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Article in *Business Horizons* · May 2011

DOI: 10.1016/j.bushor.2011.01.005 · Source: RePEc

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# Social media? Get serious! Understanding the functional building blocks of social media

Jan H. Kietzmann<sup>\*</sup>, Kristopher Hermkens, Ian P. McCarthy,  
Bruno S. Silvestre

*Segal Graduate School of Business, Simon Fraser University, 500 Granville Street, Vancouver, BC V6C 1W6, Canada*

## KEYWORDS

Social media;  
Social networks;  
Web 2.0;  
User-generated content;  
Facebook;  
Twitter;  
LinkedIn;  
YouTube

**Abstract** Traditionally, consumers used the Internet to simply expend content: they read it, they watched it, and they used it to buy products and services. Increasingly, however, consumers are utilizing platforms—such as content sharing sites, blogs, social networking, and wikis—to create, modify, share, and discuss Internet content. This represents the social media phenomenon, which can now significantly impact a firm's reputation, sales, and even survival. Yet, many executives eschew or ignore this form of media because they don't understand what it is, the various forms it can take, and how to engage with it and learn. In response, we present a framework that defines social media by using seven functional building blocks: identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, and groups. As different social media activities are defined by the extent to which they focus on some or all of these blocks, we explain the implications that each block can have for how firms should engage with social media. To conclude, we present a number of recommendations regarding how firms should develop strategies for monitoring, understanding, and responding to different social media activities.

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## 1. Welcome to the jungle: The social media ecology

Social media employ mobile and web-based technologies to create highly interactive platforms via which individuals and communities share, co-

create, discuss, and modify user-generated content. Given the tremendous exposure of social media in the popular press today, it would seem that we are in the midst of an altogether new communication landscape. *The New York Times* recently hired a social media editor (Nolan, 2009); the *Catholic Press Association* (2010) offers a webinar on how the church can use social media; and the Governor of California, Arnold Schwarzenegger, is on Twitter with 1.8 million followers. Even Northwest Organic Valley brand milk cartons now display 'find, friend, and follow us' slogans. But unknown to many, this

<sup>\*</sup> Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [jan\\_kietzmann@sfu.ca](mailto:jan_kietzmann@sfu.ca) (J.H. Kietzmann), [khh5@sfu.ca](mailto:khh5@sfu.ca) (K. Hermkens), [ian\\_mccarthy@sfu.ca](mailto:ian_mccarthy@sfu.ca) (I.P. McCarthy), [bruno\\_silvest@sfu.ca](mailto:bruno_silvest@sfu.ca) (B.S. Silvestre).

landscape of social media sites and services started forming more than a dozen years ago. For instance, in 1997, the social network site Sixdegrees allowed users to create profiles, list their friends, and add friends-of-friends to their own lists (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). Sound familiar?

There currently exists a rich and diverse ecology of social media sites, which vary in terms of their scope and functionality. Some sites are for the general masses, like Friendster, Hi5, and—of course—Facebook, which opened only 4 years after Sixdegrees closed its doors. Other sites, like LinkedIn, are more focused professional networks; in fact, Facebook started out as a niche private network for Harvard University students. Media sharing sites, such as MySpace, YouTube, and Flickr, concentrate on shared videos and photos. And after a slow start in the late 1990s, weblogs (blogs) have become very popular, because they are easy to create and to maintain. Their authors range from everyday people to professional writers and celebrities. Today, the resulting ‘blogosphere’ of more than 100 million blogs and their interconnections has become an important source of public opinion. There are even search engines, like Technorati, that are dedicated to searching blogs. Similarly, with the help of social news and bookmarking sites like Reddit, Digg, and Delicious (formerly known as Del.icio.us), users can rank sites by voting on the value of content. Most recently, the phenomenon of micro-blogging focuses on offering real-time updates. Twitter has been driving this development since it was founded in 2006. Today, more than 145 million users send on average 90 million ‘tweets’ per day, each consisting of 140 characters or less (Madway, 2010). These are mostly short status updates of what users are doing, where they are, how they are feeling, or links to other sites. In turn, Foursquare ties these real-time updates into location specific information by rewarding users for ‘checking in’ to real sites at any location worldwide, and for leaving their comments for others to view.

With this rise in social media, it appears that corporate communication has been democratized. The power has been taken from those in marketing and public relations by the individuals and communities that create, share, and consume blogs, tweets, Facebook entries, movies, pictures, and so forth. Communication about brands happens, with or without permission of the firms in question. It is now up to firms to decide if they want to get serious about social media and participate in this communication, or continue to ignore it. Both have a tremendous impact.

