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KNOWLEDGE IN ACTION

Faculty of Business Economics
Master of Management

Master's thesis

Successfully managing online social networks in international business

AKWE JUNIOR NGWESEKANG NEVILLE
Thesis presented in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Management, specialization International Marketing Strategy

SUPERVISOR :
dr. Lieve DOUCE

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DISCLAIMER

This master thesis was written during the COVID-19 crisis in 2020. This global health crisis has had an impact on the (writing) process, the research activities and the research results that are at the basis of this thesis. There was an impact mainly on the data collection and interpretation process. At one point in time respondent and potential respondents complained of work/life pressure which might have been the cause in a drop down of the number of potential respondents in one of the cases and led to a response by email in another. Some sort of inadequate structure and consistency was found in some responses that might be a result of inadequate preparedness in some cases. This led to a more difficult interpretation as more time was required to go through the data for better categorization.

SUMMARY

This research looks into two important growing issues in present day marketing. The first being the increased use of social media (SM) by Business-to-Business (B2B) companies and the second being the growing concept of value co-creation. As firms endeavor to stay sustainable, recent callings have shown the positive importance of customer involvement in a firm's value creation process as a co-creator of value. For this to happen, the firm and the customer must meet on a single platform where they could influence the value creation process of one another - thereby making platforms an antecedent for value creation. Little attention has also been paid on how B2B companies manage their SM platforms. For this shortcoming, this research blends these two important concepts. It looks into how B2B multinational companies successfully manage their Online Social Network (OSN) platform for the process of creating value together with their customers. It goes further to look into how these companies successfully manage these platforms. The exploratory nature of this research took the format of multiple case studies; interviews were conducted with experienced individuals in the domain of B2B SM management. Some of these interviewees have pioneered; managed; or are managing the most successful B2B SM stories which makes them a very reliable source of top quality information.

The results bring out three key practices of value co-creation and some fundamental guidelines firms need to adopt, for them to be successful in their co-creation and OSN management process as a whole. Firm and customers Co-create on these platforms by means of exchanging valuable industry information; Product and services co-development; Sharing of expertise experiences and joint cooperation on content. Aspects such as Customer insight-based content; Reliability; Consistency; Expert knowledge by SM team; Security and availability; and loyal tone of voice, help facilitate the successful management of these platforms. The proper management of challenges such as: Difficulty on boarding expert customers for content creation; Poor customer behavior; Tracing a balance between organic and paid advertisement; and Multinational differences, leads to a successful platform management in international businesses. Based on some research recommendations, B2B Companies need to adopt an innovative mindset in order for them to be successful in their OSN co-creation and management. In-sourcing SM can give better opportunities for success than outsourcing. A global social platform could be more effective than decentralized Platforms in B2B multinational companies. Customer motive to engage with firms in such relationship is both intrinsic and extrinsic in nature and firms need to approach each customer on individual perspectives because customer motives vary overtime and from one customer to another. Building a social community or content on expert and thought leaders ensures an environment of trust. Even though this research focuses on international businesses, the results could still be tailored for local B2B companies. As any other research, results were made in existence of some limitations that stem mostly from the methodology.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

DEDICATION

To My Mom (Nnange Dora Mesinze)

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

In the last month of the third quarter for the 2015 business year (precisely on September 18), auto lovers received a shocking announcement that got many thinking - especially environmentalists. At the top of the news was Volkswagen (VW), one of the largest car manufacturers in the world. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) gave revelation on how; many cars sold by VW in the United States (US) were equipped with software that could falsely improve diesel engine performance during emission tests – a fact that was subsequently acknowledged by the defendant. This time around, the procedure for Public Relation made a great difference. Consumers were no longer glued to the receiving end (typical of Traditional media) but could also engage with companies and peers in a two way interaction. In no distant time owners of a VW brand and analyst took to social networks (SN). One of the first tweets to break the news was posted at 8:49am by @davidshepardson. On that same day, there were more than 53 thousand tweets about the company. After a long weekend, more than 1.3million tweets featured and made an average of 8 thousand new tweets per day for that week (all spotlighting VW). Before this outbreak, there was an average of 10 thousand tweets about the company posted daily, however this number grew on average, 10 times (100 thousand) more by the end of September. This mad rush was not only limited to owners in the US. The company received unprecedented responses on their various SN platforms from all around the world, especially Europe. What was their response? Silence! Global accounts went dark on the issue and the company's global twitter account continued business as usual. The first global acknowledgment came 4 days after (22nd), with a tweet. On this day 72.5% of all messages on social media (SM) were negative. Analysts say the delay and Limited response clearly contributed to this negative sentiment (Davis, B., 2015; Davis, D., 2015; De Beule, 2015; Swaminathan & Mah, 2016).

After Swaminathan and Mah (2016) analyzed 100 thousand tweets on VW during this period, they came to the conclusion that – immediate recovery strategies after an incident by an organization's management could help reduce negative sentiments and by so doing, managers would have the possibility to accelerate the shift in conversation from the incident itself and limit the potential damage. The management of "Maersk Norwich Whale Strike" incident is just an opposite of the above case, which depicts how a business-to-business (B2B) brand transformed negativity to positive sentiments on a SN (Katona & Sarvary, 2014). Crises and brand management are just one of the advantages that accrue from the efficient use of SN.

The early and mid 2000s sprung with numerous SM platforms such as Wikipedia (2001), LinkedIn (2002), MySpace (2003), Facebook (2004), Flickr (2004), YouTube (2005) Twitter (2006), Instagram (2010), PInterest (2010) and many others. The root of this evolution into a novel way of exploring the World Wide Web (WWW) could be chronicled to the introduction of the Web 2.0 Technological concept (Dijck, 2013; Murugesan, 2007; O'Reilly, 2005). According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), it described a new way in which software developers and end-users started to utilize the WWW; that is, as a platform whereby content and applications are no longer created and published by individuals,

but instead are continuously modified by all users in a participatory and collaborative fashion. The authors go further to define SM as a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideology and technological foundation of web 2.0 and that allows the creation and exchange of user generated content. While it may be tempting to substitute the term SM for SN and vice versa in a context, it is important to note that one (SM) subsumes the other (SN).

Dijck (2013) brought out three main categories of social media. The first category involves "Social Network Sites (SNS)." These are sites that promote interpersonal contact, whether between individuals or groups; they forge personal, professional or geographical connections and encourage weak ties. The process involves creating a personal information profile, sending emails and Instant messages between each other. Personal information could include any type of information including Photos, Video, audio files and blogs (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and former Google + are examples of SNS. By 2005, Judith Meskill made a list of more than three hundred social networks and the creation of many more continues till date. The second category is "User-Generated content" which supports creativity, cultural activities and promotes the exchange of amateur and professional contents. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and development (OECD, 2007) sites three major conditions for a platform to be considered User-Generated Content: it has to be published on a SNS or a publicly accessible website to a selected group of people; must contain and display a certain amount of creative effort; finally, it needs to be created outside of a professional practice or routine. The first condition excludes content exchange via platforms such as emails; the second excludes mere replications of already existing content like posting a copy of an existing newspaper article on a personal blog without any modification or commenting; the final excludes all content that has been created with a commercial market context in mind (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Platforms such as YouTube, Flickr, PInterest and Instagram are good examples of user Generated Content Sites. "Trade and Marketing Sites" (TMS) and "Play and Game Sites (PGS)" are the third and fourth category respectively. The former represent sites such as Amazon, eBay which aim at the exchange or selling of products. The latter which is also echoed by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) as "Virtual Game and social World" represent sites that replicate or mimic all dimensions of face to face interactions in a virtual environment. This describes sites such as such: PlayStation network, Sims Social and second life. Despite this categorization, there is a blur boundary between the various categories as competition focuses more on dominating a particular online niche rather than on total specialization. For example, Facebook whose prime target is to dominate as a SN also encourages users to add creative content such as photos and short videos (UGC). YouTube on the other hand, whose prime target is to dominate UGC, also allows users or communities to share specific postings. The creation of Google + by Google was an endeavor to own a strictly SN platform while maintaining YouTube as a UGC site (Dijck, 2013).

Over the years, there has been a general growth on social network platforms in terms of users and revenue. In January 2009 for example, more than 175million active users were registered on Facebook. This was just slightly less than the Brazilian population at the point in time (190million) and twice more than the German population (80million). Flickr on the other hand provided access to over 3 billion photographs. 10 hours of content at the same time was uploaded on YouTube (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). As reported by Amy (2019), Facebook users worldwide stood at a total of about 1,755.1million; Instagram 786.8million; Twitter 283.1million. Forecast shows these numbers increasing by the end of the year 2023, to a total of; 2,023.7million; 1,002.3million; and 309.1million for Facebook, Instagram and twitter respectively. At the same time, headlines such as "LinkedIn to Grow Faster than Expected" are making the News. Amy (2020a) estimates that there would be 62.1million adult LinkedIn users in the US by the end of 2020 which will grow by 4.2% in 2021 to 64.7million. She concludes that, by the end of the 2023 forecast period, the platform would harbor over 68.8 million users.

As the number of individuals users grow, so too are the rates of company expenditure and involvement. Social Advertisement (Ad) expenditures were estimated to increase by 19% in the US by the end of 2019, which was equivalent to $37billion - almost half of TV Ad expenditure ($69.17 Billion) (Braziel, 2018). It is also estimated that more than 49.6% of companies with 100+ employees will use LinkedIn for marketing and advertising activities this year. This number is expected to reach 50.3% by 2021 (and even higher if recruitment purposes are considered) (Amy, 2020b). Current trends show more business-to-consumer (B2C) companies tapping into the use of LinkedIn recently - however, the numbers have not been able to surpass B2B users. Despite the slow adaptation by B2B companies in past years, early movers such as Dell, IBM, General Motors and Maersk have been noted for leading successful stories. Earlier CMO surveys showed a 9.6% increase in SM Spending by B2B companies in 2012 (Marx, 2013). Moorman (2012) echoes a 47% growth; 34% spending after a year; and 38% spending five years after. Despite the high spending by B2C companies, B2B companies have a steeper growth curve.

