Research note

The social strategy cone: Towards a framework for evaluating social media strategies

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ABSTRACT

Social media is growing rapidly. Providing both risks and opportunities for organizations as it does. The social strategy cone is developed for evaluating social media strategies. This framework comprises of seven key elements of social media strategies as based on a systematic literature review and case studies. The results of 21 interviews have contributed to the construction of the social media strategy cone for analyzing social media strategies. Three levels of maturity of social media strategy are proposed: initiation, diffusion and maturity. Initiation includes the key elements: 'target audience' and 'channel choice' while all case organizations studied payed attention to these elements. Diffusion includes the elements: 'goals', 'resources' and 'policies'. Maturity adds the elements of 'monitoring' and 'content activities'. Only 3 of the 9 organizations studied are in this phase of maturity. Although, theory suggests the importance of the element of 'monitoring' our research shows the need for more attention in practice.

1. Introduction

Organizations are challenged by the rise of social media. They face a changing environment where customers and employees have adopted social media on a massive scale. Furthermore, competitive pressure forces companies towards a presence on various social media channels as customers expect them to be there (Larson & Watson, 2011). Yet organizations are struggling to professionally implement social media. Just using social media is not enough. Organizations should be using social media strategically to reap the benefits (DiStaso & McCorkindale, 2013). There are best practices in literature such as Starbucks (Gallaugher & Ransbotham, 2010), Proctor & Gamble, FedEx (Berthon, Pitt, Plangger, & Shapiro, 2012), Doritos, Dove (Thackeray, 2008), Zappos, BMW Mini (Faust & Householder, 2009), Lego, SAP (Kiron et al., 2012), Dell, Adidas, Lacoste and AT&T (Keath, 2012 in Ng &Wang, 2012). However, many companies find successfully deploying social media strategies a difficult task (Bottles & Sherlock, 2011; Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011; Hvass & Munar, 2012; Ng & Wang, 2013). They often struggle to adapt to increasingly consumer-oriented communication via social media

(Gallaugher & Ransbotham, 2010; Ng & Wang, 2013). Furthermore, companies failing to disclose information in their social media campaigns can damage their reputation and credibility to the public (DiStaso & McCorkindale, 2013). Yet reports from Coca Cola and a study regarding 500 retail sites by IBM Smart Commerce, state that there is no significant impact on revenues based on social media marketing (Ng & Wang, 2013). Time spent on social media can be a waste of organizational resources.

Increasingly, managers stress the importance of using social media in a more competitive way (Kiron et al., 2012; Harrison & Barthel, 2009). Moreover, companies would like to have a predictable return on their investment in social media (Hoffman & Fodor, 2010). Organizations could benefit from a more thorough understanding and theoretical grounding, underpinning the design and implementation of social media strategies.

However, there is a lack of comprehensive frameworks, theories, methods and research instruments to develop and analyze social media strategies. Kietzmann et al. (2011) Honeycomb framework, e.g., does provide a framework to look at the various functions of social media, but only focuses it on the practical operational level.

The aim of this paper is to develop a framework for the analysis of social media strategies. The framework emerges from a systematic literature review and by conducting case studies.

Therefore the following research question is raised.

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Main question: how can we evaluate the comprehensiveness of social media strategies in practice?

We construct a framework by evaluating key elements of social media strategies from literature as a comparative lens in case studies. The case studies provide us with a thorough review of the comprehensiveness and stage of maturity of the social media strategies within selected organizations.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. First, we present a systematic literature review and its results. Second, we elaborate upon the research method underpinning the case studies. Third, we introduce case results and structure them based on maturity stages of social media strategies. In Section 5 we present our social strategy cone framework based on the results of this study, present limitations and derive a future research agenda.