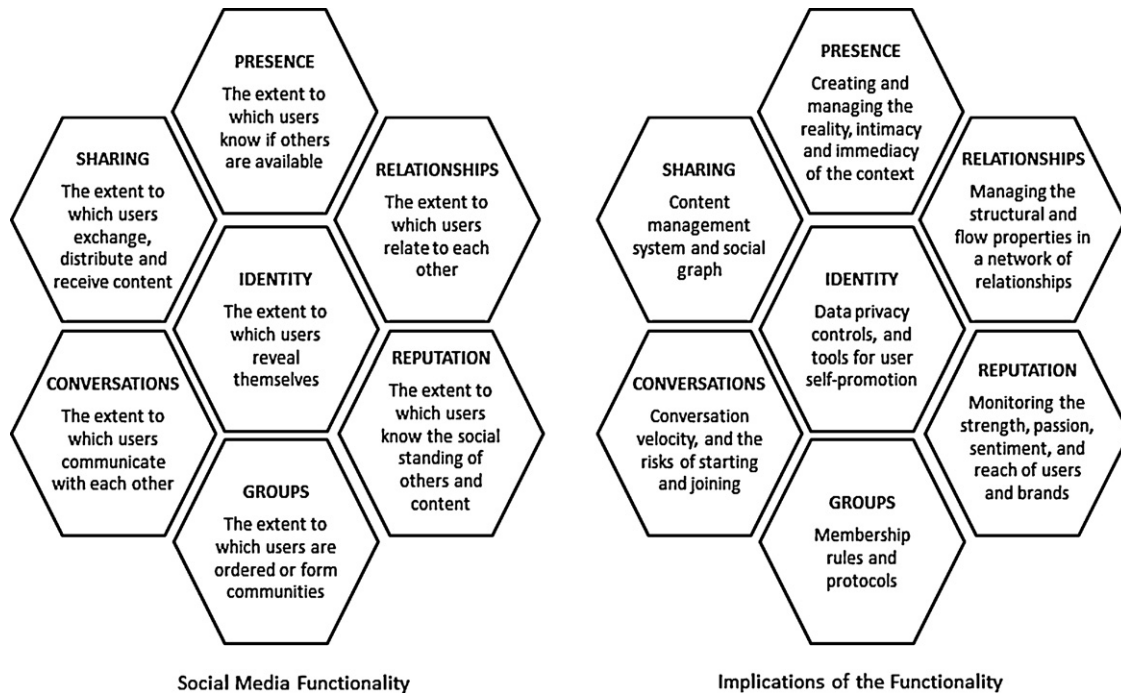
For instance, when United Airlines broke Dave Carroll’s guitar in 2008, it likely was not the first

time a musical instrument had been broken during the course of a flight. It was, however, probably the first time that the owner of the instrument recorded a music video about the experience and posted it on YouTube. The video, portraying United in a very unfavorable light, went ‘viral’ and has been viewed almost 9.5 million times (Carroll, 2009). Amongst other highlights, United Breaks Guitars was cited by Time.com as one of YouTube’s best videos, and even discussed by Wolf Blitzer on television’s CNN Situation Room. Such attention led to a brand and public relations crisis for United, as the story was cheered on by a global community of passengers who understood all too well the frustrations of dealing with airline service failures. United did not respond and, to this day, an Internet search of the term ‘United’ returns Carroll’s damaging YouTube video link at the top of the results list. This high profile example illustrates how ill-prepared firms can be in dealing with social media conversations about them. As BBC Business Editor Tim Weber (2010) explains: “These days, one witty tweet, one clever blog post, one devastating video—forwarded to hundreds of friends at the click of a mouse—can snowball and kill a product or damage a company’s share price.”

Although it is clear that—for better or for worse—social media is very powerful, many executives are reluctant or unable to develop strategies and allocate resources to engage effectively with social media. Consequently, firms regularly ignore or mismanage the opportunities and threats presented by creative consumers (Berthon, Pitt, McCarthy, & Kates, 2007). One reason behind this ineptitude is a lack of understanding regarding what social media are, and the various forms they can take (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). To help address this gap in knowledge, we herein present and illustrate a honeycomb framework of seven social media building blocks. Utilized individually and together, these blocks can help managers make sense of the social media ecology, and to understand their audience and their engagement needs. In true social media fashion, the origins of this framework can be attributed to a number of bloggers: principally, Gene Smith (2007) of the Atomiq.org, who developed and combined ideas discussed by Matt Webb (2004) of interconnect.org; Stewart Butterfield (2003) of sylloge.com; and Peter Morville (2004) of semanticstudios.com. We have taken their ideas and advanced them in four ways, each of which forms a part of our article.