As B2B emanates to higher social networking coverage, so too are they attaining greater height in their contributions to the growth of economies. Frauendorf et al. (2007) shows that 50.16% of total production in the United States of America originated from B2B production in the year 2000; 59.5% in Japan; 68.17% in Italy; and it accounted for around 71.42 to 83.53% in other European countries such Germany, Austria, Netherlands, Belgium, France and Finland (Ascending). In an in-depth three decade examination (1970-2000) of the German economy, Frauendorf et al. (2007) show B2B national production contribution to be "as low as" 70.4% (1997& 1999), with a slight increase to 71.42 in 2000) and as high as 75.4% (1974). Kleinaltenkamp (2015) basing his studies on the above data expect this contribution to go higher due to the trends of mass customization that warrants companies to focus on their core competencies and outsourcing other components (Leading to the creation of new companies that would handle the outsourced activity as their own key component all in a virtuous cycle) in order to achieve efficiency.

To make sense of this global trend of social media, researchers have embarked on studies that seek to investigate how this phenomenon affects businesses in aspects such as: Branding (Yan, 2011); Communication, Customer relationship, Satisfaction and engagement (Agnihotri et al., 2016; Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Heller & Parasnis, 2011; Quinton & Wilson, 2016); dispute (Orozco, 2016); and Innovation (Mount & Martinez, 2014). However, little research examines the impact of these aspects and many more on B2B companies (Wang et al., 2015) despite their increasing use of SM; their large economic Role; and numerous success stories. This research seeks to answer the call for further investigation into how social media as an online platform (facilitated by the internet) is used as a platform for value co-creation (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Kumar et al., 2010) especially in the B2B domain which has received less attention in comparison to its B2C counterpart (Hein et al., 2019). Taking into account the above limitations, this research would focus on exploring how B2B multinational corporations (MNC) successfully engage on their social network platforms for value co-creation purposes and the overall management of these platforms.

A B2B company in the contest of this research covers what Kleinaltenkamp (2015) describes as "all areas in which products or services are sold not directly to consumers…" In other words, markets in which goods and services are bought not for direct consumption purposes but rather for the purpose to be used as raw material for further production of other goods and services. On the basis of this definition, the distinction between B2B and B2C markets lies not in the type of goods sold but rather on the customer addressed. A car for example could be sold to a private individual as well as to a company who uses it for its further operation. In such a case, what differentiate both markets are the customers involved and not the product in question.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Value Creation

In its simplest term, value could be defined as the difference between the perceived benefit and cost expressed per unit of the final product (Besanko et al., 2017). Anderson and Narus (1998) defines it as "…the worth in monetary terms of the technical, economic, service and social benefits a company's customer receives in exchange for the price it pays for the market offering. The term "value," could be traced from the 1800s in the era of the classical and neoclassical economic period (Marshall, 1890; Say, 1821; Shaw, 1912; Smith, 1776). However, the context that surrounds the word has evolved over time. This evolution lies more on which party gets to decide what is valuable or not. Marketing researchers have used several terms to describe this early era of marketing such as the traditional or goods dominant era of marketing (Bettencourt et al., 2014; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Value creation during this period was seen as something which is created by the firm, transferred at the point of exchange and subsequently depleted by customers (Bettencourt et al., 2014). In other words, the firm was seen as the sole determinant and creator of value while the customers were looked upon as people who barely knew what they wanted and thus were just at the receiving end of whatever the company provided.

The 1950-1980 witnessed a shift in marketing position. Authors started calling on businesses to be more customer focus (Drucker, 1954; McKitterick, 1957) and that value is determined in the marketplace (Levitt, 1960) and as such marketers should look at marketing as a decision-making and problem-solving function (Kotler, 1967; McCarthy, 1960). The fundamental idea behind these propositions anchored on value-in-use. Customers bought things because they need or want self fulfillment. This puts customers at the focal point of firms because the firm's sole purpose of existence is to create satisfied customers (Vargo & Lusch, 2004).

The 1980-2000 gave birth to another new era that persists till date and forms the basis of this research. This emergence viewed marketing as a continuous social and economic process (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Several researchers made calls to market orientation (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990; Narver & Slater, 1990); Service marketing (Gronroos, 1994; Zeithaml et al., 1985); Relationship marketing (Berry, 1995; Duncan & Moriaty, 1998); Quality management (Hauser & Clausing, 1988; Parasuraman et al., 1988); Value and supply chain management (Normann & Ramirez, 1993); Resource management (Day, 1994; Hunt & Morgan, 1995); and Network analysis (Achrol & Kotler, 1999; Webster, 1992). Vargo and Lusch (2004) summarizes this concept to what they describe as a "Service-dominant Logic" that moves away completely from the "Goods-dominant Logic" which characterized the traditional marketing era.

This new logic is consumer oriented and thus sees marketing as a chain of social and economic processes that focus on operant resources through which the firm is continuously striving to outsmart competitors by making better value propositions. It demands a collaborative approach towards customers by being adaptive to their individual and dynamic needs (customized offerings) - which further implies that value is defined by and co-created with the customer rather than embedded in the output (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). As marketers, economists have also echoed the importance of the ability of a firm to extract and deliver value as a necessity to a sustainable competitive advantage (Besanko et al., 2017, p. 280-281; Magretta, 2012). Despite different synonymous appellations provided by marketers (Holbrook, 1999; Leroi-Werelds, 2019) and economists (Besanko et al., 2017, p. 306-308) as to what constitute value; they all stipulate the customer as the determinant. This makes customers active players in value creation rather than passive receivers of value as opined by the good dominant logic concept (Gronroos & Gummerus, 2014; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Vargo and Lusch (2004) further emphasize that, the fundamentals of these evolutionary approaches, see firms as institutes that could only make value propositions and should rely on customer knowledge in order to gain a sustainable competitive advantage. Gronroos and Gummerus (2014) criticizes this view to an extent, by advocating the possibility of a firm in providing value when the needs of the customer are understood and taken into consideration - which would lead to greater value in use. However, when firms create these value propositions for its customers, they need to take into consideration the entire life cycle of their product or service i.e. from purchase, to use and final disposal (Anderson & Narus, 1998).

2.2 Value co-creation

In order for businesses or firms to create value by benefit from customer value perception, they must co-create by means of integrating resources (Gronroos & Gummerus, 2014; Gronroos & Voima, 2013; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Gronroos and Gummerus (2014) define value co-creation as a "joint process that takes place on a co-creation platform involving, for example, a service provider and a customer, where the service provider's service (production) process and the customer's consumption and value creation process merge into one process of direct interactions." In such an integrated process, the service provider may engage with the customer's value creation and through joint co-creational actions, it influences the customer's creation of value-in-use. On the co-creation platform, the customer can also take on a role as a service provider and co-create value with the provider (Gronroos & Gummerus, 2014). An important aspect of these definitions is the role of platforms as an antecedent to value co-creation that acts as a resource integrator to provide a joint sphere in which both the customer and the service provider's sphere of value creation meets.

Leroi-Werelds (2019) unlike Gronroos and Gummerus (2014) proposes seven spheres of value creation (which gives rice to three forms of value co-creation) as opposed to three spheres (which involves only one forms of value co-creation). The addition includes the platform provider sphere and value co-creation between; Peer service provider sphere (the Firm) and Platform provider sphere; Customer Sphere and Platform provider sphere; Customer Sphere and Peer service provider sphere

(the Firm): and a joint sphere that incorporates all three actors with the sole purpose of creating value for the customer. However, this research would seek to examine the co-creation sphere that involves the customer and the firm.

Looking at the role of platforms, the researcher advances the importance of social networks in providing or acting as a resource integrator through which several actors of the value creation process could meet, interact and integrate individual resources for value co-creation. The internet and SNS allows users to engage in a more wider scope through the construction of a network that leads to social and professional interaction for the sharing of ideas (Hanna et al., 2011; Trusov, Bucklin & Pauwels, 2009); new product development; co-creation; and customer's feedback for the improvement of existing products and services and for the invention of new ones (Sawhney et al., 2005). As Singaraju et al. (2016) also puts it, "the role of SM platforms as system integrators is to provide a technological platform that exposes its modular resources to facilitate higher order resource formations through the active participation of non-intermediary actors (i.e. Customer and firms); which otherwise limits the ability of firm and customer to realize their optimal value co-creation potential."

Gronroos and Gummerus (2014) advanced the existence of two types of interactions (Direct and Indirect) and that co-creation platform entails only a direct interaction. Direct interaction is a joint process that occurs in a joint sphere in which the actions of two or more actors such as the Customer and the firm come together in a collaborative and dialogical process to influence the value creation process of one another. However, not all interactions or relationships between both parties imply an automatic value co-creation (Leroi-Werelds, 2019). As much as these influences might be positive or negative, it can as well be non influential (Gronroos and Voima, 2013, p. 141). Nevertheless, the latter (Indirect) would not be in the interest of this research as it refers to interactions where one actor such as a customer interacts with a standardized system or products, such as a self service technology. This cannot be considered co-creation because one actor (such as the resource provider or firm) doesn't get to actively influence the value creation by the customer and this happens only in the customer's sphere.

Through direct influence from all parties, co-creation becomes not restricted only to value creation but shoulders market implications. Value propositions may be moderated or altered during this interaction process thereby changing the customer's experiences and determination of value-in-use which influences the customers purchase intention (See & Ho, 2013) and repurchase intention (Gronroos & Gummerus, 2014). Customer participation in a value co-creation process either as a source for information or as a co-developer has a positive effect on new product innovativeness (Bonner & Walker, 2004; Fang, 2008; Nambisan, 2002) and speed to the market depending on the moderating role of: customer network connectivity; new product development process interdependence and complexity (Fang, 2008). Customer knowledge is also vital for the improvement of service quality as it is for new product/service creation and improvement (Kumar et al., 2010). Value co-creation enhance supply chain integration (Jüttner et al., 2010); unlocks new sources of sustainable competitive

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advantage (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004); facilitates customer's ability to discover new uses of a product; provide guidance for usage (Kumar et al., 2010); and eliminating value drains (Anderson & Narus, 1998) and Value leaks (Anderson et al., 2008). Value drains are services that cost the company more to provide than they are worth to the customers receiving them and that have no strategic significance (Anderson & Narus, 1998; Anderson et al., 2008). Value leaks on the other hand are activities and practices indulged in by the customer that yield no value and cost savings for the customer and firm but rather increase the cost of doing business for the both parties (Anderson et al., 2008). Companies could only identify such drains on a platform through which it meets with its customers and try to understand its customers business (Anderson & Narus, 1998). Dell used its Facebook platform to provide an opportunity where customers who had technical problems could receive advice and solutions from other customers who had once faced similar problems in the past thereby reducing cost and the number of customer complaints handled by the concerned internal department (Katona & Sarvary, 2014). It is important to note that, since customers are determinants of value through value-in-use, it is the duty of the firm to engage with the customer for co-creation purposes and not vice versa (Gronroos & Gummerus, 2014; Kumar et al., 2010).

