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Research paper

B2B brands on Twitter: Engaging users with a varying combination of social media content objectives, strategies, and tactics

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this research is to increase understanding about B2B company-led user engagement on social media content. Building on hierarchy-of-effects (HoE) theory, we explore how the world's leading B2B companies use content objectives (why), strategies (how), and tactics (what) on Twitter. We first integrate B2B advertising and social media research on companies' content objectives, strategies, and tactics. Then, using qualitative analyses, we examine the existence of objectives, strategies, and tactics in the most engaging tweets (N = 365) of the worlds' ten leading B2B brands, covering five industries, in 2017. Finally, we quantitatively examine how the use of diverse objectives and strategies differs between the most engaging tweets (N = 318) and least engaging tweets (N = 229) of the companies in 2018. The companies use objectives, strategies and tactics that relate to creating *awareness*, *knowledge and trust*, *interest*, and *liking* in the majority of their most and least engaging tweets, and express *preference*, *conviction* and *purchase* aspects much less. Differences exist in general, industry-wise, and company-wise. The study is a rare attempt to integrate the extant B2B advertising and social media research, and compare the most and least engaging B2B social media content.

1. Introduction

Social media increasingly attracts business-to-business (B2B) researchers, as recent reviews (e.g., Salo, 2017; Wang, Pauleen, & Zhang, 2016) show. A stream of researchers are specifically interested in social media content. *Content* denotes the different forms of material published on social media, including text, photos, voice recordings, and videos. Researchers interested in engaging social media content, i.e. content that drives engagement in terms of likes, retweets and comments (Leek, Houghton, & Canning, 2017), focus on topics such as how and why B2B companies use social media (Bolat, Kooli, & Wright, 2016), whether social media content in B2B and business-to-consumer (B2C) contexts should differ (Swani, Brown, & Milne, 2014; Swani, Milne, Brown, Assaf, & Donthu, 2017), and what the effective B2B content strategies on social media are (Swani, Milne, & Brown, 2013).

Researchers build on various theoretical backgrounds, including communication and word-of-mouth theories (Swani et al., 2014), psychological motivation theory (Swani et al., 2017), and semiotics (Mehmet & Clarke, 2016). To the best knowledge of the authors of this study, no research builds on the hierarchies of effects (HoE) theory, which is a traditional advertising theory (Barry & Howard, 1990; Eisend & Tarrahi, 2016). On one hand this is understandable, as content marketing is often considered as a substitute for advertising (Holliman & Rowley, 2014), for instance, due to their different approaches to message delivery (pull vs. push respectively) and their nature (continuous vs. campaigns respectively). On the other hand, this hinders the progress of social media content research, as an overall strategic picture for company-led user engagement, which refers to the promotional and advertising content created by companies (Kozinets, 2014), is lacking.

The objective of our research is to increase understanding about B2B company-led user engagement on social media content. We aim to reach the objective by integrating the extant B2B advertising and social media research with help of the HoE theory and by testing the framework empirically on Twitter. We focus on Twitter, because the limited number of characteristics (280) a Tweet can contain requires imaginative use of content tactics from companies. Twitter is one of the most popular microblogging services worldwide, and a platform where all 20 of the world's top 20 B2B brands (BrandZ, 2017) are.

Two research gaps in the extant literature offer bases for our research questions. First, HoE models predict a sequence of cognitive (mental or rational), affective (feelings and emotions), and conative (motives and behavioral) aspects the buyers go through while forming

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or changing brand attitudes and purchase intention on the basis of advertising (Lavidge & Steiner, 1961; Smith, Chen, & Yang, 2008). Researchers express detailed advertising *objectives* for these aspects (Glover, Hartley, & Patti, 1989; Lavidge & Steiner, 1961). *Objective* refers to a content provider's desired influence of the content on receivers, that is, *why* they post the content. For instance, a widely acknowledged model by Lavidge and Steiner (1961) contains six objectives: awareness and knowledge (cognitive objectives), liking and preference (affective objectives), and conviction and purchase (conative objectives). B2B researchers suggest that online is the only medium that can bring a buyer through all these six steps (Lichtenthal & Eliaz, 2003) and propose a respective *strategy* for each objective (Glover et al., 1989). *Strategy* connects objectives and tactics: it refers to a high-level plan to achieve an objective (Glover et al., 1989), that is, *how* companies aim to reach the objective, while *tactics* refers to a range of specific content decisions that are made to implement the strategy (Parente & Strausbaugh-Hutchinson, 2014: 251), that is, *what* companies post in each strategy. Although researchers provide a variety of aspects that an effective ad (Lohtia, Johnston, & Aab, 1995) or engaging social media content (e.g. Bolat et al., 2016; Swani et al., 2013, 2014) contains, no research considers these aspects as tactics by which content strategies are carried out. Additionally, although social media researchers (Holliman & Rowley, 2014) and B2B advertising researchers (Glover et al., 1989) identify similar content strategies, no research has connected social media content strategies and objectives with help of the HoE theory. As a holistic view that contains content objectives, strategies, and tactics, is lacking, our first research question is: How can HoE theory be used to integrate the exiting B2B advertising and social media research in terms of content objectives, strategies, and tactics?

Second, the HoE was originally designed to measure advertising effectiveness. On social media, user engagement statistics such as the number of likes, retweets and comments reflect content effectiveness (Leek et al., 2017). Researchers have been interested in whether social media content in B2B and B2C contexts (Swani et al., 2014, 2017), by product and service companies (Leek et al., 2017) and in different channels such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter (Andersson & Wikström, 2017) should differ, and provide a list of aspects that an effective social media content contains, including corporate brand names, functional and emotional appeals, and information search cues (Swani et al., 2013, 2017). However, no research empirically examines the differences in the companies' use of content objectives, strategies, and tactics in their most and least engaging posts on social media. Therefore, our second research question is: How can HoE theory help explain differences between the most and least engaging tweets of the world's leading companies in different industries in terms of content objectives, strategies, and tactics?

The study first offers a general overview of Twitter. Then we revisit HoE theory and integrate the existing literature on B2B advertising and social media. Our empirical examination centers on two data sets of tweets collected from the world's leading B2B companies. The paper concludes by discussing the findings, contributions and limitations of the study, as well as highlighting possible further research streams on the subject. The study contributes to B2B advertising and social media research by integrating the discussions and offering a theoretical explanation for and empirical evidence of the use of the HoE theory on social media.

2. The conceptual background

2.1. User engagement on Twitter

Web 2.0 contains hundreds of social media platforms. Companies use variety of platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, blogs (Andersson & Wikström, 2017) to engage with their consumers. Each social media site has its unique characteristics, cultures and norms, which influences the ways companies use the media for their social media strategies (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011; Swani et al., 2014).

Twitter is one of the most popular and ubiquitous microblogging services worldwide based on active users. Launched in 2006, Twitter has grown to have more than 335 million active monthly users and one billion unique monthly visits to sites with embedded tweets (Twitter, 2018). Among Fortune 500 companies, Twitter is the second most popular platform after LinkedIn: 88% of companies have Twitter accounts (Nanji, 2017). 87% of B2B companies in North America and all of the world's top 20 B2B brands (BrandZ, 2018) have Twitter accounts.

Active users generate more than 500 million tweets per day. A tweet is any message with maximum 280 characteristics posted to Twitter at any point in time through a myriad of electronic devices. A tweet may contain text, photos, GIFs, videos, links (Twitter, 2018), a Twitter username (@user), and links to URLs in order to offer further information. Setting a hashtag (the # symbol) before a word organizes conversations around particular topics and accelerates searches (Swani et al., 2014), and a thread is a series of connected tweets from a Twitter account (Twitter, 2018).