In Section 2, we explain how executives would use the framework to understand the functional traits of different social media activities, and discuss and illustrate the fundamental implications that each block presents to firms as they seek to fathom the engagement needs of their social media

Figure 1. The honeycomb of social media



audience. In Section 3, we explain how the framework can be used to compare and contrast the functionalities and implications of different social media activities. Finally, in Section 4, we conclude by presenting guidelines for how firms should develop strategies for monitoring, understanding, and responding to different social media activities.

## 2. The seven functional blocks of social media

The framework we use (see Figure 1) is a honeycomb of seven functional building blocks: identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, and groups. Each block allows us to unpack and examine (1) a specific facet of social media user experience, and (2) its implications for firms. These building blocks are neither mutually exclusive, nor do they all have to be present in a social media activity. They are constructs that allow us to make sense of how different levels of social media functionality can be configured.

### 2.1. Identity

The *identity* functional block represents the extent to which users reveal their identities in a social media setting. This can include disclosing information such as name, age, gender, profession, location, and also information that portrays

users in certain ways. For instance, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) explain that the presentation of a user's identity can often happen through the conscious or unconscious 'self-disclosure' of subjective information such as thoughts, feelings, likes, and dislikes. Consequently, users and social media sites have different discourse preferences and aims. Many individuals who participate in online activities use their real names (e.g., Guy Kawasaki, a leading blogger and managing director of Garage Technology Ventures), while other influential social media mavens are known by their nicknames, or 'handles' (e.g., hummingbird604 is Raul Pacheco, a blogger and educator on environmental issues).

Of course, there are many different social media platforms built around identity that require users to set up profiles (e.g., Facebook). This has led to the formation of secondary services like DandyID, which allows users to store their online social identities in one place. Similar in nature to business cards and email signatures, social media users now create social media profile cards, using tools like Retaggr, to advertise their different identities and encourage others to follow them. While these new forms of communication attracted many early adopters, new demographics are now participating. In particular, those 55 and older—who were relatively rare contributors in Web 1.0—are now the fastest growing demographic on Facebook, with women outnumbering men 2:1 (Marketingcharts, 2009).

As identity is core to many social media platforms, this presents some fundamental implications for firms seeking to develop their own social media sites or strategies for engaging with other sites. One major implication is privacy. Users willingly share their identities on social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, yet this does not mean they do not care what happens to this information. Indeed, users have serious concerns about how secondary firms use their information as a source for data mining and surveillance (Kietzmann & Angell, 2010), and the extent to which social media sites passively facilitate or actively encourage these activities. This has resulted in users and government agencies initiating class-action lawsuits for invasion of privacy (Kravets, 2010). Users have also developed identity strategies (e.g., real identity versus virtual identities), while others focus on self-promotion (e.g., Facebook) or self-branding (e.g., LinkedIn). Professional photographers, for example, pay a premium to share their photographs on Flickr to develop their professional brand, and start conversations within their community.

However, this does not suggest that firms should insist on profiles that are complete or accurate. In fact, in an effort to protect their privacy, people tie different identities to the context of the different social media platforms they use (e.g., hobbies and pictures on Facebook might be different from those on LinkedIn). In some cases, though, identities remain anonymous. For example, social networks like Divorce360 work for those in complicated relationships or in various stages of breakups, who strongly need support but wish to remain anonymous. Consequently, technologies such as OAuth (Hammer-Lahav, 2007) have been developed as an open standard for authorization, for “giving access to your stuff without sharing your identity at all (or its secret parts).” Although OAuth is now required for all third party Twitter applications, it does not work for everyone. For instance, users of the infamous Internet counter-culture 4chan—who brought us the ‘rickrolling’ meme: a cultural practice whereby users are tricked into watching a cheesy music video—prefer to know each other only by their handles. One of their members, an individual who goes by the name ‘moot,’ has been described as “the most influential Web entrepreneur you’ve never heard of” (Smith, 2008). Striking a careful balance between sharing identities and protecting privacy is crucial in selecting social media tools; the wrong mix can lead to a lack of accountability among users, encourage cyber-bullying, and pave the way for off-topic and off-color comments.

## 2.2. Conversations

The *conversations* block of the framework represents the extent to which users communicate with other users in a social media setting. Many social media sites are designed primarily to facilitate conversations among individuals and groups. These conversations happen for all sorts of reasons. People tweet, blog, et cetera to meet new like-minded people, to find true love, to build their self-esteem, or to be on the cutting edge of new ideas or trending topics. Yet others see social media as a way of making their message heard and positively impacting humanitarian causes, environmental problems, economic issues, or political debates (Beirut, 2009).

