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## Identification of influence in social media communities

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**Abstract:** Individual usage of social media is expected to have a growing impact on the corporate reputation of organisations. Influential users of social media can disseminate positive or negative information and opinions about products, services, brands or businesses among members of their online networks in the social media spaces. The impact of such actions can often be substantial; negative information and opinions posted in social networks, blogs, online communities and forums has the potential to reach large numbers of people and substantially impact on the organisation's image and reputation. It is important for organisations to identify the online influencers – customers with important social networking impact – and identify ways to interact with them in order to respond efficiently to bad publicity or customer attacks. This study, based on extensive literature review and experts panel study based on the Delphi method, we construct a model identifying the social media influencers and the impact of these influencers on the corporate reputation.

**Keywords:** web-based communities; social media; interaction patterns; corporate reputation; social influencers; Delphi-study.

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## **1 Introduction**

The social media – interactive online applications allowing the creation and dissemination of customer-generated content as well as the creation of personal social networks – have become a growing and very successful phenomenon during the last years. Hundreds of millions of users daily view and update Facebook profiles, send tweets, write or react to blogs, upload or watch YouTube videos. There are indicators that the value of social media applications has raised to many trillions of dollars (Trusov et al., 2010). The important role of the social media for the life of many people is one of the main reasons for organisations to pay attention to this relatively new phenomenon (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Marketing practitioners try to understand the roles and possibilities of the social media as marketing instruments and integrate them into their marketing programmes (Constantinides, 2010). They test different social platforms and make considerations on what types of social media fit best within the policies and strategies of the company (Waters et al., 2009).

Given the growth of social media and their networking power, the influence of one individual on the corporate reputation can be – especially within online social communities – substantial (Kioussis et al., 2007). Besides the use of social media as customer engagement tools, more and more companies also recognise the importance of social media monitoring, so as to 'listen' to customer voice and interactions on social media (Constantinides and Fountain, 2008; Pang and Lee, 2008). Negative voices in the social media can lead to an oil slick of negative publicity, which is difficult to handle (Gillan and Gianforte, 2012). On the other side, positive voices of product or brand advocates can improve the corporate reputation. Therefore, the combination of monitoring and engagement becomes a necessary element of reputation management.

Tracking the social media customer voice is a real challenge. One alternative to following the whole social space is to focus on the most vocal customers within communities of interest, habits, who by all means are also important influencers. It is

therefore important for organisations to not only follow closely what is said about their organisation, but also identify the main sources of customer voice and the way this is disseminated. We define this behaviour within the social media as 'community behaviour', where certain individuals can have a significant impact in their social network. This study has two main objectives: To identify indicators that make a social media user an influential actor within customer communities. Besides that the study will attempt to assess the impact of social media used by individual actors on corporate reputation.

This study is valuable for contemporary organisations engaged in social media marketing and communication strategies. The scientific value of this research is the identification of the indicators behind the influence of actors, but also the identification of the sources that make an actor influential like interaction patterns and social network structure. Therefore we look to the influence as a concept not only determined by the characteristics of an individual; factors associated with the interactions and the network of an individual are also of great importance in such 'influence processes'. There is therefore a clear distinction in this study between the three parameters of influence; actors, interactions and networks.

## **2 Theoretical framework**

Up to recently there has been little research attention paid to the relation between individual web-participation and the corporate reputation of organisations (Barnett et al., 2006). The emergence and rapid expansion of the social media has drawn increasing attention to this issue. Among other things the social media allow users to share thoughts and experiences about organisations. Such social media generated customer voice can affect the corporate reputation within communities, networks, forums and blogs and this makes the networked consumer a factor to reckon with. According to Gotsi and Wilson (2001), corporate reputation is defined as: "...a stakeholder's overall evaluation of a company over time. This evaluation is based on the stakeholder's direct experiences with the company, any other form of communication and symbolism that provides information about the firm's actions and/or a comparison with the actions of other leading rivals". Depending on the size of its social network and the authority every social media user has some degree of social influence on other users. As Van Riel (2004) stated, the reputation of an organisation is determined by concerned citizens.

