

Social media-related tensions on business-to-business markets

– Evidence from China

Abstract

Previous research has established the benefits of using social media in support of engagement in business-to-business settings. Yet the study of problems that arise from social media use in business relationships remains limited. Utilizing a dyadic perspective, this study addresses the gap by focusing on tensions in buyer-supplier relationships that arise from social media use. Findings present three dualistic tensions: active engagement anticipated by suppliers versus passive monitoring practices of the buyers; increased transparency through business-to-business social media versus invisibility; as well as tensions between local versus international business-to-business social media engagement practices. The study draws on 52 semi-structured in-depth interviews with senior managers who work in relevant positions at manufacturing firms based in China. By identifying characteristic tensions pertaining to business-to-business social media, this study aims to contribute to research on the ‘dark side’ of business relationships as well as to literature on business-to-business social media engagement.

Keywords:

Tensions; dualistic tensions; business-to-business social media; social media engagement; passivity; transparency

1. Introduction

While the number of social media (SM) investigations in business-to-business (B2B) contexts is growing, for instance, pertaining to the identification of new business opportunities and partner acquisition (Michaelidou, Siamagka, & Christodoulides, 2011), branding (Gupta, Balmer, & Low, 2015), and maintaining relationships with the help of SM (Wang, Pauleen, & Zhang, 2016; Ahearne, Jelinek, & Jones, 2007), further research efforts are needed, in particular, on how firms use SM to engage with each other, as managing SM in B2B contexts differs from the B2C domain (Iankova, Davies, Archer-Brown, Marder, & Yau, 2019). Despite the growing research interest, there is still a scarcity of studies on SM in B2B settings, especially pertaining to approaches that capture the challenges and struggles firms in business markets face when it comes to creating engagement through SM (Pansari & Kumar, 2017). There is pressure on B2B firms to catch up with the SM activities of their B2C counterparts and they would need more guidance on the specific issues they can expect and how they could handle them. Besides the benefits of SM for business engagement, strategizing with SM in B2B settings is rife with tensions. To overcome this limitation, this study focuses on B2B engagement through SM activities. Instead of concentrating on the benefits of using SM to support B2B engagement, it sheds light on the emergence of tensions and we seek a better understanding of the ‘dark side’ pertaining to tensions that can complement the more advanced knowledge about the ‘bright side’ of B2B SM use.

Addressing the ‘dark side’ of SM use in B2B contexts requires appropriate theoretical lenses. Therefore, the study draws on theoretical discussions on tensions (Quinton & Wilson, 2016; Putnam, Fairhurst, & Banghart, 2016). We are particularly interested in the dualistic tensions that occur due to simultaneously existing, contradictory, and interdependent aims (Smith & Tracey, 2016). The complexity of tensions increases when multiple parties and different approaches to business relationships are involved in the business interaction (Pressey & Vanharanta, 2016), including transactional and relational connections (Quinton & Wilson, 2016). There is an increasing research interest in tensions in the B2B domain (Chowdhury, Gruber, & Zolkiewski, 2016; Fang, Chang, & Peng, 2011; Pressey & Vanharanta, 2016; Tura, Hanski, Ahola, Ståhle, Piiparinen, & Valkokari, 2019). Several tensions have been identified predominately in organizational studies, for instance, with focus on the strains between exploration versus exploitation (Farjoun, 2010; Bledow, Frese, Anderson, Erez, & Farr, 2009), firms’ mission versus their social responsibility obligations (Besharov & Smith, 2014), and emergent versus designed organizational structures (Garud, Jain, & Tuertscher, 2008). Tensions have been studied in various B2B settings; however, B2B SM has been under-researched despite its growing managerial relevance. A pioneer study that provides some hints in this regard is Quinton and Wilson’s (2016) work; they draw attention to strains between relational versus transactional exchanges, emergent versus strategic SM network development, the pace of SM network formation versus the development of trust in business relationships, and the notions of sharing and reciprocity versus seeking competitive advantage. While the authors highlight tensions relevant for B2B SM based on literature, their empirical investigation focuses primarily on the ‘bright side’ such as new partner acquisition through SM (Quinton & Wilson, 2016). This study aims to contribute to filling this gap by identifying dualistic tensions of SM usage in B2B engagement. The research questions that we are exploring

are as follows: How do tensions arise through SM engagement in B2B contexts? Which tensions arise through B2B SM engagement?

This paper contributes to the in-depth understanding of SM use in B2B organizations. Specifically, three dualistic tensions have been identified: tension between desired active engagement versus passive monitoring practices; increased transparency versus invisibility due to B2B SM presence; as well as tensions between local versus international B2B SM engagement practices. Drawing on the identification of dualistic tensions in B2B SM, the study offers a set of propositions for future research and extends Quinton and Wilson's (2016) framework on B2B SM networks with three dualistic tensions. Finally, this study yields insightful practical implications to organizations on how to manage dualistic tensions as part of their B2B SM strategies.

The study is organized as follows: section two provides a literature review on B2B SM, SM engagement, B2B tensions, and dualities in the study of tension; section three describes the methodology; section four illustrates the analysis and findings; and the final sections provide discussions, conclusions, and directions for future studies.

2. Literature Review

2.1 B2B SM

SM enhances business relationships. Despite the significance attributed to face-to-face interaction, the rise of digital technology for interpersonal communications in business-to-business contexts has been recognized since the early 2000s (e.g., Leek, Turnbull, & Naude, 2003). Andzulis, Panagopoulos, and Rapp (2012, p. 308) describe SM as “the technological component of the communication, transaction and relationship building functions of a business which leverages the network” and “prospects to promote value co-creation”. B2B SM refers to the internet-based applications that enable the creation and sharing of user generated contents in business relationships (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) and the “digital communication platforms and services that allow parties to connect with one another, to share information and engage in dialogue” (Leek, Canning, & Houghton, 2016, p. 25). In the past two decades, SM marketing has transformed from dyadic, limited communication processes to interactive SM platforms. In B2B settings, SM is typically used in support of two-way communications, the maintenance of personal relationships, as well as networking among business parties (Iankova et al., 2019; Karampela, Lacka, & McLean, 2020).

SM can be used as a tool to attract new partners (Michaelidou et al., 2011), for example, to acquire customers (Lacoste, 2016). As part of this effort, SM provides the opportunity to identify prospective partners in the business network (Shih, 2009; Guesalaga, 2016). Also, if managed appropriately, it can strengthen existing relationships (Leek et al., 2003), for instance, by displaying valuable content for partners (Wang et al., 2016). SM provides an appropriate platform for increasing both functional and emotional appeal (Swani, Milne, Brown, Assaf, & Donthu, 2017), not only for close partners but also among weaker ties that characteristically comprise more than two-thirds of managers' connections on SM (Quinton & Wilson, 2016). Through increasing the speed of information flow, SM plays a pivotal role in the generation of Word of Mouth (Trusov, Bucklin, & Pauwels, 2009). B2B

firms are typically more concerned about the risks of using SM than their consumer-focused counterparts (Iankova et al., 2019), and thus the rate of SM adoption has been considerably slower for B2B organizations (Michaelidou et al., 2011; Siamagka, Christodoulides, Michaelidou, & Valvi, 2015).

There is a conspicuous network aspect to SM use in B2B settings. Ammirato, Felicetti, Della Gala, Aramo-Immonen, Jussila, and Kärkkäinen (2019) raise attention to the fact that SM increases both vertical and horizontal communications in buyer-supplier relationships, intensifies knowledge transfer, and enhances collaboration that is especially helpful among geographically dispersed firms; these authors, however, also highlight that there is still a lack of understanding of which SM opens up possibilities for firms in business markets. In relation to the potential of SM, Agnihotri, Dingus, Hu, and Krush (2016) emphasize SM's role in strengthening collaboration networks: when managers on the customer side communicate with the supplier via SM, they can expect greater responsiveness; this increases expectations on the customer side and thus suppliers should mitigate SM-related risks in order to maintain and grow their customer base. Besides certain risks, for example, misinterpretation possibilities in networks, potential time-wasting, and security risks (Simula, Töllinen, & Karjaluoto, 2013), the main reasons that discourage B2B firms from using SM are that they are unable to measure the benefits of SM for their business (Jussila, Kärkkäinen, & Aramo-Immonen, 2014), and that without suitable benchmarks from similar cases, they often struggle to adopt new mental models and practices required for the B2B use of SM (Jussila, Kärkkäinen, & Leino, 2012).