2. Literature review

2.1. Definition of social media strategy

Before we elaborate upon our findings from the systematic literature review we constructed a definition of social media strategy. It is important to explore a few definitions of the underlying terms. Social media is defined as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (Kaplan & Heinlein, 2010, p. 61). Porter (1996) defines strategy as the "creation of a unique and valuable position, involving a different set of activities" (p. 68). Mintzberg defines strategy as a plan driven by a predefined decision (in Ng & Wang, 2012). He describes strategy formulation as involving the interplay between a dynamic environment and some of the crucial processes in an organization, and as having distinct change-continuity cycles. A strategy needs to have specific objectives, a targeted audience and the required resources (Dutta, 2010). Social media; however, is a specific part of strategic decision making based on digital resources, more specifically a group of internet based information systems. Woodard, Ramasubbu, Tschang, and Sambamurthy (2013) define a digital business strategy as "a pattern of deliberate competitive actions undertaken by a firm as it competes by offering digitally enabled products or services". Another study, by Bharadwaj, El Sawy, Pavlou, and Venkatraman (2013), define a digital business strategy as "an organizational strategy formulated and executed by leveraging digital resources to create differential value". The definition of Information Strategy stated by Kapovsky, Hallonoro, and Galliers (2013) and followed by Henfridsson and Lind (2014) does not differ that much: "a process of goal-directed activity intended to realize a strategy for using information systems in an organization".

Given the definitions above, we define social media strategy as: "a goal-directed planning process for creating user generated content, driven by a group of Internet applications, to create a unique and valuable competitive position".

2.2. Systematic literature review

To analyze research regarding social media strategies, a systematic literature review was conducted. In a systematic review clarity exists in the approach, the selection of the items and the meta-information (Webster & Watson, 2002). The objective of the literature review is to discover key elements of social media strategies and review existing frameworks, methods, theories and standards for the development of social media strategies. Therefore the following question is underpinning the literature review.

Sub question 1: which elements does a comprehensive social media strategy comprise of?

The systematic literature review was conducted in 2013 and was repeated in the first half of 2014. Scopus and web of science were used as international library services which have access to a vast number of multi-discipline academic databases. The abstracts of the results were carefully read and assessed on criteria for relevance, excluding articles that used the word strategy in another semantic way e.g., search strategies. Table 1 provides an overview of the selection process.

Table 1 shows that 5207 articles were retrieved from international databases regarding this subject. After careful evaluation of the abstracts and the removal of duplicates, 66 studies remained in the final selection of articles. The scarcity of literature indicates a literature gap regarding social media strategy. Table 2 provides details of metadata from the selection.

Based on the literature review we find that research regarding social media strategy is a rapidly growing field of interest. Furthermore, the review indicates a lack of effective frameworks for analyzing and comparing social media strategies. Some classification frameworks exist to categorize social media practices (Hofmann & Fodor, 2010; Kietzmann et al., 2011; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Larson & Watson, 2011) and some articles provides us with pointers for specific social media strategies (Gallaugher & Ransbotham, 2010; Munar, 2010; Ng & Wang, 2014; Guinan, Parise, & Weinberg, 2011). However, the current literature pays little attention to defining more refined and comprehensive ways of comparing and evaluating social media strategies. Researchers have just started giving their attention to the subject of social media strategy. The studies conducted so far were exploratory, to establish theory or were based on case studies. The current insights mainly rely on untested theories and only a few exploratory case studies have been conducted. Although the literature is not yet well developed, our analysis of current work led to the identification of initial patterns in the literature regarding the importance of certain elements of social media strategy development. Given the findings of the review we were able to derive a list of key elements of social media strategy. These key elements are target audience, channel choice, goals, resources, policies, monitoring and content activities. Each of these elements will be further described. An overview of the references used and the core contributions of these studies in regard to the key elements of the social media strategy framework are presented in Appendix A.

2.2.1. Target audience

Organizations should define which target groups to address using social media channels because companies: "must be able to segment their priority populations, that is, be able to identify, isolate, and know the degree to which these populations use and access web 2.0 social media" (Thackeray, Neiger, Hanson, & McKenzie, 2008, p. 342). This population could consist of various 'stakeholders', groups, and cultures (e.g., personal or professional, generation X or Y) (Berthon et al., 2012; Dutta, 2010; Larson & Watson, 2011).

2.2.2. Channel choice

The choice of the channel largely determines the effectiveness and even the appropriateness of communication through a certain social media channel. Klang and Nolin (2011) say that affordances and limitations are set by the technological infrastructure. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) provide a matrix with various social media channels with different characteristics and capabilities in terms of media richness and self-disclosure. Dutta (2010) makes clear that different target groups have to be addressed by different social media channels.

Table 1
Systematic literature review 2014.