Social media applications make markets more transparent since customers exchange product information, advices to others based on personal experiences from the product or service usage and product recommendations. Such information affluence and transparency has given customers a lot of power resulting in increasing customer mistrust on corporate communication and product or services claims (Bart et al., 2005).

In this context important questions for marketers operating in today's markets are: what makes a person more influential than another person? Is there any difference between social influence in the online social domain and the influence in social psychology (offline social domain)? Organisations have the feeling that individuals in the social media domain have a major role in influencing the corporate reputation and there is plenty of anecdotal evidence supporting this belief (Gillin and Gilmore, 2012). The question of who is the owner of a brand is widely discussed in practitioner circles. The

identification of social influence and influencers within the social media is an important and valuable piece of information for organisations.

Researchers have different opinions about the definition of the term 'social media'. The term was introduced around 2003, the moment that social networks became more popular. For that reason social networks and social media are often confused. To see this distinction, it is important to see social media as an umbrella term for online social places. Where social media is defined as "a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological multi-faceted and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content" [Kaplan and Haenlein, (2010), p.61]. Social networks are the most widely known applications fitting to this definition. But a common characteristic of a social network is the sense of community. Other applications are: blogs (Blogger, WordPress), joint projects (Wikipedia), content communities (YouTube, Flickr), virtual social worlds (Second Life), and virtual game worlds (World of Warcraft) (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010), online forums, bulletin boards and review sites (Quora, Epinions, TripAdvisor, Personal Democracy forum Europe) or content aggregators (paper.li, InnoCentive, iGoogle) (Constantinides and Fountain, 2008; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

Within the social media we can identify different types of interactions. Analysis of these interactions leads to recognition of certain patterns: social media interaction patterns. This indicates that individuals within the social media communicate with each other according to specific patterns. The categories determining influence in social media interaction patterns, the so-called actors, interactions and networks are of great importance (Golder et al., 2006). Within these categories we distinguish different indicators that determine and predict influence within the social media.

## *2.1 Corporate communication*

One of the main objectives of corporate communication is to influence stakeholders but within the corporate communication three streams of activity can be distinguished; management communication (Jo and Shim, 2005), marketing communication (Zeithalm, 1988) and organisational communication (Eisenberg, 1984). Management communication refers to internal communication within an organisation. The marketing communication makes use of different communication channels line advertising, public relations and direct marketing (Naik and Piersma, 2002; Kotler and Pfoertsch, 2006) and it is meant for customers or potential customers, while the organisation communication is focused on recruitment (Taylor and Bergmann, 1987), crisis communication (Ulmer and Sellnow, 2000) and webcare (Van Noort and Willemsen, 2011).

According to Oomens and Van den Bosch (1999) and Ihator (2001), it is possible to distinguish two main communication types: proactive communication and reactive communication. The goal of proactive communication is actively seeking contact with consumers in, e.g., online communities, while the goal of reactive communications is reacting to a message of a consumer. Within the domains of corporate communication mentioned earlier (crisis communication, public relations, direct marketing, webcare, corporate advertising and recruitment) these two types of communication are common to most of them. Crisis communication is for example both reactive and proactive, citizens asked questions about a certain situation, for example an explosion, and the organisation

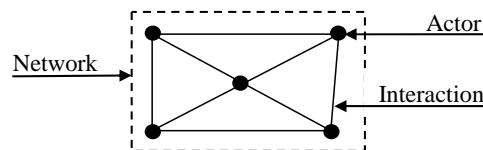
gave an answer to these questions. However, it is also possible to give updates about the explosion.

## 2.2 Social influence

According to the literature, social influence is: “consciously or subconsciously persuading others from your thoughts, beliefs or actions” (Kahan, 1997). Influencing another person depends on several different factors. Someone can be for example influential because of his authority, because of his social status or because of his large network. Based on these different reasons of influence there are three categories in defining social influence: actors (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; Cosmas and Sheth, 1980; Keys and Case, 1990; Weimann, 1991), interactions (Sternthal et al., 1978; Hass, 1981) and networks (Cosmas and Sheth, 1980; Ibarra and Andrews, 1993).