Taken together, these lines of research shed light on the adoption of SM in the B2B context by emphasizing its benefits, drawbacks, and barriers. A literature summary of some relevant B2B SM work is presented in Table 1. Yet, the studies of SM from the tension perspectives remain limited, which will be elaborated in the latter sessions.

Table 1. Some key sources on SM in B2B marketing

Authors (s)	Focus	Method	Pros & cons of B2B SM		Issues/Barriers	Dualistic tension
			Pros	Cons		
Karampela et al., 2020	B2B brand relationship strength: commitment, intimacy, satisfaction, and partner quality	200 survey respondents who worked in sectors ranging from professional services to logistics and agriculture	Relationship strength between a supplier's brand and a customer, namely, intimacy, commitment, satisfaction, and partner quality	N/A	N/A	N/A
Ammirato et al., 2019	Knowledge management in B2B setting	Surveys of 125 companies in Federation of Finnish Technology Industries	Improve knowledge creation dimension	N/A	Not many efforts would be invested in supporting the adoption of social media	N/A
Iankova et al., 2019	Perception of social media marketing effectiveness	449 responses of an exploratory panel-based survey in USA or UK	Acquisition Orientated usage, which includes branding and awareness raising type activities	B2B organizational members perceive social media to have a lower overall effectiveness as a channel and identify it as less important for relationship-oriented usage than other business models	The effectiveness of social media is perceived to be low as it is not beneficial for the relationship-oriented usage	N/A
Nunan et al., 2018	B2B sales process	A commentary on Agnihotri et al. (2016) paper	Make initial contact with a lead, maintain the relationship or to ensure a more transactional sharing of information within an ongoing sales process	Measuring social media using traditional marketing metrics creates the risk of focusing on short-term benefits without considering issues of long-term value creation for customers; the spread of misinformation and "fake news", identity theft, malware, and the growing threat of corporate espionage	N/A	Introduce the need for recognizing the tensions in B2B SM and the control difficulty of managing SM over the decentralized and organic flow of information that characterizes SM
Salo, 2017	Review of social media research in the industrial marketing field	Review paper	Business relationships and customer acquisition specific objectives; business outcomes (e.g., brand awareness, WOM, information sharing)	Ethics	N/A	N/A
Swani et al., 2017	Understanding of the relationship between Facebook social media content and popularity metrics (i.e. likes and comments volume)	Content analysis of 1498 unique company wall posts from 214 Facebook brand pages	Building relationships; viewers of B2B posts tend to be highly involved and rely on information search to manage their high-risk situations	Hard sell messages appear to have limited value	N/A	N/A
Agnihotri et al., 2016	The impact of a salesperson's use of social media on customer satisfaction and salesperson responsiveness	Surveys on 111 sales professionals involved in B2B industrial selling	Salespeople will value information exchange with their buyers; offers great possibilities for salespeople to enhance their overall information communication with customers	N/A	N/A	N/A
Laeka & Chong, 2016	Adoption and use of social media by B2B marketing profession	Surveys on 181 marketing executives in B2B companies in China	Learnability, efficiency, memorability, memorability attributes, hedonic value	N/A	N/A	N/A
Mehmet & Clarke, 2016	Identification, categorization and analysis of meanings generated by B2B social media exchanges in campaign discussions	A Fairtrade Australia B2B case study	Connect stakeholders together to create a unified image; allow customers to connect with the company, promoting the nature of the trading system and witnessing the benefits the B2B relationships have created	Allow people to challenge and contradict the company's primary message or objective	N/A	N/A

Quinton & Wilson, 2016	Building networks and relationships which lead to new business (tensions, network development, ties, and relationship development)	554 LinkedIn group interactions and 12 interviews with professionals in the wine industry	Behaviors in SM (trust, sharing, reciprocity, altruism), network creation opportunities, relationships creating value, business performance enhancement	N/A	N/A	Identify four tensions between SM networking practice and business relationship development
Wang et al., 2016	SMEs' performance in B2B communication and their business outcomes	5 case studies based on face-to-face interviews with the senior managers/owners of SME	Velocity, symbol sets, parallelism, rehearsability, and reprocessability	Lack of security features	N/A	N/A
Siamagka et al., 2015	Social media adoption	Survey of 105 senior marketing executives in the organizations in the UK	Enhanced competitiveness, cost-effectiveness, customer engagement/relationship building potential, business exposure and real-time feedback	Cost and uncertainty about the benefits of social media; consideration of reputational risks and legal issues	Lack of staff knowledge/training, senior managers' lack of support, and reluctance to lose control of the brand	N/A
Jussila et al., 2014	Social media use cases, opportunities, and challenges	Survey of 125 business-to-business companies in the Finnish technology industry sector	Employer branding and recruitment, general communication, sales support, project communication, finding out customer needs, improving the efficiency of project work, marketing	Failures leading to customer dissatisfaction or the leakage of confidential information to external organizational parties	N/A	N/A
Simula et al., 2013	Crowdsourcing as innovation processes and value co-creation	Survey data from industrial firms (N=145), and three managers' interviews from large Finnish industrial B2B firms	Enable flexible customer-seller interaction	Not for evoking ideas or for innovation co-creation among people outside the organization	Organization culture and resource constrain	N/A
Jussila et al., 2012	Facilitating customer interaction in the innovation process	Survey of 122 Finnish decision makers from companies with more than 50 employees	Offer very novel and innovative ways to deepen and widen the B2B-related customer interaction, for the sharing of customer-related information, as well as for the resultingly created new customer information and knowledge.	The lack of understanding with regard to the possibilities of social media in innovation, the difficulties of assessing the financial gains from social media, the difficulties in adopting new mental models and practices needed for the adoption, as well as the lack of evidence from similar cases using social media in innovation	The knowledge of relationship between social media and innovation and financial performance is low; limited experiences of similar successful adoption cases of social media	N/A
Michaelidou et al., 2011	Usage, perceived barriers, and the measurement of effectiveness of Social Network Sites as a marketing tool	Survey of 102 marketing directors or general directors of B2B SMEs	Attracting new customers and cultivating customer relationships, communicating their brands online by capitalizing on SNS' potential to reach wide audiences	N/A	Lack of staff familiarity and technical skills	N/A
Leek et al., 2003	Using the media most suited for a particular communication task	Non-participant observation (using Tweet Archivist Desktop tweets)	Twitter can be used both on its own and in conjunction with other media, thus influencing richness criteria and consequently suitability for performing different tasks (information sharing, problem solving, and PR)	The interaction elicited from Twitter activity was low	N/A	N/A
This study	This study focuses on exploring the tensions that emerge from the B2B SM from the duality perspective.	Semi-structured in-depth interview with 52 managers who have relevant experience in the use of B2B SM	There is a scarcity of research examining B2B SM engagement, especially its challenges. Our study offers contributions to the B2B marketing scholarship – especially regarding engagement and B2B tensions literature – by identifying different dualistic tensions that occur when the B2B firms utilize SM.			