According to Kumar et al. (2010), the evaluation of a customer's value should not include only the customer's lifetime value (CLV (customer purchase behavior in terms of either repeated Purchases or additional purchases via cross-selling and up-selling)), but rather the overall customer engagement value (CEV) of which CLV is part of. One of the important elements of CEV which is very necessary for value co-creation with customers is the Customer Knowledge Value (CKV). Through CKV, the firm would benefit if a two-way interaction or relationship between the customer and the firm is being established by the firm. Kumar et al. (2010) look at CKV as a customer's knowledge behavior through feedback provided to the firm in the form of ideas for innovations and improvement that could be ignited from intrinsic or extrinsic motivation.

In the findings of Fuller et al. (2008), customers that have in-depth product knowledge; engage in product related discussions; and support the firm in developing new product ideas and in problem solving are usually customers with strong interest in the firm's product and/or brand. Kumar et al. (2010) supports this view with the use of their CLV concept. This concept stipulates that customers with high lifetime value have more product experience which makes them more passionate about the firm and thereby increasing their commitment or willingness to provide new ideas into the firm. These ideas could be on how to improve existing products and efficiently manage processes. Goodman et al. (1995) also discovered that customers who are more engaged with the service offered by a firm are more likely to express their dissatisfaction and offer critique. Such findings are in line with those of Bonner and Walker (2004) which concluded that customers with strong past relationships and who are amongst the top customers of the firm turn to contribute more in the innovativeness of new product developments and their market success. Despite the strong positive correlation between CKV and CLV on willingness to contribute in value co-creation, Kumar et al. (2010) warns that the relationship has more of an inverse U-shape than linear. They back this view by denoting that – high customer

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knowledge which results from a high lifetime value (e.g. through repeated purchase) indicates an almost perfect fit between the company's product and customer needs. This thereby makes mid tier customers more comparably vital for such a process. Such views have been echoed by other researchers (Bower & Christensen, 1995; Chandy & Tellis, 2000). In other words, highly satisfied customers are expected to have little motivation to communicate with the company on how to better improve on the existing product. However, they could play an important role in assisting less knowledgeable or experienced customers if the company provides a social network platform with the right intrinsic or extrinsic motivation (Kumar et al., 2010). In all, it implies that the level of customer knowledge and degree of their contribution varies across customers. As such for firms to efficiently benefit from the processes of co-creating value with their customers, they must be able to identify customers with such extensive product or brand knowledge while providing the right motivation and value co-creation platform.

2.3 Relationship Management

The act of value co-creation between the firm and the customer on an OSN platform and the establishment and management of such platform by the firm is guided by a fundamental intention. This is the Intention of a firm to establish a cordial and successful relationship with its customers to the benefit of both parties. The decision of a firm to venture in these online relationships is propelled by the lapses of traditional customer relationship management approach. It is also influenced by the shift in the high congregation of customers that rely on SM or SNS for swift valuable information and need satisfaction (Heller & Parasnis, 2011). Since the focus of this research lies in the understanding of value co-creation relationships on SNS and the overall successful management of customer relationships via these platforms in B2B international businesses, it is important to examine some of the existing literatures that surround relationship management in both virtual and non virtual instances.

According to marketing relationship theories, organizations get into business relationships for diverse reasons and need to be satisfied – such needs might not be restricted to finances only but extends to the quest for other resources (Aiken & Hage, 1968). As such, before reaching out to a business customer for value co-creation relationships, the firm should brainstorm on what it wants from the customer and what the customer would benefit or need from the process. At the same time it should be prepared to grant the needs of the customers through incentives. These incentives might be a commitment to share research findings, discounts in proportion to the cost of the goods/service sold to the customer or a percentage transfer of cost savings benefited by the firm from the process (Anderson & Narus, 1998). Fuller (2010) provides a holistic approach as to why customers take part in virtual value co-creation relationships with firms from a consumer perspective. These motives are both intrinsic and extrinsic in nature and their magnitude of impact varies across a customer's – which also implies that different customers are being motivated by different motives over time. The 10 motivation categories provided are: Intrinsic Playful Task, Curiosity, Altruism – Community support, Make Friends, Self Efficacy, Information Seeking, Skills Development, Recognition (Visibility), Personal

Needs (Dissatisfaction) and Compensation – Monetary Reward (Fuller, 2010). Bagozzi (1995) cites goal fulfillment as one of the most common and determinative factors influencing the customers decision of maintaining or getting into a relationship with a firm. As explained by Andrew (1976) in another way, there would be no reason for organizations to indulge in any form of relationship if they could "single handedly" achieve all individual goals effectively and efficiently. This might be an emerging goal or one which the customer had once earlier committed to. For example, if a firm's customer has made a commitment to reduce its carbon footprint, it would easily indulge into a co-creation relationship with its supplier if the initiative would help it in achieving the goal it had earlier committed to. This could also imply that a firm's better understanding of its customer's commitments would increase the likelihood of the customers acceptance to co-create each time an opportunity is presented by the firm. Business relationships might also be an end to itself i.e. customers getting into a relationship just for the purpose of belonging, *Suis generis* and thus disregard the potential benefits of what the relationship might offer in its instrumental sense (Bagozzi, 1995).

In as much as businesses think they know what customers want from social media interactive relationships or better still customer motives, research from Heller and Parasnis (2011) show a significant gap between what businesses think motivates customers and what customers say they want or care about. Firm's therefore need to come to the reality that the customer is in control and as such start thinking like the customer and if for any reasons they are not sure of the customer's motives/needs, they should not hesitate to ask them (Heller and Parasnis, 2011). The latter stipulates the importance of understanding what customer's value, as a prerequisite of successfully managing online relationships.

As Quinton and Wilson (2016) carried out studies to understand inter-organizational business relationships on social media network sites, they emphasized the importance of Trust, Sharing, Reciprocity and Altruism as fundamental for a successful business relationship. In an integrated definition, trust could be defined as the degree of confidence a firm's customer has on the firm with regards to reliability and integrity and vice versa (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In a social media context, trust could be created by evaluating the relevance and in depth knowledge of the content created by the contributor as well as the profile of contributors on social media platforms (Quinton & Wilson, 2016). The importance of trust in the success of a business relationship can't be over emphasized. In a research conducted by Morgan and Hunt (1994), commitment and trust as moderators had a significant role to play in the success of inter-organizational relationships, which as well makes them a key factor in understanding the process of relationship development. In a cross-industrial and cross-cultural study, Wulf et al. (2001) came to the conclusion of their research finding that, relationship quality (relationship satisfaction, Trust and relationship commitment) had a significant impact on behavioral loyalty in a business-to-consumer relationship. The results of such findings have been echoed by previous researchers (Crosby et al., 1990: Dorsch et al., 1998; Dwyer et al., 1987: Leuthesser, 1997). Satisfaction as a part of this construct could be defined as a positive state - resulting from the overall appraisal of all aspects of a firm's working relationship with another firm

(Anderson & Narus, 1984). One would therefore not be wrong to put this in line with the results of Kumar et al. (2010) with regards to the positive relationship between CLV and the customer's commitment or willingness to provide new innovative product and process ideas to the firm – as was earlier mentioned. This is because a higher CLV by its definition represents higher customer satisfaction as well. The absence of this relationship satisfaction breeds relationship conflict (Anderson & Narus, 1984: Schul et al., 1881) which the researcher believes would definitely be harmful to the proneness of a customer's ability to engage in a value co-creation relationship. In other words, a degree of customer satisfaction is needed if the customer is to optimally indulge in a value co-creation relationship with the firm. Also, relationship Commitment could be defined as the extent to which the parties (Customer and the firm) believe in the importance of the relationship and its ability to warrant their maximum effort for the maintenance of the relationship. The parties ensure that the relationship lasts indefinitely (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

Quinton and Wilson (2016) opined that the conventional conception of the incremental nature of trust (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) which is also believed to have a longer build up time might be nullified in the establishment of online social media business relationships. Accordingly, this is due to the rise of social media interactions - as organizations with little or no interaction backgrounds are able to make real time connections. In reporting their finding, trust still stays incremental for social media inter-organizational interactions, but trustworthiness heuristics stems from the membership of a professional social media network. Nonetheless, relationship "warming ups'' and the buildup time for trust has been compressed in social media environments (Quinton & Wilson, 2016). Again, content sharing across groups was perceived to contain focused material that provides value and largely depended on the reciprocity of members of that group in the same light (Quinton & Wilson, 2016). The concept of reciprocity requires the return of good for a good deed received from the other party (Becker, 2014). According to theories of reciprocal actions, measures taken by one party should be reciprocated in like manner by other members in the exchange relationship (Gouldner, 1960; Lusch, 1976). Despite previous research (LaPlaca, 2004) that cited mutual beneficial relationships as the ideal for successful business interactions, Quinton and Wilson (2016) discovered numerous cases of social media business exchange or interaction as a result of altruistic behaviors that go far beyond reciprocal business behaviors or mutual beneficiary behaviors. Altruism thus also becomes fundamental for collaborative problem solving in B2B business relationships through the sharing of vital information amongst business members.

As firms engage in a relationship with its customers, it has to understand that the proneness of a customer to engage in any relationship also varies across service providers, situations (Bendapudi & Berry, 1997) and product categories (Wulf et al., 2001). As such, when firms invest in relationships, it should note that the results of such investment depends on its knowledge, governance quality, rational (Noordhoff et al., 2011) and its ability to locate such Knowledgeable customers who appreciate its investment (Wulf et al., 2001). Vargo and Lusch (2004) also stress the importance of attending to customers through an individualistic approach. As earlier mentioned, this is because

customers have individual needs and these needs are dynamic in nature. Christensen et al. (2005) tries to address the issue of customer individuality and dynamism by calling on companies to focus on the job to be done by the customer in order to better understand the customer. Several customers might purchase a company's product but use it for different purposes. For example, Church & Dwight after carrying out a research on how customers use their Arm & Hammer baking soda product realized that the product was used for diverse reasons by customers other than baking. Some used it for laundry, some added it to their toothpaste, others used it for carpet cleaning, and some used it as deodorants for their refrigerators. Through these findings, the company had to create reinforced soda product brands that would help customers carry out their diverse jobs more efficiently and in an effective manner (Christensen et al., 2005).