Search query (keyword phrases[a])	Scopus results	Scopus selected	WOS results	WOS selected	Total results	Total selected
"Social media" and "strategy"	945	35	211	13	1156	48
"Web 2.0" and "strategy"	748	6	174	5	922	11
"Social network site" and "strategy"	79	0	10	0	89	0
"Social media" and "policy"	516	9	255	1	771	10
"Web 2.0" and "policy"	360	1	121	0	481	1
"Social network site" and "policy"	38	0	14	0	52	0
"Social media" and "governance"	130	3	54	2	184	5
"Web 2.0" and "governance"	107	1	57	1	164	2
"Social network site" and "governance"	17	0	1	0	18	0
"Facebook" and "strategy"	482	11	103	5	585	16
"Twitter" and "strategy"	405	8	67	5	472	13
"LinkedIn" and "strategy"	39	2	4	0	43	2
"YouTube" and "strategy"	220	7	50	3	270	10

Total selected: 118. Total selected items without redundancies: 109. Total selected items based on reading abstracts: 66.

[a] Strategy was also addressed as strategies and policy as policies.

Table 2
Metadata of the selection in the literature review.

Year	# Items	Discipline	# Items	Type	# Items	Research method	# Items
2008	1	Management & governance	23	Journal articles	47	Theoretical exploratory	34
2009	1	Information science	18	Professional magazines	10	Case studies	21
2010	67	Travel & tourism	6	Conference proceedings	9	Survey	2
2011	12	Marketing	4			Policy analysis	2
2012	12	Communication science	4			Design science	1
2013	24	Public relations	3				
2014*	9	Medicine & healthcare	3				
*First quarter							
		Public administration	3				
		Other	2				

2.2.3. Goals

In order to be of value, social media should be aligned with business goals (Bottles & Sherlock, 2011; Gotterbarn, 2012; Thackeray et al., 2008; Dutta, 2010; Larson & Watson, 2011). Social media should have a clear purpose to be effective. Klang and Nolin (2011) stressed the importance of concrete and measurable goals as part of social media plans. Thackeray et al. (2008) also paid specific attention to the goals and objectives of social media practices.

2.2.4. Resources

Valuable resources (FTEs and professional expertise) should be allocated to be successful in social media (Thackeray et al., 2008). Dutta (2010, p. 130) claims that: "the success of your social media strategy will depend on your resources and the quality and authenticity of your message". Some employees should receive training and education to obtain the required skills to work with social media channels (Burkhalter, Wood, & Tryce, 2014). Furthermore, to fully reach the professional potential of social media as a professional user it is important to use the paid advertising programs.

2.2.5. Policies

Social media blur the borders between the organization and the environment (Gotterbarn, 2012). Some basic rules should be set in the organization to both regulate the corporate communication of employees and protect their rights in regard to free speech (DiStaso & McCorkindale, 2013; Gotterbarn, 2012). The governance of communication via social media can be important within organizations in preventing bullying, harassment and gossip (Marlin-Bennett & Thornton, 2012). Furthermore policies are necessary since the corporate reputation can be harmed if employees have no clear boundaries as to how social media should or should not be used (Burkhalter et al., 2014; DiStaso & McCorkindale, 2013; Mortleman, 2011). Cases such as BP, Visit Denmark, United Airlines, and Nestlé KitKat show the potential negative impact of social media (Berthon et al., 2012 Munar & Destination, 2012).

2.2.6. Monitoring

Communication via social media takes place outside the boundaries and control of an organization. Companies should carefully monitor and listen to what is happening on social media channels in the public space, especially in times of crisis (Berthon et al., 2012; DiStaso & McCorkindale, 2013; Klang & Nolin, 2011; Larson & Watson, 2011; Mortleman, 2012). To evaluate progress in an efficient way, Dutta (2010) suggests using standard software tools (e.g., Google Alerts, TweetDeck, Radian6, Fisheye). Impact measurement based on simple metrics such as numbers of comments, questions, likes, responses, visitors, followers, and friends can help to evaluate activities (Klang & Nolin, 2012).

2.2.7. Content activities

The content activities plan makes clear in which timeframe and in what order campaigns, projects, use and monitoring will take place (Klang & Nolin, 2011; Thackeray et al., 2008). Furthermore, it is important to make a schedule of content posts, based on a pre-defined timeframe, to warrant frequent contributions to various social media channels (Barnes, 2014). The schedule should be very practical and should also provide organizations with an indication of which content is appropriate, authentic and is written by using a "human voice" (DiStaso & McKorkindale, 2013).

The literature review provided us with a list of seven key elements that could be of important value for a social media strategy of an organization. In the next section will be explained how these elements will be deployed in the case studies.