2.2 SM engagement in business markets

SM, as a conduit to connect a company with current and potential partners, provides a powerful tool to support engagement activities. SM is considered to be a value-adding channel that strengthens the flow of information exchange and connectivity and decreases issues that derive from time shortages and the lack of geographical proximity (Lea, Wu, Maguluru, & Nichols, 2006). Brodie, Hollebeek, Juric, and Ilic (2011) define engagement as the “psychological state that occurs by virtue of interactive, co-creative customer experiences with a focal agent/object (e.g. a brand) in focal service relationships” (p. 260). B2B engagement through platforms can take various forms, such as orchestrating, facilitating and stimulating (Blasco-Arcas, Alexander, Sörhammar, Jonas, Raithel, & Chen, 2020). Facilitating (unplanned interactions) and stimulating (planned interventions by the platform owner that creates engagement between specific actors on or outside the platform) are especially for B2B engagement through SM platforms because they can refer to typically unplanned SM activities (liking, sharing, commenting) and the planned sharing of SM content, respectively. Van Doorn, Lemon, Mittal, Nass, Pick, Pirner, and Verhoef (2010) and Hallock, Roggeveen, and Crittenden (2019) classify engagement into interest-based and relationship-based engagement – SM influences both types of engagement through digitally enhanced connectedness, network effects, dynamic communication patterns, and information exchange. The SM engagement in B2B relationships enables the combination of synchronous and asynchronous interactions, both between the dyad and at a network level (Nunan, Sibai, Schivinski, & Christodoulides, 2018). Not all SM activities fall under the umbrella of engagement; for instance, there are some reputation-focused SM activities that may not directly support engagement (Ashley & Tuten, 2015), yet engagement activities through SM represent a vital part of the firm’s SM presence and overall engagement efforts with business partners. SM engagement facilitates the cultural transition from advocating to helping and problem-solving among partners. Swani, Brown, and Milne (2014) recognize that SM presence could be accentuated and amplified through e-WOM created through engagement activities. Engaging in SM platforms with business clients and prospective partners create awareness and may generate referrals later on (Michaelidou et al., 2011). SM engagement improves coordination and collaboration among multiple stakeholders (Chan, Wang, Lacka, & Zhang, 2016; Wamba, Edwards, & Akter, 2019) that can be harnessed through synchronizing activities among multiple network partners (Drummond, O’Toole, & McGrath, 2020).

A controversy is that unlike in the case of in-person interaction, the control of information generated on SM platforms is partly with SM companies that are often unavailable to marketers (Nunan et al., 2018). B2B marketers are yet to improve their strategies and skills regarding creating engagement through SM (Simmons, Simmons, Ammeter, & Ghosh, 2010; Diba, Vella, & Abratt, 2019). Their ongoing SM engagement challenges include relationship building (Michaelidou et al., 2011), managing SM’s influence on B2B branding (Gupta et al., 2015), and turning SM engagement efforts into sales (Andzulis et al., 2012). The development of SM has challenged B2B marketers by creating a space in which business partners may interact synchronously at high speed (Eid, Abdelmoety, & Agag, 2019), and due to this time pressure companies now have less control over the content of this interaction that may come with tensions. Insights into issues of engagement strategies are sparse in literature (Chirumalla, Oghazi, & Parida, 2018; Jussila et al., 2014). This study responds to calls for research on SM engagement in B2B settings (Pansari &

Kumar, 2017), focusing on the engagement through SM and exploring related dualistic tensions.

2.3 B2B tensions

Tensions are pervasive and – at least to some extent – unavoidable in business networks of interdependent actors (Cadotte & Stern, 1979) and digitally enhanced business networks. The use of SM in B2B settings is no exception to this. The problem with tensions is that they have the capacity to undermine relationship building (Fang et al., 2011), harm relational intimacy (Wuyts & Geyskens, 2005), and change the relationship atmosphere (Abrahamsen, Henneberg, & Naudé, 2012). Also, tensions can trigger withdrawal, frustration, and disappointment (Andersen & Kumar, 2006), contribute to the emotional state of inertia (Gilliland, 2004), and incite distrust (Johnsen & Lacoste, 2016) – none of which can be regarded as favorable relational outcomes.

There are tensions, however, that can have a positive impact, such as creative tension (Autio, 2005) that supports innovation and learning (Elkjaer, 2004). Pressey and Vanharanta (2016) categorize tensions into three groups: structural, psychological, and behavioral tensions. Structural tensions refer to problems that derive from control mechanisms and governance in networks. Psychological (or emotional) tensions are based on attitudes of actors towards one another, for instance, as a result of mistrust. Lastly, behavioral tensions relate to the way of working and communications within the network. Unlike other types of tensions that remain passive, this third group of behavioral tensions are intertwined with actions.

Further B2B contexts where tensions are discussed is the management of service innovation activities that may result in value appropriation from other actors – if related tensions are left unmanaged, they can undermine innovation efforts and value creation (Burton, Story, Zolkiewski, Raddats, Baines, & Medway, 2016). Tensions can spread in business networks in a way that they hinder effective collaborations and in turn, the achievement of commonly agreed outcomes (Tóth, Peters, Pressey, & Johnston, 2018). The lack of transparency and information asymmetry proved to be important sources of tensions in business networks (Chowdhury et al., 2016). To secure the interests of both product and service functions, firms need to balance product and service-related assets, and tensions between the two are common, especially pertaining to the unlearning of certain routines (Gebauer & Friedli, 2005; Tronvoll, Sklyar, Sörhammar, & Kowalkowski, 2020). Tensions also arise when suppliers and customers co-develop innovative solutions, where customers provide the requisite knowledge (Oinonen, Ritala, Jalkala, & Blomqvist, 2018).

2.4 Dualities in the study of tensions

Duality refers to the interdependence of the opposites in a both/and relationship that is not mutually exclusive (Putnam et al., 2016), meaning that the opposites seem to be contradictory, but are “ostensibly” in nature. Thus, the oppositional pairs are not necessarily antithetical or antagonistic (Putnam et al., 2016), but they exist within a unified whole (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 387). Duality is an inherent part of the paradox theory

(Ashforth & Reingen, 2014). It indicates that the poles are “ostensibly” contradictory, or “opposites that exist within a unified whole” (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 387).

There are some characteristics of duality, such as: dualities are associated with tension; the oppositional poles are presented simultaneously; each pole is defined, at least, partially, as part of the other; and the poles are complementary (Ashforth & Reingen, 2014). Duality has been studied in management literature, for instance, duality-type decision making (Karhu & Ritala, 2020); managing the functionality and the dysfunctionality in the organizational dynamics (Ashforth & Reingen, 2014); and the managerial model and process in managing exploration and exploitation (Smith & Tushman, 2005). However, there is limited research that utilizes the dualistic perspectives in exploring the tensions in the SM context.

Among other factors, aligning actors’ contradictory aims and different approaches to communications (Johnston & Pongatchat, 2008) and competing goal attainments (Gaski, 1984) can engender tensions. Furthermore, tension often arises regarding the oppositional interests of responding to customer requirements versus managing supplier resources (Harrison & Kjellberg, 2010) and different strategic orientations (Merrilees, Rundle-Thiele, & Lye, 2011). As these examples and the ambidexterity perspective on B2B relationships demonstrates (Yang, Fang, Fang, & Chou, 2014; Menguc & Auh, 2008), duality is an underlying characteristic of various tensions.

Salo (2017) provides a review of research on SM in B2B settings and describes how SM provides opportunity for information sharing about collaborations that can create a source of tensions in competitive situations. At the same time, SM amplifies reach, relationship formation, and the maintenance of established relationships, including when these relationships are on the back burner. The counterintuitive situation between competition and cooperation highlighted by Salo (2017) is profoundly dualistic and is rooted in the cooptation paradox that is produced by the simultaneity in competition and collaboration between firms (Bengtsson & Kock, 2014; Raza-Ullah, Bengtsson, & Kock, 2014; Gnyawali, Madhavan, He, & Bengtsson, 2016). The dualistic nature of certain SM tensions is of particular interest for this study.

Schad, Lewis, and Smith (2018) delineate that companies are increasingly encountering more contradictory goals, e.g., having pluralist objectives in the firm, and suffering from more challenging and competing environments, and multiple stakeholders’ interests and preferences. Hence, a duality approach provides a solid avenue to understand these confrontations and to facilitate the understanding of how firms could respond to the conflicting, yet complementary demands. Specifically, due to the contradictory nature, the underlying assumption of the two oppositional poles will incite tensions, and these tensions will exist over time (Smith & Lewis, 2011), and are mutually exclusive and necessarily antithetical (Cameron & Quinn, 1988). Choosing between oppositional poles has proved to be challenging (Putnam et al., 2016). These dynamics are outlined in the paradox theory. For instance, the cooperation-competition duality is materialized as the cooptation paradox (Raza-Ullah et al., 2014), which has been conceptualized through the B2B application of the paradox theory. Thus, we aim to capture the dualistic nature of some tensions relevant for SM engagement in B2B contexts – the notion of duality is important for the theoretical grounding of this study.

