Chilled which allows pinning and organising videos into story boards (similar to Pinterest). That particular start-up (Company J) produces software as a service that helps small and medium businesses to easily and quickly create promotional videos. Considering the nature of Company J's business Chilled is an appropriate platform for Company J to promote its video content and reach its audience that is passionate about or interested in video content.

4.1 Social Media Activity for Start-Ups

The research shows there are a number of functions of social media activity for start-ups; however, three main functions were identified by multiple respondents: Brand Awareness, Search Engine Optimisation and Lead Generation.

4.2 Social Media Management

The interviewees were asked a number of questions in relation to how they managed their social media activity. While three of the start-up's interviewed had formally documented social media strategies in place, two of these were viewed as out of date and no longer relevant. Seven of the ten had no formal social media strategy of any kind. Four of the ten had more than one person in the company active on social media.

The start-ups surveyed are using tools that help to automate content publishing, social media monitoring, automatic activity report generation, automatic Twitter accounts' following and un-following. Seven out of ten start-ups said that finding the time needed for using social media was a challenge and are using social media management tools to try to alleviate this problem. There was no dedicated social media marketing person in the majority of the companies surveyed with responsibility being shared across individuals or being undertaken by the founder of the organisation.

Two out of ten start-ups surveyed indicated that they are not using any social media management tools. Of the remaining eight start-ups seven are using a product called Hootsuite to manage their social media activity. Company J mentioned that they are spending a lot of time monitoring social media content and they intend to start using a social media management tool very soon. Company F uses the specific website for each social platform they use. Table 1 outlines major Social Media management tools adapted by organisations interviewed for this research.

Management Tool	Function
Hootsuite	Social media monitoring, analytics and alerts dashboard.
Buffer	Tweet Scheduling Application
TweetDeck	Application owned by Twitter that brings more flexibility and insight to power users. The functionality includes customisable columns and filters, tweet scheduling, notifications about new Tweets
Paper.li	Application enables people to publish online newspapers based on topics they like and treat their readers to fresh news and automatically publish it
Twilert	Application that enables you to receive regular email updates of tweets containing preselected keywords
Nutshelmail	Application that automatically sends a social media activity report to an email
Tweetbot	Application that helps to organise Twitter lists on a smartphone
Marsedit	Desktop blog editing client for the Mac
Netvibes	Social media monitoring, analytics and alerts dashboard.
Twitadder	Automated Twitter management software

Table 1: Social Media Management Tools

4.3 Social Media Challenges for Start-Ups

The results of our research highlights a number of areas which start-ups find challenging in relation to their social media activities. These are summarised in Table 2. Two key challenges are identified by our interviewees: Time and Content Creation.

Time - 70 per cent of our interviews cited the difficulties in managing how much time is required for social media activities, particularly in relation to curating interesting content to share or creating original content. Company J describes the challenge as follows:

“It can get time consuming and distracting. Let's say you are on Facebook and you see a Mashable article that is related to video and you waste your time on reading what you shouldn't be reading...”

Content creation - Seven out of the ten start-ups surveyed indicated that various aspects of content creation are a challenge. Producing quality content is something that requires multiple resources. Company A stated that the time required to create the content is a challenge because it requires contributions from different people in order to make the content interesting and

appealing. Content creation requires skill, time and money.

Other social media challenges - A number of other challenges were mentioned during the interviews by individual organisations. These challenges are summarised in Table 2 below. It is worth noting that two of the Start-ups detailed their efforts to be consistent in their social media efforts but found it difficult to execute; partially due to lack of commitment to social media. This poses the challenge for organisations to be both active and consistent in their social media efforts. Consistency in social media execution was seen by most of the start-ups surveyed as a key social media tactic. Company E stated that they focus on things that are needed for generating sales immediately; therefore social media becomes a secondary activity. As a result there is no consistency in Twitter or blog posting which, they admitted doesn't look well for their website visitors.

