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**The Role of Online Brand Community and Social Networks in  
Corporate Brand Development: A focus on the machinery  
equipment industry**

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# Strategic Brand Management: Master Papers

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## **Abstract**

**Purpose** – This paper aims to explore online brand communities on social media platforms, built by B2B companies in the machinery equipment industry, and how these virtual spaces can contribute to relationship marketing and corporate brand building.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper adopts both literature review and a multiple case study approach of two companies, Caterpillar and John Deere, in order to provide in-depth understanding and new insights. The data consists of the analysis of both companies' three main social networks, Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn.

**Findings** – The study shows that there are specific benefits for B2B companies when using social networks based on the type of channel the firm uses. Besides, building and maintaining brand presence in social networks helps B2B companies raise brand awareness and reinforce the core values for building a strong brand identity.

**Research limitations/Future research** – The limitations of this paper include that only two companies were analyzed using case study research, examining a small sample for data collection. Future research should also acknowledge the company's perspective for insight.

**Theoretical implications** – This paper fulfills the research gap of online brand communities established by B2B companies, especially in the mechanical equipment industry, on social media platforms.

**Practical implications** – This research assists as a guide for managers to take a proactive online response to online brand community members' activity in order to strengthen the relationship between the company and the brand community, as well as facilitate community recruitment.

**Originality/Value** – This study fills a gap in previous research on the contribution of online brand communities and social networks in B2B companies' relationship marketing strategy and corporate brand building

**Keywords** – B2B companies, Online brand community, Social networks, Relationship marketing, Corporate brand building

**Paper type** – Research paper

## Introduction

Price and performance sensitivity is suggested to be critical factors for industrial companies to establish business partnerships (Bendixen, Bukasa & Abratt, 2003). Moreover, an overabundance in the supply of quality goods in highly competitive markets may influence organizational decision making in Business-to-business (B2B) companies, an understanding of the buying process can contribute to a more profitable relationship between firms (Lynch & de Chernatony, 2004). Brand building is beneficial for B2B companies, aiming to enhance the image of the brand by adding value for customers or businesses (Bendixen, Bukasa & Abratt, 2003; Mudambi, Doyle & Wong, 1997). Brands can create an emotional attachment with customers, which potentially mitigates the degree of price sensitivity in their purchasing decision. However, B2B companies in industrial markets favor product branding instead of corporate branding (Kapferer, 2012), despite corporate branding, referring to conveying the firm's core values with all stakeholders. A corporate brand with a positive image can gain customers or business partners' trust, ultimately ensuring long-term relationship establishment (Walley et al., 2007).

A sustainable relationship can bring competitive advantages for business, especially in B2B content (Ellis, 2011). Thus, B2B companies work on building strong relationships with their stakeholders in different ways. Muniz and O'guinn (2001) suggest that the nature of online brand communities being geographicless and gathering people with common interests and strong emotion towards the brand has been widely discussed in the business field, which can enable the companies to build customer relationships. However, the importance of this concept is rarely recognized by B2B companies (McWilliam, 2000), or used inefficiently for them (Fisher, 2019). Moreover, social media, as a key communication tool for companies to connect brands with customers, is widely used in Business-to-Customer (B2C) companies

(Swani & Brown, 2011). Also, B2B companies are suggested to adopt different digital channels aiming to reach more stakeholders (Habibi et al., 2015). However, using social media platforms to strengthen the corporate brand building seems not to be emphasized in industrial companies.

Therefore, this paper aims to analyze online brand communities on social media platforms, built by B2B companies in the machinery equipment industry, and the ways these virtual spaces can contribute to relationship marketing and corporate brand building. According to Statista (2019), Facebook has 2,375 million users, while Twitter followed with 330 million users and LinkedIn with 310 million. Thus, this study will be conducted by analyzing two companies in the machinery industry, which are Caterpillar and John Deere and their presence on the previously mentioned social media platforms. The reason for choosing these two companies is that they have been reviewed as crucial players and pioneers in the machinery equipment industry (Trefis Team, 2019). The authors thus believe that the study of these two companies can potentially bring essential insights for others within the industry on strategic brand building through online brand communities and social networks management.

## Literature review

### *Corporate branding in industrial markets*

According to Kapferer (2012), B2B companies in industrial markets tend to focus their marketing efforts on product branding more than corporate branding. He recognizes there is potential financial value in corporate brand building and brand reputation.