Managing customer relationships on OSN in an international setting could be quite challenging, these companies operate across different geographical boundaries that harbor different cultures and as such the result might lead to the existence of customers with different needs across these multiple boundaries. In bid to bridge these differences, several research has been carried out that try to advance reasons or circumstances for total standardization and adaptation or a degree of both across the marketing mix of a company (Calantone et al., 2006; Hatzithomas et al., 2016; Lee & Griffith, 2019; Westjohn & Magnusson, 2017). In this light, it also becomes important to understand how these international businesses handle these differences in the process of co-creating value with their customers and the management of platforms for their worldwide audiences.

CHAPTER III
RESEARCH DESIGN AND QUESTIONS

3.1 Research Design

This research explores how Multinational B2B companies successfully manage their OSN platforms for value co-creation purposes. It endeavors to also look into how these platforms are successfully managed and further understand the challenges faced and the mechanisms deployed to handle such challenges for their overall successes. The underlying objective of this study is to be able to present critical discussions from findings and comparative analysis with appropriate related findings from other existing research presented in the literature. Such findings and discussions would also be used to build possible theories or hypotheses from the construct under study. When appropriate, findings that are firmly grounded would be used to make recommendations for further study and logical conclusions or managerial recommendations. For the purpose of aiming for a thorough examination, a multiple rather than a single case study approach is adopted which also helps increase validity, analytical generalization of findings and serves as a strong base for such purposes (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2009). This research approach is suitable for theory building (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2009) and in having an extensive/in-depth knowledge contribution from group, organizational, social and other related phenomena (Yin, 2009)

The main characteristics of the companies in Table 1 represent companies that cut across all sizes (small and medium sized and large enterprises) and markets including Investment banking, Shipping, Marketing and social media consultancy. Saunders et al. (2007) present several ways through which a researcher could select samples for data collection. Since the research aims to study a particular phenomenon within a particular industry, the choice of cases is based on self-selection, convenience and purposive selection. By purposive selection, the researcher ensures that the cases are all B2B companies who have presently established a social network presence. These companies either operate across international boundaries or are local consultancy companies that handle social media activities for multinational companies. However, the respondents sample was based more on overall experience in SM management in B2B multinational companies rather than on the companies themselves. Some of the respondents have pioneered, led or lead the most successful stories in B2B SM management which makes them a very vital source of quality research information.

Table 1

Profile of Companies and Respondents in the Study

Company	Job Title	Full Time related Professional Experience	Industry
Maersk	Senior Marketing Manager	>11 Years	Shipping
Alpha (Anonymous)	Head of Content	>12 Years	Investment Banking
The House of Marketing (THOM) (Quanteus Group)	Senior Consultant	>05 Years	Marketing Consultancy
	Junior Consultant	>07 Years	
Wichmann/Schmidt	Digital Marketing Strategist	>16 Years	Digital Marketing Consultancy

As put by Yin (2009), the selection of cases should not be looked upon as the form of sampling technique generally used in a survey. This is because the purpose of a case study research is to develop theories rather than to test theories (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007) and as such, the basic goal of the researcher should be to have more than one case so as to avoid criticisms reflected in terms of uniqueness and artifactual conditions. Multiple case study is also suitable as it facilitates broader exploration of research questions and theoretical collaboration; helps the researcher in developing a robust theory because propositions are more deeply grounded in varied empirical evidence (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007); and finally, it helps provide grounds for comparisons - so as to ascertain whether the replication of an emergent findings across other cases is possible, or just a mere idiosyncratic finding attached to a single case (Eisenhardt, 1991).

 One of the most important sources of data collection in industrial marketing case study research (Easton, 2010) and case study research in general is by interview (Yin, 2009). Interviews should be often considered a primary source of data for phenomena that move away from everyday practices to intermediate and strategic phenomena (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). In order to benefit from the reach expertise of the interviewee on the matter of study, a semi structured interview is adopted as the primary source of data collection. This interview format is highly recommended for case study research in such situations as it provides high flexibility (Easton, 2010). Yin (2009) describes such interviews as in-depth interviews in which respondents are asked about the fact of the topic in study and their opinions about events. Interview sessions ranged from 40 to 50 minutes depending on the number of unstructured questions that came up as a way to prime responses. However, one respondent responded to the interview questions by email due to convenience reasons. The research

also strived to include multiple knowledgeable informants per case so as to get different points of view about the phenomenon. Such an approach is highly recommended by social science researchers as a way of reducing any form of data bias that could originate from the over dependence on a single informant per case (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2009). Even though multiple respondents existed in just a single case (THOM), two responders had experience in other organizations included in the study, as such questions were asked about their previous experience as a form of double check. Upon permission of the interviewees, interviews were recorded as a means to prevent the problem of researcher's inattentiveness that may arise from an attempt in taking down notes during the interview and the problem of poor recall that may occur during data analysis (Yin, 2009).

Yin (2009) suggests several strategies through which researchers could treat their data fairly in order to produce compelling analytical generalizations and rule out any alternative interpretations. For the purpose of this research, the researcher relies on the theoretical propositions that have been built in the extensive literature and at the same time, examine rival/converging explanations across data to come up with explanations. The non-mutually exclusive nature of these strategies permits their interwoven integration into any case study research (Yin, 2009). The uniformity of the respondents with regards to their experience that stems more from the service industry rather than the production industries, could be a possible logical explanation as to why the data was more of convergent in nature than rival on the aspects in study. As earlier noted, the theory developed in the previous chapter is used as theoretical orientated guidelines to assess arguments. This is used alongside data obtained from the field in order to build theoretical explanations or discussions to findings and possible recommendations.

Data analysis techniques are looked upon as compliment to the above strategies that help in increasing the internal and external validity of a case study research (Yin, 2009). The author goes further to cite four data analysis techniques for case study research. Pattern matching (Yin, 2009) and Explanation building (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) forms the basis for this research analysis. The four recordings and the email response represents the form of data that was analyzed. Tessier (2012) tries to present methods of analysis which appear in a form of an evolution and ranged from field notes, to transcript, and working directly from the tape. Modern qualitative computer-base data handling/management programs presently exist that could be used especially for large data. They also assist in combining transcript and direct record analysis. However, they are quite costly; and require appropriate training (Burnard et al., 2008; Tessier, 2012; Yin, 2009). The use of these tools should not be seen as an end in itself. If a researcher chooses to use such tools, they need to understand that the tools only act as aid in locating textual phrases and measuring occurrences. This makes it unacceptable to present their output as if they were the end product of an analysis (Burnard et al., 2008; Tessier, 2012; Yin, 2009). In other words, the quality of the output and the answers to the "How" and "Why" questions of the research still depends on the ability of the researchers post computer thinking, and their analytical rationale - thereby putting the researcher at the forefront of the analysis and as a guarantor of quality (Burnard et al., 2008; Tessier, 2012; Yin, 2009). Due to the

absence of a universal form of analyzing qualitative data, the mode of data analysis depends on the choice of the researcher (Tessier, 2012; Yin, 2009).

In the scenario of a recorded interview, the researcher can decide to transcribe or work directly from the tape based on what works best for him/her while taking into consideration the cost associated to the methods; skills; advantages and limitations of all available methods; and eventually the measures to overcome such limitations for better reliability (Tessier, 2012). Irrespective of whether data is managed by hand or computer-base, the specific issue of data analysis process in qualitative research centers around identifying the themes and categories found in the data. It also requires the reiteration of the process over and over for quality guarantee purposes (Burnard et al., 2008). This process can be referred to as open coding. Taking into consideration the quantity of data, skills and time scope for the research, analyses of the data were done directly from the recording. Multiple reiteration of record listening and going through the email response to gain familiarity (Burnard, 1991) and fine tune the data coding (by hand) process (Burnard et al., 2008) and report writing was done so as to attain greater reliability.

The question by question approach as opined by Yin (2009) and as also presented by Burnard et al. (2008) and Glaser and Strauss (1967) was adopted as a coding process for this research. Yin (2009) advises that researchers should start with their interview questions and then move to the identification of evidence within the data format that address these questions. This process is followed for all interview questions until the researcher gets answers that address the main research question (Yin, 2009). As earlier stated, the researcher listened to these interview recordings and went through the email response over and over in order to get relevant categories that could address these interview questions. This process was also done in order to be able to provide a coherent and chronological story in presenting the findings. This was also very necessary especially as some valuable points could still be identified from statements that were not tied down to the question at the time of the interview. Without exclusion of case study research, all empirical research needs to be presented as a story (Yin, 2009). But the presence of what Morse and Field (1995), convey as "dross" (the amount of irrelevant information in an interview. In other words, aspects that are said but unrelated to the topic or question) are practically present in all interviews (Burnard, 1991) and thus hamper the flow of such a story. In the process of identifying and categorizing key elements beneath each heading or questions, these dross-like elements were being ignored while key statements were identified and noted which are presented alongside the findings for more empirical backing.

The data coding or categorization process also takes into consideration similarities, synonyms, or expressions that were made in different ways by different respondents but that however aim at explaining a common view that had already been categorized. In such a situation, these expressions only added more weight to the single category it represented and they are at times presented as central pieces of evidence through multiple quotes. While Burnard et al. (2008) expresses this as the narrowing from initial coding to Final Coding framework, Burnard (1991) describes it as the grouping

of higher-order headings. As an original source of data, the recordings and the email response were revisited over and over for better clarification in presenting quotes and overall findings.

Burnard et al. (2008) explain two grounded ways through which researchers could present qualitative case study research findings. In the first, the researcher could choose to report major findings under each category or theme while using appropriate word verbatim to support the findings. Another separate chapter then follows with the discussions in which relative arguments are made in relation to existing research or literature. The second involves an integrated approach in which the discussions are incorporated into the findings and presented in a single chapter. The latter approach is more adopted for this research and as such, separate chapters are adopted for the illustration of findings and for the subjective discussions of findings against already existing literature.

3.2 Research Question

1. How are B2B MNC using their social network platforms for value co-creation?

2. What are the most important elements for successfully co-creation and Social Network management?

3. What are the challenges faced in the process (es) of value co-creation on these networks and how do they handle such challenges?