3. Research method

To further develop our understanding of the key elements for effective social media strategies we use the literature study, not as a mere theoretical background, but as a first step in our research into the development of a social media strategy framework. Therefore we need in-depth case studies to contribute to further theory devel-

opment in order to create such a framework. A quantitative study would have given more generalization but at this stage we are more in need of clarification; however, we acknowledge this limitation. Glaser and Strauss (1967), Lee (1989) and Yin (1994) have argued in favour of case studies for theory construction. In contrast to case research for grounded theory development (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and interpretive research (Klein & Myers, 1999), we use the cases as additional experiential sources for evaluating and extending the theoretical insights gained from the literature review. This implies that the research design, data collection, and analysis are led by theoretical insights that have already been gained in the previous section and that thus we do not need to apply a fully open research strategy. The data collection and data analysis aims to evaluate and enhance the key elements of the framework by testing it in multiple cases from practice. With the help of purposive or judgmental sampling (Babbie, 2007) nine organizations in three countries were selected according to a specific set of criteria. These criteria include heterogeneity of the organizations, maturity of the social media strategies and the progress of implementation. The implementation process should have progressed beyond 'go live' for us to be able to investigate the degree of adoption. Given these criteria we searched for heterogeneous companies that used social media in different stages. Nine organizations were selected:

1. The satellite company is a small entrepreneurial organization that produces scientific satellites and develops related skills to enhance production.
2. The electronic manufacturing company is a medium-sized organization (50 employees). They develop and supply electronics and embedded systems for customer specific products like electric cars.
3. The print company is a large international service organization for high quality printing. The company offers both printing and related services such as consultancy, finishing and distribution.
4. The university with4000 employees and almost 10,000 students has four departments responsible for the presence on social media platforms: the marketing department, the internal and external communication department, and the online communication department.
5. The defence technology supplier is a very big (65,000 employees) organization. They build aerospace and defence systems. Social media is addressed from the communication department.
6. The municipality is a medium-sized organization (1,600 employees) with more than 150,000 citizens.
7. The smalle-commerce start-up aims to strengthen customer relationships with the help of bonus systems for returning customers.
8. The restaurant has the goal to serve the best Mexican food and wants to be known in the entire country and also has international ambitions.
9. The sports brand is a very large international organization (44,000 employees) that produces shoes and clothing but also delivers many services. While its first and main audience were runners it also targets to other athletes, such as soccer players and basketball players and gear for potential athletes, fashion and leisure.

We developed a data collection procedure that aimed at evaluating the usefulness and comprehensiveness of the key elements as described in the literature review. We arranged this by asking at least two employees from every organization, those having the most knowledge of their social media practices. Furthermore, the respondents should have knowledge regarding the organizational expectations as well. We asked the employees how and whether they recognized and applied the seven key strategy elements from the literature review. We also maintained openness to facts and

evidence that would not be recognized if we rigidly applied the data collection scheme. Therefore the interview guide was based upon the key elements but also was exploratory of nature. A sample of the interview questions is included in Appendix B.

Because our ambition was to discover additions to the theory, in addition to what we had gained through literature, we paid special attention to deviations during the collection of this data. In total 21 interviews were conducted for this study. In each organization at least two interviews were conducted up to a maximum of five.

Trained research assistants that were part of the research group conducted the interviews. They first participated in a training course regarding social media and its business implications. Another precondition for conducting interviews was that the research team had experience with qualitative interviewing techniques. They all received training and education in advance. At least two interviewers were present at each interview making it possible to divide the tasks of conducting and reporting the interview and being able to notice non-verbal cues of the interviewees.

The interviews have been recorded by using audio and analysed according the theory of Miles and Huberman (1994). Transcriptions and summaries were created from the interview recordings. Each element found in the literature study was searched manually in the interview transcriptions by positive remarks about this element (+) for example "a seamless fit with marketing goals", negative remarks about this subject (−) for example "no activity plan, they work on a day to day basis" or no remarks about this subject (+/−). The two authors and a research assistant did this in isolation from each other. By conducting the analysis separately from each other it was warranted that there was a high level of reliability of the categorization. There were two cases were it was rather difficult to decide on a verdict whether the remarks should be categorized as (−) or (+/−). Afterwards, the outcomes were discussed and the members reached consensus regarding the data analysis. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 3.