Industrial products have been defined as "products used in manufacturing that are not marketed to the general consuming public" (Mudambi, Doyle & Wong, 1997, p. 435). When it comes to B2B companies in industrial markets, corporate brand building can serve as a strategic competitive advantage in the market. From an organizational perspective, the scope of the brand and its associations go beyond the

product or service (Aaker, 1996). Brand associations can be described as "image dimensions that are unique to a product class or a brand" (Aaker, 1996, p. 111). The importance of a positive image is recognized for building the corporate brand along the value chain and amongst its stakeholders (Bendixen, Bukasa & Abratt, 2003; Walley et al., 2007).

The nature of B2B relationships opens an opportunity for building brand loyalty between customers and suppliers, as in firms seek stability and continuous, reliable quality from their suppliers (de Chernatony & McDonald, 2003). On the other hand, B2B companies can benefit from customer retention and generating customer commitment by establishing an emotional connection between both parties (McEwen, 2004).

#### *Relationship marketing in B2B companies*

Marketing in B2B companies has moved from being the only transaction-focused on a more relationship-focused approach (Ellis, 2011). The concept of Relationship Marketing has at its center, building a long-term relationship with the customer through a more personal interaction (Gummesson, 2002). Relationship Marketing can be considered as "the art of initiating, and maintaining profitable relationships, turning prospects into customers and customers into friends" (Hougaard & Bjerre, 2009, p. 16).

By focusing on strategic relationship building, the company or brand can establish a connection with the customer and build the relationship towards customers being supporters and advocates for the brand (Gummesson, 2002). The Relationship Marketing orientation can also serve as a competitive advantage (Ellis, 2011); B2B companies looking to strengthen their position in the market can benefit from their relationship network by demonstrating their conscious efforts of understanding customers' motivations and meeting their demands (Hougaard & Bjerre, 2009).

Brands have a vital role in the development of relationships with customers. In order for a brand to be successful in the long-term,

customer engagement and loyalty should be strived for (de Chernatony & McDonald, 2003). The willingness of the customer to engage with the brand creates an opportunity for the formation of communities or groups of people that share common interests with other group members, establishing a channel for discussion and participation (Gummesson, 2002). Customers want to start a dialogue with brands, and through the use of social media platforms, the internet has provided a space in which brands can reach customers and vice versa (Kapferer, 2012).

#### *The concept of online communities*

With the Internet plays an essential role in consumers' daily life and the social phenomenon of people being more likely to interact, express and share values in a social context (Mu et al., 2012), the emergence of online communities has provided an appropriate platform for businesses to develop market relationships without geospatial constraints (Kim et al., 2008). Some other benefits of online communities in the business field were discussed from different aspects in previous research. From the perspective of product development, continuous innovation in goods and services derived from customer feedback in online communities was the company's prioritized concern, especially because it can potentially reduce costs for market research (Fisher, 2019) and brand building (Füller, Schroll & Von Hippel, 2013). On the other hand, enhancement of the relationship between the firm and customers was pointed out to strengthen the company's brand development (Zheng et al., 2014).

#### *The concept of online brand communities*

A brand community is identified as a brand-specialized community where it gathers Consumers who are familiar with the brand and are willing to share information, knowledge, and experience to be consistent with brand value (Muniz & O'guinn, 2001; McWilliam, 2000). Online brand communities can strengthen market trade-in the unlimited geographic distance and be compatible with a higher degree of social relationship (Andersen,

2005). In order to examine the functions of an internet-based brand community, he intended to develop a conceptual model with three instruments to find out how the online brand community can benefit corporate branding. Firstly, the online brand community as a relationship hub where it formulates social connections among existing members in the community purposely (Andersen, 2005). To confirm this, competitive advantages such as brand trust, loyalty, value co-creation are likely to be created by managing user relationships in the online brand community (Zheng et al., 2014).