The enormous number and diversity of conversations that can take place in a social media setting, means that there are format and protocol implications for firms which seek to host or track these conversations. Twitter, for instance, is centered around exchanging short messages that are mostly real-time status updates, so as to create an ‘ambient awareness’ of issues (Kaplan & Haenlein, in press). Mostly, these messages are of an ephemeral nature, without any obligation to respond. Reviewing past tweets requires an archiving service like Google Replay, which lets users search through and review tweets. Twitter, then, is more about conversation than identity. Blogs, on the other hand, are less about staying connected synchronously than about facilitating rich, often lengthy conversations that can be traced back on the blog itself.

Drawing from research on industry dynamics (McCarthy, Lawrence, Wixted, & Gordon, 2010), we argue that differences in the frequency and content of a conversation can have major implications for how firms monitor and make sense of the ‘conversation velocity’: the rate and direction of change in a conversation. The rate of change is the number of new conversations over a specified period of time, and the direction of change is the continuity-discontinuity of the conversation (i.e., changes in how favorable or unfavorable a conversation is toward a firm and its products). For instance, to make collective sense of the short, speedy, and numerous conversations hosted by sites such as Twitter, firms need tools and capabilities that allow them to connect the dots. That is, the conversations are like pieces of a rapidly changing puzzle which, when aggregated, combine to produce an overall image or message. In contrast, people such as Marc Andreessen (a co-founder of Netscape) use regular blogs to post detailed, but less frequent accounts. These postings can be rich and useful, but not necessarily connected to a greater social media exchange on the same subject.



Another fundamental implication of conversation is the issue of firms starting or manipulating a conversation. For example, Unilever gave its community something to talk about upon launching the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty in 2004. People not only conversed on Dove's own blog or discussion board, but also talked very positively about the campaign across many social media platforms. To spark more conversation, one billboard in the series asked viewers to vote on whether a woman displayed was 'fat' or 'fab,' with the results posted in real-time on the board. Thus, there are benefits and risks in joining and manipulating conversations. Firms which know when to chime in—and, when not to—show their audience that they care, and are seen as a positive addition to the conversation; this is in contrast to firms which flood conversations that were not 'theirs' in the first place.

### 2.3. Sharing

*Sharing* represents the extent to which users exchange, distribute, and receive content. The term 'social' often implies that exchanges between people are crucial. In many cases, however, sociality is about the objects that mediate these ties between people (Engeström, 2005); the reasons why they meet online and associate with each other. Consider Groupon, which publishes a 50% - 90% discount coupon for local businesses each day via email, Twitter, mobile phone applications, and its own website. The coupon is only valid, however, once a critical mass has agreed to purchase the special offer. Social shopping services like Groupon leverage the 'social graph,' a mapping of users' connectivity, to share the news via email across their entire social network. Consequently, social media consist of people who are connected by a shared object (e.g., agroupon, text, video, picture, sound, link, location). Sharing alone is a way of interacting in social media, but whether sharing leads users to want to converse or even build relationships with each other depends on the functional objective of the social media platform. For instance, the objects of sociality are pictures for Flickr, Indie music for MySpace, and careers for LinkedIn.

We suggest there are at least two fundamental implications that the sharing block of the honeycomb has for all firms with ambition to engage in social media. The first is the need to evaluate what objects of sociality their users have in common, or to identify new objects that can mediate their shared interests. Without these objects, a sharing network will be primarily about connections between people but without anything connecting them together. Of course, these objects and the type of

sharing that can be built into a social media platform very much depend on the aims of the platform. For example, YouTube started as a platform to allow individuals to upload and share homemade videos; the first of these showed one of the founders enjoying a day at the San Diego Zoo. This case illustrates that even though the object medium is video, YouTube was established primarily to enable users to share personal objects—experiences and observations—with the world.

A second implication concerns the degree to which the object can or should be shared. As YouTube grew, users increasingly uploaded video not created by them. This led to criticism and lawsuits against YouTube for failing to ensure that uploaded material complied with copyright laws. YouTube has also been denounced for hosting videos that contain offensive content. As a result, YouTube developed controls and allocated resources to filter and then screen the content that it helps share. This includes requiring users who want to upload video, to register and agree to terms of use; providing a content management system that allows content owners (e.g., movie studios) to identify and manage their content on YouTube; asking users to flag inappropriate content; and employing an army of people who screen and remove content that is in violation of the terms of use.