3. Methodology

Given the explorative nature of the research questions, a qualitative approach drawing on in-depth interviews with senior managers has been adopted in this study. The rationale of using this approach is that firstly, it enables a better understanding of the yet under-researched phenomenon of B2B tensions pertaining to SM use, as it leaves space for participants to ‘tell their stories’ (Drummond, McGrath, & O’Toole, 2018; Baxter & Jack, 2008). Furthermore, it provides the researchers the opportunity to enrich the comprehension and appreciation of the research arena (Beverland & Lindgreen, 2010), for instance, by allowing a wider contextual understanding that includes the consideration of non-verbal cues, emphases, and pauses held by the interviewees. The paradoxical tensions outlined in paradox theory (Smith & Lewis, 2011) served as a sorting mechanism for the empirical investigation. Without the intention to contribute to the paradox theory itself, we applied its embedded duality aspect for the study of tensions. As pointed out by Smith, Erez, Jarvenpaa, Lewis, and Tracey (2017) duality depicts oppositional elements as conceptually distinct and contradictory, yet also mutually enabling. Dualities incorporate an understanding of the underlying elements, mechanisms, and dynamics of coexisting contradictory elements in change, and stability and duality encourage a broader conceptualization of opposing elements.

3.1 Data collection approach

Data were collected from Chinese B2B manufacturing firms. China is the world’s largest SM market (Thomala, 2020). As of April 2020, among the Top 10 most popular social networks worldwide, five are Chinese-based social networks (Clement, 2020). There is a growing number of users utilizing SM in China, and more interestingly, there is a growth in marketing professionals and companies adopting SM and presenting on SM platforms (Lacka & Chong, 2016). Companies from the supplier side were first identified via a professional market research company that the university of the lead author had a network with. Senior managers in these companies were approached via email to ensure their willingness to participate in this research. We then selected managers who are either in charge of marketing or SM activities directly, or who hold senior management positions who have had responsibility for overseeing companies’ marketing and SM activities for at least three years to make sure they possess the SM management capabilities to answer our interview questions. Altogether, sixteen B2B companies were selected. Interviews typically lasted for approximately 60 minutes each. After interviews on the buyers’ side, buyers of the interviewed suppliers were contacted and were included in the research in order to understand their insights of the activities and the tensions of the SM application. Marketing managers as well as the senior managers who have relevant experience in selecting and managing suppliers were approached. Semi-structured interviews with suppliers lasted for an average of 70 minutes each. In order to ensure the triangulation and consistency of data, two managers from each supplying and buyer company were interviewed; we made structured observations about firms’ SM platforms and posts for triangulation purposes. In the end, 52 interviews were conducted with 32 managers from

the supplier-side and with 20 managers from the buyer-side. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and resulted in a total of 426 pages of transcription.

3.2 Company selection

All firms were medium to large size, based on the minimum employee number threshold of 100, following the suggestions of Alfaro & Tribó (2013). The rationale for approaching larger firms was that they have more resources to invest in SM at a professional / organizational level (Matthews, MacCarthy, & Braziotis, 2017), whereas for smaller firms the personal and organizational SM use appear to be more intertwined and more ad hoc. From a research perspective both larger and smaller firms are relevant but due to their special characteristics and decision-making practices, they are better studied within their own contexts. Detailed company information, including industry, employee numbers, and interviewees' positions are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Overview of interviews

Co.	Industry	Org. Size (Employees)	Position	Experience in current position (years)	Co.	Industry	Org. Size (Employees)	Position	Experience in current position (years)
S1	Water-pumping	500	1 Marketing Manager 2 Account Director	4 3					
S2	Office carpentry	300	1 General Manager of Marketing 2 Vice-president	6 11	B6	Electrotechnology	35,000	1 Supply Chain Manager 2 Procurement Manager	7 9
S3	Security systems	800	1 Marketing Director 2 Vice-president	5 11					
S4	Electrical appliances	150	1 Sales Director 2 Vice-president	8 14					
S5	Kitchen, bedroom & bathroom (KBB) installation	2,000	1 Marketing Director 2 Director of E-Commerce Services	16 5	B5	Cabinet making	2,000	1 Supply Chain Manager 2 Procurement Director	4 7
S6	Car propulsion systems & aftermarket solutions	1,300	1 Marketing Manager 2 Public Relation Manager	4 7	B4	Car industry	2,000	1 Supply Chain Manager 2 Procurement Manager	8 6
S7	Car industry	12,000	1 Marketing Director 2 VIP Clients Director	7 5					
S8	Semiconductor device	3,000	1 Marketing Manager 2 PR Manager	5 3					
S9	Electric car manufacturing	1,600	1 Marketing Manager 2 Vice-president	6 10					
S10	Private security	34,000	1 Marketing Director 2 Relation Manager	6 6	B2	Electrical appliances	2,000	1 Procurement Manager 2 Operations Manager	4.5 6
S11	Lift and escalator	2,000	1 Consumer Director 2 Marketing Manager	11 9	B8	Architecture	1,000	1 Operations Manager 2 Procurement Director	7 6
S12	Carpentry	500	1 Marketing Director 2 Channel Director	4 5	B7	Architecture	500	1 Procurement Manager 2 Operational Director	6 3
S13	Audio products	1,000	1 Marketing Director 2 Consumer Director	6 4	B9	Information technology	1,500	1 Procurement Manager 2 Procurement Manager for Supply Chain	4 3
S14	Pumping solutions (oil & gas)	400	1 General Manager 2 Marketing Manager	16 6	B3	Electricity generation	29,000	1 Operations Manager 2 Procurement Manager	6.5 9
S15	Architecture	10,000	1 Marketing Director 2 Customer Director	5 4	B1	Garment	200	1 Procurement Manager 2 Operations Manager	4 4.5
S16	Car parts manufacturing	3,000	1 Senior Director of Marketing 2 General Manager of Customer and Marketing Department	6 9	B10	Medical devices	800	1 Procurement Manager 2 Operations Manager	7 3

Note: Co. = company; S = supplier; B = buyer; Org. Size = Organization Size (No. of employees).

In the text M1 refers to the first manager and M2 to the second manager per company. The empirical study draws on interviews conducted with managers regarding B2B SM activities, their perceptions, relevant strategies, and challenges. SM platforms that appeared throughout the interviews included Weibo (equivalent to Twitter), WeChat (equivalent to Facebook and WhatsApp), Zhihu (equivalent to Quora), and LinkedIn, with special regard to how companies engage with their business partners on these SM platforms. The reasons for using these SM platforms were that their international equivalents, e.g., Facebook and Twitter, were found to identify potential customers and partners, build professional relationships (Swani et al., 2014; Schultz, Schwepker, & Good, 2012), and to establish effective interactions between companies (Leek et al., 2016). Thus, this study further explores the SM engagement activities of selected Chinese firms. The interviews included questions about: how SM is used at the focal firm; how they see the role of SM as a tool to engage with their organizational partners (buyers or suppliers); how SM influences buyer-supplier relationships, if at all; and any cases where SM discouraged the further development of relationships. Whenever the issue of tensions arose, we aimed to ask about further details by using laddering: additional enquiries helped the exploration of managers' personal meanings, struggles, and the context (Van Rekom, Jacobs, Verlegh, & Podnar, 2006).

3.3 Data Analysis

Two authors in the co-authorship team worked as the coders for this research as they have extensive knowledge in B2B SM, dualistic tension, and qualitative research techniques. We followed the Gibbs's (2002) framework to analyze data – creating open coding (discussion of the major activities, for instance, about SM activities and their impact), axial coding (patterns and themes of the activities, for example, contradictory elements existed in SM activities influencing the supplier-buyer relationship), and selective coding (the themes linking to the underpinning theory, for example, using the duality lenses of the paradox theory to explore tensions). We used NVivo 12 to analyze our data, where parent / child nodes as well as the word frequency were generated to support the coding procedures. All the child and parent nodes were analyzed independently by the coders. They were then cross-validated, and codes and themes were discussed on an iterative basis. Inter-coder differences were addressed via multiple discussions in the co-authorship team. Agreement has been reached by resolving the initial minor differences to ensure the inter-coder reliability, following Hayes and Krippendorff's approach (2007). Apart from checking the codes and themes from the supplier-side and the buyer-side separately, the research team also compared the two interviews that were conducted in the same company for the within-case analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994), and only minor rather than substantial differences were identified between the views of the managers at the same firms (for instance, some were more SM savvy than others).