4. What challenges do they face in the process (es) of value co-creation on social networks as a result of the diversity brought about by their Multinational status and how do they strive to handle such challenges?

CHAPTER IV
RESULTS

4.1 Value Co-creation Relationships through Online Social Network Platforms.

> Alpha: "Social network platforms are all about creating a community that is appealing to people as well as customers emotions. The whole aspect of making your customers say, we are not only customers but we are as well fans of the business."

In other words, the use of an SM platform should make customers care about everything that involves the firm directly or indirectly. The purposive use of OSN platform by B2B companies - be they multinationals or domestic are basically the same. It's all about bringing the company closer to its customers in a more efficient and effective way that makes them more eager to engage with the company.

> Wichmann/Schmidt: "A common mistake in my opinion is to treat it as a big branding platform with clever ads and concepts etc. Because then you've lost sight of your B2B customer. What's important is to focus on the customers' problems and see how you can help them."

If companies want to turn customers into fans and increase their engagement on their platforms for the purpose of creating value with them - pushing their company products to them is the quickest way to fail. Companies need to move a certain decree away from their products or services while at the same time act as problem solvers.

The most used SN platforms for customer engagement that was constantly mentioned for B2B companies are LinkedIn and Twitter. However, these same platforms still were consistently cited overall as some sort of a "must use" platform by B2B companies when compared to the others. YouTube for example is a good platform for displaying product guides through videos. Facebook serves as a good platform for informal communication especially with employees in multinational companies as well as fans (noting that most of such fans are not customers because Facebook platform was cited to be mostly followed by a large group of people who might not necessarily be looking for professional insight but rather affiliate to the company for other reasons not related to any previous or present purchase experience). This also makes it a good platform for crisis management/public relations as well - alongside twitter, especially ones that indirectly affect the whole community.

> THOM: "With Facebook, you get in between a life wall where there is a lot of competition. The people whom you want to target with the B2B content are not there and as such you get lots of people who are not looking for any professional insights."

> Wichmann/Schmidt:" The most important social media platform for B2Bs continues to be LinkedIn especially for company news, insights and recruitment. However, other platforms are

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valuable too. Twitter is useful for PR connections, Facebook is still huge and can be very valuable for informal communication, e.g. with employees in global companies. Also Instagram, if you have a clever strategy on how to use it. And YouTube is becoming more important for B2Bs too as they produce more video, e.g. guides and other content."

Maersk: "I personally think LinkedIn is the only one that really brings in something. With Facebook we see very low engagements, not a lot of clicks or clicks to ratios. Twitter is also not super, but with LinkedIn you can actually have the conversation and reach the right target audience and you can actually target it in a way that you do not hassle other people and of course LinkedIn is more of a business platform. Although I believe there is a thin line between business-to-business and Business-to-consumers firms, the objectives of these channels are different and I think LinkedIn has the right interested audience for B2B."

Alpha: "In my previous Maersk experience between 2013 and 2014, there were major incidents involving Maersk and the use of Facebook changed to a crisis management tool. For example, there was a major incident involving Maersk in which one of its ships in Kampala went on fire. We had no idea at the headquarters in Copenhagen and we were only informed on twitter by a fan that lives beside the Suez Canal and she was absolutely right. Also, there was a typhoon incident in the Philippines during this period. We specifically used Facebook for not just employees, but everybody who is connected to Maersk to report themselves safe. So this was a major change in the communication with the clients and the fans."

This implies that each platform serves a unique purpose better than the other and as such the scale of preference depends on the state of a firm and their objectives. If a B2B company's objective is to get to a wider audience that might not necessarily be customers but fans, then a Facebook page for example would do the job better with the right content.

Online social networks facilitate value co-creation through the following 3 salient practices: (1) Sharing Valuable industry information that helps both parties in their decision making; (2) Product and service co-development; and (3) Content co-creation.

4.1.1 Sharing valuable Industry Information

For businesses to make accurate decisions and sustainable strategies they need expert information and they need this on time and in details. While Twitter offers timeliness in getting these information notifications, LinkedIn offers the opportunity to get them in more details since tweets are limited by the number of characters, thus making them more political according to THOM. However, this mutually exclusive advantage makes them a very important tool for information gathering needed for accurate decision making and strategy formation by both the customer and the firm. Despite the fact that two experts downplayed the importance of twitter in delivering on this practice due to this limitation, the others believe they are somehow mutually beneficial in attaining this objective in their

own unique ways. The importance of twitter in the sectors were customers need fast and reliable information to make key decisions of whether or not to trade and how (like the investment banking sector) was really stressed upon by Alpha and the emphasis was more that those of other respondents who operated in different sectors.

> Alpha: "At Alpha bank we would have a panel of experts and they would make forecasts several times a year on what would happen along the quarters of the financial market and we would roll out a campaign and it would be websites, videos, and social media campaigns. The social media element of communicating with customers was so strong and they visited the social media sites more that they did or the website. In the investment banking domain, knowledge is the commodity we provide. It is not an exact science as such, what you want to do is to offer guidance with the information or knowledge you have. Irrespective of legal restrictions, you ought to allow them to make their own decisions after they must have assessed the information and assumptions you provided"

> Alpha: "Twitter served as the most important platform for the experts. Each expert has a twitter account with a strong presence and influence which could be leveraged by the firm and other customers. Social media platforms are then looked upon as platforms to gather information and at a very fast rate because the tweets are just made instant, with instant reaction and instant feedback. At Alpha bank, we know that these are the gold experts, these are the oil experts and these are the financial experts that we could always associate with and ask when we need answers."

Firms need to understand that customers are the determinants of value and as such should be given the freewill to decide on what information is valuable or not for their decision making and how? Associating the firm with experts and thought leaders in every industry touched by its product/services is fundamental for the success of this practice. This enables the firm to see what they are talking about, reach them with their thoughts and to also contact them for more insight when they need swift reliable information in more details and vice versa.

4.1.2 Product and Service Co-development

The use of White papers is one of the marketing tools through which firms stir critical insights from customers and thought leaders in the industry about a new or pre existing product or service. It's a form of content marketing designed to promote the product or services of the firm. It could also be used to advocate for a particular situation based on facts, logical reasoning, research, expert knowledge or features of the product/service. While such documents are meant to persuade customers to buy the company's product/service in the situation of sales, it also gives customers the opportunity to crisscross against other alternative offers; understand the product/service related issues at hand; and thereby make better decisions that help solve their problems or meet their needs.

What makes them quite valuable for product and services co-development or innovation is the possibility to add points, problems and questions to them with the aim of getting proactive views or indirectly racing the offers of the firm's competition. Such moves bring in new ideas as customers expressed their satisfaction, dissatisfaction or contributions.

Another way of co-creating with customers is through exclusive invites to customers that give them the opportunity in taking part in meetings that involve key strategic decisions.

> Alpha: "What we sometimes do is to make an exclusive invite for our VIP customers on LinkedIn through the InMail option that gives them the opportunity to participate in virtual meetings with the entire board for instance."

With such an offer, expert customers get the opportunity to proactively share their views and problems that can go a long way to shape organizational strategy for better sustainability.

4.1.3 Content Co-creation

OSN centers all on content creation and the choice of content created depend on the firm's overall objectives. In its simplest term, SN content could be defined as all activities carried out by a firm on its SN platform with the aim of attracting and retaining fans and customers. When firms come together with their customers to create this content then it could be termed co-created content. Such contents gain credibility on the side of other customers which also leads to more shares and reach. It also increases the commitment and branding of the customers especially when the customer is put on the spotlight.

> THOM: "The customer is always interested or happy to be put on the spotlight. When creating and presenting content with the customer, you need to make it sound like a story in which the customer emerges as the hero. Focus on the customer's problems; Needs; and Challenges, in that way you appear more genuine in presenting your products/services."

Sharing Personal Product/Service Experience

According to Fuller et al. (2008), customers who have in-depth product knowledge; engage in product related discussions; and support firms in developing new product ideas are usually customers with strong interest in the firm's product/brand. Such customers might have used the company product over the years and thus could be classified as expert customers. Despite some arguments that question their ability in product development and innovation (Bower & Christensen, 1995; Chandy & Tellis, 2000; Kumar et al., 2010) other still believe irrespective of the controversies, they still play an important role in assisting less knowledgeable or experienced customers if the company provides a social network platform with the right motivations (Kumar et al., 2010).

Live webinars were cited to be the most important means used by B2B companies to bring their expert customers on a single virtual platform (irrespective of their location). This enables them to share their expertise for the benefit of other customers or potential customers who might have little or no expert knowledge with regards to the products/services offered by the firm.

> Alpha: "In the financial sector, LinkedIn was definitely important and what we did was we produced quite a lot of videos and one of the most successful one's we did was in terms of having direct customer communications through panel discussions and these videos were later posted on LinkedIn for more engagement. LinkedIn was good for anything that involves signing up for webinars and a direct customer line as well."

> Maersk: "We do a few webinars where we open the floor for customers who have the opportunity to express their frustrations and for it to be addressed. This is content, and then we also upload it on YouTube and share on social media. That's in a way content that is co-created."

> Alpha: "One thing we do with a more human touch is to bring together our expert trade masters from all over the globe virtually so that they could discuss their war stories. These are stories about their worst trade deals they ever made. What do they think went wrong? What would they do better if faced with the same situation? Whether this is fun or not depends on the firm's ability to understand the customer's experience and the angle from which the customers are coming from. It is also important to know the various areas that interest each customer so as to be able to give them the right invite."

Several webinar hosting sites do exist at the disposal of companies and one of the advantages they provide is giving room for live participation by audience who might be curious customers with a need to satisfy or a problem to solve. However, LinkedIn and Twitter were cited as the right platforms for B2B to generate traffic to their landing page for the webinar hosting. LinkedIn and Facebook are also important for creating webinars based on the content to be shared and on the type of audience to be addressed. This is facilitated through their live streaming features. LinkedIn, Twitter and YouTube are also very important for creating engagements with customers through recorded posting of webinar sessions, conferences or interviews with expert customers.

Content Editing

Content co-creation could also be on aspects such as: Industry forecast; Articles for specialized press; Case studies; Looking for solutions to global challenges; and Co-branding articles. Such content might require that the firm and the customer come together to edit the content before it is posted.

> THOM: "it is important to note that most platforms (LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook) are not coded for the purpose of co-creating content through virtual editing. But some contain features that could be useful as well. Facebook Creator studio for example could be linked to

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every Facebook page and contains features used for this purpose. You could create content, store as draft, give access to customers for editing/feedback and schedule automatic posting when ready."