Additionally, another element was discovered to create a valuable recruitment platform for the community. Potential users, professions, and partners joining in are the foundation for community development (Andersen, 2005). E-word-of-mouth (EWOM) can strengthen the participation of new members, which goes hand in hand with a later levels of user involvement (Andersen, 2005). The primary purpose of growing user involvement has been distinguished for maintaining continuous customer interest towards a product, a service, or a brand in a particular community, which is similar to keeping active user engagement with the brand (Andersen, 2005). It is also identified by Zheng et al. (2014) that user engagement plays a vital role as participatory behaviors in the promotion intent mode. It can as well be viewed as a reciprocal connection between brand and users, which highlighted that the more benefits users gained from the community, the higher the level of involvement is likely to be achieved (Zheng et al., 2014). These benefits include not only addressing issues users experience with a brand or a product but, more importantly, fostering the feeling of belonging to a group. It has been confirmed by Kim et al. (2008) that the recognition and sense of belonging acquired when customers interact in a brand community would make them more likely to share the brand values to others in return. This process develops the community as a whole, working to define brand values and further build a profitable brand-oriented community (Muniz & O'guinn, 2001).

Besides, considering social relation capital, Fisher (2019) suggested that online communities should be treated as one of the essential stakeholders that companies should pay attention to. As a result, his findings indicate that company engagement, as a trigger for interaction and communication, is essential to ultimately establish a genuine relationship with its stakeholders in online brand communities.

#### *Online brand communities for B2B companies*

The importance of establishing long-term relationships between buyers and sellers has been emphasized to enhance B2B companies' brand building, in order to result in better marketing performance (Cassia & Magno, 2019). The online brand community - as a critical tool to enhance corporate branding should be adapted to develop relationships in a B2B context. Although previous research has discovered that the purpose of an online brand community in B2B content strategy is to deliberately focus on sharing the technology and users' equipment experience, further long-term relationship objectives should be paid more attention to (McWilliam, 2000). Furthermore, Fisher (2019) suggested that B2C firms are better suited to utilize online brand communities that require direct involvement customers in the relationship-building process, in other words, they are more likely to result in positive connections with the brand.

#### *Social networks and B2B companies*

Regarding the relationship between brands and social media, evidence shows that B2C companies use social media as a powerful communication tool towards brand building more than B2B firms (Swani & Brown, 2011). They claimed the reason lies in B2B marketers' belief that face-to-face communication is essential during the purchasing process. As a result, B2B marketers choose email marketing, white papers, and digital consumers' magazines as the leading course of action (Järvinen et al., 2012). However, with the revolution of technology in digital communications, B2B companies cannot be outsiders any longer. As the nature of B2B

relationships involves a considerable amount of people during the purchasing process, meaning B2B marketers need to strategize messaging and communication channels for each stakeholder (Habibi et al., 2015). For a company to reach a large extent of stakeholders (Gronroos, 1991), social media can be considered a reliable method.

Furthermore, in the age of globalization, brand building has played an essential role for B2B firms, especially in markets where the brand is an implication of trust (Cawsey & Rowley, 2016). Therefore, online brand presence (Cawsey & Rowley, 2016) would be a promising start for a brand-building program in B2B companies (Ohnemus, 2009). Another reason for social media adaptation is the stronger role of the end-user online. The concept of positive communication with end-user might help a firm improve its business, makes B2B marketers look for a convenient and economical way to reach them (Lashgari et al., 2018).

Among social media tools, social networks are the most popularly used until recently. Both B2C and B2B companies adopt Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and YouTube. These sites are considered low-cost media means to enhance the relationship with customers (Rimlinger, 2011).

Facebook is a success story when mentioning social networks. A considerable amount of brands use their Facebook Fan Page for advertising, developing communication, and understanding consumers altogether to build brand loyalty (De Valck, van Bruggen & Wierenga, 2009). Furthermore, Facebook allows brands to target customers according to their interests (Andersson & Wikström, 2017) and maintaining networks on a personal level, which means a company can use Facebook as a tool for expressing their personality and culture less formally (Kvick-Nastaj & Poblete, 2013).

LinkedIn has been considered as the most appropriate social media platform for B2B companies for a long time due to its professional virtual environment. Sarkkinen (2009 cited in Cawsey & Rowley, 2016) claims

that companies can gain support with the feedback received from particular interest groups on this channel. Besides, LinkedIn facilitates effective interaction and engagement through seminars as well as enhancement of awareness, thanks to the vast spread of content and endorsement of a company's personality, expertise, and competence (Kvick-Nastaj & Poblete, 2013).

Another social network that B2B firms should take into account is Twitter. Even though a tweet has a short life cycle (Cawsey & Rowley, 2016), Twitter is still a promising channel to spread content and stimulate EWOM (Jansen et al., 2009). As a microblog, Twitter plays a suitable role when a company wants to publish swiftly and casually (Jansen et al., 2009). According to Cawsey and Rowley (2016), Twitter is also a social media tool that brands adopt in order to segment communication and directly provide customer support and engagement.