4. Analysis and findings

In this section, first we share information about some overarching patterns identified across different companies (such the increasing role of SM, bonding, and SM as a precarious source of financial rewards), and then we present three dualistic tensions relevant for SM engagement: active engagement versus passive monitoring, increased transparency versus invisibility, and local versus international practices in SM engagement.

Regarding B2B SM engagement, there is a pattern of the increasing importance of SM in business and daily life: *“Social media has been deeply integrated into people’s lives; a high number of people got used to using social media to obtain knowledge, read news, and collect information”* (S16, M1). Bonding with partners through SM engagement arose as an important motivation: *“The key advantage of social media is that we could build bonding with customers and suppliers through the sharing and interaction process”* (S13, M2). This has also been confirmed on the buyers’ side. *“Social media can help us build relationship with suppliers. This is especially true when we are not familiar with the supplier and try to find supplier’s information. We can find related information or news on social media and we can even know their organizational structure and product information”* (B1, M1). Overall, SM engagement proved to be important, at least indirectly, for sales generation and for various non-financial reasons, while most financial hopes associated with SM remained unfulfilled. On the supplier side, there appeared to be an implicit expectation towards direct financial gains following SM investments through the fact that engagement facilitated by SM directly evolves into purchase. This wish, however, appears to remain so far unfulfilled in B2B settings, leaving suppliers disappointed. Some of them shared a firm belief that at least in the long run, SM engagement will increase financial contributions (S16, M2, S11, M1), yet it was relatively unclear how (S14, M2). In contrast, some managers were entirely disillusioned about the financial contributions of SM in a B2B context, especially when compared to consumer facing operations: *“Social media can be used to increase sales volume in business-to-consumer contexts but it is impossible to do so in our [B2B focused] industry”* (S14, M1).

4.1 Active engagement versus passive monitoring

SM has a solid role in encouraging B2B engagement, especially as it is seen from the supplier’s perspective: *“Social media is a very good tool ...to attract clients ...and then to create Word of Mouth”* (S5, M2). However, while most suppliers would have wished for more active engagement with their buyers and other stakeholders through SM, the level of activity fell below their expectations. Although suppliers welcome those few buyers who do show their support by giving likes, providing some comments, and further sharing some content, the nature of engagement they experience in B2B SM interaction shows patterns of passivity. Suppliers still see the benefits of using SM, for instance, deriving from the ‘stickiness’ of some SM content: *“We use social media to maintain partnerships with them [partners], because social media has stickiness”* (S15, M1); *“Social media can help us maintain relationships with some of our customers, mainly because of the stickiness of social media. Everyone uses social media every day and even if they will not spend a lot of time on it, they will still receive a lot of information”* (S14, M1); *“The advantage of social media that it has some certain interactivity and stickiness”* (S3, M2). Furthermore, monitoring the SM activities of business partners was deemed to have various benefits, for instance, suppliers reported that they can improve innovativeness through SM usage. For example, feedback collected through monitoring SM inputs from clients helped improve technological innovation, as more was learned about clients’ needs through observing conversations on SM (B7, M2). Also, conversations on SM helped incremental innovation of products in mature markets (B10, M1), and SM also served as a platform for communicating innovative capabilities of the firm (B2, M1). Buyers also reported that they observed whether the suppliers monitor the feedback/comments on their SM as *“companies will try to control and delete those negative feedback. If a supplier completely ignores such negative information or evaluation on social media, this means the company does not care about his reputation. Hence, for such suppliers, we are unwilling to cooperate with”* (B1, M1).

Some suppliers balanced the relatively low interaction with their buyers on SM with some increased engagement of a wider group of organizational stakeholders, for instance, *“We also use social media to communicate with different organizations, such as academic research units, scientific research institutions, government departments, professors, experts, engineers, and so on. In fact, we found that social media is a very good tool for communication and interaction with them”* (S8, M1).

There appears to be a common pattern that buyers use SM for gathering background information about suppliers. For instance, one of the managers emphasized: *“We will use social media to investigate some company background information. I don’t think it plays another role”* (B5, M1). Passivity was perceived as the norm when buyers were asked about engagement through SM: *“We just gather some information occasionally [from SM], which is a passive process, (...) I don’t think their [suppliers’] social media is attractive or sticky”* (B3, M2). Furthermore, some managers may be discouraged by their organizational cultures that suggest SM usage is primarily for entertainment and thus SM usage at the company implies prioritizing other things than work: *“We don’t have any time to surf on social media. If you always read the information with your phone, your colleagues will think you are having entertainment. Hence, we don’t use the phone a lot during the working time”* (B6, M1). As the quote demonstrates, actively engaging with suppliers’ SM seemed much less usual practice compared to paying attention and reacting to buyers’ SM: *“I will give a ‘like’ for my customers and less likely to give ‘like’ for our suppliers”* (B2, M1).

Active engagement on the supplier side was connected to establishing and further strengthening trust, and suppliers were fairly positive about the trust building power of SM: *“Trust is built through accumulation. The most important characteristic of social media is continuity. We can publish our articles on a continuous basis. We can publish regularly on our social media, attend several exhibitions, and attend several large press conferences. Increased media exposure through these experiences will be helpful. In particular, there are some important design exhibitions. Such exposures will increase the trust from customers”* (S12, M1). Some suppliers were more reluctant and emphasized the time perspective of building trust: *“Trust could not be built quickly on social media. Trust is mutual and should be carefully managed for a long-term with our customers”* (S6, M1).

Buyers assigned less importance to the trust-building role of SM, yet it was still perceived as something positive: *“...if the supplier keeps sending information, and we have time to read them, I believe this can generate a positive attitude towards them and it can increase the trust in the supplier”* (B1, M1). Having no serious issues with SM, however, is an important aspect of supplier evaluations: *“As our company’s suppliers are long-term oriented, usually we don’t need to investigate their social media activities. So, it will not influence trust. (...) But it is true that they can’t have any negative information on social media, for example: no one complains about them online or talks about the low quality of their products”* (B2, M1). Overall, buyers were not eager to engage with suppliers actively through SM but avoiding negativity on SM was important to them.

4.2 Increased transparency versus invisibility

The network building power of SM is acknowledged across suppliers and buyers: *“I think one of the strongest aspect of social media is its network interactivity, it forms a social network”* (S5, M2); *“Social media will create a network to enhance the interaction between you and your partners”*

(B10, M1). However, the increased transparency through SM presence was perceived as ambiguous by both suppliers and buyers. Increased transparency refers to the amplified visibility of who is connected to whom, which companies work together, the activities they are engaged in, who is responsible for certain tasks such as purchasing within an organization, and the easier flow of Word-of-Mouth in networks. Some suppliers praised SM for the increased accessibility of contact details but noted potential operational risks due to SM interaction, for instance: *“Social media enables the transparency and openness of information. This means that the contact information – for instance, phone number of managers, email addresses and company addresses – is now available. This is really helpful for us to examine the strength, reputation, and awareness of partners. However, we cannot deny that social media can bring operational risks as well, for example, when the company is criticized on social media...”* (S13, M1). The increased transparency and risk were also reported on the buyer side, for instance, *“social media does expose a lot of things on social media to increase transparency and make the material traceable. You can see whom your customers are in contact with, what kind of interactions are on the web, you even can give people a compliment or forward the information. And for those forward information, we will think about why he forwards. So in such way, social media increase transparency”* (B2, M1). Indeed, some firms have experienced problems that derived from increased transparency through SM interaction: *“...we had a group purchase activity... but I won't tell you the details... some of the clients believed that some of our product descriptions were exaggerated, resulting in complaints from members of the purchase group. One of them wrote a long article published on social media. The article has attracted a large number of views and shares, which caused a negative impact on our brand. It took major effort to provide explanations. Through this event, our company has developed a deeper understanding of social media communications and began to pay attention to remove and manage negative comments from social media”* (S12, M1). This has been observed by the buyers as well. *“I think we can generate different conclusion if we hold different perspectives. [SM] is a bad thing if others can see our interaction with suppliers. However, it is good to see that our operation in the industry becomes more and more transparent.”* (B9, M1). Prompt replies and the removal of negative comments appear to be a way to reduce relational damage, yet firms are well-aware that bad news travels fast and thus they expressed concerns about potential consequences. One of the managers noted that although their competitor is *“very social [on SM]”*, this is *“a strength and a weakness”* at the same time, because if *“some clients cannot receive their products... they will have more comments on the Internet... these [comments] will spread fast...”* (S6, M2). As such, limited engagement through SM appeared to be the safer option to this firm. One of the managers (S4, M1) was concerned about having to keep irrelevant followers just for the sake of their SM posts to appear popular among stakeholders.