Challenge	Subset
Time	Needed to be active Time to produce content Maintaining Engagement Timing & Consistency
Content	Cost of production Time to produce Expertise problem Authenticity Quality Difficult when product not ready Consistency Hard to plan regularly
Managing Reputation	
Measurement of Return	

Table 2: Social Media Challenges for Start-Ups

4.4 Twitter Feed Analysis

According to the broad findings of the existing literature about the organisational use of social media (Jansen et al., 2009; Walters et al., 2009 cited in Lovejoy and Saxton, 2012) organisations seem to employ social media for at least two primary purposes - information sharing and dialogic relationship building. However, as highlighted in the Literature Review in Chapter 2, we don't know how start-ups are using social media and how these information and dialogic functions are being expressed on their social media activities. In order to complement the qualitative interview research and answer the aforementioned question Twitter communication analysis has been carried out.

4.5 Twitter Feed Classifications

As shown in Table 3, our analysis has identified 12 different types of tweets in our sample of 794 tweets. From these types, we have formed 3 main functional tweet categories: Information, Interaction and Promotion:

Information

Information category tweets are defined as tweets that refer to general content usually from a third party source and are not of a direct promotional nature. The intention behind these tweets is simply to inform and the subject matter is generally related to the senders industry or has some relevance to the organisations stakeholders.

Interaction

The Interaction category is made up of tweets that promote dialogue and interactivity by attempting to build communities, foster relationships and create networks. The core function of this category is to spark interaction with followers via conversational messages.

Promotion

The Promotion category defines tweets that are of a promotional nature and serve to promote the account holding company, its content or third party content about the company. These tweets tend to take the form of referrals to the senders new blog posts, promotions of special offers or the highlighting of awards or praise the start-up has received.

Category	Example
Interesting facts	Physicists produce highest man-made temperature: 7 trillion degrees http://t.co/PE9rGVQ
Tips	Thinking of Government tenders? Then check out Tender Scout http://t.co/SZmLar and let them do the work! #smeInteraction
Event information	Looking forward to 'Expanding Your Online Experience Offline', interested? Signup

	http://t.co/RTRxLaX #smelInteraction
Informational content	Polaris' Dogpatch Labs locates in heart of Europe's digital capital - Dublin. http://t.co/EzhjAs #Dublin #venturecapital
Gratitude	thanks @dan_banta. Demo videos will be out soon. just a few more weeks before the curtain rises :) #superexcited
Emotional	My fav @37signals post - and a great lesson for boot strapped startups. Money doesn't fix problems. http://t.co/K9bRLI5
Acknowledgement	Congratulations @roleconnect on being Silicon Republic's startup of the week! http://t.co/fLA9qWZw
Call to action	Stay connected with Company H after @cipd HR software show - follow us on @slideshare http://t.co/OSb80M4 #HRSS12
Blog referring	Blog: The new employee psychological contract http://t.co/Fv5GvBw #hrblogs #connectingHR #careerdev
Sales promotion	An offer you can't refuse. 90 day free trial for simple and flexible performance management software available at stand H36 #HRSS12
Event specific promotion	Great day at #CEIC2012! Tomorrow we are giving away a 16inch portable monitor at 3.15-drop by booth 325 to enter :)
Updates about the company	@sundaybusiness thanks for featuring Company D today in #donedeal much appreciated

Table 3: Twitter Feed Categories

DISCUSSION

Our study demonstrates that while the use of particular social media channels depends on the type of content the organisation is producing and the intended audience for that content, the major social media platforms dominate channel choice. Blogs, Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn are the platforms of choice. Though many of the start-ups maintained a presence on Facebook; it is not seen as a key platform. However, this may be due to the B2B nature of many of our sample. Despite the recent growth of social networks such as Google+ and Pinterest, they are very much seen as niche players.