## **Methodology**

In this paper, the analysis will be conducted with the combination of a literature review and two qualitative case studies of the brands Caterpillar and John Deere. The reason for choosing qualitative research is to develop a deeper and richer understanding of how these two machinery equipment companies can strengthen their corporate brand through the use and management of their Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn platforms.

Firstly, the literature review is expected to assist researchers in identifying the potential research gap associated with the research topic (Collis & Hussey, 2014), as well as to provide foundational understanding about relevant concepts (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). In this paper, a prior literature study from four perspectives was deeply examined and summarized to connect online brand communities and social networks with corporate branding in B2B content generation. The logic of the literature review starts with discovering the importance of strategic relationship marketing and its contribution to

corporate brand building. It then leads to the usage of online brand communities and social media networks as tools for B2B companies to build up corporate branding through managing relationships with stakeholders.

A case study is one of the most useful research designs when the research purpose is to explore new insights on certain phenomena in a social context (Collis & Hussey, 2014; Yin, 2014). It can be done by using single or multiple cases of evidence to conduct an in-depth knowledge of the topic (Yin, 2014). In this research, a multiple case study has been adopted, with data collected from three social media platforms managed by Caterpillar and John Deere, processing 597 posts, to enable the authors to draw some findings by identifying differences and similarities between both companies in those three social media scenarios.

## **Case study**

### *Caterpillar*

#### *Company overview*

Caterpillar is one of the world's top players in the manufacturing of construction, mining equipment, diesel and natural gas engines, industrial gas turbines, and diesel-electric locomotives, which defines three main segments for Caterpillar: Construction Industry, Resources Industry and Energy & Transportation (Caterpillar, n.d.). Besides, they have also expanded their business into finance with their Financial Product Segment (Caterpillar, n.d.). Caterpillar pays attention to providing the best way for its customers to build a better world and bringing economic development to its stakeholders (Caterpillar, n.d.).

#### *Online brand community on Facebook*

On their Facebook channel, Caterpillar has created various groups based on different purposes, which are specified as Caterpillar, Caterpillar Challenge, Caterpillar Shoes, and Caterpillar Machines (2019a). Since the brand community is the main focus of this research, the Caterpillar group will be the source of data

collection. This group was established in 2009, which has collected 1.7 million followers (2019b). The top fan section appears at first sight in the community chapter, which showed the frequency of highly engaged members (2019b).

Generally, business-oriented content appears much more than customer-oriented content. More specifically, information on Caterpillar's participation in different activities is widespread on the site. For example, providing facility training for other organizations and joining events to showcase product operations. However, this type of post does not get much user response. Additionally, there are several social and public services that the company has been involved with. For instance, the company sponsors fundraising activities for organizations, as well as sporting events like the women's motorcycle race. It shows the company's capability to create more values beyond benefits. The level of responsiveness of members to such content is relatively shown as more "likes" and comments.

Furthermore, information about product development shows up as one of the site's main contents. The way such posts appear is usually carried out as sponsored content or via user share. Member engagement differs depending on the equipment category, usually heavy tractors get the most "likes." In particular, some of Caterpillar's posts were met with negative feedback from the community regarding public interest issues. For example, Caterpillar equipment has been used by Israel's military to demolish three Palestinian homes. The feedback of users is divided into two attitudes: one portraying aggressive emotion towards the brand in opposition, and the other standing up in defense of the brand.

The active members' involvement shows up in different aspects — the main one being sharing their work and personal life with the brand. Examples range from sharing a positive user experience driving Caterpillar trucks to customers wearing Caterpillar clothing. Regarding this content, members indicate a relatively high interest by "liking" or

commenting below each post. Another way of user participation involves inquiries about products; these are usually answered by either the company service or other community members.

However, a passive posture is perceived in general from the company's part, usually shown by the Facebook tag function. Also, responses to community member posts can rarely be found, thus demonstrating a relatively low engagement from the company.

#### *Online brand community on Twitter*

From analyzing Caterpillar's Twitter account, there are several insights collected for this purpose, and the way the brand adopts this social media can be offered. Caterpillar joined Twitter in June 2008 and currently has 131,000 followers (2019c). Similar to their Facebook profile, the brand has included a link to its website and composed a small introduction of the company and goals, which shows a professional presence and commitment in its social network (2019d).