### 2.4. Presence

The framework building block *presence* represents the extent to which users can know if other users are accessible. It includes knowing where others are, in the virtual world and/or in the real world, and whether they are available. In the virtual world, this happens through status lines like 'available' or 'hidden.' Given the increasing connectivity of people on the move, this presence bridges the real and the virtual. For instance, actor Ashton Kutcher and his actress wife Demi Moore are both active on Foursquare, and when they 'check in' at a particular location, fans and traditional media can view this information and know where to go for celebrity gawking. Similar presence-focused platforms center on geographical spaces, not specific locations. Friends Around Me allows users to share their status updates and check-ins across networks—Facebook, Twitter, Foursquare, and Gowalla—and displays which friends are in close physical proximity. Flash-mobs like T-Mobile's Welcome Back (Lifesforsharing, 2010) are a similar phenomenon, whereby large groups of people, organized mostly via social media, practice an unusual but enormously powerful act: assembling in a public place to suddenly perform for a brief time, then dispersing just as quickly. Another

example of real-time presence is Trapster, a vehicle speed trap sharing system that relies on user-generated content to warn drivers of live police speed traps, red light cameras, speed cameras, and so forth. In other cases—for instance, LinkedIn—knowing who else is online or where others are located physically does not matter.

The implication of presence is that firms need to pay attention to the relative importance of user availability and user location. In some cases, this is tied very directly to a desire to interact synchronously, whether this is through voice or sharing data. Should users prefer to engage in real-time, then the social media platform should offer a presence or status line indicator, along with a suitable mechanism through which these users can contact each other and interact. A firm might also want to investigate if users have a desire for selective presences, where one can be visible to some people while staying hidden to others. Another direct implication of presence is that it is linked to the traits of other functional blocks in the honeycomb framework, including conversations and relationships. For instance, drawing upon ideas by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), firms should recognize that social media presence is influenced by the intimacy and immediacy of the relationship medium, and that higher levels of social presence are likely to make conversations more influential.

## 2.5. Relationships

The *relationships* block represents the extent to which users can be related to other users. By 'relate,' we mean that two or more users have some form of association that leads them to converse, share objects of sociality, meet up, or simply just list each other as a friend or fan. Consequently, how users of a social media platform are connected often determines the what-and-how of information exchange. In some cases, these relationships are fairly formal, regulated, and structured. LinkedIn, for instance, allows users to see how they are linked to others and how many degrees of separation they are from a 'target' member—possibly an employer they would like to meet. Member profiles also need to be validated by others to be complete. With a focus on relationship building, LinkedIn has a referral system so that these users can be introduced, through a chain of friends-of-friends, to the person they intended to meet so that they can be closer to the people they would like to meet. Of course, growing a network as large as possible likely reduces the degrees of separation to these individuals. In other cases, social media platforms are centered on existing relationship maintenance, not expansion.

Social software like AOL Instant Messenger (AIM) and Skype allow people to talk to 'buddies' or 'contacts' they already know. On other platforms, relationships are informal and without structure. Blogs, for instance, can allow users to develop a relationship with each other, without a formal arrangement of what and how much information they should share. In yet other cases, including Twitter and YouTube, relationships hardly matter. The general rule is that social media communities which don't value identity highly, also don't value relationships highly.

Because the implications of the relationship block are numerous, we use two properties—structure and flow—from social network theory (Borgatti & Foster, 2003; Granovetter, 1973) to explain the importance of different relationship traits. The structural property of a user's relationships refers to how many connections they have and their position in their network of relationships. Research shows that the denser and larger a user's portfolio of relationships is, and the more central his or her position in the portfolio, the more likely that user is to be an influential member ('influencer') in their network. The flow property of user relationships refers to the types of resources involved in individual relationships and how these resources are used, exchanged, or transformed. It describes the strength of a relationship: strong relationships are "long-lasting, and affect-laden" (Krackhardt, 1992, p. 218), while weak ones are "infrequent and distant" (Hansen, 1999, p. 84). It also refers to the 'multiplexity' of relationships; that is, when users are connected by more than one type of relationship (e.g., they are work colleagues and friends).

Consequently, if a social media community values relationships, the issue of structural and flow properties becomes important. Social media sites and firms seeking to engage with their users must understand how they can maintain or build relationships, or both. If the relationships need to be formal and regulated, then a process should be developed to validate authenticity of users. If a social media platform adopts a brokering role or facilitates transactions, social mechanisms via which other individuals act as an approval step (e.g., LinkedIn), or legal steps can be employed. If users mostly expect to maintain existing relationships, then a simple identification process is required. For instance, users can send a 'friend request' that needs to be accepted by the other party before the two can add each other to their contact list. If the nature of the engagement among users is to grow their networks, then more information might need to be displayed to create meaningful relationships; this, of course, must honor the users' expectation of both identity and privacy, as outlined above. Another alternative is that

users of the community enter into a legally binding transaction (e.g., the social commerce site Bonanza), which is an altogether different relationship.