Users can engage in the content by liking, commenting, or retweeting. Likes allow users to show their positive attitude toward someone's post (Swani et al., 2013: 221). Commenting engage users in interpersonal conversations with those who have posted the tweets. Retweeting allows users to forward their own or someone else's tweet to their followers, thereby validating the content and in this way the tweet reaches more people (Malhotra, Malhotra, & See, 2012). These engagement statistics are visible for all users in real time and are widely accepted as measures of the popularity of social media content. This means that a user may not only be influenced by the content of a tweet, but also by how other users have reacted to it.

Kozinets (2014) differentiates between company-led and consumer-led engagement; the first relates to the promotional and advertising content created by companies and the latter contains collaborative and consumer-generated content. We focus on the first. Twitter attracts researchers from various fields, but only a handful of B2B researchers have examined how managers can create user engagement on Twitter. Swani et al. (2013) focused on both B2B and B2C settings and revealed that B2B marketers tend to use emotional appeals more than functional appeals in their tweets, but neither B2C nor B2B marketers adopt "hard sell" message strategies. Leek et al. (2017) examined the different levels of behavioral engagement (likes, retweets, and comments) associated with different functions and the linguistic styles of tweets used by product and services companies. The results suggest that company type and tweet function influence the degree of engagement. To strengthen this embryonic stream of research, we focus on Twitter. In the next section, we introduce our conceptual background.

2.2. Hierarchies of effects: understanding the relationship between content objectives and strategies

The hierarchy-of-effects (HoE) theory has a long and acknowledged role among researchers in various disciplines including advertising, marketing, communications, sociology, and psychology (Barry & Howard, 1990; Eisend & Tarrahi, 2016). The theory is rooted in different models of understanding of advertising's effectiveness through the different phases of the buying process faced by the consumer, including cognitive ('thinking'), affective ('feeling'), and conative ('doing') stages (Barry 1987; Barry & Howard, 1990; Smith et al., 2008). Despite the huge popularity and the agreement of the importance of the stages among researchers, the models have gained criticism, for instance, criticism of the lack of empirical studies for temporal evidence (Vakratsas & Ambler, 1999) and disagreement in terms of the order of the states (Barry & Howard, 1990).

The most recognized models propose that consumers progress through the stages in the above order. One such model is AIDA, which was the first concept that suggested that consumers go through levels of

Table 1
A summary of content objectives, strategies and tactics in the existing literature on B2B advertising and social media.

Content objectives (why?)		Content strategies (how?)	Content tactics (what?)	
Cognitive	Awareness (Lavidge & Steiner, 1961) (*Andersson & Wikström, 2017; Holliman & Rowley, 2014; Michaelidou et al., 2011*)	Corporate strategy (Glover et al., 1989); *Communicate the brand online* (*Michaelidou* et al., *2011*)	Items	Brand/company/product name (Jensen & Jepsen, 2007; Cutler & Javalgi, 1994; Hanssens & Weitz, 1980; Lohtia et al., 1995; *Swani* et al., *2014*)
				Corporate/product brand (Jensen & Jepsen, 2007*;* Cutler & Javalgi, 1994*;* Hanssens & Weitz, 1980*; Swani* et al., *2013*)
				Company/product logo (Lehmann & Steckel, 1985; Lohtia et al., 1995)
		Generic strategy (Glover et al., 1989); *Promoting new services and products* (*Bolat* et al., *2016*)	Items/interpretatives	Components or contents (Lohtia et al., 1995)
				Price claims (Turley & Kelley, 1997)
				Packaging or shape (Lohtia et al., 1995)
				Association with a typical person, lifestyle, or situation (Cutler & Javalgi, 1994)
				Pictures of usage context (Lehmann & Steckel, 1985)
				Brand descriptions (Cutler & Javalgi, 1994)
				Product specifications (Hanssens & Weitz, 1980)
				Picture or illustration of product (Cutler & Javalgi, 1994; Hanssens & Weitz, 1980; Lehmann & Steckel, 1985; Lohtia et al., 1995)
				Product shown in action (Hanssens & Weitz, 1980)
				News and/or information (Cutler & Javalgi, 1994)
				Years of experience (Lohtia et al., 1995)
				Independent & company research (Lohtia et al., 1995)
				Company contributions (*Andersson & Wikström, 2017*)
				Information sharing about product/service (*Leek* et al., *2016*)
				Headline new products (*Brennan & Croft, 2012*)
				Headline press-releases (*Brennan & Croft, 2012*
				Headline new appointments (*Brennan & Croft, 2012*)
				Headline new blogs and videos (*Brennan & Croft, 2012*)
				What the company is (*Andersson & Wikström, 2017*)
	Knowledge (Lavidge & Steiner, 1961) *and trust; Trust building* (*Holliman & Rowley, 2014*)	Pre-emptive strategy (Glover et al., 1989)	Items/Interpretatives	Availability (Lohtia et al., 1995)
				New ideas (Lohtia et al., 1995)
				Information sharing about industry (*Leek* et al., *2016*)
				Information sharing about events (*Leek* et al., *2016*)
				Headline developer events (*Brennan & Croft, 2012*)
				Firm's developments (*Bolat* et al., *2016*)
				Emerging trends in the industry (*Bolat* et al., *2016*)
Cognitive/Affective	Interest[a]	*Information search strategy* (*Swani* et al., *2014*);	Items (/Interpretatives)	Telephone number (Lohtia et al., 1995)
				Internet address (Turley & Kelley, 1997)
				Address (Lohtia et al., 1995)
				Hashtag (#) (*Swani* et al., *2014*)
				Username (@user) (Swani et al., 2014)
				Hyperlink (*Rooderkerk & Pauwels, 2016*)
				Encouragement (*Rooderkerk & Pauwels, 2016*)
Affective	Liking (Lavidge & Steiner, 1961)	Brand image strategy (Glover et al., 1989)	(Items/) Interpretatives	Person's experience with the product (Lohtia et al., 1995)
				Storytelling – narrative, drama, playlet (Cutler & Javalgi, 1994)
				Environmental issues (Leonidou et al., 2014)
				Information sharing about opinion (*Leek* et al., *2016*)
	Preference (Lavidge & Steiner, 1961)	Positioning strategy (Glover et al., 1989); *Brand positioning* (*Holliman & Rowley, 2014*)	Items	Comparative-portrayal and/or naming of the competition (Cutler & Javalgi, 1994)
				Substitution based on similar feature (Cutler & Javalgi, 1994)

(*continued on next page*)

Table 1 (*continued*)

Content objectives (why?)		Content strategies (how?)	Content tactics (what?)	
Conative	Conviction (Lavidge & Steiner, 1961)	Unique selling proposition (USP) strategy (Glover et al., 1989)	Items(/Interpretatives)	Benefit feature (Hanssens & Weitz, 1980) Use benefit (Cutler & Javalgi, 1994) Quality claims (Lohtia et al., 1995; Turley & Kelley, 1997) Price-value (Lohtia et al., 1995) Guarantee and warrantees (Lohtia et al., 1995) Performance (Lohtia et al., 1995) Safety (Lohtia et al., 1995) Spokesperson, testimonial (Lohtia et al., 1995) *Practical utility* (*Rooderkerk & Pauwels, 2016*)
	Purchase (Lavidge & Steiner, 1961)	Direct appeals to action strategy (Glover et al., 1989); *Direct selling* (*Holliman & Rowley, 2014*)	Items	Special offers (Lohtia et al., 1995) Incentives (Lohtia et al., 2003) *Direct call to purchase* (*Swani et al., 2013, 2014, 2017*) *Sales/subscription* (*Leek et al., 2016*)

Normal text = findings from the B2B advertising research; italics = findings from the B2B social media research.