According to the actor network theory (Callon and Law, 1982) the three categories in social influence are interwoven with each other. The actor (a human or non-human entity) uses an interaction to affect others in a network: their thoughts, beliefs or actions (Figure 1). These three categories have also the capability of independently exercising influence. We have influential actors, influential interactions and influential networks, each one independently from the rest.

**Figure 1** Actor network theory



Source: Callon and Law (1982)

## 2.3 Influential actors

The emergence of word-of-mouth communication (WOM, or word-of-mouth advertising) via social media has a major impact on business (Jones et al., 2009). It is difficult for organisations to influence this form of communication that can impair or enhance the reputation of a brand, product or service. Kiss and Bichler (2008) recognise the importance of WOM and point to the impact of specific individuals in this form of communication, the ‘influencers’. According to a recent study 58% of the marketers deem the role of online influencers to be large to very large while 55% of marketers indicated that they have no or limited understanding of the identification of the online influencers (Lewis PR, 2011). Research by Gillin (2008) states that the concept of influencers has made a new turn, which ensures that the normal citizen has influence in different processes. The influential people in the conventional world are not necessarily the most influential people in the digital world (Citera, 1998; Keller and Berry, 2003; Gillin, 2008). The study of Citera shows that people who were quite introverted in everyday life, turned out to be very extravert on the internet; they dare to openly express their opinion and take the lead in online conversations. This extraversion is particularly evident in online communities, where shy people can show their knowledge and expertise without coming in visual contact with others.

Influential actors are not always persons, actors could also be classified as companies or other instances. In this study we mainly focus on influential individuals, the influencers. Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), pioneers of research in the field of influence, define influencers as people who influence others in their vicinity. Their status of 'influencer' gave them the power to speed-up the information distribution (Kitsak et al., 2010). According to Bakshy et al. (2011), it is in any case important to make a distinction between different kinds of influencers, to identify influence within the social media. For example not only the stereotypical famous people like Barack Obama, but also the people who are closer to you such as your friends or acquaintances, could be influential. According to Gladwell (2001), there is a distinction between three types of influential people:

- 1 connectors
- 2 salesmen
- 3 mavens.

A connector is characterised as a person with many connections, a salesman is able to sell everything that is within reach and the maven is characterised by his expertise in a particular field. But since influencers appear in many different capacities, it is insufficient to limit the discussion to only three different types of influencers. Different personal or behavioural characteristics of influencers also result in different types of influencers.

The literature points to several different indicators for identifying an influencer's potential. Keller and Berry (2003) point to indicators related to influencing characteristics of individuals: active minds, trendsetters, social presence and impact. Other indicators of influencing capacity which both are qualitative and quantitative are: social activity (Bottger, 1984; Littlepage et al., 1995), charisma (Bass, 1997; Shamir and Howell, 1999), expertise (Cosmas and Sheth, 1980), communication (Keys and Case, 1990), power (Kadushin, 1968), authority (Cialdini, 2007), shared interests (Cha et al., 2010), uniqueness (Iyengar et al., 2009), creation of follow-up activities (Keller and Berry, 2003), innovativeness (Agarwal and Liu, 2008), awareness (Gillin, 2008), personal messages (Cha et al., 2008) and amount of followers/friends (Cha et al., 2010, Kwak et al., 2010).

## *2.4 Influential interactions*

A sociological definition of an interaction is given by Jensen (1998, p.188) who describes an interaction as "the relationship between two or more people who, in a given situation, mutually adapt their behavior and actions to each other". Reports, messages and dialogues are terms usually associated with interaction. According to Bales (1955) and Hass (1981), the communicative power of a person largely depends on interactions. Social interaction is one of the most common motives for using the internet and the introduction of social media strengthened this attitude. Current research to influential processes in digital media is often focused on the analysis of social networks. But the value of interactions in influential processes is often underestimated. Within the social media the role of interactions in identifying social media influence is important. Social interactions through online applications differ from offline interactions due to the lesser importance of physical appearance and physical proximity of the sender (McKenna and Bargh, 2000). As a result, the introvert people and people who experience social anxiety

and loneliness tend to use the social web to assuage their real-worlds isolation (Correa et al., 2010). An online community is for that reason a better representation of the knowledge and expertise present in the world, than offline communities.