## 2.6. Reputation

*Reputation* is the extent to which users can identify the standing of others, including themselves, in a social media setting. Reputation can have different meanings on social media platforms. In most cases, reputation is a matter of trust, but since information technologies are not yet good at determining such highly qualitative criteria, social media sites rely on 'mechanical Turks': tools that automatically aggregate user-generated information to determine trustworthiness. For instance, Jeremiah Owyang's 70,000 and Guy Kawasaki's 292,000 followers on Twitter attest their reputations as social media maven and emerging technology expert, respectively. Another example is LinkedIn, which builds the reputation of one individual based on endorsements from others. However in social media, reputation refers not only to people but also their content, which is often evaluated using content voting systems. On YouTube, the reputation of videos might be based on 'view counts' or 'ratings,' while on Facebook this could be 'likes,' and so forth. Via the StumbleUpon platform, for example, one can only see content that has already been filtered by users who share a common interest. The more StumbleUpon knows about a user, the better it can match up preferences of like-minded individuals who have given the particular website a 'thumbs up' or 'thumbs down' verdict.

As with the other blocks in the honeycomb framework, reputation has significant implications for how firms should effectively engage social media. If firms and users value their reputations and those of other users, then a metric must be chosen to provide this information. The number of followers on Twitter has limited value in that it only indicates how popular a person is, not how many people actually read the posts. Since people can follow as many others as they like, they also do not have a reason to 'unfollow' anyone. For a firm, this means the engagement needs of its community should inform the choice of reputation system. If time and activity in a community matter, a measure of the number of posts over time might be a better metric. If the quality of an individual's contributions matters, a rating system would be an appropriate choice.

Once a firm has identified appropriate metrics for the reputation of its community's social media engagement, the appropriate evaluation tool must be chosen. This could either be based on objective data

(e.g., number of views or followers) or collective intelligence of the crowd (e.g., rating system). For example, social media service sites such as Social Mention search and compile user-generated content from over 80 social media sites. It enables firms and individuals to monitor how many times they and others are mentioned, using a number of metrics including: strength (the number of times you are mentioned); sentiment (the ratio of mentions that are positive to those that are negative); passion (how often certain users talk about you); and reach (the number of different users talking about you divided by the total number of times you are mentioned).

## 2.7. Groups

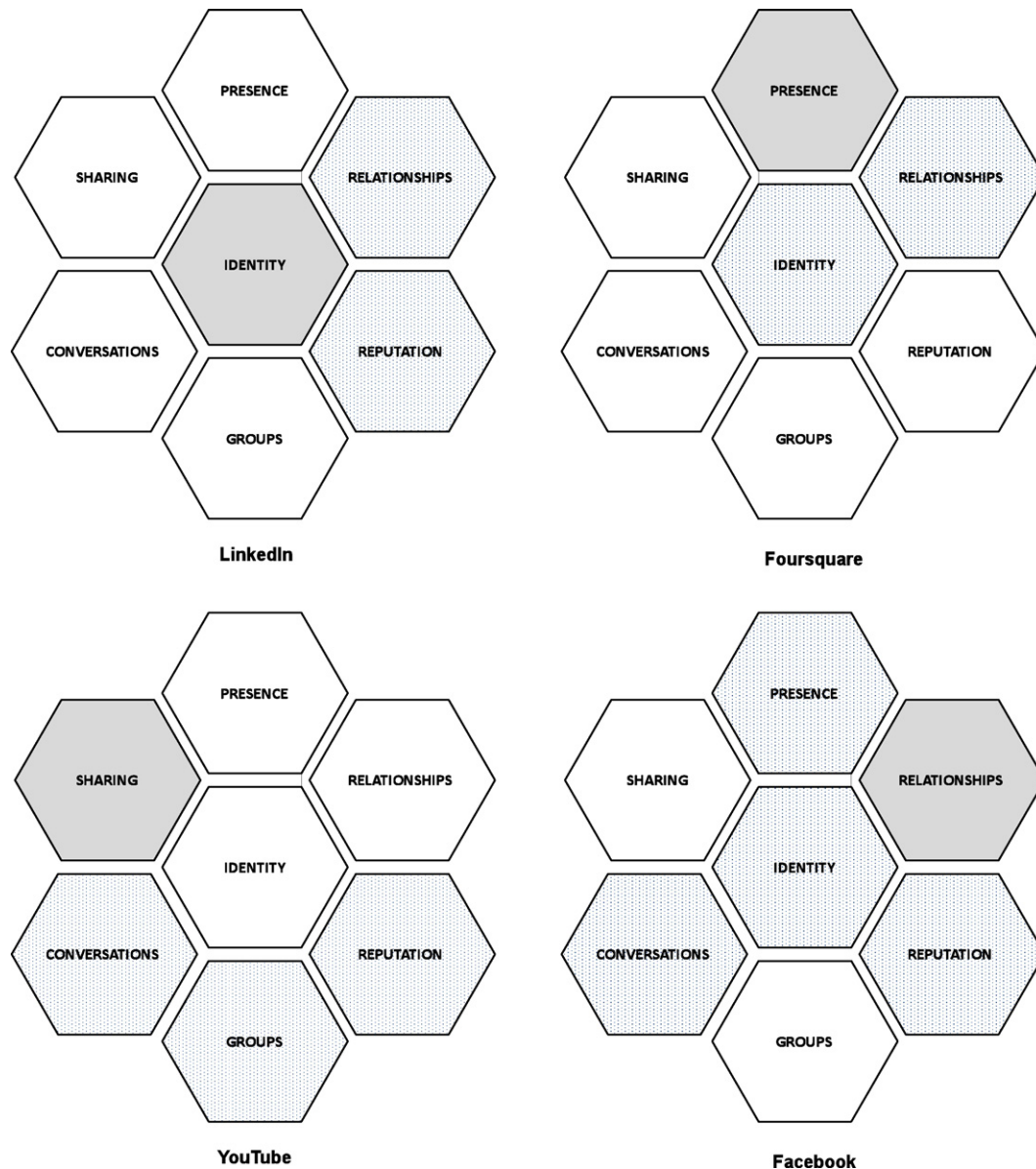
The *groups* functional block represents the extent to which users can form communities and sub-communities. The more 'social' a network becomes, the bigger the group of friends, followers, and contacts. A widely discussed relationship-group metric is Dunbar's Number, proposed by anthropologist Robin Dunbar (1992), who theorized that people have a cognitive limit which restricts the number of stable social relationships they can have with other people to about 150. Social media platforms have recognized that many communities grow well beyond this number, and offer tools that allow users to manage membership. Two major types of groups exist. First, individuals can sort through their contacts and place their buddies, friends, followers, or fans into different self-created groups (e.g., Twitter has lists). Second, groups online can be analogous to clubs in the offline world: open to anyone, closed (approval required), or secret (by invitation only). Facebook and Flickr have groups, for instance, with administrators who manage the group, approve applicants, and invite others to join.