[a] Interest is originally included in AIDA models; the need to add interest as an objective raised during our empirical research.

attention (cognitive stage), interest (combination of cognitive and affective stages), desire (affective stage), and action (conative stage) (Egan, 2007; Strong, 1925). The above model by Lavidge and Steiner (1961) also belongs in this category. Their model was developed somewhat differently from the AIDA models and was the first to include consumer involvement (Barry & Howard, 1990) in the affective stage in the forms of liking and preference. Lavidge and Steiner (1961) also recognized that the steps are equidistant, and a consumer may move up several stages simultaneously. Their model offers six *content objectives* for our research (see Table 1). In the next chapter we introduce these and add a seventh objective (*interest*) because our empirical research revealed the need to include it. As dozens of researchers have later revealed that the three main stages can exist in any order (Barry & Howard, 1990), we do not take a stand in relation to the order of the categories. The recent AIDA models include, for instance, post-purchase aspects (e.g., Rogers, 1983) and an information search as an essential part of the process in the era of branding and social media (Wijaya, 2015).

HoE models have also been recognized in B2B contexts, including advertising (e.g. Lichtenthal, Yadav, & Donthu, 2006), services (Casidy, Nyadzayo, Mohan, & Brown, 2018) and branding (Zablah, Brown, & Donthu, 2010). Building on the consumer research of Lavidge and Steiner (1961) and others, Glover et al. (1989) propose respective B2B advertising *content strategies* for each objective (see Table 1). We will introduce these in the next chapter. Glover et al. (1989) propose that strategy should be based on a benefit sought by the target market segment. They suggest that ads lie on a continuum (Bernstein, 1974) from low persuasion ads that aim to create awareness in long term to high persuasion ads that express unique product benefits and aim to conclude in purchase. By examining 68 entries to a B2B advertisers' competition, Glover et al. (1989) revealed that 82.3 % of advertisements specified one of the strategy types, most often positioning or purchase strategies and second most often corporate or brand image strategies. Using the same data, Hartley and Patti (1988) revealed that companies often set many objectives, most often awareness, knowledge, liking, and purchase objectives. They also revealed that ads usually resulted in awareness and purchases, whilst preference and conviction were both the least-used objectives and the least common results.

The above models offer us underlying explanations for the categorization of B2B advertising and social media content tactics into their respective strategy and objective categories in the next section. Before that, we provide an overview of the extant B2B advertising research.

2.3. B2B advertising research: the relationship between strategies and tactics

2.3.1. An overview of the existing B2B advertising research

The earliest contributions to B2B advertising were already published over four decades ago. Still the topic has gained limited research attention: The number of articles published about the subject is limited, the majority of the articles are published before the year 2000, and the articles have received a considerably small numbers of citations. Potential explanations for this are the complex and technical nature of products, parties' mutual interest in building relationships, and the critical role of personal selling in communicating a brand's key attributes to the customer (Brown, Bellenger, & Johnston, 2007). However, as B2B advertising research offers an important basis for social media content research, it is the approach we build on.

After some initial general articles on the subject (e.g., Brown & Brucker, 1976), the extant research contains three main streams. The first and the largest stream focuses on the elements and consequences of an effective ad, and thus this is the approach we build on. The second stream focuses on advertising budgeting (e.g., Lynch & Hooley, 1987; Lynch & Hooley, 1989; Miles, White, & Munilla, 1997), and the third stream includes studies (e.g., Elsäßer & Wirtz, 2017; Jackson, Keith, & Burdick, 1987; LaBahn & Kohli, 1997) that touch upon B2B advertising context but, in their essence, focus on other phenomena.

The topics of the studies in the first stream are diverse, but in essence, they represent two approaches: the elements of an effective ad and the connection between ad content and its influences. Concerning the first, along with some normative guidelines (Bellizzi & Hite, 1986; Rogers, 1995) and focused conceptual frameworks (e.g., Lichtenthal et al., 2006) on the subject, research is mainly empirical. Theoretically, some researchers build on HoE (Jensen & Jepsen, 2007; Glover et al., 1989; Lichtenthal et al., 2006) and legitimacy theory (Leonidou, Leonidou, Hadjimarcou, & Lytovchenko, 2014), whilst all others only build on B2C and B2B advertising. The majority of the research focuses on comparisons in the form of comparing products (e.g., Stevenson & Swayne, 1988); using race (Stevenson & Swayne, 1999), gender (Reese, Whipple, & Courtney, 1987), and environmental claims (Leonidou et al., 2014) in ads; using color (Clarke & Honeycutt, 2000; Huang, 1993) and creative techniques (Cutler & Javalgi, 1994) in advertising in different countries; comparisons of B2B and B2C advertising, both offline (Turley & Kelley, 1997) and online (Lohtia, Donthu, & Hershberger, 2003); and differences in cognitive capabilities for interpreting ads (Jensen & Jepsen, 2007). Exceptions are studies on advertising campaigns (Korgaonkar, Bellenger, & Smith, 1986) and message strategies (Glover et al., 1989).

The studies in the last approach exclude comparisons but take the external viewpoint into account. These studies build on the extant advertising research too. Research (Baack, Wilson, van Dessel, & Patti, 2016; Chamblee & Sandler, 1992; Hanssens & Weitz, 1980; Lehmann & Steckel, 1985; Lohtia et al., 1995; Soley, 1986; Soley & Reid, 1983) builds on causal logic to reveal the influence of ad elements on ad performance. As Johnston (1994) argues, there is no one prescription for an effective ad, but the relevant content variables differ depending on various factors. Other approaches include examining gender differences on perceptions of sexist ads (LaTour, Williams, & Henthorne, 1998) and the influence of direct mail on purchases (Ljungren, 1976).

Although approaches build on different logics, many studies on both approaches summarize a variety of ad elements. These elements are detailed descriptions of *what* companies actually publish in their ads in order to influence the ad receiver. We call this *content tactics*. In the next chapter, we review B2B advertising research in order to reveal tactics for each strategy, because the extant research lacks this kind of categorization.

2.3.2. B2B advertising strategies and their respective tactics

We reviewed the B2B advertising research in order to reveal tactics for each strategy (Table 1), keeping in mind that each of the strategies focuses on benefits (Glover et al., 1989). Our review revealed three types of tactics: style, item, and interpretative aspects. As *style* aspects contain issues that do not express benefits, including ad size (e.g. Cutler & Javalgi, 1994), layout (Hanssens & Weitz, 1980), and copy length (e.g. Chamblee & Sandler), they are excluded from our study. *Item* aspects refer to aspects that are unambiguously expressed and easily recognized in the content. Examples of these are company/brand name (e.g. Cutler & Javalgi, 1994), and an Internet address (Turley & Kelley, 1997) (see, Table 1). *Interpretative* aspects require understanding the tactic at hand in a wider context, as well as they may contain hidden meanings that influence the receiver. These kinds of tactics often contain storytelling (Cutler & Javalgi, 1994) for instance in videos.