On the one hand, some buyers firmly believe that the privacy of business dealings should be maintained and anything that compromises this cannot be accepted. For instance, as one of the buyers emphasized: *“Many of the operations in our industry are not transparent, and these should be under-table. So, it is impossible for us to do a lot of socializing in our industry [including SM]”* (B2, M1). On the other hand, increased transparency was welcomed by others: *“Transparent operation is helpful to the whole industry. It will be difficult to do business in the industry where black box operation exists”* (B1, M2). Finally, other buyers see some benefits but warn about using SM with caution: *“Social media does add some transparency. You can see to whom your suppliers*

are talking online, what they're replying to, or what they've been doing lately, but it's a double-edged sword. The bad thing is that sometimes your competitor will attack you online [on SM], even if there's a minor problem, or not even a problem. You may not have a proper way to respond in such a situation. Therefore, I believe social media should be used carefully" (B4, M1).

4.3 Local versus international practices in SM engagement

Tensions between local and international practices in and beyond SM were present. Firms often have organizational partners at an international level (suppliers, buyers, and other collaborators), and depending on the relative importance of the partner, they may wish to align their B2B SM practices with them. One problem is that there is a scarcity of information about international differences in B2B SM practices, and even when the focal firm has an idea about how they could improve fit in terms of SM engagement with their international partners, they still need to appeal to their partners based locally. The spectrum between transactional and relational approaches came into the picture and it appears that SM is somewhat more important for deciding about the first transaction and less so in established relationships, especially when firms aim to align with international standards. As one of the buyers pointed out: “[SM] *makes some difference when you compare suppliers that you are not familiar with. However, this [SM] will not have impact at later stages of the exchange relationship. As an international company, we will not change the transaction process with a supplier*” (B6, M2).

This could be especially problematic when the expected intensity of SM activities is very different between the partner firms that are located in different countries. For instance, one of the buyers who works for a Sino-German joint venture, emphasized the German influence on the use of SM: *“Being a German company, the evaluation is very strict. ...social media is less developed in Germany and many Germans don't surf on social media. We are also less likely to rely on social media”* (B4, M1). While indeed SM use in Germany has some specificities (Schenk, 2019), the manager's point seems to be based on general perceptions. It is interesting, however, how perceptions about international SM practices influence SM interaction locally. Improving knowledge about B2B SM media practices at an international level appeared as an important gap to fulfill: *“If there is any better [SM] tool [for B2B contexts], I believe the way industry uses social media should be changed. For example, WeChat is not used in foreign countries, and even some countries dislike using voice messages on social media”* (B3, M2).

In addition, political tensions between two countries can have an indirect, negative impact on buyer-supplier relationships accelerated by SM as explained by one of the interviewees on the supplier side, given that their firm has headquarters in the country the political issue was associated with (S5, M1). Even when a SM problem started from the consumer side, it was felt at an inter-organizational level, given that the demand for the type of product they supply largely depends on the end consumers. Overall, the prioritization between local and international practices of SM engagement and where the focus of attention and control should be proved to be challenging.

4.4 Similarities and differences between buyer and supplier approaches

Suppliers described substantial pressure to increase their engagement with buyers through SM, sometimes with having their consumer-facing counterparts in mind. Buyers, on the contrary, considered suppliers' SM engagement efforts mostly unimportant. Some buyers especially disliked when suppliers were too active on SM. Another variation between suppliers' and buyers' approaches was that suppliers focused on creating engagement through SM, whereas buyers had the tendency to use SM as an additional information source for supplier evaluations.

Also, suppliers welcomed the increased transparency that comes with SM, whereas buyers appeared to have a preference to stick to their traditional purchasing channels and avoid SM interaction with suppliers. Both suppliers and buyers paid attention to avoid the creation of negative WoM through SM use, and SM engagement was rarely the focus of managing business relationships, but it appeared to attract increasing relevance, even in traditional industry settings.

5. Discussion

5.1 Proposition development

This study finds that the use of SM in B2B contexts, especially, for instance, for sharing and gathering information, is of increasing importance. SM is one of the channels firms envisage for these purposes, besides face-to-face interaction through personal selling, trade exhibitions, and workshops, which is aligned with the findings of Hollebeek (2019). Besides playing the role of one of the communication platforms, however, SM has the capacity to enhance in-person interaction, as some interviewed managers pointed out. In fact, managerial expectations arose, especially on the supplier side, that SM can be envisaged beyond information sharing and would support active engagement as well as promotion activities.

First, comparing the attempts to actively engage on the supplier side with the perceptions of the buyer side, it appears that buyers have a characteristically passive attitude towards SM. Nonetheless, SM is still relevant for them, but they tend to look at it as a monitoring device that adds to the evaluation of future and existing partners based on their SM activities or the lack thereof. These differences reflect on the challenges of B2B engagement in relation to facilitating and stimulating as explained by Blasco-Arcas et al. (2020). Some interviewees (typically buyers) shared the notion of 'stickiness', i.e. there may be a 'stickiness' of some partners' SM content, that causes partners to 'stick' with them, following the company on SM, and reading their published content on a regular basis as their updates were found interesting and useful. Stickiness supports customer retention. The phenomenon vaguely appears in other settings; for instance, Pelet, Ettis, and Cowart (2017) describe that satisfied customers are more likely to browse for further information on the firms' online interfaces and 'stick' with them. Our findings suggest that somewhat similar dynamics of stickiness are present in some buyer-supplier relationships when it comes to SM engagement.

The attempts for active SM engagement on the supplier side and the very limited action they can eventually trigger on the buyer side causes dualistic tensions, primarily on the supplier side, yet suppliers believe they should keep things going despite the experienced low engagement. Thus, supplier companies still actively engage in SM activities because they still hope for increased engagement and expect future benefits, such as attracting new clients, maintaining relationships, and creating positive WoM, despite buyers appearing to be passive on SM. The duality appears

between the suppliers' active approach and the buyers' passivity, where the suppliers still intend to accommodate the buyers' communication needs but wish to activate them.

P1: There appears to be a dualistic tension between the suppliers' intention to create active SM engagement (e.g., with active commenting, sharing, liking) and the buyers' more passive approach to SM use (e.g., monitoring and 'stickiness').

Secondly, the level of transparency in SM engagement matters, and buyers and suppliers appear to have different but co-existing approaches to this in their relationships. Research suggests that companies can benefit from B2B SM in terms of maintaining business relationships and building trust (Quinton & Wilson, 2016), initiating relationships with new clients (Guesalaga, 2016), and enhancing brand awareness (Töllinen, Järvinen, & Karjaluoto, 2012). There are deep-rooted misalignments between buyers and suppliers on how engaged they wish to manage the dyadic relationship, for instance, in the development of trust (Andersen & Kumar, 2006) and relational/transactional orientations (Pillai & Sharma, 2003) that can affect whether firms take a more active or passive approach. Recent research by Hollebeek (2019) further extends the benefits of B2B SM and proposes that SM enables business customer engagement, specifically the integration of business customer resources, as well as the effectiveness and efficiency of integration. There is empirical evidence in our study that managers indeed seek to identify points of contact via SM when developing buyer-seller relationships. This is partly enabled by the increased transparency of the network through SM that responds to challenges of multi-level networks that incorporate inter-personal and inter-organizational layers (Payne, Moore, Griffis, & Autry, 2011). While increased transparency may support the development of new personal links and inter-personal communication, it comes with some tensions: those buyers who prefer to follow their usual ways of communications and purchasing processes, find the existence of multiple communication channels daunting. This can be considered among the challenges that come with orchestration in B2B engagement (Blasco-Arcas et al., 2020).