The direct implication of groups is fairly straightforward. It can be assumed that a social media community would enjoy a way to group its users, even when the number of likely contacts is low for each member initially. It is good practice to enable this feature from the start such that members don't have to sort through lengthy contact lists to order their contacts later. If the members just need to order their contacts to manage followers, friends, fans, and the like, then simple user-generated grouping will suffice. This resembles allowing users to label their contacts, without these contacts being aware of it. If, however, a group wants to pursue an agenda and grow its membership, then more formal group rules and functions would be required.

The indirect implications of groups are complicated. Groups in social media are more than just a



Figure 2. Contrasting the functionalities of different sites



listing of users. There is a focus on different permissions for different group membership activity and content. Given the enormous traffic on social media and the amount of noise it generates daily, the need for filtering is paramount. To connect to some of the earlier honeycomb blocks, groups can vary in how they allow individuals to share specific details with some contacts, but not others. Different parts of an identity could be set up for each block. In terms of presence, a user could choose to be available to some (e.g., those in the friends group) on the weekend, but not others (e.g., colleagues). But what happens when life is multiplex and one friend is also a colleague? Permissions management is inherently difficult, and the more flexibility that is embedded in the system, the

more difficult it is to manage for the users. For this reason, many social media platforms have chosen to offer a few categories of groups and a few combinations of permissions. Of course, these choices are highly contextual, and a firm would benefit from studying exactly what kinds of groups their community would support, and how these should affect their engagement with other honeycomb pieces.

### 3. Differences matter: The 4 Cs

It is difficult to stay abreast of the choices people have for social media platforms. It seems that new sites and services emerge every day, vying for the

attention of individuals and communities online. When examining the social media ecology, it quickly becomes clear that many sites have struck a careful balance among the different blocks of the honeycomb. Some focus more on identity, some more on sharing, et cetera. None of today's major social media sites focus solely on just one block. Gene Smith (2007), one of the bloggers who helped evolve this framework, argues that sites tend to concentrate on three or four primary blocks. In Figure 2 we illustrate this with four examples: LinkedIn, Four-square, YouTube, and Facebook. The darker the color of a block, the greater this social media functionality is within the site.

Using tools like the honeycomb framework to understand and develop social media platforms, and the social media landscape more generally, is increasingly important. Consequently, we now present a guideline—the 4 Cs: cognize, congruity, curate, and chase—relating how firms should develop strategies for monitoring, understanding, and responding to different social media activities.