4. Case study results

4.1. Case findings

This section comprises of the findings of our nine case studies. In this section we utilize the seven key elements from the literature review as a lens to compare the comprehensiveness of the social media strategies from practice. The following questions directed the comparative case study and analysis.

Sub question 2: to what extent do organizations define comprehensive social media strategies?

Sub question 3: how did nine organizations define and employ their social media strategy.

An overview of the nine organizations that were studied based on the key elements of social media strategy is presented in Table 3.

Firstly, we will show the general results and then we will discuss the results per stage of maturity in the analysis in the next section.

The satellite company does not use many social media channels. It is an organization that helps students to increase their skills and network in the aerospace industry by building a scientific satellite. Its main focus is the business-to-business market. It prefers social media channels that help to recruit high quality personnel: "Our main channel is LinkedIn specifically for recruitment". One of the board members that is specifically responsible for external affairs says: "internally everything is currently handled by a wiki but in the future the channel of choice for some of the tasks the wiki currently has will be a dedicated concurrent design software package".

The electronic components manufacturer aims to develop a long-term relationship with every purchaser in the light of producing relatively cheaper goods with a high quality and with intensive

Table 3
Overview of case findings with regard to comprehensiveness of social media strategies.

Key element	Sports brand	Restaurant	E-commerce start-up	Municipality	Defence technology supplier	University	Print company	Electronics brand	Satellite company
1. Goals	+	+	+/−	+	+/−	+/−	−	−	−
2. Target audience	+	+	+	+	+	+	−	+	+/−
3. Channel choice	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
4. Resources	+	+/−	+	+/−	+/−	+	+/−	−	+/−
5. Policies	+	+	−	+/−	+	+	+/−	−	−
6. Monitoring	+	+	+	−	−	−	+	−	−
7. Content activities	+	+	+/−	+	−	−	+/−	−	−

after-sales services. They have a dedicated LinkedIn company page to attract high quality personnel and state: "we have a lot of social media expectations but we do not use it extensively at the moment". For one of the interviewees, a male project leader, successful use of social media is being able to become: "well known as a company with competent employees".

The print company decided to create their accounts and get as much from the social media as they can. The current practices of the print company align with their corporate vision, "paper and digital media complement each other", the male owner (>50) said. The organization did not mention their specific channel choices but showed that they think content is very important: "we only allow high quality postings".

The university has a special department for social media. One of the female employees (<40) in that department says: "we want to move from on-site marketing to on-line marketing with social media". Also the manager of the Online Media Team says: "we are aware of the rapid changes in technology and trends in social media platforms and we observe the changes in the interaction with social media of the employees in their private life, instead of trainings or seminars".

At the defence technology supplier it would be expected that: "they have strict rules for social media content". Since this company develop radars and high-tech systems for government, they have to be very careful with a their secret information and security. Two members of the communications department are interviewed. They say they are "still in the testing phase"; however, from our analysis, presented further on, they appear to be out of the initiation stage. By using social media the defence company hopes to enhance the reputation of the company, so that upcoming students and similar interest groups find it more appealing to work for them. Additionally they say: "we also want to inform people about, for example, certain events that will take place, where we are involved". However, they cannot post anything they want on social media.

The municipality has a department that is responsible for all communication and official statements but does not yet have a code of conduct. At the moment they are developing policies for use so we marked it (+/−). The goals of the municipality are well aligned with the organizational goals being: "become the centre of the region, known as a city of knowledge, and create healthy, strong communities and public services". One interviewee, from the on-line media department, who was positive about social media, claimed that "social media democratizes, in the future we will use social media to interactively create policies and regulations". Another interviewee from their marketing department was less positive: "Government officials should not waste their time on Twitter".

The small e-commerce start-up did not yet define policies for their employees and has a limited activity plan but it does belong, in our analysis (in next section), in the maturity stage of social media

strategy. The monitoring activities and the rich social media content mainly accounts for this. "We belong to the Facebook group pioneers" says the male owner of the company. Another male employee explains: "different content is posted on different channels for different target users. Information about business progress or projects is tweeted, whereas in the case of the economic pioneers network, Facebook is used to share interesting articles with one another and to have discussions with each other". The social media activities are not that well distributed since the female interviewee from purchasing says: "I have only a few touch points with social media".