While this study echoes the benefits of SM in engagement, findings suggest that over-using SM is problematic in B2B contexts, mainly because the buyers may perceive the supplier that intensely uses SM in their communication with them unprofessional. Furthermore, the buyers expressed concerns that if they interact with the suppliers directly and too often via SM, this may potentially jeopardize confidentiality, for instance, pertaining to product specification, new product development plans, and even the way the relationship is developed with the supplier. That is to say, one important dualistic tension pertaining to B2B SM appears between suppliers' efforts to utilize increased transparency in connecting and communicating with buyers, and the fact that buyers normally dislike this, for instance, they would avoid retweeting, liking, or commenting, as they do not want this action to be viewed by others, especially not by their competitors. In addition, the buyers still prefer following their established bidding and other purchasing processes without the involvement of SM. Thus, avoiding suppliers' enquiries via SM when it comes to purchasing, and concurrently aiming to be perceived as a transparent organization, causes dualistic tensions.

P2: There appears to be a tension between the suppliers' perceived benefits pertaining to increased transparency through SM (e.g., their increased ability to reach

out to the buyers' contact persons through SM engagement) **and the buyers' intention to maintain 'invisible'** (e.g., regarding purchasing procedures and practices).

Finally, while international aspects of SM engagement are yet relatively unexplored, it appears to be relevant beyond consumer settings and so the international specificities of B2B SM engagement deserve attention. Difficulties pertaining to international B2B communication differences are acknowledged in sales studies (for instance, Fock, Yim, & Rodriguez, 2010; Gu, Wang & Wang, 2019), literature on governance mechanisms (Burkert, Ivens, & Shan, 2012), and on managing innovation in networks (Inemek & Matthyssens, 2013). In consumer settings, Davvetas and Diamantopoulos (2018) show that global identity moderates the effect of buying decisions on the perceived justifiability of the decisions. Our findings indicate that global corporate identity influences B2B engagement via SM (along with the management of the transparency of purchasing processes on SM as well as the extent to which SM is incorporated in organizational partner selection), and the justification of choosing between SM engagement approaches. For instance, if international influences suggest that the use of SM is inappropriate for organizational partner selection practices, a firm with a stronger global corporate identity may be more lenient to comply with these presumed practices.

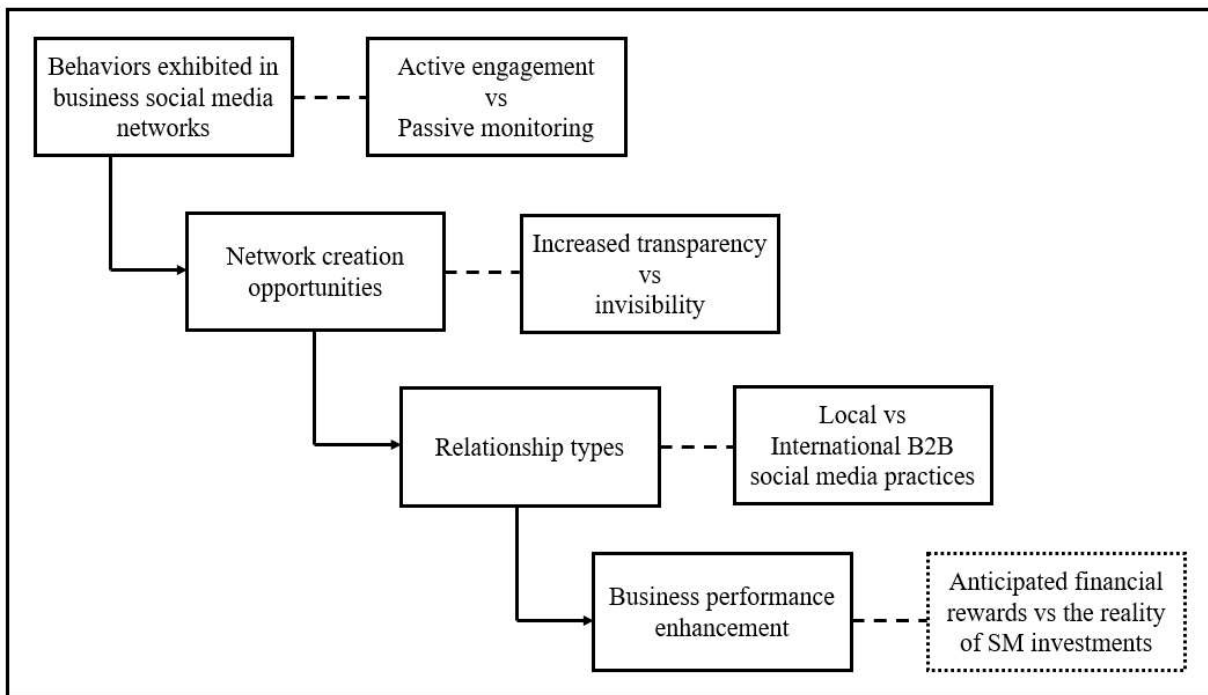
P3: There appears to be a tension pertaining to navigating between the local B2B SM engagement and international practices.

The figure below provides an overview of the identified three dualistic tensions and the overarching patterns of the financial gains of SM. On the left side, four dimensions of B2B SM activities as described by Quinton and Wilson (2016) can be seen. These dimensions provide a starting point to go further and connect relevant dualistic tensions to each one. Firstly, the behaviors exhibited in business SM networks incorporated trust, sharing, reciprocity, and altruism through SM activities. Our study extends this behavioral dimension by raising attention to behavioral differences between suppliers and buyers. While suppliers make an effort to increase the intensity of SM engagement, buyers appear to prefer passive monitoring through SM. Secondly, Quinton and Wilson (2016) noted emergent and strategic network creation opportunities, depending on to what extent these opportunities can be planned in advance. Our study sheds light on the dualistic tension around increased transparency through SM that affects network creation opportunities. There is no agreement among managers as to whether this increased transparency is beneficial, and while some managers use SM to seek contacts they would not have been able to reach otherwise, others (typically buyers) became more conscious about the extent to which they support SM communications, especially when it came to keeping their traditional purchasing procedures and communication channels. Thirdly, the transactional and relational 'relationship types' as described by Quinton and Wilson (2016) are still relevant for B2B SM – our study raises attention to the international complexity. Firms not only need to navigate between different relational approaches when managing SM, but also understand the SM context of their international partners and still meet the communication needs of local partners. Finally, while Quinton and Wilson (2016) claim that SM can enhance business performance in various ways, our findings show a more diverse picture. Indeed, SM proved to be an efficient tool in helping to acquire new business partners; the return on investment (ROI) on B2B SM spending, however, was highly debated, especially among

suppliers. Dualistic tensions arose pertaining to high expectations and yet the realization of low or no ROI on SM investments.

Figure 1. Dualistic tensions in B2B SM engagement

An extension of Quinton & Wilson’s (2016) framework



Note: The four phenomena on the left side (behaviors, network creation opportunities, relationship types, and business performance enhancement) are based on Quinton & Wilson (2016); the three dualistic tensions and additionally the misalignment between anticipated financial rewards and the reality of SM investments are connected to them on the right side and are based on the findings of this study.

5.2 Theoretical contributions

This study contributes to emerging academic discussions on SM practices in the B2B settings and especially pertaining to B2B SM engagement that has been highlighted by other scholars such as Nunan et al. (2018) as an area that requires further research attention, for instance, in relation to control issues. This study provides further insights to this discussion, for instance, by the exploration of the counterintuitive situation between local and international SM engagement practices in B2B settings and related organizational-level control issues.