This means that, while these platforms serve as appropriate channels for posting B2B content, the firm needs to go an extra mile in investing in content co-creation social platforms if it must gain from the benefits that accrue.

THOM: "There are many tools out there that help to facilitate content co-creation editing and most of them provide the additional luxury of managing your overall social media activities on every platform the firm is present. One of such tools I am fun to use is Kontentino but this is however just one of the many."

4.2 Important Elements for Successful Co-creation and Content Management.

There is a high demand for valuable content by B2B customers and this has made content creation more difficult, perishable and expensive. With such difficulty and expense, an expert raised the importance of analyzing the cost benefit relationship or the input output ratio which might determine how wide or exclusive the content is made available. SN exposes customers to numerous contents from various industries including competitors. As such, added value to content is the only way to attract and keep them engaged with the firm. As expressed by interviewees, value co-creation with customers or extensive market research are the best ways of creating valuable content that receives more engagements and shares. Content, even if valuable serves little or no purpose if not shared on the right platform and managed properly. According to interviewee, several elements need to be considered when co-creating with customers and disseminating it on SN platforms.

4.2.1 Customer Insight

Co-created or non co-created content that centers around the customers problems, needs and challenges is more efficient in getting the customers willingness and in improving the engagement and reach through shares on platforms.

Maersk: "With the whole corona outbreak now, every company is looking for money and trying to reduce SG&A (Selling, General and Administrative) costs. If we tell them we are now providing services that help reduce this cost or solve their present needs then they become more enthusiastic. If we tell them that we can now help them clear their goods from custom or that we could provide them with warehousing or we can provide faster movements through flight and trains or re route final destinations at lower cost, then they become very interested because these are major supply chain challenges currently faced."

With a better awareness of such insights, firms know what content to create or involve customers that would lead to much more engagement by the customer in all aspects.

4.2.2 Reliability and Credibility

> Maersk: "Unlike B2C Marketing, B2B deals less with emotions. This doesn't mean tapping into customer emotions isn't important but rather it means you need to get the facts and figures right in business contents that you create as well, because other companies rely on this to make strategic decisions."

> Wichmann/Schmidt: "Be authentic in your approach. Do not manufacture stuff. Instead, show what's already there and Make it interesting."

> Alpha: "With LinkedIn I think it's very much of the credibility to the direct customers or very trustworthy and credible customer communication."

> Maersk: "Sources/referencing and co-creating with experts in the industry is very important for credibility. If you are creating content which might not be linked to the firm's direct expertise or research, it is important to cite the source for more credibility. Also, working on content with big brands in the industry is also very important for credibility. It is common in B2B to see huge companies in the industry that are not well known by name but rather by their auxiliary brand, you might also need to take that into consideration. For example, if we cite INDITEX few persons might know it, but if we cite Zara, Pull & Bear, Massimo Dutti, or Bershka, in a co-created content which are auxiliary brands of the former, then people get to pause for a minute to find out what's going on. The reaction is the same for co-created content with other brands such as Nike, Apple, Volkswagen, BMW or Mercedes. If we do content with Volkswagen which shows how we solve their problem through our services, Audi, Mercedes are more likely to pay attention to such content."

This also implies that firms need to be prone to elaborate collaborations with customers and/or research (primary/secondary) on customers for business related content that they post in order to gain reliability and credibility. This makes content creation very time consuming, expensive and at the same time worth as it leads to more engagement on the part of the customer. As a small business that might not be privileged to work with big international renowned customers, thinking of such in terms of local champions in the firm's domestic or local area of distributions might do the job as well. This isn't as easy as may sound! An Interviewee expressed the difficulty in getting these experts to co-create public content with the firm. Reason being that, they do not want to make it appear like they are tied down with the firm as this might lead to higher charges in the future or deter other profitable openings/offers from competitors. Such challenges might require that the firms go beyond stimulating intrinsic customer motivators.

4.2.3 Consistency

Customer attention might be easier gained than retained. The customer's exposure to content is as large as their ability to connect to the internet and SN. Feeding customers with consistent valuable content is important to attract and retain them. According to interviewees, this is very challenging. As one of them puts it "sometimes you really do not know what to post out there, but customers don't expect that."

4.2.4 Expert Product/Service Knowledge by the Social Media Team

Irrespective of the form of engagement that occurs on these platforms, the SM team needs to have an expert knowledge about the product or service offered by the firm. Firms would always have customers and potential customers post tough questions about their challenges or the firms offering respectively. The SM team needs to respond to this in an expert manner and on time. Without such knowledge, time might be wasted or the customer unsatisfied with the response. However, another alternative for handling this is to create a swift connection between the SM team and the customer service team. The importance of such knowledge and collaborations should not be underestimated if the firm interns to create happy customers.

4.2.5 Security and Availability

This has to deal with the human touch of the social network itself. Customers need to understand that they are dealing with human and not automated machines. As such they expect responses with a human touch rather than a response that seems automated each time they present a problem. SN in itself is distant, automated responses are quite inefficient in narrowing such distance but rather leads to more mistrust and a further widening of the preexisting distance. One way to attain this is by showcasing the teams behind the platforms.

4.2.6 Consistent Loyal Tone of Voice and the Style

This might sound superfluous, but the importance of it was stressed. A Firm needs to maintain a style that represents a loyal tone of voice and this need to be consistent. Access to SN is free to the public and as such firms do not want to be looked upon as hostile towards their customers. Even in times of hostile customer reactions or engagements on content, the firm needs to maintain a loyal tone of voice as much as possible. Firms would need to remember that the actions of the customer might be forgotten but followers might not forget the firm's actions easily especially if not logically defended.

4.3 Major Challenges of Value Co-creation, Content Management and Possible Remedies

This research examines challenges in two dimensions. First, it looked at challenges related to the processes and secondly at the challenges that might be pertinent as a result of the multinational structure of a firm. In looking at these challenges, interviewees were also examined on the possible remedies they use or they think could be put in place to handle them. Some of these challenges and possible solutions have earlier been sketchily expressed but still necessary to explain them in more details.

4.3.1 Difficulty in Producing Valuable Content Consistently

According to respondents, customers always expect to hear from the firm and they expect the firm to come up with something that helps them solve their problems each time they do. Meeting up to those needs is not easy which is why it becomes possible to find B2B companies operating on OSN as if they were B2C companies – Thus losing focus of their main customer. A valuable content is one which brings hope to the daily hassles or problems faced by the firm's customers. One way of ensuring that the firm meets up with this expectation consistently is to involve expert customers in the content creation processes. By doing so, the firm gets to understand the insights of their customer much better which enables them to provide accurate solutions. Another way is to invest in market research that focuses on understanding the needs of the customer. With this, the customer must not be involved in the content creation process.

4.3.2 Difficulty in on-Boarding Expert Customers for Co-creation Content

For intrinsic motives, expert customers are willing to take part in co-creation of content with firms especially one that requires them to show their expertise. However, response from Maersk shows that the monotonous nature of this requires a form of extrinsic motivation. These expert customers become uncomfortable when they are involved in numerous content creations with the firm. Customers turn to feel that this would lead to an opportunistic behavior from the firm that might look at them as being stocked. Moreover, they also think that such actions portray some sort of a huge commitment with the firm which might deter opportunities from other competitors. Taking into consideration the advantages that accrue from co-creating content with customers, it becomes necessary for the firm to act as a guarantor of non opportunistic behavior and to also provide extrinsic motivations which might center on discounts or hidden preferential treatments.

4.3.3 The Balance between Presence and Overly Present

Getting the right balance with the presence of content on customer feeds depends on how organic the business wants to be.

> THOM: "What you do not want to do is hassle the people which might look very aggressive with content. This involves continuously making a particular content overly present to the

customer which might generate aggressive resentment. You need to find the right balance between not harassing them and still feeding them with up to date information."

While all interviewees stressed the importance of being organic as much as possible they also commented on the importance of paid campaigns or content posting at the beginning of the a company's social media life cycle and also in times when the company has enormous data on customer profile that would enable them target the right audience and thereby increasing the efficiency of such content.

THOM: "When doing paid ads for content, you are going to target specific people based on their interest. You can create different persona profiling within your leads and customers that you can nurture on different topics, insights, personalized ways, timing, channel, age, country and region. You should also note that this evolves over time."

The opportunity to profile customers and experts for B2B content varies across platforms. One other advantage the LinkedIn and Facebook platforms have over Twitter is that they provide the algorithms for such target contents. LinkedIn goes further to enable businesses to identify people based on their positions and seniority within the company, which is important especially if they wish to make direct personal contact.

4.3.4 Poor Customer Behavior

Added to the possibility of facing disgruntled customers, the company also needs to be ready to face attacks that might be personal.

Alpha: "I once faced a customer who commented on our entire social platform content at that time, that we had an employee who was a rapist. Such a comment was not product or service related but could have a great negative impact on us if not attended to."

Time, speed and professionalism counts if the firm wishes to curb the negative impacts of such comments. In large organizations, teams that specialize in monitoring and moderating not only negative comments but also customer worries and the identification of security breaches are quite needed.

4.3.5 Product and Service Industry Content creation and Co-creation

One reason for the slow adoption of social media by B2B companies was because they thought individuals per se did not care about their products and that their processes would be boring to the general public. However these processes have become a valuable source of content as people are enticed to see the processes it takes for products to get to them. Such content can also be useful for startups or other businesses which might be facing problems in using the firm's product especially if the content was created within a customer's facility.

In addition to the difficulty in creating content and getting other customers onboard co-creation or co-branding of content, a respondent expressed that the difficulty exceeds in the B2B service industries than in Production industries. According to this interviewee, the act of large production activities within the product industry is a large source of content if well harnessed together with the customer. This requires that Service Companies engage in more individual research if they need to create valuable content.

Challenges faced as a result of the multinational structure of the firm in value co-creation and management of content was not much of a concern. To most interviewee's, these challenges are quite uniform because the needs and the challenges are more similar across the globe for B2B firms. However one common challenge cited with little momentum was the aspect of culture.

4.3.6 Cultural Diversity

It could be possible that firms wish to create or share content that goes beyond Industry and touches the hearts of the people. In such a situation cultural beliefs might be necessary to look into.