The influence of an interaction can be measured with different indicators. Karpf (2008) studied the influence of interactions in the context of weblogs. He created the blogosphere authority index (BAI) and made in this index a distinction between four different criteria to test contributions on influence:

- 1 network centrality score
- 2 hyperlink authority score
- 3 site traffic score
- 4 community activity score.

The network centrality score (1) measures the reputation of an individual. Is he a central person in a network or just someone with a limited number of contacts? The hyperlink authority score (2) measures the amount of links to a blog as a criterion for influence. The site traffic score (3) measures the amount of website visitors. The community activity score (4) is a score that is connected to the number of interactions that evokes from a blog. Other indicators for the influence of social interactions are context (Maheswaran and Meyers-Levy, 1990), argumentation (Hunter, 2004), emotional situation (Forgas, 2007), agenda setting (McQuail and Windahl, 1993), framing (Esser and Spanier, 2005) and timing (Kovoor-Misra and Nathan, 2000).

## 2.5 Influential networks

Network analysis of one individual is a complex task since individuals do not live in a vacuum with only a few clear and stable connections. An individual usually broadens its horizon thus creating a large network. The rise of social networking sites (SNS) allows the creation of large personal networks since here are almost no barriers to connect with other people; connecting in online networks is simple, a push on a button connects a new person to the network. A large network is often a form of status, so people are busy trying to boost the network with new connections (Cha et al., 2010). Many relatively unknown friends, the so-called weak ties of Granovetter (1973), clearly emerge. The weak ties offer individuals the opportunity to spread a message to a wide network. Nevertheless, there are just a few differences between the influence of a social network in the social media and a social network in the social psychology.

Van Dijk (1991) describes a network as follows: "a network is a connection between at least three elements, points or units". This definition applies to physical networks, social networks and media networks. The focus in this study is on the social networks within which individual actors can influence others. These networks consist of individuals and relations as described in the paper of Christakis et al. (2009). The degree of influence of individuals derives mainly from the network in which they live. A characteristic situation where the influence of an individual is clear we observe in viral marketing. In this marketing technique, a message is spread as an epidemic (Subramani and Rajagopalan, 2003). The network in which the influencer is currently located and the characteristics of the influencer itself have an important role in the spread of information. Indicators which in different studies were associated with influential social networks are:

the social distance between two actors (Granovetter, 1973), reciprocity (Tichy et al., 1979), multiplexity (Tichy et al., 1979), size of the network (Perkins and Syrquin, 1989), density (Tichy et al., 1979; Scott, 1987), connectivity (Lindelauf, 2011), centrality (Lindelauf, 2011), emotional value (Ellison et al., 2007), group cohesion (Aviv et al., 2003) and clustering (Mislove et al., 2007).

The indicators of influence described above are validated by a Delphi study amongst an online expert panel. The indicators are pointed to the three different categories within social influence: actors, interactions and networks. In the Delphi study these categories will be filled with other indicators likely to emerge that predict or determine the influence within those categories and then within the social media.

## **2.6 Research questions**

The previous analysis of literature identifies two areas where there is a gap of knowledge. These two areas result in the following two research questions that express the focus of this paper.

- 1 How could influence within the social media be identified?
- 2 What is the impact of social media on corporate communications and the reputation of organisations?

## **3 Methodology**

In order to answer the two research questions an online expert panel in the form of a Delphi study has been used (Dalkey and Helmer, 1963), whereby the participants should come to consensus about the topic of influence within the social media. Compared to other research methods in this particular study, the online Delphi method has a number of clear advantages. First of all, it is less time-consuming for the participants and the researchers because the participants can at the same time answer the in-depth questions even simultaneously. Another advantage of the Delphi study is the fact that the data is readily available online; processing the data takes less time than in offline depth interviews, and the chance of errors is very low. In essence an online Delphi Study is an expert study in two or more rounds; the first round gives input for the second round and the second round gives the participating experts the chance to give a reaction on the answers in the first round. In a third round it is possible to generate an anonymous discussion between the participants. In this research, we use the two-rounded Delphi study of Dean et al. (2000).