The objective *awareness* relates to information (Lavidge & Steiner, 1961) and contains two strategies. *Corporate strategy* refers to using the brands as symbols of the company. As a brand refers to “a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or combination of them” (Kotler 1991; p. 442), and as products, services (Keller, 1993), and companies (Aaker, 2004) can be brands we categorize tactic items brand, name (e.g. Cutler & Javalgi, 1994), and logo (e.g. Lehmann & Steckel, 1985) at the levels of company, product, and service in this category. The strategy targets diffuse, long-term benefits that inform the respondent over a period of time and has low persuasive power (Glover et al., 1989). Because corporate branding activities are not usually linked to short-term sales (Aaker, 2004), they fit the category well. *Generic strategy* is not defined by Glover et al. (1989), but they mention that it reflects the benefits offered by competition, makes no attempt to establish superiority, is informative, and has limited persuasive power. We propose that Keller’s (1993) brand attribute associations (descriptive features that characterize a product or service) help us identify the tactics of this category. These include a product’s physical composition, a service’s requirements, packaging, price information, product appearance information, user imagery (the type of person that uses the product or service), and usage imagery (the situations in which the product or service is used) (Keller, 1993). First five items in Table 1 fit these criteria. Additionally, we categorize brand descriptions (Cutler & Javalgi, 1994), product specifications (Hanssens & Weitz, 1980), pictures of products (Cutler & Javalgi, 1994), and products shown in action (Hanssens & Weitz, 1980). Company-level aspects—including information on news (Cutler & Javalgi, 1994), years of experience, and research (Lohtia et al., 1995)—also fit the category. Tactics in this category have the characteristics of both item and interpretative aspects as, for instance, years of experience can be expressed explicitly, but usage imagery need to be interpreted from a picture or video.

The objective *knowledge* refers to information or ideas (Lavidge & Steiner, 1961) in a *pre-emptive strategy*. Glover et al. (1989) do not define strategy but mention that it seeks to establish superiority as benefit is offered by competition and it contains informative moderate persuasion. We follow a dictionary definition that refers to giving one person or party an opportunity to gain information, before it is offered to others. We place information about product availability and new ideas (Lohtia et al., 1995) into this category. The former of can either be expressed through its item or interpretative aspects, and the latter through its interpretative aspects.

Raising *interest* is not included in the model by Lavidge and Steiner (1961) but it is included in AIDA models. Our empirical research revealed a need to add it as an objective. We locate interest between *knowledge* and *liking* because it relates to both feelings/emotions and cognitive theories of knowledge acquisition (Egan, 2007: 43; Schiefele, 1991). Interest refers to an individual’s orientation toward an object, activity, or an area of knowledge and his or her willingness to learn more about it (Schiefele, 1991), thereby also including an information search (Wijaya, 2015). In content, this can be expressed as either encouragement or how more information on the brand or topic can be found. Tactic items such as a telephone number (Lohtia et al., 1995), an Internet address (Turley & Kelley, 1997), and a postal address (Lohtia et al., 1995) belong to this category. B2B advertising literature does not express strategy for interest, but our review on B2B social media research reveals it.

Liking deals with favorable attitudes or feelings toward the product (Lavidge & Steiner, 1961). It consists of *brand image strategy*, which refers to differentiating a brand on the basis of psychological or intangible characteristics (Laskey, Day, & Crask, 1989), expressing affective benefits without reference to competition and to moderate emotional persuasion (Glover et al., 1989). Using this strategy, companies do not necessarily post about themselves, but they post emotional aspects with which they aim to get people like them. Tactics for this strategy mainly include emotional interpretative aspects, including a person’s experience with the product (Lohtia et al., 1995); or storytelling in the form of narrative, drama, or playlet (Cutler & Javalgi, 1994). We also categorize environmental issues in this category because they can raise both positive and negative feelings (Leonidou et al., 2014). Along with interpretative aspects, tactics related to environmental issues can be expressed as well-defined items, such as recycling.

Preference contains *positioning strategy*, which emphases differentiation relative to competition, and its high-to-moderate persuasive power arises from placement in the consumer’s mind (Glover et al., 1989). Tactics such as comparative portrayal and/or using the name the competition, and substitution based on a similar feature (Cutler & Javalgi, 1994) represent this strategy. As each of these requires naming

the competitive situation, the tactics consist of unambiguous items.

Conviction includes *unique selling proposition* (USP) *strategy*, which refers to expressing an explicit claim of uniqueness (Laskey et al., 1989). The strategy highlights benefits that are not delivered by the competition and it has high persuasive power (Glover et al., 1989). The tactics refer to item aspects, as the virtues—such as benefit feature (Hanssens & Weitz, 1980), the use benefit (Cutler & Javalgi, 1994), quality claims (Turley & Kelley, 1997), performance, and safety (Lohtia et al., 1995)—are expressed in an unequivocal way. However, these and using a spokesperson or testimonial (Lohtia et al., 1995) may have interpretative elements.

Purchase contains *direct appeals to action strategy*. As the name indicates, the strategy refers to benefits' delivery and incentives to act, and has high persuasive power (Glover et al., 1989). The tactics of this strategy contain item aspects, including special offers (Lohtia et al., 1995) and incentives (Lohtia et al., 2003).

In the next section, we aim to reveal the content objectives, strategies, and tactics from the existing B2B research on social media content, thereby completing Table 1 with a contemporary approach to the subject.

2.4. B2B social media content's objectives, strategies, and tactics

Two individual but complementary emerging approaches exist in research that touches upon social media content. The first (e.g., Andersson & Wikström, 2017; Holliman & Rowley, 2014; Michaelidou, Siamagka, & Christodoulides, 2011) identifies objectives and tactics and touches slightly upon strategies. The second (e.g., Swani et al., 2013, 2014, 2017; Leek, Canning, & Houghton, 2016) centers on content tactics and has connection to strategies.

In terms of objectives, many researchers (Andersson & Wikström, 2017; Holliman & Rowley, 2014; Michaelidou et al., 2011) recognize that creating *awareness* is the most important objective of companies engaged in social media. We indicate the names of the authors—as well as our other findings from social media research—in italics in Table 1. For corporate strategy, we add a similar strategy of communicating about the brand online (Michaelidou et al., 2011), as well as items corporate/product brand name (Swani et al., 2014) and corporate brand (Swani et al., 2013). Although the strategy of Bolat et al. (2016) that promotes "new services and products" may have a wider meaning in the context of social media, we consider it as a strategy that fits generic strategy which does not attempt to establish superiority, but is informative and has limited persuasive power. The related tactics contain interpretative aspects, such as information sharing about company contributions (Andersson & Wikström, 2017), a product/service (Leek et al., 2016), and press-releases (Brennan & Croft, 2012). What the company is (Andersson & Wikström, 2017) can either represent item or interpretative aspects.

For the objective *knowledge*, we add a parallel objective: building *trust* (Holliman & Rowley, 2014). Building and maintaining online trust is challenging, specifically in the B2B context (Mudambi & Aggarwal, 2003). Sociological research on cognitive trust proposes that we cognitively choose whom (whether they are persons or institutions) "we will trust in which respects and under which circumstances, and we base the choice on what we take to be 'good reasons'; constituting evidence of trustworthiness" (Lewis & Weigert, 1985: 970). As trust is a concept that is interconnected with communication (Mudambi & Aggarwal, 2003), we propose that, on social media, companies aim to increase users' trust by sharing pre-emptive information and thereby offering users good reasons to trust them. The tactics include interpretative aspects, including information sharing about industry, event, firm developments and industry trends (Bolat et al., 2016; Brennan & Croft, 2012; Leek et al., 2016).