The restaurant that was part of our analysis offers Mexican food and is located within a city where it is mainly aiming on young customers. The small restaurant has an activity plan with only a few activities: "soccer bets and free gifts". They have one clear goal in social media: to attract clients in a higher age bracket (30–50) than their current clients. According to both interviewees Facebook allows the people to comment on the pictures of the restaurant and participate in the contests that the restaurant organizes. Moreover, the male owner of the restaurant says: "we change the contests on the Facebook page on a weekly basis, so that people connected to the restaurant on Facebook can participate in those contests and win prices like free meals and deserts".

Finally, the sports brand is one of the top brands for sports clothing and shoes. We interviewed a male digital sales asset specialist, a female digital analyst and a female marketing coordinator. In the end, the sports brand stands as a benchmark for all the other eight organizations in terms of their social media strategy. The sports brand took all the key elements into account when planning their social media strategy. The company shows remarkable practices as well. For example, the sports brand has set up an entire social and gaming platform: "not only did our organization do a decent job of marketing itself using the four main social networks, but it has also taken the time to establish its own unique social platform". It also stands out in terms of monitoring: "we monitor all activities seven days a week. Every person has monitoring programs installed on their smart phones, so he or she can respond to requests or violations".

4.2. Cross-case analysis

Evolution and growth models are widely discussed in the IS domain and we draw on Gottschalk (2002), and Nolan (1973, 2012) to identify three existing stages for maturity of social media strategies. We do not think this stage will be the final growth stage but the growth will eventually be like the disruptive innovation growth line (Nolan, 1973; Christensen et al., 2006). Fitterer and Rohner (2010) studied 24 maturity models and clustered them into groups. This study fits best with the business alignment maturity models that concern IT strategy. Luftman (2000) is one of the main contributors to this field splitting business alignment into four groups, both in

IT and business domains following Henderson and Venkatraman (1993). It is important to notice that there is a clear distinction in level (often strategic), infrastructure and processes (Renken, 2004). Mergel and Bretschneider (2013) provide us with what constructs to use to develop a social media strategy, but we use their study to complement our social media strategy framework.

Based on the comprehensiveness of the strategies, the indications of experience and success with social media as indicated by the interviews, we distinguished three stages of maturity for social media strategy development:

1. Initiation stage.
2. Diffusion stage.
3. Maturity stage.

4.2.1. Initiation stage

The three organizations in the initiation stage are the printing company, the electric engineering (EE) factory and the satellite company. Channel choice is the only key element from social media strategy that all three organizations have thought about. The print company talks about "high quality postings"; the electronic engineering company uses LinkedIn to find high quality personnel and the satellite company uses LinkedIn and a "wiki". Although, all nine organizations have made decisions about certain social media channels, the appropriateness and richness (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Rice, 1993) varies considerably, especially in the three maturity levels. The second key element that can be addressed in the initiation stage is the target audience. Although, the print company does not address the target audience in their interviews they seem to be well on their way to the diffusion stage. Berthon et al. (2012) shows that the organizations have to deal with cultural differences in addressing the target audience. Both the electronic engineering company and the satellite company need high quality personnel and therefore use LinkedIn. On all the lacking key elements, the three organizations made clear statements in the interviews such as "no clear goals" (print company), "no policy yet" (satellite company) and "no plan" (electronic engineering company) indicating that they are still in an early stage.

4.2.2. Diffusion stage

Table 4 suggests that there are three organizations showing medium performance in social media strategy. What they all have in common is that they have not paid attention to the key element of monitoring. Moreover, the allocation of resources is sometimes difficult. As Mergel and Bretschneider (2013) state, monitoring is necessary to show insights that can help to obtain future resources. Only the university seems to conquer this problem with a dedicated social media department and a rising budget for social media. The municipality and the defence industry supplier appear to struggle with their allocation of resources. At the municipality the scarce resources have prohibited a software tool for automatic monitoring being bought. Policies have been set. The defence industry supplier shows well-developed policies as they state: "only two people have access to the corporate Facebook page". The municipality has plans for policies but these are not yet in place. The university has a specific code of conduct, following an industry model.

Only the municipality has a comprehensive set of goals in four different themes. At the university they use general marketing goals for social media strategy purposes but, at the defence industry supplier, the goals are not explicitly known. In all three organizations the goals are not aligned with business goals but at the municipality "some KPI's are set", but they are not monitored yet. Bottles and Sherlock (2011) stressed the importance of the contribution to organizational goals. An activity plan in terms of process, impact and outcome (Klang & Nolin, 2011) is not available, as clearly stated in all 11 interviews with these organizations. The university is on

Table 4
Summary of maturity stages related to key elements of social media strategy.