Secondly, this research identifies a set of dualistic tensions that B2B firms encounter while using SM, namely active engagement versus passive monitoring, increased transparency versus invisibility, and local versus international practices of SM engagement. Past literature on B2B SM sheds light on the perspectives of SM adoption (e.g., Siamagka et al., 2015) or the pros and cons of SM (e.g., Jussila et al., 2014; Salo, 2017; Iankova et al., 2019), yet there is a paucity of research in exploring B2B SM engagement from a tension perspective. Thus, this study, extending the Quinton

and Wilson's (2016) framework in understanding B2B SM practice, employs a unique and essential perspective – dualistic tension, to explore the underlying contradictory yet complementary tensions of using SM. With the identification of the three dualistic tension categories in SM engagement, we aim to contribute to both the B2B SM engagement literature (e.g., Quinton & Wilson, 2016) as well as to the discussions on B2B tensions in networks (e.g., Pressey & Vanharanta, 2016).

Finally, most of the extant literature contributes to B2B SM by exploring only either the supplier's or buyer's perspective by utilizing survey, case study, or interviews (for instance, Karampela et al., 2020; Mehmet & Clarke, 2016; Wang et al., 2016). However, there exists a nascent body of literature that utilizes a dyadic approach. This study utilizes a dyadic approach for the data collection, so the tension which emerged from one partner (e.g., supplier) has been confirmed by the other partner (e.g., buyer), which yields insightful contributions to the understanding of the dualistic tensions in B2B SM.

5.3 Managerial implications

The occurrence of some dualistic tensions appears inevitable and thus this study also yields some strategies and tactics to manage the tensions. Past studies suggest different approaches to address tensions, for instance, acceptance (Smith & Lewis, 2011), integration (Smith, 2014), and balance (Seo, Putnam, & Bartunek, 2004), meaning that organizations could accept the contradictory elements and seek balance or an equilibrium situation. Other studies also indicate that connection and dialogue could be ways to respond to tensions (Barge, 2006; Janssens & Steyaert, 1999); specifically, companies could develop dialogues among stakeholders to treat the opposite poles with equal importance, interdependence, and interplay with each other (Putnam et al., 2016). The managerial implications and strategies in managing tensions are provided in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Strategies and tactics in managing dualistic tension

Dualistic tensions	Managerial problem	Suggested action
Active versus passive engagement	Suppliers would wish more active engagement with their partners through SM but buyers have different approaches	Suppliers should raise their own awareness of these B2B-specific behavioral differences. They could, however, increase engagement with other organizational partners on SM such as non-profit partners, research and academic institutions.
Increased transparency versus confidentiality	Suppliers are delighted to be able to identify key persons on the buyer side through SM, yet their efforts are not always well-received on the buyer side.	Buyers should formulate SM policies on their side and communicate it clearly with their partners on and beyond SM, i.e. whether SM enquiries are welcome, or they prefer specific communication channels for specific purposes.
Local needs versus international SM practices	There appears to be a communication problem between headquarters and subsidiaries at an international level regarding SM practices, especially in B2B contexts, that results in assumptions and ad hoc SM activities or the lack thereof.	Both at the supplier and buyer side, B2B SM engagement across different countries should be included in conversations at a strategic level, including potential standardization features and country/region-specific practices.

Buyers and suppliers should raise awareness and acknowledge their different approaches to SM engagement. Suppliers should take into consideration to a greater extent that their SM presence is characteristically incorporated into early supplier evaluations on the buyer side and manage SM content and activities accordingly. Buyers should be more explicit about whether and how they prefer using SM in the relationships with suppliers, so that suppliers can make some changes in how they interact with the buyers. Acceptance should ideally be part of the ultimate solution for different B2B companies and some of the dualistic tensions in our study. For instance, while the intensity of SM engagement can still be influenced, accepting that having relatively lower levels of B2B SM activities compared to B2C standards as a characteristic feature of the industry, is important. Also, it is indeed difficult to create a direct link between immediate financial gains and B2B SM engagement. Some of the interviewed firms already showed high acceptance of this, while others found it problematic to justify investments into SM engagement without visible financial gains. However, if expectations could be managed accordingly from the beginning and across various divisions of the firm, the acceptance of the missing link to direct financial gains specific to B2B contexts would presumably be easier. Thus, we would encourage managers responsible for SM management in B2B contexts to address this inconvenient topic early on when planning SM activities if they intend to reduce related tensions along the way.

Most firms – suppliers and buyers alike – would benefit from a SM audit pertaining to their current activities specific to B2B contexts with the incorporation of B2B SM engagement into the strategic planning of corporate communications and stimulating dialogues at different levels of the

organizations. This could ideally incorporate addressing dualistic tensions that can be expected along the way and preparing for some issues that are likely to arise. For instance, the relative passivity of B2B buyers should not be decoded as lack of SM success, but instead as an industry characteristic that could be partly balanced by the more active involvement of actors from the wider business network, such as non-profit organizations and academic institutions. Specific SM policies could address the management of increased transparency, for instance, when it comes to contacting key personnel for various enquiries. Also, B2B SM should create and prioritize its own key performance measures rather than using consumer-focused firms as a benchmark in this regard; for instance, measuring post views, platform visits, and time spent on the firm's SM platform appear more suitable indices compared to the number of likes, shares, and comments. With regard to the SM implementation in international firms, this study suggests that SM practice should become an inherent part of the formulation of corporate communications and firms should ideally make an effort to prepare for not only potentially high impact, low likelihood occurrences, such as how they limit the spread of bad news and/or manage it proactively, but also how they boost the positive impact of unexpected good news such as industry awards in a SM network context.

6. Conclusion and future research

This study explores dualistic tensions in B2B contexts that emerge pertaining to SM use, and extends the academic discussions on B2B SM networks by incorporating elements of its 'dark side'. Dualistic tensions arise when simultaneously contradictory goals or priorities need to be met. Both the supplier and the buyer side were included in this exploration. The first identified dualistic tension is around supplier expectations of active SM engagement that do not appear to be realized on the buyer side. Suppliers are pressured by B2C SM standards, but buyers – unlike consumers – show more interest in using SM as a monitoring tool, thus their engagement is more passive in nature. The second explored dualistic tension is whether increased transparency that comes with SM engagement should be welcomed and strengthened or instead avoided at all costs. Both suppliers and buyers struggle to align SM interaction with other corporate practices and, in particular, some buyers were concerned that increased transparency through SM may compromise their purchasing processes. Finally, the study finds evidence for dualistic tensions between local B2B SM practices and assumptions about international practices. Suppliers struggle to find the balance between them as they appear to have limited information about such differences, but they are aware that these differences exist.

While this study contributes to the understanding of B2B engagement with SM, it also yields the signature manifestation that when suppliers utilize SM as a tool to engage with their buyer, dualistic tension could also emerge. Thus, in general, B2B SM could act as a growing, essential role; companies should also bear in mind the tension which might exist in the supplier's expectation and buyer's behavior. More importantly, companies need to learn the approaches to manage the dualistic tension, for example, accepting and acknowledging the co-existence of the tensions. Furthermore, companies could carry out continuous SM audits to understand their SM contexts and frequency, as well as the engagement that they could have with their buyers.

Notwithstanding the theoretical contributions as well as the managerial implementations, this study is also subject to a few limitations. This study explores the emerging dualistic tensions in the B2B context; future studies should explore the roots of these dualistic tensions in deep-rooted organizational matters prior to the use of digital communication tools (such as different positions on relational and transactional orientation) and in further related settings, for instance, comparing

SM engagement in B2B2C companies and mixed B2B and B2C contexts to compare and contrast the characteristics, natures, and impacts. In addition, due to the explorative nature of the current study, the in-depth interview method is adopted. However, future study could also utilize the quantitative approach, e.g., SEM, to examine the drivers as well as the impacts of dualistic tensions in influencing B2B engagement. This study yields interesting results of the dualistic tensions in the Chinese B2B firms – other researchers are encouraged to explore the B2B SM-related tensions across further international contexts, including international comparative approaches. Finally, future studies should further explore tension management practices relevant to B2B SM and adopt a longitudinal approach in exploring and managing tensions.

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