Related to *interest*, we name the *information search strategy* (Swani et al., 2014) in line with our definition of *interest* in the previous section. We add three tactics items that indicate where more information can be found: a hashtag, a Twitter username (@user) (Swani et al., 2014), and a hyperlink (Rooderkerk & Pauwels, 2016). We also add encouragement (Rooderkerk & Pauwels, 2016) as it relates to raising interest and can either be an item or interpretative.

For *liking*, we only found one interpretative tactic: information sharing about opinion (Leek et al., 2016). Opinions are more than just information; they are emotionally loaded aspects, and thus categorized here. Related to *preference*, we only add a similar strategy—brand positioning (Holliman & Rowley, 2014)—to positioning strategy. And for *conviction*, we found one tactic: practical utility (Rooderkerk & Pauwels, 2016). In relation to making a *purchase*, we include a similar strategy—direct selling (Holliman & Rowley, 2014)—although researchers (Holliman & Rowley, 2014; Swani et al., 2013) suggest avoiding using it in relation to social media. Additionally, we add the tactic items of a direct call to purchase (Swani et al., 2013, 2014, 2017) and sales/subscriptions (Leek et al., 2016).

Next, we empirically examine the existence of the above content tactics, strategies and objectives the companies use to engage users on Twitter.

3. Methodology

3.1. The sample

We began our sampling with the assistance of indexing web sites (Li & Walejko, 2008) and focused on the world's top 20 B2B brands, as listed in the BrandZ Top 100 Most Valuable Global Brands report for 2017, to ensure that we examined the most influential companies. To provide a representative sample that was not skewed toward any specific industry, we chose the two best-ranked global companies in each industry category for closer examination: IBM and Microsoft (technology), Citibank and HSBC (banks), GE and Siemens (conglomerates), FedEx and UPS (logistics), and ExxonMobil and Shell (oil and gas). Each brand is fundamentally a corporate brand, although some of them use their corporate name as product name too, and some are service brands. Many of the companies also operate in B2C markets. Although many B2B social media content (e.g., Swani et al., 2013, 2014, 2017) and advertising (e.g., Lohtia et al., 2003) researchers reveal differences between B2B and B2C companies, and some researchers (e.g. Brennan & Croft, 2012) exclude the companies that address both B2B and B2C markets from their study, we retain all these companies. This is because B2B companies have various stakeholders (Andersson & Wikström, 2017), and thus their content receivers are heterogeneous (Brown & Brucker, 1976) and can have various roles (Nickell, Rollins, & Hellman, 2013), and therefore communicating in new contexts can reach buyers who are not normally reached by salespeople (Brown et al., 2007).

3.2. The data

We manually gathered two data sets. The first was gathered at the very end of the year 2017 and in early 2018 in order to validate our conceptual framework. In autumn 2018, when we aimed to analyze how companies used objectives, strategies, and tactics in the most and least engaging tweets, we were unable to use the data because we had been unable to download videos and also all the tweets in the first data were no longer publicly available. Therefore, we gathered the second data set in September 2018. In both sets, we accessed the public Twitter accounts of the ten companies. By conducting an observational research where information gathering requires no interaction with the person who posted it online, and focusing on public tweets by companies, we overcame the ethical challenges that relate to analyzing private messages or posts of individuals (Moreno, Goniu, Moreno, & Diekema, 2013). As companies have multiple Twitter accounts for different purposes or geographical areas (Leek et al., 2016), we only focused on global accounts to ensure comparability.

We gathered all the public tweets of the above companies during a

Table 2
Descriptive statistics.

Company	Total number of own tweets	Total number of retweets	Total number of tweets	Mean number of likes	Mean number of retweets	Mean number of comments	Mean number of video views[a]
Data set 1							
IBM	379	368	747	237	108	5	28589
HSBC	127	5	132	72	23	3	84624
Citibank	411	313	724	185	44	5	174984
GE	176	6	182	139	68	10	60252
UPS	290	50	340	301	144	18	31353
ExxonMobil	185	29	214	87	44	7	2873
Shell	184	26	210	277	70	15	326905
FedEx	225	29	254	204	57	11	17749
Siemens	271	249	520	94	33	2	20055
Microsoft	322	481	803	482	180	22	60050
Total	2570	1556	4126				
Data set 2							
IBM	134	171	305	250	120	9	N/A
HSBC	124	14	138	40	18	2	N/A
Citibank	227	111	338	195	40	7	N/A
GE	154	22	176	94	33	6	N/A
UPS	159	50	209	100	30	5	N/A
ExxonMobil	155	11	166	89	31	6	N/A
Shell	174	18	192	476	84	18	N/A
FedEx	119	12	131	278	77	21	N/A
Siemens	228	210	438	125	32	2	N/A
Microsoft	379	339	718	538	185	26	N/A
Total	1853	958	2811				

[a] Calculated on the basis of the number of total tweets that contain a video.

period of 6 months. The first data set contains 4126 tweets between 1st July and 31st December 2017, and the second data set consists of 2811 tweets from 1st March until 31st August 2018 (see, Table 2). Although the difference between the total number of tweets is huge, the number of included tweets can be considered valid in comparison to recent studies that use B2B Twitter data (Leek et al., 2016; Swani et al., 2014). We gathered engagement statistics in forms of likes, retweets, and comments (Leek et al., 2017), as well as video views in the first data set. We excluded video views in the second data set because we then recognized that videos start automatically and thus the number of views may differ from the number of engaged views.

3.3. Identifying the most and least engaging tweets

In the first data set, we focused only on the most engaging tweets because we wanted to validate the framework with content created by companies (Kozinets, 2014) that most likely engages users (Swani et al., 2014). We first identified posts that were ranked highest using four criteria (the number of likes, retweets, comments, and video views), then three and two criteria, until the percentage of the most engaging posts of each company reached the level of 5 % or more. The second author made an initial list and the first author re-checked it.

In the second data set, we focused on the most and least engaging tweets. We first counted the averages of the likes, comments, and retweets for each company in order to reveal which tweets were above average (i.e., the most engaging tweets) (Bossuyt, Vermeir, Slabbinck, De Bock, & Van Kenhove, 2017). We also counted the sum of the variables (likes, comments, and retweets) for each tweet, as well as the average of each value by companies. We only retained tweets of which had a value that was above average for all four criteria ($N = 318$). The number of the most engaging tweets varied by companies, but on average, covered 11.2 % of the tweets of each company. Therefore, we then identified 11.2 % of the less engaging tweets (in terms of the number of likes, comments, retweets as well as the sum of the variables) of each company. We only retained tweets that were identified as being in the least engaging category for all four variables ($N = 229$).

3.4. Data analyses

We combined qualitative and quantitative analyses. First, the first and the second author used the first data set to examine whether or not each aspect of tactics in Table 1 existed. Whereas item aspects of tactics (e.g. company name, hashtags) were easily recognizable, interpretative aspects of tactics (e.g. storytelling) in pictures and videos required a qualitative interpretation of the meanings of posts (Jensen & Jepsen, 2007; Leonidou et al., 2014). This answers the call by Swani et al. (2013, 2014) to investigate message strategies that involve the use of videos and images.