> THOM: "I think there is a thin line between B2C and B2B SM precisely in terms of the persons communicating at the other end. You will need to understand that with either of them, those at the other end of the line are people who take decisions whether to patronize your product or not. These people have beliefs stemming from their cultural and religious background."

> Alpha: "If your largest markets are in non Christian countries for example and you need to post global content on Christmas for example, maybe a happy holiday might do the job better than Merry Christmas."

Thoughts like this should help stimulate the mind when firms need to post contents that touch individual beliefs. But according to all responders however, such things are not really of a major concern in B2B.

All respondents also trivialized the idea of creating multiple social platforms by B2B international companies as a way of dealing with their international structure. According to them, the management expenses out ways the benefit, not to talk of the confusion and misalignment that can result with headquarters' objective especially if not well decentralized.

> Wichmann/Schmidt: "The challenge for multinationals is often to make it relevant for all locations without compromising the quality of the content. Local content works best, but will need to be created locally. But the experience and competencies often sit at global level, so global and local need to bridge the gap. Global department needs to drive the global content and posting and make sure it resonates across geographies and segments. But they also need to serve the local offices and help them get their messages across on social media and online channels. That's easier said than done! But I think a lot has to do with mindset."

Maersk: "I think having multiple accounts is confusing for a global company, not only to them but also to the customers. It might make sense for web care, but for a social network, I don't think it is that easy. Moreover, Platforms such as LinkedIn and Facebook are designed for global reach and at the same time could be used to segment and target local content that would also help local offices get their message across."

Also, having a culturally diverse team or global virtual meetings/collaborations, that involves local operators and customers in the creation of global and local content can be very important in ensuring that the firm does not overlook some very important aspects.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

This chapter is going to focus more on the main subjective interpretation of the results presented in the previous chapter so as to endeavor to provide a clearer interpretation of some major findings.

Three forms of value co-creation were identified in this research: Sharing valuable industry information; Product and Service Co-development; and Content Co-creation. Having a clear understanding of the customer insight is very important for the success of created content and co-created content on OSN for B2B companies. This is because these companies are not so much driven by emotions but rather are in quest of content that would help them in better decision making and profitability. Customer Insight centers on the problems, needs and challenges faced by the firm's customers. As reflected by most respondents, the customers are the final determinant of value which is the more reason why content created should resonate around their insights - a view also expressed by Gronroos and Gummerus (2014) and Vargo & Lusch (2004).

Companies basically have two ways of getting such insights. The first, being through co-creation as also mentioned by other researchers (Gronroos & Gummerus, 2014; Gronroos & Voima, 2013; Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Gronroos & Gummerus, 2014) and as seen in the findings. The second is through intensive market research. While the latter might be quite expensive, it basically yields the same performance as uniquely expressed by the Maersk respondent. This market research that also focuses on understanding the firm's customers better, enables the firm to come up with valuable contents and ideas that meet the customer's needs and drives a lot of engagement on OSN platforms. Either of these two approaches also helps the firm in consistently creating valuable content, which is one of the major challenges expressed by respondents.

With that said, adopting an innovative mindset should be considered a de facto for B2B companies that want to succeed in creating valuable content for the better management of their OSN platforms. This indirectly means that non innovative B2B firms are more likely to fail than innovative B2B firms in managing their social platforms due to possible inadequate innovative content. This is because the idea of accepting to co-create with customers or engaging in extensive market research that seeks to understand the customer better is embedded in an innovative mindset.

Customer's interest varies across content activities and purposes. While some customers might be interested in participating in content creation that demands them to share their expertise, others might just be interested in taking part in content that demands them to showcase their engagement in solving global environmental issues for example. This therefore demands that firms understand their customer's short term and long term commitments in order to also truly understand what motivates each customer. Such an understanding would enable the firm to contact the right customers for the right content creation process. This would be due to the existence of a tailor made co-creation engagements derived from the better understanding of all their customer portfolios of commitments.

Fuller (2010) expressed the need of such an individualistic approach to value co-creation motivation, because he found out that these motivations vary across customers.

As seen in the literature, Fuller (2010) endeavors to provide 10 motivation categories as to why consumers take part in co-creation. It turns out that not all these motivational factors hold within the B2B industry. As per the findings, B2B customers are mostly motivated by their information seeking desire, personal needs to be satisfied, altruistic behaviors, recognition and their desire for community support. When experts come together to share their bad experiences (like in the case of Alpha to be more precise) and expertise, it represents some sort of altruistic behavior and desire for recognition respectively. For the latter, the behavior depicts the desire to assist or prevent other customers from making similar errors that could be very costly to them. All respondents also expressed the need of putting the customer at the spotlight of co-created content. In as much as this is also a form of recognition, an interviewee called for the need to go beyond this by offering some sort of a special status to customers who show more commitment to the relationship. This is because public recognition without any special recognition that helps customers in reducing their cost, may cause them to shy away from the spotlight at some point in time due to fear of losing other opportunities as it has earlier been explained. This action gives rise to a form of Compensational motivation as also expressed by Fuller (2010). The quest for valuable information that helps customers solve their problem and meet up with their personal needs and challenges has been seen as a drive force to customers engage with the firms on their OSNs. A desire for community support could come as a result of a commitment to Digital innovation, global challenges and sustainability. When customers make such commitments, it becomes easy for the firm to lure them into any form of co-creation that aims at achieving either of what they stand for.

The importance of the concept of trust in breeding and sustaining business relationships (Quinton & Wilson, 2016) is found in the content of this research in the form of Credibility and Reliability. Quinton and Wilson (2016) advocate that trust could be created by evaluating the relevance and in-depth knowledge of the content created as well as the profile of the contributors (Quinton & Wilson, 2016). Also in their finding, trust still stays incremental for social media inter-organizational interactions, and trustworthiness heuristics stems from the memberships of a professional social media network. One important element consistently cited in the establishment and maintenance of trust is the rich profiling of a firm's network relationship. This implies that a company that has a rich network of trustworthy clients has a higher tendency of gaining trust from other customers. Views like this have also been grammatically expressed in proverbs such as "Show me your friends and I will tell you who you are." In the presentation of findings, the importance of this concept has been echoed by respondents in many different ways. They express the importance of co-creating contents with expert customers, or associating with thought leaders so as to receive more engagement from other customers on a created content and in order to build credibility and reliability. These expert customers are more likely to be customers that are well respected in the industry either for their sizes, commitment or the

positive brand they have created from one good deed or another – a move that marketers might want to express as some sort of "brand leveraging."

As respondents expressed, contents and services that are co-created with the customer or that are created as a result of well informed customer insight from market research, received more attention, shares and demand. Customers are more receptive to contents that are co-created especially with expert customers for reasons related to credibility. Services that also receive enormous customer reviews from product co-development activities are also highly welcomed by the customers because it becomes effective in addressing their concerns. However, such good customer reaction is also gotten from contents and services that are developed from extensive market research on customer insight. Such results are in line with those of other researchers that opine in one way or the other that, product and services that are co-created with customers or that focus on customer insights shoulder positive marketing implications (Anderson et al., 2008; Anderson & Narus, 1998; Bonner & Walker, 2004; Fang, 2008; Kumar et al., 2010, Nambisan, 2002; See & Ho, 2013). In other words, one would not be wrong to say that organizations should endeavor to work closely with their customer for content creation as they would appear more genuine.

Kumar et al. (2010) expressed the importance of knowledgeable/expert customers in sharing their knowledge as a way of assisting non experts on the use of the firm's product/Service. They also discovered a U-shape rather than a linear relation in their contribution to product development. According to them, this is due to an almost perfect fit that might exist between their needs and the firm's product/service. While the researcher cannot express the magnitude of this in the findings, it was realized that expert customers play a very vital role in sharing their experience and knowledge in the form of content co-creation. This is done mostly through webinar sessions as seen in the findings. The existence of the term "expert customers" shows a certain degree of customer satisfaction, which is vital in a customer's willingness to engage in a co-creation relationship (Kumar et al., 2010; Wulf et al., 2001). Alongside them, connections with thought leaders and industry experts were also very necessary for aspects that deal with obtaining and sharing vital industry information on Linked In and Twitter.

Expert Product/Service Knowledge by the Social Media Team was explained in the results as one of the important elements needed in the successful management of OSN. In the absence of this, a close link between the social media team and the customer service department should be established as a close substitute. The failure of either of them leads to disgruntled customers and potential customers who come on these platforms to express their technical worries or in quest for more technical pre-purchase information respectively. With such consequences, this indirectly implies that the internal management of OSN platforms is more advantageous in meeting customers' needs than an outsourced social operation. This is because there is a higher tendency for internal employees to emotionally connect with customers and to have a better; technical knowledge of the product/service offered by their firm or links with the customer service department. Also the aspect of loyal tone of voice, security and availability, also mentioned as important elements of success is also more

achieved with the internal management of these platforms due to the more human touch and more dedication that might be less present in an outsourced management process.

Customers are mostly intrinsically motivated to take part in co-creation activities with firms. They see it as a way to share their expertise. However, this motivation has a limit in areas of content co-creation. At a certain point, these customers begin to feel that they are getting too attached to the firm and as such the firm might use this to their advantage, or that it might prevent them from other opportunities that could come from competitors. This is because they believe competitors see such acts as an act of strong commitment between the firm and them which might discourage them to present better business proposals. At this point in time, the firm needs to go beyond the usual by not only acting as a guarantor of non opportunistic treatments/behavior or givers of spotlight treatments but also through the provision of extrinsic motivators which may come in the form of discounts or preferential treatments.

While many discussions or research has been raised on the topic of adaptation and standardization of the marketing mix of multinational companies (Calantone et al., 2006; Hatzithomas et al., 2016; Lee & Griffith, 2019; Westjohn & Magnusson, 2017), it was generally echoed by respondents that the standardization of OSN platforms for multinational companies is more advantageous. According to their view, a decentralized platform (based on countries or regions) is more costly, time consuming and could be very confusing if not well managed. Also, the needs and problems of B2B customers all over the globe are mostly unique. In circumstances where they are not or in circumstances where the content might be emotionally not appealing to all cultures, the SM platforms make it possible to segment and target content based on many criteria from a single global platform. The ability to better understand customers/leads by profiling and segmenting them based on their topics of interest, insights, personalized ways, timing, channels, ages, country and region makes it possible to manage content from a single platform. Moreover other platforms such as Kontentino and many others make it possible to schedule content posting based on the different time zones and times when the firm think the target audience are more active online (for example, if the target audiences are in U.S.A and global operations is done in Belgium, it is possible to program a post for 6pm U.S time which on the contrary might be midnight in Belgium). Through all these, firm's have the opportunity to target local content for local and global content for global at the right time through a single platform.