The reason of using the Delphi approach, is the fact that this study prevents a tunnel vision (Kvale, 1996) since every participant can give input in the concept of social media influence, without interference of others. The fact that influence can be seen from different perspectives makes it logical that more insights in more contexts arise. The second round ensures that these different insights result in a comprehensive view of social media influence, with the individual differences polished.

The study was carried out by with the participation of twelve marketing and communication professionals in the first round and eighteen professionals in the second round. These professionals have more than ten years of experience in their field of work. The participants were first briefed with a whitepaper with global information about the



research. The different goals of the research were not revealed to them, in order to prevent that the participants are affected in advance. The first round was an open question questionnaire; the participants could give their insights in their own words on influence indicators. The answers were analysed by the researcher and tallied on the number of the same indicators. The most mentioned indicators were used in the second round. Besides identifying the indicators participants were asked to give their insight about the role of social media influence on corporate communication and reputation.

In study steps were the following:

- 1 Selection of the expert panel.
- 2 Preparation and distribution of the first open-end questionnaire.
- 3 Completed questionnaires received were analysed and the results were categorised.
- 4 Preparation and distribution of the second closed questionnaire.
- 5 Comparison and categorisation of suggestions and processing of results, in order to achieve consensus.
- 6 Writing a detailed summary for the participants.

### *3.1 First round*

Questions which were asked are: ‘what makes one influential in social media?’, ‘what makes the message influential?’ and ‘what makes the social network influential?’ The professionals gave several characteristics which were related to the three categories: ‘actor’, ‘interaction’ and ‘network’. These characteristics, indicators in the rest of this study, could be divided into two groups:

- 1 intrinsic characteristics
- 2 extrinsic characteristics.

The intrinsic characteristics such as being a trendsetter are difficult to measure, the extrinsic characteristic such as the number of friends are better quantifiable. The results of this first round were analysed, categorised and synthesised as input for the second round with closed questions.

### *3.2 Second round*

In the second round the goal was to find consensus about the concept social media influence, especially on the different indicators. The structure of the questions in the second round was in the form of propositions and hypotheses that were merged with the indicators identified in the literature. Each question started with a sentence, which should be complemented with possible indicators. The participants had to indicate (on a five points Likert-scale) to what extent they agreed with the accuracy of these indicators and were asked whether they think that the indicators were measurable in the social media. An example question: “the message (data exchange) of an online influencer has more influence when...” This statement was supplemented with different indicators like “he has expertise in a certain area”. Beside that the participants should answer some questions about whether they expect actors influenced the corporate communication and reputation.

The mean and median are used to give value to the extent to which an indicator determines influence. As in the study of Hasson et al. (2000), this form of analysis gives the most reliable analytical results in a Delphi study. The fact that an indicator has a lower mean proves that this indicator is insufficient in determining the influence of an actor within the social media.

## **4 Results**

The focus of this study was not only about influence in social networks, but on social media in general: Forums, blogs, Twitter or Facebook, each form of social media was included in the study. Marketing and communication professionals seem to have different views on 'social media influence'. Several new indicators were identified are the result of this wide scope of research.

### *4.1 Results of the first question round*

In the first round twelve of the twelve invited professionals participated. The open answers were interpreted and tallied, if an answer was encountered more than four times, it was included in the second round of questions. The primary objective of the first round was to pool the different views of the participants regarding influence within the social media.

The experts were exposed to three characteristics of influential actors, interactions and networks. A striking result is that the twelve participants look in a different way to the online influencers. One finds the intrinsic characteristics important, such as knowledge, commitment, trust etcetera. While the other believes the size of the network or the reach of a message determines the influence. In order to prevent that a result is send in one direction it was chosen to make the questions in the first round as broadly interpretable as possible. In the second round these different perceptions should lead to joint consensus on the indicators.