About Caterpillar's tweets, the brand has a high frequency of tweets, with several posts per day. There are three types of tweets that the brand pays attention to (1) Campaign promotion. As of recent, Caterpillar is sharing its latest campaign, "Let's do the work," using a series of videos, which involves images of Caterpillar users on the field and uses messages with a more emotional approach. This style of content receives very positive feedback from community members in the form of reactions and comments; (2) Insight on corporate culture. Caterpillar shows the brand's industrial designers sharing the process of product design, manufacturing, and testing Caterpillar machinery to provide the best user experience and the highest efficiency for its customers; (3) Promotion of brand extensions. Includes promotion of other lines of products and services, such as clothing lines, accessories, and financial services that Caterpillar offers to end-users and customers. Besides these three main types of tweets, Caterpillar also tweets about news and updates on the business, corporate social responsibility activities under

the name of the Caterpillar Foundation, as well as racing events and championships which the brand sponsors. The degree of followers' involvement in Caterpillar's tweets is at an average level, with several tweets gaining approximately twenty to fifty likes and community responses around five to twenty in the form of comments and retweets. After looking at the official accounts, the hashtag with the company name was also examined. However, there was not enough involvement from Twitter users to analyze or gain insights from.

When responding to followers' comments and retweets, Caterpillar replies quickly professionally and formally while providing brief and useful guidance to followers' requests.

#### *Online brand community on LinkedIn*

Caterpillar Inc. is the official corporate LinkedIn profile. This site has built a community of 842,782 followers; this social network also displays the number of current employees in the company, registering 55,461 employees on LinkedIn (2019e). The official corporate LinkedIn profile is dedicated to the brand's primary segments: "Construction industries, resource industries, and energy & transportation" (2019f). A Global Caterpillar Network Group, managed by the brand, is also a group site that is accessible upon request confirmation. For this research, an analysis of the official Caterpillar Inc. company site and its contents has been performed.

Caterpillar Inc. LinkedIn profile posts daily content that links to the corporate website news section. The brand frequently uses hashtags like #iAmCaterpillar and #LetsDoTheWork to showcase corporate culture. Community members feel encouraged to engage in a conversation with the brand, sharing stories that are related to the brand, and also inquire about selection processes near them. Employees participate in the conversation as well and post comments regarding their experiences of working at the company while using the brand's hashtags.

Common themes identified on the site's content are aligned to corporate culture, the brand's heritage, innovation, and ideas. Caterpillar's LinkedIn content is primarily focused on showcasing the efforts of the company to become an attractive workplace environment. Topics of interest on this matter are work-life balance and showing a behind the scenes of the industrial and product design processes.

The brand is using its platform to advocate for the representation of women in the industry, illustrating users of Caterpillar's industrial products and also sharing the stories of women that work for the company. The brand uses hashtags like #WomenInSTEM and #LetsDoTheWork to showcase women working in the field.

### *John Deere*

#### *Company overview*

John Deere is a leading manufacturer within the machinery equipment industry. John Deere (n.d.) works on different categories of business that range from different heavy equipment machinery to financial services. Over 180-year history enables them to innovate and expand their business constantly, as well as to enhance their long-lasting core values: integrity, quality, commitment, and innovation; which drive the company to offer the best solution for customers with the purpose of providing convenience to human life (John Deere US, n.d.). Moreover, John Deere adopts different social media channels to increase business opportunities and reach target groups. The brand's digital strategy has a hybrid focus between the company website and its different online communities on Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. They intend to create different channels to communicate with customers and further strengthening the corporate brand. In the following section, the authors study how John Deere uses those three social media platforms for brand promotion.

#### *Online brand community on Facebook*

John Deere created their Facebook page in 2015. Since then, it has accumulated 4.3

million followers (2019a). In the specified community section, there is a top fan part showing the frequencies of active members' engagement (2019a).

Several content attributes were found in the posts. John Deere shares major company events in their community. For example, to celebrate the 100-year history of John Deere, the company launched a tractor showcase earlier this year. The feedback from members of the community was highly positive. Moreover, the outcome of different events, such as conferences, is one of the most shared aspects of the company. These elements indicate that the company is expanding its business in a geographical environment constantly. They also continue to share established business partnerships in their community. It shows that the company always looks for potential business opportunities. Members' responses to such posts appear as a high-level "like."