Maturity stage	Stage indicators	Cases	Key element (incremental)
Initiation	Experiments	Satellite company	Channel choice
	No control	Print Company	Target audience
	Learning	Electronics engineering	
	Personal initiatives		
Diffusion	Introduction of policies	Municipality	Policies
	More focused campaigns	Defence company	Goals
	Allocation of some resources	University	Resources
	Goal oriented Alignment to existing plans		
Maturity	Increasing resources	Sports brand	Monitoring
	Content activities	Restaurant	Content activities
	Monitoring and social listening software	E-commerce start-up	

the brink of maturity: "we use Google AdWords to attract new students and have the biggest Twitter community of all universities".

4.2.3. Maturity stage

Klang and Nolin (2011) describe both activity planning and monitoring as important elements of a social media strategy. From the findings in the last section we derive that these elements only arise in the maturity stage. The sports brand has a well-developed activity plan that is monitored according to several success factors. The restaurant plans its activities on soccer bets and free gifts and uses Facebook to give insights and to monitor these activities. The e-commerce start up is less clear about its activity plan but monitors increasing number ratio and monthly changes. They have defined social media success as "increasing fan numbers, increasing interactivity, and increased reach". Only the sports brand is effectively using software tools for monitoring, as suggested by Dutta (2010).

The goals of social media are clear in these three organizations but are not similar. The sports brand has six prominent goals: increase sales, customer support, creating awareness of new products, brand loyalty, brand advocacy and reputation building. The restaurant wants to attract "older" clients (30–50 year) and the e-commerce start-up generally "wants to extend their reach". The start-up established a special department to do so, as did the sports brand. Within the restaurant it is not clear who performs the social media activities. All three organizations follow Thackeray et al. (2008) in stating the goals in promotional activities. Only the sports brand shows they are clearly measurable (Klang & Nolin, 2010). Gotterbarn (2012) shows that policies have to be set in place within organizations regarding the social media behaviour of employees. The restaurant only states: "our personnel cannot 'like' another restaurant". The sports brand has a code of conduct and the start-up only has "some guidelines".

The following summary analysis, as displayed in Table 4, shows how the key elements of the social media strategy relate to the three stages of maturity as indicated by the comparative cases.

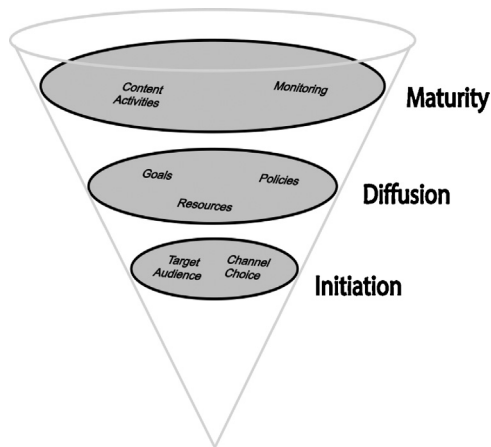**Fig. 1.** The social strategy cone.

5. Discussion

5.1. Introducing the social strategy cone

Since the literature review showed that there is a lack of standard methods for evaluating professional social media practices and underlying strategies, a new framework is now introduced based on the results of this study. The literature review in this study revealed increasing attention to the strategic aspect of social media. The case findings support the idea that most organizations' social media strategies are not yet well developed. This study shows that in all nine organizations studied, the social media strategy is quite different. In seven cases the strategy is fully emergent. In order to effectively address both challenges and risks of social media and benefit from the professional opportunities it presents, organizations could approach the topic more strategically to deliver more competitive value. The framework presented here in Fig. 1 can be used as a tool to assess the comprehensiveness of social media strategies.

Based on the findings from this study we have identified seven key elements as part of a comprehensive social media strategy. We combine these in the social strategy cone framework as displayed in Fig. 1.

The social strategy cone is designed as follows. It reflects the three levels of maturity of social media strategy as found during the case studies. At the bottom are target audience and channel choice. Organizations generally seem to start with making decisions regarding these two key elements. In the second stage, in the middle of Fig. 1, organizations extent their field of attention with considerations regarding the definition of goals, allocating resources and creating policies and guidelines for use. In the most mature stage, at the top of our current framework, organizations pay attention to all key elements including monitoring and the planning of content activities. It is important to acknowledge that each higher stage incorporates all underlying elements as well.