### *4.2 Results of the second round*

The participants received a questionnaire based on the analysis, and categorisation of the answers they gave in the first round. The questionnaire was sent among the twelve participants in the first round; ten of them fully participated in the second round. The answers were evaluated for consensus. The higher the consensus, the more the participants could identify with the indicators in the three categories: actors, interactions and networks. Two participants have answered the questions regarding the influential actors. In addition, six professionals who were not able to participate in the first round took part in the second round. The total number of participants in the second round was therefore sixteen, plus the two participants who completed the first part. The questionnaire was divided into four parts. The first part consisted of questions regarding the influential actors, the second part of influential interactions, the third part of influential networks and the last part of questions regarding the role that social media plays in influencing the corporate reputation.

Indicators that were mentioned regarding the influential actors are:

- 1 being an active mind
- 2 being credible
- 3 has expertise
- 4 has authority
- 5 is a trendsetter
- 6 has substantive influence in discussions and conversations.

The influence of an interaction largely depends of

- 1 the amount of times a message has been shared
- 2 the amount of reactions a message raises
- 3 the amount of quotes a message raises
- 4 the amount of personal reactions an interaction raises
- 5 the click-through rate of a message
- 6 the amount of readers/listeners which were reached
- 7 the quality of interactions
- 8 the relevance of a message for readers/listeners
- 9 the message has throughput with traditional media
- 10 the message evokes a large group of unique visitors
- 11 the message provides an additional value.

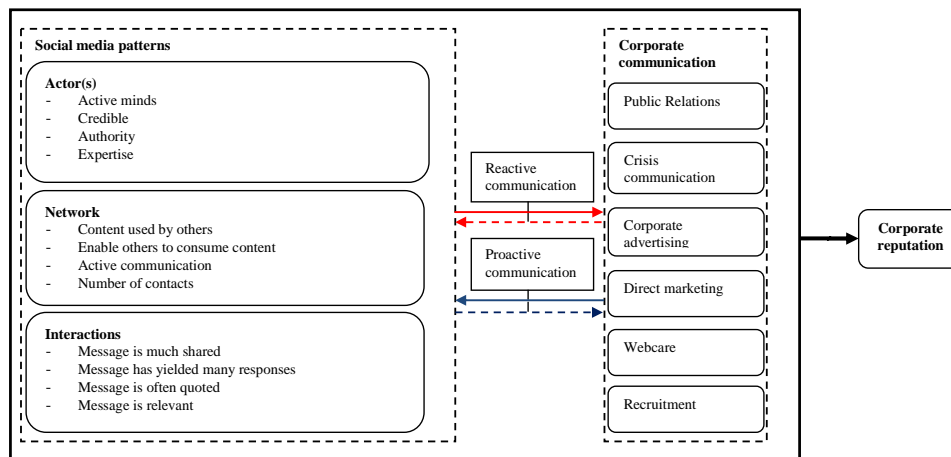
An actor has influence in a network if:

- 1 the message was shared outside the own network
- 2 if content is used by others in the network
- 3 if the actor has a large number of good contacts
- 4 if the actor can activate others to read a message
- 5 if the actor actively communicates with others
- 6 if the actor has a number of subtop-influencers in the network
- 7 if a message is shared within the own network
- 8 if the actor has many contacts
- 9 if the actor shows great commitment
- 10 if the speed at which a message is shared/used within a network is high.

Figure 2 presents the top four indicators related to the three different categories, these can be seen in the first column, this is also the descriptive side of the model; the rest of the model is an effect model (Vollenbroek et al., 2013). The descriptive side of the model is related to the first research question that was related to the identification of influence

within the social media. The overall model is an effect model and is related to the second research question. Influential actors, interactions and networks have a major impact on the corporate communication of an organisation. According to the participants the use of social media by organisations has a positive impact on managing the reputation of the organisations, which also has an important role for the online influencers. They offer organisations an additional opportunity to strengthen the corporate reputation.

**Figure 2** Social media corporate reputation influencers (see online version for colours)



Source: Vollenbroek et al. (2013)

## 5 Main findings and conclusions

In recent years, an increasing number of methods and tools have been developed to measure the influence of individuals in social media environments; In this study we conducted an explorative analysis to the quantitative and qualitative characteristics related to social media influencers, by conducting a Delphi study on the basis of an extensive literature review. We found that actors, interactions and networks are the three important parameters in social media influence. The qualitative and quantitative variables associated with social media influencers were identified. Based on the research results we can draw conclusions concerning the different determinants for identifying influencers. First, we identify the way influencers disseminate information and the way the receivers respond to this influence. The transmitter (influential actor) exercises influence by virtue of his or her expertise and authority. The receiver evaluates this message and executes an action for example by spreading the word (influential interaction) among his or her network (influential network). This is the main reason why we have made a distinction between influential actors, influential interactions and influential networks. Within these three categories different indicators could be clearly identified.