Furthermore, information about product development and new equipment promotion accounts for the majority of the content. It is usually carried out as sponsored content to demonstrate equipment functionality. The advertisement concepts vary for different products, but a common pattern is to add a human life association to the product. Also, the Facebook page shows social events such as the women's motorcycle race, which John Deere sponsored.

The involvement of members is mainly demonstrated through their responses to posts. Firstly, members use the community for technical assistance, looking for solutions to issues they may experience. John Deere provides solutions with a link or direct answer below the post. A polite and sincere attitude is used while replying to comments to express the company's appreciation for people's feedback. At the same time, other users are actively willing to assist. Moreover, users of the company are likely to share their personal life experiences associated with the John Deere brand, which range from experiences in a professional setting and visiting the company's offices, to day-to-day activities such as kids wearing John Deere branded shirts, driving

their toy trucks. Those contents usually get more positive feedback from community members. With the company launching the "Share your John Deere story" campaign in the community, the brand encourages members to engage and share their own stories on how the products have increased the value of their operations and how the products have evoked the user's emotions towards the brand.

Overall, the John Deere online brand community operates in a high activity practice. The average frequency of occurrence of four posts in a month also indicates the level of active participation of members inside the community.

#### *Online brand community on Twitter*

John Deere joined Twitter in 2009. Currently, the brand has acquired 177,000 followers (2019b). John Deere's Twitter account profile includes a link to their website and has the slogan of the brand "Nothing runs like Deere" (2019c). Besides the official Twitter account, John Deere also manages Life at Deere, an account used for talent recruitment.

Several claims can be made based on a content analysis of the posts. Firstly, John Deere has an elevated posting frequency on Twitter. The brand usually posts two to three times a day. The brand uses audiovisual content to promote posts of products featuring new developments. The brand usually associated products with inspiring stories and experiences shared from end-users through the use of video content. John Deere also encourages its followers to upload images and stories with the possibility of becoming inspirational posts on the John Deere official Twitter account. Secondly, a considerable number of tweets in the brand's account comprises up-to-date news about the company, including industry events, and partners' and customers' achievements while using John Deere products. Thirdly, the brand uses its platform to post random and funny tweets about day-to-day life. This style of content looks to trigger interaction from its followers. John Deere garners a considerable amount of reactions in the form of "likes" ranging from 70 to more than 300 likes per

post. However, their Twitter content has a low-level of comments and retweets. Emotional and inspiring stories from end-users, as well as funny posts, received a high response, in the form of likes, comments, and retweets, as well as positive feedback from community members.

When responding to followers' comments and retweets, John Deere keeps a passionate and positive attitude towards its members. The brand quickly replies to provide helpful information and support for their followers. John Deere also replies to followers' comments with a compliment in a more fun and less formal manner.

#### *Online brand community on LinkedIn*

John Deere has an official company page on LinkedIn that has gathered 594,633 followers (2019d). LinkedIn registers 40,619 employees at John Deere (2019d). This company page is mainly dedicated to the brand's areas of expertise: Agriculture, construction, forestry, turf care, golf, and technology (2019e). LinkedIn also has a section where the company shares its employees' testimonies of their experience working for John Deere. The brand also manages Life at Deere, a career-focused LinkedIn page that has 22,040 members (2019f). Submitting a request to join is needed to have access to the group. For this research, an analysis of the official John Deere company LinkedIn site and its contents has been considered.

The John Deere company site on LinkedIn posts two to three times per week, garnering positive reactions and feedback from its followers. The brand uses its site to share content from other sources and posts a selection of links to websites referring to the brand, ongoing projects the company has, and outlooks on the future of the field. The John Deere journal is the company's blog, which is referred to on the site as well for more information on the company's projects.

The brand builds the site's content around current themes such as innovation, artificial intelligence, technology, sustainability, and expectations for the future of their field of

work. Community members seize the opportunity to comment on these posts and engage with the brand sharing their personal experiences with John Deere, adding on the topics of discussion and also inquiring about the company's views on political topics. The brand replies by thanking users for their feedback and responds to any inquiries made.

John Deere also uses the site to promote online brand campaigns. The 'We are for ground-breakers' campaign was recently launched and was met with very positive feedback from followers that related to the insight the brand was trying to communicate. Community members commented, expressing love for the brand, sharing their stories, and how the brand has been a part of their life, and some use the slogan "Nothing runs like a Deere" in the comments.