Whilst some of the aspects were similar, many aspects diverged from those identified in the extant research or emerged from the data. We listed emerging aspects, or general associations (Jensen & Jepsen, 2007), discussed the findings and revised Table 1. For instance, we revealed that companies communicated about company history, previous events, and timely events. We moved back and forth between our data and conceptual definitions for objectives and strategies in order to reveal into which objective category each new tactic belongs. We concluded that company history and previous events represent the objective *liking* because the tweets expressed captivating videos and pictures that raised attitudes or feelings (Lavidge & Steiner, 1961); and that timely events represent the objective *knowledge and trust* because these tweets expressed information on events rather than raised emotions. Interpretations also helped us construct higher-order, more abstract conceptual layers of meaning in data (Spiggle, 1994). For example, both expressing about company history and previous events represent “sharing historical stories” and this became a novel strategy category. The first author re-interpreted the meanings of each post in three rounds of data re-interpretation, until no new aspects were revealed from the data. In each round, a revised version of the table operated as a framework to re-interpret the data (e.g. Leonidou et al., 2014) and we discussed about findings and included novel tactics to the table. Appendix 1 presents both our final categorization and illustrative examples of each tactic.

We used the second data set to quantitatively reveal the differences in the companies’ use of objectives and strategies in their most and least engaging tweets. We first coded objectives (e.g., AW) and strategies

(e.g., aw1), as detailed in Appendix 1, and examined whether the tactics existed (1) or not (0) in each most and least engaging tweet. In cases where there were many tactics, such as in the "communicating the brand" (aw1) strategy, a tactic category was only counted once. For instance, aw1 received the value 1 if a tweet contained a company name, logo, or both and the value 0 if none of the tactics existed. The respective objective (in this case, AW) received the value 1 if any of its strategies received the value 1. Then we calculated average percentages of most and least engaging tweets that contain each strategy and objective and reported it by industries (see Appendix 2) and by companies (see Appendix 3). This allowed us discern differences of strategies and objectives between the most and least engaging tweets across industries and companies. The value 1.000 indicates that all the analyzed tweets contained the objective/strategy in question, whilst the value 0.000 indicates that none of the tweets contained the objective/strategy. We conducted analysis of variance (ANOVA) post hoc analyses to reveal the statistically significant differences ($p < 0.05$) between the averages. We discuss the results of our analysis and interpretation processes next.

4. Findings

The section begins by describing the tactics for each strategy category, objective by objective (Appendix 1), and then explains the role of the objectives and strategies in the most and least engaging tweets.

4.1. Social media content objectives, strategies, and tactics

4.1.1. Awareness

On the basis of our empirical examination, we retained the two first strategies and added a new one. In naming the strategies, we followed social media research. We renamed corporate strategy as *communicating the brand*. It contains brands, names and logos. In its simplest form, companies include their name traditionally in a text. The name is often expressed in a form of @user (e.g. @Microsoft, @IBMWatson, @Mobil1). In some posts companies just mention "we", which does not promote the company in the same way as mentioning the name does. Companies use company, product, and brand logos as well as product designs in pictures and videos.

To ensure convergent logic in strategy names, we reworded *promoting new services and products* as *portraying* (*new*) *services, products, and information*. The word *new* is in brackets because companies also promote existing issues. The strategy involves all the aspects identified in the literature except for price claims (which we categorize to the objective of *purchase* because the tweets that contained price claims encouraged a purchase rather than just presented the price) and association with a typical person, lifestyle, or situation (which better fits the objective *liking* because these associations are typically expressed in emotional videos). Although we were unable to find some tactics (e.g., headline press releases), we retained them because they emerged from social media research and may exist in other data. We found that some companies demonstrated their services in action, thus we added it in the Appendix 1. As the tactics also represented various different ways to express company contributions (Andersson & Wikström, 2017), we formed a new strategy: *informing about achievements*. The strategy contains accomplishments that the company has achieved in research, in service processes, and in technology, as well as containing the contributions of product and company people. The last four emerged from the data.

4.1.2. Knowledge and trust

Here *knowledge and trust* contains three strategies. We renamed *preemptive* strategy as *promoting availability*. It builds on the "availability" recognized by Lohtia et al. (1995), which we considered as tactics in Table 1. The data shows three item tactics: endorsing the availability of products, information, and people.

Uplifting future insights refers to posting information on future visions. It is based on "new ideas" (Lohtia et al., 1995) and contains six tactics. Visions of the industry builds on "information sharing about industry" (Leek et al., 2016) and "posting feeds about 'emerging trends' in the industry" (Bolat et al., 2016). Visions of the company builds on "posting feeds about the firm's developments" (Bolat et al., 2016). The four last tactics emerge from the data: visions of technology, collaboration, research, and individuals.

Endorsing timely topics contains information sharing about various contemporary issues. The strategy contains seven tactics. Events is built on the extant research (Brennan & Croft, 2012; Leek et al., 2016), whilst six others—anniversaries, celebrations, products, techniques, people, and nature—emerged from the data. As an illustrative tweet in the nature category shows, a tweet can contain many objectives (in this case, *liking* elements in form of donations).

4.1.3. Interest

Interest contains three strategies. *Asking questions* emerged from the data. It refers to raising interest by posting questions and either answering a question in a tweet or posting a link to additional content. *Encouraging* refers to boosting content receivers in order to gain more information on the subject at hand. Phrases such as 'see', 'watch' and 'learn more:" represent this kind of endorsement, which usually has a link for further information. *Linking* refers to adding hyperlinks to the post. Tactics include links to Internet addresses, hashtags, and Twitter usernames (@users). We found no tweet that enclosed a telephone number or postal address of the company, thus we excluded these items from Appendix 1.

4.1.4. Liking

Liking is the largest objective in terms of the number of strategies it uses (6). It refers to the emotional strategies a company uses to encourage users to like the brand. *Honoring people* relates to social aspects, in form of storytelling that mentions or shows people. Tactics for this focus on what people do (including, e.g., association with a typical person, lifestyle, or situation, as described above), information sharing about opinion, thanking people, and exhibiting people. *Emphasizing environmental aspects* focuses on posting sustainability-related aspects. Tactics for this include recycling, renewables, and emission reduction.

Featuring contributions to society refers to posting contributions that have an influence on stakeholders or at the societal level. Tactics for this that emerged from the data include donating, reconstructing, taking side in public discussions, and facilitating people's everyday life. *Sharing historical stories* refers to nostalgic posting about past aspects. Tactics for this appear from the data and include company history and previous events. *Exhibiting collaboration* refers to highlighting co-operation with external stakeholders. Tactics include expressing a new collaboration, long-term collaboration, partnering, doing teamwork, and sponsoring. Collaboration is not necessarily explicitly stated in a tweet, but requires further understanding about the situation. *Furthering others* refers to boosting others in a post. Tactics for this that emerged from the data include furthering people, other organizations, products/technology, and places.

4.1.5. Preference, conviction and purchase

Preference contains two strategies. *Express positioning* is in line with the existing literature and refers to posting about an advantage in relation to competition or competitors. *Highlighting superiority* emerge from data and refers to being ranked the best.