CHAPTER VI
CONCLUSION

This research endeavored to look into how B2B multinational companies use their OSN platform for the purpose of value co-creation with their customers. It also went further to look into how these companies successfully manage their content on these platforms. Despite the fact that the study focuses on examining B2B international businesses, the results and discussions on findings could also be applicable to local B2B companies. The results and discussions showed trends in the importance of a B2B firm in having an innovative mindset and many more aspects as a way to succeed in the management of their OSN platform and OSN co-creation activities. With the challenges presented by experts in the processes, the research also reached out for possible solutions to the common challenges expressed by these companies.

Theoretical Implications

This research cuts across two growing marketing domains in recent times. It looks into the phenomenon of social media management and value co-creation both of which have gained steam till date. The research also fuses the two concepts in order to understand how one of them (Value co-creation) occurs in the other (Social media). The results of this research add more empirical literature in these areas.

According to the Service-dominant logic, customers are an indispensable element in a firm's value creation process and as such firms need to co-create with them in order to produce what is valuable. The customer then becomes the sole determinant of value and not the firm (Gronroos & Gummerus, 2014; Gronroos & Voima, 2013; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). This research doesn't prove otherwise. The findings back up this view as it was realized that contents that were co-created with the customer or created based on intensive market research on customer insight was more successful than contents that did not involve customers. These contents were also considered more reliable by other customers. This implies that putting the customer at the center of creating value has an impact on the success of whatever that is being created.

This research also specifically adds to the already existing literature of social media as it provides more elements that warrant the successful management of these platforms. Even though some of this elements have been expressed in the studies of relationship marketing within (Quinton & Wilson, 2016) and without (Wulf et al, 2001) social media, they merely focused on B2B relationships in which one might not necessarily be a Customer but rather partners of equal status or on B2C relationship respectively. The findings of this research focuses on B2B relationships on OSN in which one party is the customer, as such the findings are more strongly objective on the power of one party (Business Customer) over another (Firm). Thus the elements under findings are more unique to such relationships and thus add to existing literature in its own unique way. Such explanation could account

for the reason why aspects such consistency rather than reciprocity (Quinton & Wilson, 2016) was noticed in the cause of the study as customers always expect more than they are willing to offer.

Managerial Implications

The results or findings of this research don't only add to contemporary literature but also serve as guidelines for managerial decisions regarding the management of OSN in B2B companies. The findings are also very helpful as well for B2B companies that wish to make their presence online for the first time. The creation of valuable content for online platforms goes beyond touching emotions in the B2B industry. Managers need to focus on content that addresses the needs of their customers and the one way of doing this is through the involvement of customers in the content creation process or through research that focuses on understanding the needs of the customers. Content created from such processes leads to more engagement and shares.

Firms with an innovative mindset are more likely to succeed in the purpose for which they first joined social media – which is to create customer engagement. An innovative mindset creates more willingness of the firm to look into the challenges of its customers and endeavor to ensure that those challenges are being resolved and the needs of their customers met. B2B customers are more interested in such content and as such turn to react more positively.

Again, this research also brings into the understanding of SM managers on the necessity to choose their platforms based on their objectives. This is because these platforms serve diverse needs and for that reason LinkedIn and Twitter were seen as uncontested platforms for B2B presence. In industries where valuable information is the commodity that is being sold, twitter offers a better opportunity for the firm to get valuable information at admissible speed and at the same time reach out to its customers with valuable information at great speed. LinkedIn stands as the best platform in getting information in more details and in reaching a large audience of B2B customers that are looking for professional insights. The existence of special algorithms embedded in the network make it very easy to target content and thereby increase the efficiency and effectiveness of content being distributed through the platform.

In house management of the OSN platform would lead to a greater success than outsourced management. This is because social media teams need to have a more human touch and exhibit a certain degree of expert knowledge in regards to the product and services offered by the firm. This helps to ease the handling of situations and to address the needs of the customer on time and with more accuracy. Outsourcing a social media operation, to member void of the company expertise would definitely lead to a failue.

It also brings into light several guidelines firms need to follow in order to be able to effectively and efficiently manage their OSN platforms. These guidelines even though developed from findings within the B2B context, could also be applicable in the B2C context.

In cases where B2B multinational companies are faced with the decision of whether to standardize or adapt their social media platforms across countries or geographical regions – the research provides backings as to why a standardized approach is more advantageous than an adaptive approach which involves numerous decentralized platforms. Moreover, these OSN platforms and other existing social media tools help facilitate the management of a single global platform across different geographical boundaries in a more local way as well.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

As any other research, this research was also bounded by imitations, some of which serves as avenues for further enquiries or research. According to other researchers, the inclusion of multiple respondents per case is a measure for resolving data bias that results from over dependence on a single informant per case (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2009). This was possible in a single case, while two responders had previous experience in other organizations included in the study. The effectiveness of this can be quite questionable because the responses given by the latter on their former organizational experience was not certain on the actual practice at the point in time. This is the more reason why this research focused more on overall experience rather than on cases.

The case studies and respondents all had a European origin with the majority of their management experience within Europe. This uniformity of data sources might have ignored the scenarios of key business areas such as Asia that might have some different business practices or experience from Europe. Taking into account this limitation, a similar research involving case studies and respondents with experience that cuts across seemingly extreme business continents (Asia and Europe or Europe and Africa for example) might be worth looking into.

There has been quite a number of unresolved debates as to what number of precise interviews should be constituted in a multiple case study research. While Creswell and Poth (2016) made mention of 5-25; Galvin (2015) talks of 12 to 30; Glaser and Strauss (2017) judges by diminishing return or saturation; and Yin (2009) focuses more on striving that the researcher should aim for more than one study.   This study had a total of 5 interviews. However, taking into consideration the above arguments the research believes that a respondent size of more than 5 would definitely have attained higher quality or give room for better assessment of saturation.

Yin (2009) also advocates that a researcher should endeavor to use at least two sources of evidence in order to attain more quality of the findings reported. While he listed 6 data sources, the results of this finding relied solely on the interview as a single source of data.

As Glaser and Strauss (1967) puts it, the aim of qualitative research is to get into the perception of another person's world, as such the researcher should try to offset subjective bias that might accrue in his attempt of interpreting the interview data. Burnard (1991) and Burnard et al. (2008) suggest several validity measures to eliminate such subjective biases and goes further to cite several

challenges which would not be looked into. The first measure involves handing over the data to colleagues who are familiar with the process of coding so they could generate independent codes or categories that would be compared with the codes or categories of the researcher. The second requires that the researcher hands over the analyzed data or the findings to the respondents for validity of what the researcher has presented. As a limitation, the findings of this research are based solely on the subjective interpretation of the researcher as none of these validation techniques were done.

In the course of booking appointments for the interview, the researcher receives a couple of feedback from the interviewees about a very busy unprecedented tight work schedule that had aroused as a result of the rapid insurgence of the COVID-19 pandemic across Europe at that point in time. During the collection of data, the researcher at times witness some sort of inconsistency and inadequate structure of response across certain interviews even though the interview questions were sent to them weeks before the interview date. This showed some sort of low preparedness from some interviewees that might have originated from psychological stress. In some cases, the researcher could feel this through visual or verbal expressions before the main interview started. This made data collection and interpretation difficult and time consuming especially as the researcher had to go through the recordings over and over in order to get some valuable themes or categories for each interview question. Again, at the beginning of my interactions with my contact /gatekeeper at Maersk, there was a positive reaction as to the number of persons that could participate in the research. However, Due to the sudden COVID-19 crises, similar unpleasant responses were returned which somehow left me with just one respondent within the company.

A number of strong assertions have been made in this research based on the interpretation of the findings. These aspects are also worth looking into in the form of a more quantitative research. Research is needed in order to better quantify the role of a B2B firm's Innovativeness on the success of its OSN activities. This is because innovative actions originating from customer insights were seen as a very important element in the creation of valuable content for customers. It also provides consistency which also helps to improve on the success of OSN content.

Again, quantitative research could also look into the importance of co-created content and extensive firm market research on the overall success of OSN content in B2B companies. This is because respondents mentioned that content that is created with the customer or that was produced due to extensive research from customer insight was more successful and received more engagement.

Lastly, a quantitative research could also examine the role of the key elements of success and challenges (that are previously mentioned) on the overall success of the management of OSN platforms in B2B companies.

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Appendix 1: Interview Questions

Research Topic: Successfully Managing Online Social Networks for Value Co-creation in International Business (B2B Context)

Research Profile:

I am a Master's student of International Marketing Strategy at Hasselt University, Belgium. After a year of hard work, the completion of this research is the final step to the award of my master's degree in the month of June. This research seeks to understand how Multinational companies come together with their Business customers on a social network platform for the purpose of creating value together (Value Co-Creation) and how they successfully manage these platforms. This research is strictly for the purpose of academics.

Privacy and Confidentiality:

The researcher and the school stand as guarantors of privacy and confidentiality in circumstances where the interviewee raises strict concerns.

In the case of strict privacy concerns, the research will anonymously report the source of data within the report. Being the sole researcher, data gotten would only be analyzed and reported by me and no other second party.

In the case of strict confidentiality concerns, the school will stand as a guarantor to ensure that my defense is done in a closed room with few juries from school (rather than the open defense which is accessible to other Business Experts) and the research won't also be published.

A total of 7 Interview questions can be found below and I wish to request 30-45 minute out of your busy schedule for an interview. However, respondent could chose to answer these interview questions by email or any other means deemed convenient for them.

For Further enquiries and explanations, the researcher could be contacted through any means provided at the end of this document.

Interview Questions

1. How do B2B companies interact with their customers in order to create value through the various social network platforms that they use?

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2. What do you think motivates business customers to come together with the company for the various purposes of creating value on these social networks?

3. What aspects do you consider paramount to the success of such co-creation relationships and the management of social network platforms

5. What challenges (Technical, Customer behavior or internal management related) hinder the smooth functioning of these co-creation relationships?

6. What challenges do you think are unique to companies with multinational structures?

7. How do you handle such challenges (as mentioned in question 5 & 6) or what measures do you think should be put in place to prevent such challenges?

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