The John Deere company site on LinkedIn is used to announce collaborations and strategic partnerships. The brand was a LEGO League Sponsor for people in STEM. The company also has partnerships with other brands such as IBM, NASA, and Peloton Interactive. Community members highlight these collaborations and state their views on how John Deere is a role model for other companies. The company's employees also join in the conversation and share their pride in being part of the company.

Corporate culture is a theme of interest amongst community members, some of the company's posts regarding this topic receive significant positive feedback, including comments from followers that wish to apply for a job at the company. Earlier this year, the brand announced the appointment of a new CEO, and followers congratulated the company and shared their reactions towards the corporate decision. Company milestones are also of high interest for the brand's followers.

## **Discussion**

To determine whether industrial companies' communities on three different social media platforms are beneficial to create their brand

values, Caterpillar, and John Deere brand community on Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn will be compared and discussed separately.

### *Facebook*

On Facebook, the large numbers of followers in Caterpillar's and John Deere's communities imply that the willingness of members to start a dialogue with brands is high, which provides both companies an opportunity to reach customers and build relationships with them (Kapferer, 2012).

The common features of content for both communities are related to professional activities. Firstly, activities demonstrate the day-to-day business operations of John Deere and Caterpillar. They can be understood as a way for both companies to allow community members to understand the company's development. Moreover, information on new technology and device development are frequently released in both communities, aiming to evoke enthusiasm from followers for the product and brand. Constant innovation meets the needs of users requiring a better user experience and inspiring a unique emotional link to the brand; this is suggested to strengthen the companies' competitive position (Hougaard & Bjerre, 2009; McEwen, 2004) as well as the consistent perceived quality of the product by customers can potentially create a positive brand image for both companies (de Chernatorny & McDonald, 2003).

Furthermore, both the brand's involvement in social events through sponsorships for promotion of their corporate social responsibility efforts show interest in giving back to communities, demonstrating a responsible and reliable character which can potentially contribute to a positive brand image for them (Bendixen, Bukasa & Abratt, 2003; Walley et al., 2007).

Following our findings, is the willingness of community members to share personal life stories connected to the brands. In particular, on the John Deere community, the 'Share your John Deere story' campaign encourages members to share their passion and love for the John Deere brand and its products. It builds a

relationship between the firm and its followers, as discussed by Andersen (2005), which can contribute to brand trust and loyalty.

In comparison, members show different types of responses to the content generated by both companies. The members' reactions show a certain degree of interest in the company's business efforts to posts. However, the more emotional content there is the more positive feedback towards the brand (McEwen, 2004). This confirms the nature of relationship marketing that emotional content can mitigate the alienation between brands and users, especially in the machinery industry, in terms of a genuine friendship-like relationship with users being nurtured (Hougaard & Bjerre, 2009). This strong bond can also turn community members into supporters of the brand (Gummesson, 2002). This is demonstrated in the way community members defended Caterpillar by stepping into the brand's defense regarding the controversy generated because of Israel's use of the brand's machinery equipment.

Moreover, when comparing both the brand's style of response, John Deere's comments are more interactive and provided genuine answers in a short amount of time. This manner of engaging with members of the community leads to positive results. Thus, encouraging involvement in the John Deere community and nurturing members' sense of belonging to the community (Kim et al., 2008) and together promote the brands' values (Muniz & O'guinn, 2001).

Besides, the tag function on Facebook is found to be advantageous for both Caterpillar and John Deere sharing information more frequently in the community, potentially increasing the chances of member engagement.

### *Twitter*

When looking at both Caterpillar and John Deere Twitter accounts, a common trend is witnessed in their content generation related to corporate activities. Firstly, updating members on the latest information so that members can understand both companies' daily operations. To be more specific, John Deere differentiates

itself with the use of funny tweets for this activity. These posts allow users to relate to the brand's personality and create a more familiar connection. This type of human content can create a sincere kinship that can potentially generate trust (Zheng et al., 2014) and stimulate involvement and EWOM from followers (Andersen, 2005).

Secondly, both companies use their Twitter platforms to promote brand extensions. Continuous innovation delivery demonstrates attempts at understanding customers and end-users needs, which can nurture a sustainable relationship in the future (Hougaard & Bjerre, 2009).

On the other hand, John Deere focuses on sharing real stories from their followers containing emotional components. This content seems to cultivate a strong bond with community members, stimulating engagement to some extent, as well as to further increase brand loyalty (Andersen, 2005). At the same time, John Deere tries to maintain a welcoming and inspirational attitude inside its Twitter community, showing an understanding of members' motivations. This further encourages a sense of belonging in the group, and followers may benefit from the brand and increase the shareability of the brand's content (Kim et al, 2008).