It is clear that start-ups are endeavouring to find their audience and engage with them, advice offered by Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) to be active wherever your customers are present. Start-ups see the key activity as creating original content on their blog and then seeding that into the social media ecosystem using Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn updates. Hanna et al. (2011, p. 268) refer to “owned” (blogs) and “earned” (e.g. tweets or re-tweets) media. This concentration on owned and earned social media perhaps reflects the budgetary constraints start-ups operate under with very limited marketing budgets. Here we find that practice is indeed reflecting the espoused theory – start-ups practices are supporting the argument of Kietzmann et al. (2011) that blogs are about facilitating rich conversations. While microblog posts and social network status updates are being used to keep customers informed in the short term, blogs are being used to share deeper and richer information over longer periods of time (Weinberg & Pehlivan, 2011).

It is noteworthy that only one start-up had actually paid for advertising on any of the social media platforms, using LinkedIn ads to drive traffic to their website for a limited period of time as an experiment. Clearly start-ups do not have the budgets for paid advertising on social networks.

It is also worth noting that rather than using social media to engage in customer feedback (Mangold & Faulds, 2009), only one of the start-ups sampled consciously engaged in this practice. This is consistent with Kuikka and Äkkinen's (2011) study of social media use in a large organisation which found that while customer feedback is seen as a potential use of social media, the actual expectations of this happening were low.

Brand Awareness

Our research finds that start-ups are overwhelmingly using social media as a brand awareness tool. This brand building takes a number of forms. Firstly, the start-ups aim to educate their audience on their products and services and broadcast what it is they do. However, as identified by Fournier & Avery (2011) there is also great wariness of using social media as a promotional vehicle as brands are not always welcome on social media. Start-ups are conscious of being genuine and authentic in their activity and not appearing selfish or too commercial in their updates, reflecting the notion that “social media is for people, not brands” (Ritson, 2010, p. 54). There is a clear focus on coming across as genuine and trustworthy. This is also evidenced by the fact that promotional material was only found in 21% of the tweets analysed, perhaps reflecting the assertion by Kietzmann et al. (2011) that Twitter is more about conversation than identity.

Our findings show that start-up organisations are not thinking about social media on a strategic level, with few organisations having a formal strategy in place. In fact, most admit that social media is undertaken on an ad hoc basis and is seen as secondary to the other duties of the individuals. This ad hoc approach is in contrast to the traditional, experimental and emergent approaches identified by Weinberg and Pehlivan (2011).

Search Engine Optimisation

An issue which has received little discussion in the literature to date is the importance of social media activity for the Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) strategies of organisations. Our research highlights that many start-up's motivation for using social

media stems from the basic need to improve their website's ranking in the search engines. The main search engines like Google, Bing or Yahoo evaluate the relevancy of a website by keywords being found on that website and links (backlinks) to that website from other search engine indexed websites that have high authority. While keywords can be easily adjusted using content management systems and widely available free SEO plugins, backlinks to the website are much more difficult to obtain. Start-ups are demonstrably overcoming this difficulty by being active on social media channels.

Social Media as a Sales Tool

As with SEO, our research highlights an area underplayed in the academic literature, namely how social media is being used as a tool to generate sales leads. This is particularly important where the product is offered online with the Software as a Service (SAAS) model. Using this model, start-ups are creating sales funnels and are using social media activity in a very strategic way to drive traffic to their website, i.e. into the funnel where they then use various optimisation techniques to increase their sales conversion rates.

In a more traditional sense, social networks are being used to find and contact potential customers. In particular, LinkedIn is seen as a valuable source of potential leads and many start-ups are paying for upgraded accounts to allow them greater flexibility in searching for and contacting relevant individuals. This notion of connecting with potential customers is also reflected in the start-ups discussions of event specific marketing and industry learning. Many of the Interaction focussed tweets analysed were centred on specific industry trade show events or promotional shows. The start-ups try to attract new followers by tweeting about a particular event, connecting with individuals attending the event and then actually meeting them in person. This online / offline dynamic is an interesting aspect of how start-ups use social media to build relationships. We find that start-ups are both connecting with followers and then meeting them in person and also meeting with individuals and then connecting online afterwards.