### 3.1. Cognize

A firm should first recognize and understand its social media landscape, using the honeycomb framework. This will unveil the social media functionality and engagement implications for understanding your customers. Similarly, it is important to find out if and where conversations about a firm are already being held, and how these are enabled by the different functionalities in the honeycomb framework. At the same time, firms need to pay attention to other critical elements of the social media landscape, including who some of the main influencers are. Listorious, for instance, provides details of key experts on topics on Twitter. While reviewing the social media landscape, a firm should also collect competitive intelligence to determine if its rivals are already active, and what the response level is for their particular social media strategy.

### 3.2. Congruity

Next, a firm needs to develop strategies that are congruent with, or suited to, different social media functionalities and the goals of the firm. This involves focusing on the core honeycomb blocks of a social media activity that will facilitate the needs of its business. Are they seeking to drive more customers into a bricks and mortar store, to increase sales online, or to create new leads directly attributable to a social media tool? What are the metrics for evaluating the success of the social media platform? Important success measures might focus on the

velocity of a conversation. The mantra 'customer service is the new marketing' emphasizes that the firm is no longer in control of the conversation, and that any social media strategy should also focus on increasing customer happiness (e.g., how well customer issues are resolved) and customer input (e.g., suggestions for improving a product or service). The plan also needs to integrate a social media strategy tightly with other marketing strategies, whereby one points the audience to the other. Unless users are made aware of the existence of a social media forum, they are unlikely to discover it by chance. The 'find us, friend us, and follow us' slogan on milk containers is a suitable example for how 'bought' media (e.g., advertising) and 'owned' media (e.g., the brand or the product itself) can be integrated with social media (the 'earned' media) to seed and drive conversations, sharing, relationships, and so forth. Other choices in the planning stage require another look at the honeycomb to learn what key activities—conversations, for instance—will help the firm gain trust with a key influencer and within the community.

### 3.3. Curate

A firm must act as a curator of social media interactions and content. This involves developing a clear understanding of how often and when a firm should chime into conversations on a social media platform, and who will represent the firm online. Social media involvement is not an exact science, but to reduce the ambiguity, firms should develop policies that outline how their employees look after and preserve different forms of social media engagement. The key here is to identify employees who have the ability to listen and who care about the chatter online, and those who can create content that is emotionally appropriate for the community (Armano, 2009). Another important option is to create 'mash-ups,' which combine content and functionality from a variety of sources that already exist. For example, organizations can curate conversations by showing YouTube videos of credible individuals on their site, or by presenting existing research from other sites.

In any event, to effectively follow and use social media can be a challenge, and it is likely that many firms initially won't have the talent or capabilities to succeed. So, when firms hire consultants who act on their behalf, they are well advised to conduct due diligence to ensure that opportunities are maximized and risks are minimized—not the other way around. Having the right controls in place is especially important, as individuals who communicate with customers must be given enough discretion and

authority to develop relationships by solving customer issues, not just sympathizing with the customer as often seems to be the case with traditional customer service.

### 3.4. Chase

Of course, a constant chase for information about social media activity is tremendously time-consuming. Yet, firms must scan their environments in order to understand the velocity of conversations and other information flows that could affect current or future position in the market (McCarthy et al., 2010). The honeycomb framework provides a valuable tool for evaluating the changing social media ecology. If used as an ongoing lens, a firm can revisit the assumptions about a community's engagement needs, observe how other social media platforms are evolving, and gauge how competitors are responding. More specifically, it is important to follow conversations and other interactions that include a particular firm, brand, product, or individual. Fortunately, social media analytics tools like TweetDeck, Social Mention, and Google Alerts exist to make this process more manageable. It is important, though, to note that positive social media exposure often results more from inbound than outbound conversations, and real-time is much better than post-hoc. For instance, when a customer tweeted his disappointment that a chain restaurant had run out of corn tortillas, a full time social media employee alerted the branch manager in less than 2 minutes and the issue was resolved even before the customer left the restaurant (Armano, 2009). But even when it seems too late, an appropriate social media response may turn the tide. Imagine if United Airlines had released an apologetic United Loves Guitars video on YouTube, possibly starring Eric Clapton, Slash, Jimmy Page, or B.B. King!

## 4. Final thoughts

Social media introduce substantial and pervasive changes to communication between organizations, communities, and individuals. This presents an enormous challenge for firms, as many established management methods are ill-suited to deal with customers who no longer want to be talked at; instead, customers want firms to listen, appropriately engage, and respond. Firms interested in getting serious about social media will find a useful tool in the honeycomb framework. By analyzing the seven building blocks—identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, and groups—firms can monitor and understand how so-

cial media activities vary in terms of their function and impact, so as to develop a congruent social media strategy based on the appropriate balance of building blocks for their community.

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