Looking at both companies' response styles, Caterpillar comments members' retweets formally using a professional language. This maintains interactions on a business level rather than trying to develop a more personal connection. Meanwhile, John Deere tries to reply to followers' retweets as fast as possible with useful information in a warm and passionate attitude. It shows that the company is trying to support its followers. John Deere actively compliments and makes fun when retweeting its followers, which results in attracting attention and involvement from followers aiding in two-way communication. As a result, the company can keep members' interest in the brand a current topic of discussion within the community (Andersen, 2005).

## *LinkedIn*

Both Caterpillar and John Deere brands use their LinkedIn platforms with recurring themes related to the brands' core values; by doing so, both firms can reinforce the relationship built with their community members, increase the chances of shareability (Kim et al., 2008) and potentially maximize their reach. Moreover, the emotional component that both brands add to their content reinforces positive brand associations (Aaker, 1996), encouraging community members to engage and interact with the brand and with other community members (Mu et al., 2012).

This study shows that both firms have an understanding of their followers' motivations (Hougaard & Bjerre, 2009) to be part of the LinkedIn community and have strategically built their content around corporate culture providing insights on how it is to work for their companies, increasing the sense of belonging from their current employees and also inspiring people to become part of the Caterpillar and John Deere workforce (Kim et al., 2008).

Corporate brand building focus in their LinkedIn platforms allows both firms to strengthen their brand positioning and identity (Kapferer, 2012) while at the same time managing user relationships and building a favorable brand-oriented community (Muniz & O'guinn, 2001).

Additionally, Caterpillar inspires its members with the use of messages about gender equality and women empowerment, which shows a great practice in corporate social responsibility. Such CSR activities facilitate to build a positive brand image for the company, which are beneficial for the brand building (Bendixen, Bukasa & Abratt, 2003).

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, the authors recognize that Caterpillar and John Deere have a well-established positioning and are able to enjoy a brand love status. Community members share their support and also advocate for both brands online.

When considering the benefits of using each of the social media networks analyzed for this study, Facebook presents itself as a network with the potential for growth regarding online brand communities. Similarly, LinkedIn also has the capacity to build a strong community, always remaining on the professional side. On the other hand, even though Twitter has a large user following for both brands, there is a sense of dismembered community due to the individualistic nature of the platform's architecture.

Online brand communities show a preference for emotional brand associations, which highlights the importance of strategic brand content development for user engagement in a more positive virtual environment for the brand. By focusing on these aspects, brands can work towards increasing brand loyalty. For brand management consideration, when companies adopt a proactive response to community members' activity, it helps build closer relationships and encourages other members to keep participating in the community actively. The positive reaction of community members on social media suggests a sense of pride from followers being part of the community.

Building online brand communities on social media platforms allow for B2B companies and their brands to reach their target audiences and establish a channel for two-way communication between its stakeholders. The notion of B2B companies in industrial markets not participating in online brand community building is erroneous; it is crucial for brands to have a social media presence, build and maintain a community in order to raise brand awareness, and reinforce the core values for building a strong brand identity.

The authors highlight John Deere's brand management strategies for building their corporate brand; these efforts have enabled the firm to increase brand loyalty from their customers and community members. Their model is a good practical example of how brands in industrial markets can build sustainable relationships and positions.

On the other hand, in order for Caterpillar to develop a more personal relationship with its community members, the brand should embrace a less formal and more personal interaction style when engaging with community members.

## Limitations and future research

There are several limitations identified in this paper. Firstly, due to time constraints, this paper only collects data by observing social media content, which lacks companies' insights into their brand strategy regarding the use of online brand communities and social media content generation. Secondly, the findings have been drawn by observing and analyzing a limited number of posts. In addition, only two companies in industrial markets as research targets seem to be limited.

Thus, future research is suggested conducting interviews with brand managers to include their perspective in order to understand their views on this topic. As this paper focuses on industrial companies in the machinery equipment category, other companies in different industry markets can be further studied using this approach. Moreover, future research is suggested to adopt a larger sample, coupled with analysis of other widely used social media platforms (such as YouTube and Instagram), to allow B2B companies to choose the most beneficial online channels to build long-term relationships and corporate branding.

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