Conviction contains three strategies. *Endorsing benefits* replaces USP and refers to posting about being exceptional without reference to the competition. Tactics are in line with those from the existing research. Another strategy relates to *promoting safety*, including product safety (Lohtia et al., 1995) and company safety, which emerge from the data. Third strategy is *assuring performance*, including product performance (Lohtia et al., 1995) and company performance, which emerge from the data. We found no tweet that enclosed information on guarantees or

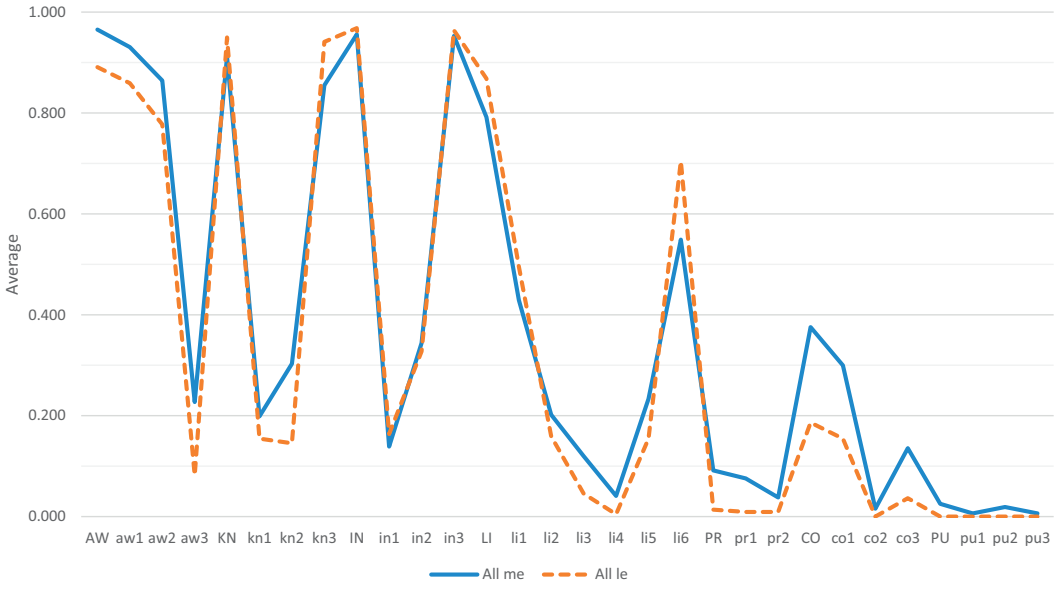

Fig. 1. The use of objectives and strategies in the most (me) and least (le) engaging tweets.

warrantees, thus we excluded these items from Appendix 1.

Finally, *purchase* contains three strategies. *Encouraging a purchase* relates to the encouragement to buy. Tactics include sales/subscriptions, an encouragement to preorder, special offers and price claims, as explained above. Tactics that emerged from the data include *tempting* the customer and *competition*, which we also use as strategy names. The next section presents our results on the varying role of objectives in the most and least engaging tweets.

4.2. Social media objectives and strategies in the most and least engaging tweets

Our analyses show that trends in using content objectives and strategies in the most (me) and least (le) engaging tweets are quite similar (Fig. 1). A similar trend exists for industries and companies (see Appendices 2 and 3). At the level of objectives, the use of *awareness* (AW), *knowledge and trust* (KN), *interest* (IN), and *liking* (LI) elements is typical in tweets; the use of *preference* (PR) and *purchase* (PU) is rare; and the use of *conviction* (CO) varies much between the companies. However, some individual strategies, such as asking questions (in1), for reaching the objective *interest* do not follow this trend.

The following statistically significant differences ($p < 0.05$) exist in the companies' use of objectives and their strategies. The most engaging tweets generally use *awareness* more often than the least engaging tweets. The similar result exists in technology, conglomerate, and logistics industries, as well as in the tweets by UPS. Banks in general and Citibank particularly, provide completely opposite results as their least engaging tweets contain more awareness elements than their most engaging tweets. Statistically significant differences in using awareness were neither found in the oil and gas industry nor in the tweets by other companies. In terms of strategies, compared to the least engaging tweets, the most engaging tweets communicate more about the brand (aw1); new services, products, and information (aw2); and company achievements (aw3). Similar results exist in the conglomerate industry and among tweets by IBM. In terms of using individual awareness strategies, the logistics industry uses more awareness strategies in their most engaging tweets than in their least engaging tweets. Banks again offer opposite results.

In terms of *knowledge and trust* (KN), no statistical differences exist in general or industry-wise. At the level of companies, HSBC and ExxonMobil use more whilst Shell uses less knowledge elements in their most engaging tweets than in their least engaging tweets. Differences in using individual strategies exist both industry and company-wise. For instance, technology and conglomerate industries promote availability (kn1) more in their most engaging tweets than in their least engaging tweets, and banks again offer opposite results.

Related to *interest* (IN), no statistically significant differences exist in general or industry-wise, despite the exception of banks, which use more interest elements in their most engaging tweets than in their least engaging tweets. UPS offer opposite results. In terms of strategies, technology industry uses more and banks less encouraging (in2) in their most engaging tweets than in their least engaging tweets, as well as banks use more linking (in3) in their most engaging tweets than in their least engaging tweets. Company-wise, for instance, whilst HSBC promotes availability interest (in1) more in the most engaging tweets than in the least engaging tweets, IBM and FedEx offer opposite results.

In terms of *liking* (LI), no statistically significant differences exist in general, industry-wise, or company-wise, despite the exception of technology industry, which use fewer liking elements in their most engaging tweets than in their least engaging tweets. At the level of strategies, many differences exist. In general, the most engaging tweets feature contributions to the society (li3) and share historical stories (li4) more and further others (li6) less than the least engaging tweets do. Industry-wise, conglomerate offers similar results in terms of featuring contributions to the society (li3) and furthering others (li6), whilst logistics and banks exhibit collaboration (li5) more in their most engaging than in their least engaging tweets. Company-wise, for instance, IBM and UPS honor people (li1) more in their most engaging tweets than in their least engaging tweets, whilst Microsoft and HSBC do the opposite; and HSBC furthers others (li6) more in their most engaging tweets than in their least engaging tweets, whilst Microsoft and Siemens do the opposite.

Related to *preference* (PR), the most engaging tweets in general, in the conglomerate industry, and in the tweets by IBM, use more preference elements than the least engaging tweets do. At the level of strategies, the most engaging tweets express positioning (pr1) more often than the least engaging tweets do. GE and Siemens offer similar results, the last also highlighting superiority (pr2) more often in their most engaging than in their least engaging tweets.

In terms of *conviction* (CO), the most engaging tweets in general, and in the technology and conglomerate industries, use more conviction elements than the least engaging tweets do. Citibank does the opposite, yet all its tweets focused either on troubleshooting or employers' praise of the company on the Take Our Children to Work day. At the level of

strategies, the most engaging tweets in general and by conglomerate and technology industries endorse benefits (co1) more than the least engaging tweets do. Citibank does the opposite. Logistics industry promotes safety (co2) more in their most engaging than in their least engaging tweets.

In terms of *purchase* (PU), no statistically significant differences exist in general or industry-wise. Company-wise, Microsoft and Siemens post more purchase elements in their most engaging tweets than in their least engaging tweets. At the level of strategies, conglomerate industry, specifically Siemens, encourage purchase (pu1) more often in their most engaging tweets than in their least engaging tweets.

5. Discussion

The objective of this research was to increase understanding about B2B company-led user engagement on social media content. To reach the objective, we integrated the extant B2B advertising and social media research with help of the HoE theory and tested the framework empirically with Twitter data. We aimed to answer the questions: How can HoE theory be used to integrate the exiting B2B advertising and social media research in terms of content objectives, strategies, and tactics? and How can HoE theory help to explain the differences between the most and least engaging tweets of the world's leading companies in different industries in terms of content objectives, strategies, and tactics? Our empirical examination centered on two data sets of tweets collected from the world's leading B2B companies.