CONCLUSION & FUTURE RESEARCH

Our research highlights the ways start-ups are building their brands with social media. Firstly, they are creating rich content on their blogs and using social networks such as Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn to share and promote this content. Secondly, they are using social media to become known as knowledgeable and an expert in their industry domain. They do this by sharing informative content, commenting on relevant community forums (e.g. LinkedIn groups) and by interacting with the community. Importantly, the research also reveals that the majority of start-ups are making little or no use of metrics or Key Performance Indicators in order to gauge the success or otherwise of their efforts.

The Twitter feed analysis provides an interesting insight into the actual use of social media in contrast to some of the findings of the research interviews. Our conclusion from this analysis is that start-ups need to be more aware of the nature of their Twitter use and relate this use to their strategic goals for using social media. In general, they should aim for a mix of Information, Interaction and Promotion tweets in order to gain the greatest value from this social media channel.

Our research has established that the main challenges start-ups associate with realising the espoused benefits of social media can be described as Time and Content Creation. While many of the start-ups related different individual challenges, the amount of time required to manage and maintain consistent social media activity and the various aspects of content creation are the over-riding themes. Indeed, these themes are bound together as the time required to produce quality content is also cited as a challenge.

Overall, we find that the key challenges start-ups experience in achieving successful use of social media are very much a function of the limited resources available to start-ups in terms of budget, human resources and founder(s) time. Moreover, there is a link to our findings to Research Question 1: by not strategically using metrics or Key Performance Indicators, the challenge of managing time and content creation becomes all the greater. In other words, by not measuring the value to the organisation of their social media activities, start-ups find it difficult to dedicate time and resource to the activity. It is clear that in order to overcome these challenges, many start-ups must review their social media practices and begin to focus on benefits which are easier to attain and more practical with smaller resources.

6.1 Implications for Practitioners

Our third research objective was to formulate recommendations for start-ups on the best practices for the use of social media. Our research clearly shows that there is a need for start-ups to create a link between the social media activity they undertake and the desired outcomes they wish to achieve. Our study shows that the majority of start-ups are not measuring the value of their social media activity to the organisation. In order for the value to be demonstrable and transparent to the whole organisation, the activity must be measurable. If the value is clearly understood, the activity will gain more support and commitment in the organisation and issues such as time management and consistency of activity won't be as problematic.

Our research also shows many start-ups are not thinking about their social media strategy on an ongoing basis. Many organisations document a strategy which then goes out of date quickly and is not referred to again. Overall goals and aims are not related to daily activity and success or failure to meet these goals is not measured.

6.2 Future Research

Given the fragmented nature of research in the field of social media already discussed in the literature review, there are a number of areas which would benefit from further academic research. While we hope that our exploratory research has contributed a greater understanding of how start-up organisations use social media, the research could be continued on a larger

scale in terms of sample size and location. Given that the majority of our sample are classified as B2B organisations, similar research could be undertaken with an emphasis on B2C organisations.

Our findings relating to the use of social media for SEO lead to an interesting area which could be studied; namely, to measure the effect of social media activity on SEO. Similarly, our finding that social media is being used as a sales tool by start-ups warrants further investigation to establish how widespread and how successful this practice is in other organisations. Likewise, it could be studied whether other organisation types also approach social media in the ad hoc manner of start-ups.

Finally, it is hoped that the analysis done on the start-ups Twitter feeds contributes to the social media discipline by providing a basis for further research into the Twitter utilisation practices of other organisations. Our classification can be applied to different organisation types in order to measure their Interaction, Information or Promotion focus. The analysis and classification could also be generalised across other types of social media including blog, LinkedIn and Facebook posts. This would provide more valuable insight into how organisations are using social media. Indeed future research may examine the correlation between different factors (such as organisation size or B2B/B2C nature) and the focus of the social media activity.

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