Coming back to the first research question (How could influence within the social media be identified?), we can conclude that influence within the social media can be identified by 27 indicators, based on the consensus in the assessment on the Likert-scale the participants have given in the Delphi study. However, we focus on the

top-10 indicators that have the highest value for the identification of behavioural influence within the social media. Influence in the social media increases – in order of importance – if:

- 1 a message is often shared
- 2 a message evokes many responses
- 3 a message is widely quoted
- 4 a message is used by many others
- 5 the actor is an active mind
- 6 the message is credible
- 7 the actor has high impact on others
- 8 the actor is an authority
- 9 the actor has expertise in a particular field
- 10 a message evokes many personal responses.

It should be taken into account that as soon as the value of an indicator increases or decreases, the influence of the actor also increases or decreases. It is important to build various indices to express the influence value more precisely, especially within the different social media. An actor who has authority and high expertise, whose messages are often shared and who evokes many responses for example has more influence than an actor who has no authority or expertise, whose messages never has been shared, but who has many contacts. An index of these different situations makes it possible to compare the actors with each other.

Looking to the second research question (What is the impact of social media on corporate communications and the reputation of organisations?) we can argue on the basis of the opinions of the participants in the Delphi study that the impact of social media on corporate communications and reputation can be substantial. On the other hand a correct and conscious treatment of social media influencers can prevent reputation damage and affect the corporate reputation in a positive way; the Delphi study confirms that social media influencers affect the corporate reputation. For that reason, we can conclude that the presence of social media influencers will only strengthen the corporate reputation, because they were believed by the followers.

## 6 Discussion

In this paper, we came to a descriptive and effect model where influence within the social media was identified with several indicators and where this social media influence was related to the reputation of an organisation.

The descriptive side of the model is in the first place important for social media monitoring tools, because it can be the basis of an algorithm that shows which actors, interactions or networks (or a combination of the categories) is most influential in a certain corporate communication context. Marketing- and communication professionals could use the score based on the algorithm in their choice for the communication with an

influential actor, interaction or network. Such scores could play a key role in customer service, crisis management or maybe for example corporate advertising.

Future research should lead to an improvement of the 'social media corporate reputation influencers model'. An important issue for future research is a study to the construction of indices. Each indicator in this research has its unique, individual value in the determination and prediction of influence within the social media. However, the value of coupled indicators (called an index) is much more valuable. For example, if the word of an individual is shared a lot and this individual has also a lot of contacts, it has more influence than when he has only a lot of contacts. In the future it is recommended to improve this model by constructing indices that will allow the identification of the most influential social media users or brand ambassadors. Such indices will therefore provide help in cases of reputation damage due to bad publicity, product problems or bad customer experiences of any kind. Identification of social media influencers and engagement of such agent during a reputation crisis or a customer social media attack can help resolving the problem (Gillin and Gianforte, 2012).

In the future, each type of corporate communication toolbox should include several such indices.

Another point for a future research is that a similar study cannot be conducted among marketing- and communication professionals. but identify the social media influence from the perspective of the social media user. How influencers within a certain community affect their network or other users?

A limitation of this study is the limited sample size of the Delphi study. The limited size of participants can lead to the assumption that not all indicators that apply to social media influence have been identified. Furthermore it is not possible with this limited sample size to do a reliability analysis on the results of the second question round. The results from the first and second round of questions can only be interpreted by the researcher.

Finally, it is difficult to prove at this stage causal relation between the influence within the social media and the impact on the corporate reputation. The marketing- and communication professionals suggest that there is a relation, but more empirical research is needed in order to obtain a more reliable evidence of the relation to social media influence and the positive or negative corporate reputation.

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