In terms of the first question, we revealed that HoE theory offers valuable insights and underlying explanations regarding the integration of B2B advertising and social media research. The definitions of Lavidge and Steiner (1961) for six objectives, covering cognitive, affective, and conative aspects and their respective strategies (Glover et al., 1989) mainly help identify tactics from each research stream for each category. However, we needed additional insights from branding (e.g., Keller, 1993), sociological (Lewis & Weigert, 1985), and psychological (Schiefele, 1991) research in order to justify and revise some aspects for the modern world. We revealed that categorizing content tactics into *style*, *item*, and *interpretative* aspects was essential as the first aspect cannot be categorized in this kind of framework. Our empirical examination revealed the need to include objective *interest* and to extend the objective *knowledge* so that it contains *trust* as well. The former originates from HoE theories, and the latter is line with social media research (Holliman & Rowley, 2014), thus reflecting the contemporary communication environment. Additionally, although many tactics and strategies were in line with existing research (e.g. Bolat et al., 2016) several new tactics and strategies emerged from the data, and we renamed some existing strategies to fit the modern environment. With these modifications, the HoE helped us to integrate the existing B2B advertising and social media research.

In relation to the second question, *awareness*, *knowledge and trust*, *interest*, and *liking* are objectives which exist in the majority of both the most and least engaging tweets, whilst *preference*, *conviction*, and *purchase* were expressed much less. The role of *awareness* is in line with the existing social media research, which shows that the main content objective is creating awareness (e.g., Andersson & Wikström, 2017; Michaelidou et al., 2011). *Awareness* also covers the majority of the tactics we revealed from the existing research. The importance of *interest* is in line with Wijaya (2015) who proposes that information search along with interest is an essential aspect related to social media. The finding is mostly in line with B2B advertising research (Glover et al., 1989; Hartley & Patti, 1988), which has revealed that *awareness, knowledge, liking,* and *purchase* are the most typical advertising objectives for B2B companies. The role of *purchase* differs, yet our findings are in line with researchers (Holliman & Rowley, 2014; Swani et al., 2013) who propose that social media posts are more effective if they avoid "hard sell" or explicitly commercial statements.

Additionally, we revealed that the most engaging tweets use *awareness* (cognitive), *preference*(affective), and *conviction* (conative) elements more than the least engaging tweets. The role of *awareness* is understandable (as explained above), but the importance of the *preference* and *conviction* elements is somehow surprising because they are the least-used objectives and least common results in B2B ads (Hartley & Patti, 1988) and they are rare in the content tactics of the existing B2B social media research. A detailed examination showed that the use of these elements is typical in the tweets by companies in the conglomerate category and the first among technology companies. These companies operate in the competitive product business, which explains their aims of convincing the audience of the excellence of the products and getting people to prefer them. The finding relates to the findings by Leek et al. (2017) who revealed that company type influences the degree of engagement. We propose that neither the company type nor the preference and conviction tactics themselves are the *reasons* for the engagement numbers of the tweet: although the tactics were found from tweets in specific industry, these tweets also contained various other objectives, including *awareness, knowledge and trust, interest,* and *liking*; for example, Siemens tweeted about trade shows and GE described the performance of their new wind turbines. These tweets are success examples of how B2B companies attract various heterogeneous content receivers (Andersson & Wikström, 2017; Brown & Brucker, 1976), thereby reaching buyers who are not normally reached by salespeople (Brown et al., 2007). A detailed discussion about the strategies is beyond this study.

6. Implications

6.1. Theoretical implications

Our study offers four contributions to the extant research. First, we offer a holistic model for content objectives, strategies, and tactics by integrating the extant B2B advertising and social media research with help of HoE theory. Glover et al. (1989) proposed strategies for the six objectives of Lavidge and Steiner (1961), and both B2B advertising (Lohtia et al., 1995) and social media content (e.g. Bolat et al., 2016; Swani et al., 2013, 2014) researchers provide a variety of aspects that an effective ad or engaging social media content contains, but research neither considers these aspects as tactics by which strategies are carried out nor has studied the respective tactics for each strategy. Our study fills these gaps, thereby giving an overall strategic picture for company-led user engagement (Kozinets, 2014) that has been lacking and has thus hindered the progress of social media content research.

Second, we add *interest* as the seventh objective to Lavidge and Steiner's (1961) model due to the need identified in our empirical examination. Although HoE has attracted research interest for over a century and *interest* has been an essential part of other models such as AIDA, it is excluded from the model by Lavidge and Steiner (1961). This is understandable, as *awareness*, *knowledge* and *interest* are all concepts related to cognition and thus difficult to differentiate. Yet, by providing definitions and explanations from psychology (Schiefele, 1991), we justified its importance and place among the objectives. Third, we add *trust building* as a parallel strategy to *knowledge*. Previous research has considered these different concepts, but taking the contemporary nature of social media into account and building on sociological research on cognitive trust (Lewis & Weigert, 1985), we justified their interconnectedness and revealed that companies can try to increase users' trust by sharing pre-emptive information and thereby offering users good reasons to trust them. Fourth, we differentiate style, item, and interpretative content aspects. Style aspects—such as layout (Hanssens & Weitz, 1980) and copy length (e.g. Chamblee & Sandler)—are widely examined in B2B advertising research, but these do not express benefits, as required by the strategy framework of Glover et al. (1989). We introduce unambiguously expressed and easily recognized *item* aspects, such as company/brand name (e.g., Cutler & Javalgi, 1994), and *interpretative* aspects that may contain hidden meanings and

thus require understanding the tactic at hand in a wider context.

6.2. Managerial implications

The study offers managers a detailed platform with which to plan their social media content. The study helps managers to see what kind of strategies and tactics they can use to reach each of the objectives. Additionally, the study helps managers to plan the tactics on the basis of whether they want to reach cognitive, affective, or conative influences with their content. There is no one solution to using content objectives, strategies, and tactics to gain user engagement on social media, but rather, companies gain user engagement by using a variety of different kinds of objectives and strategies in their posts.

6.3. Limitations and further studies

Despite the novel contributions above, the study has some limitations. We analyzed the tweets with a qualitatively-focused interpretative approach. As interpretation and meanings are subjective, other researchers might conclude with different results. However, we discussed many times during our research process in order to ensure that we agreed on the meanings interpreted from the data. We also tried to make our analysis paths as visible as possible. Additionally, we only focused on tweet content and excluded links from our analyses. This may influence the results, as sometimes users may like or retweet a tweet on the basis of the linked content, not because of the content of the tweet. Our quantitative analyses were based on whether a tactic existed or not in a tweet. Calculating how often each tactic is shown in a tweet might conclude in different results. Social media is full of different kinds of platforms, and we focused on one only. Therefore, our results should be generalized with caution to any other platform.

As this study focuses on the publicly visible Twitter posts of only ten companies, further research could focus on examining the phenomenon empirically with a larger data set, in different social media contexts, or in closed networks. These could offer novel insights into user engagement and online relationship management, which is an aspect this study was unable to cover. In addition, as B2B companies have different kinds of stakeholder groups, including potential and existing customers and employees, shareholders, investors, suppliers, regulators, and community groups (Andersson & Wikström, 2017). Further research could focus on interpreting B2B social media content targeted at different stakeholders and/or in different social media accounts, both individually and by comparing their contents.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2019.03.001.

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