We envisage that the social strategy cone framework can be used for reviewing the comprehensiveness of existing social media strategies and as a guideline for designing new corporate social media strategies.

The social strategy cone framework and its elements, as explained in this paper, have proved useful for investigating social media strategies. Its elements serve as a comparative lens for the comprehensiveness and stages of maturity of the strategies.

5.2. Final considerations

Theoretically we delivered a useful framework with a maturity model incorporated. A specific framework to describe and evaluate social media strategies is necessary for three reasons. First, the boundaries between the organization and their environment are blurring. As a result, communication via social media is, in some part, beyond the scope of traditional IT as an organizational resource. Second, the lines between private and professional lives are becoming blurred by the use of social media (Dutta, 2010; Klang & Nolin, 2011). As a result, employees are increasingly in touch with their personal social networks fostered through social media. A third reason is the specific need to develop organizational skills to facilitate direct and personal conversations with consumers in (semi) public spaces. Social media needs a company's continuous attention, putting a strain on traditional corporate communication procedures. Consumers are increasingly demanding direct and genuine responses from organizations. Social media is therefore difficult to outsource since the personal nature of communication through social media demands an authentic response (Bottles & Sherlock, 2011; Dutta, 2010).

While good strategy processes from the fields of marketing, communication and IT could also partly address these points; we argue that a more tailored approach to social media strategy would provide clearer direction with regards to these emerging challenges.

However, we must raise an important limitation of the framework here. We have not yet sought to study the relationship between the comprehensiveness of social media strategies on the one hand and the effectiveness, in terms of organizational results, on the other hand. Therefore, the framework currently only provides an indication of the quality of the plan. It cannot account for the implementation quality and its organizational results. Given the outcomes from these case studies we expect that, the more thorough and comprehensive the social media strategy, the more effective the implementation. More empirical research is necessary to investigate these organizational effects, such as return on investment.

Although, we found some inconsistencies with theory (little attention to monitoring and content strategies) the framework proves to be valuable for practitioners as a checklist for designing and evaluating social media strategies. The social media strategy framework worked well in shedding light on many relevant aspects of social media strategy. While there is a plethora of social media channels available, the case studies indicate that companies concentrate on the channels with the largest reach. Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, Twitter and Google+ are mostly included in the channel choice as part of the strategy. In our cases, the organizations use social media primarily to reach out to potential customers, potentially seeing social media as predominantly still a way to broadcast their messages instead of nurturing communities of existing users. Six organizations regulated the use (policy), made resources available and aligned their goals, mostly with marketing objectives, not with corporate objectives. Our case findings show that social media was not sufficiently aligned strategically to organizational goals. The role and position of the process of creating content, frequency of posting and tone of voice, seems to be an important point of attention and guidelines for this are sometimes included in social media strategy, as the cases revealed. In only three organizations, the content activity was planned. The theoretical ground of the framework stresses the importance of continuous monitoring of social media channels. Organizations face new opportunities for listening to their customers and employees. As a result, more reliable and sophisticated ways of monitoring the social media environment are necessary. However, in our case studies little attention was given to the practice of monitoring with one exception. The

sports brand seemed to do very well with social media, recognizing the importance of monitoring and they have configured tools to monitor their results and listen to their customers.

5.3. Future research

The maturity stages that emerged from this study are open to further discussion and future research. We would encourage the framework to be used in future studies to gather more empirical understanding of the importance of social media strategies and the elements within. In order to further refine and validate our framework we will employ it in additional case research. These first sentences follow (nearly) the exact wording of the famous Gibson and Nolan paper (1974): "currently some large companies have reached the tail end of the S-shaped SMS curve: their departments are mature, in the sense defined by the framework. But has SMS evolution really come to an end for these companies? What can they expect in the future?" Now, we seem to be at the beginning of a new S-shaped curve driven by mobile technology development. Again quoting Gibson and Nolan (1974): "in the blush of enthusiasm for this newest advancement in technology; however, it is important to remember the painful lessons of the past. To efficiently exploit the newest technology, it must be managed". And this is exactly what a social media strategy should do. Since organizations are yet finding out new and effective ways to address social media, and methods and instruments for strategy creation are currently lacking, the framework can be further developed and refined in future studies.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2015.07.009.

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