Ambidextrous Socialization: Exercising Control in Social Media Environment

Sirkka L. Jarvenpaa
McCombs School of Business,
Univ. of Texas Austin/
Aalto Univ. School of Science
Sirkka.Jarvenpaa@mccombs.utexas.edu

Rachel Lim
Center for Bus. Tech. Law
McCombs School of Business
Univ. of Texas at Austin
Esther.rachy@gmail.com

Virpi Kristiina Tuunainen
Aalto University
School of Business
Virpi.Tuunainen@aalto.fi

Abstract

How can firms use social media environments (SMEs) to create productive ideas within an extended organization particularly if customers do not have strong identification with the company? How can firms control heterogeneous social media users to achieve organizational goals? These questions are important as the prevailing literature on SME assume that firms can exert little control over individuals’ autonomous behaviors. Based on empirical observations on how one firm used SME to increase customer engagement and innovation, we build on the theory of clan control to argue that in collective, heterogeneous, and rapidly changing knowledge intensive environments, co-creation in socialization of users is based on fundamentally different logic than in traditional organizations. We advance the concept of ambidextrous socialization, that rather than reducing uncertainty that users feel in socialization, seek to increase uncertainty and thereby promote flexibility, plurality, and adaptability in volatile, virtual, and fast moving environments.

1. Introduction

Social media environments (SME) provide an opportunity for the firms to engage their extended organization including customers and the public at large in co-creation and innovation opportunities [1]. SME refers to platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and the blogosphere. However, as outsiders become members of the extended enterprise, the question arises as to how to integrate the new cadre so that productive outcomes important to the firm are achieved. Traditionally, an important mechanism for achieving organizational goals is control. Control is commonly defined as “the set of mechanisms used to motivate individuals to act in a way that is consistent with organizational objectives” [2, p. 469].

Much of the prevailing literature depicts SME as uncontrolled, even as chaotic. In the midst of valued contributions, much meaningless information is generated (including spam) that agonizes users and the firm rather than builds relationships between the users and the firm [2] [3]. Few negative and inappropriate comments can derail conversations [4]. Some have argued that SME leaves the firm with little ability to control and manage its dialog with customers [3]. Case studies point to co-creation disenfranchising rather than engaging current and future customers [5]. Others, however, suggest that companies can still control their destiny although how they can effectively exercise control is much less clear [7].

Formal controls that are embedded in rules and pre-specified outcome measures and authority structures are infeasible and counterproductive, destroying the emergent and autonomous processes that are associated with innovation and SME leaving the firm with informal control [6]. Informal control focuses on shared vision or objectives, shared values, and becoming accepted in the community [7, 8] [9]. Ouchi [10] argues that when knowledge of the transformation process is low (high means-end uncertainty) and outcome measurability is low (knowledge outputs are difficult to assess), firms have to rely on informal control - clan control. Indeed, research on online communities suggest extensive reliance on clan controls, such as, shared values, joint production goals, and common identity particularly in collectives involving knowledge-intensive and novel tasks (e.g., [11] [12] [13]).

However, what is not understood is what gives rise to clan control in highly heterogeneous SME. In traditional organizations, clan control was rooted in the input, or selection/membership processes of organizations [10]. Entry to the organization was conditional to the congruence of an individual’s beliefs, values, and understandings with that of the
organization [7]. Research on knowledge intensive environments emphasizes the importance of ensuring that individuals who are hired have appropriate values and beliefs [14]. However, in SME, firms have little control over who chooses to participate. Kirsch et al. [9] found that in complex knowledge work environments, such as information systems project teams, clan control needs to be conceptualized “as a social phenomenon.” They examined how social capital (structural, relational, and cognitive capital) gives rise to clan control, and recognized that in highly heterogeneous project teams where members have different expertise and background, the development of social capital can be problematic.

The SME of an extended enterprise is not only heterogeneous but also highly dynamic. SMEs are highly fluid and fickle communities where the direction of conversation as well as memberships can change in a moment’s notice [1]. Many only lurk. Those that participate are driven by their transactional needs rather than relationships. Convergence towards shared cognitions, relational and structural connections are not likely. There is a great diversity in awareness, experience, and satisfaction with the company, its products and services, its values, and well as the company’s online presence and activities. These differences are also highly dynamic, varying by circumstances.

How can clan control be promoted in heterogeneous SME of an extended enterprise? How can social and role acceptance be managed in such environments? What are the social dynamics that promote member socialization toward collaborative activities and meeting the organizational goals? In this paper, we advance the concept of ambidextrous socialization as an antecedent of clan control.

2. Background on Socialization

Socialization as an antecedent of clan control [10] instills the shared values and norms that then regulate behaviors and render them congruent with organizational goals. Behavior that is cooperative, collegial, and consistent with the organizational expectations is viewed as evidence of clan control.

Organizational socialization refers to “the process by which an individual acquires the social knowledge and skills necessary to assume an organizational role” ([15], p. 211). Just as with organizational newcomers, new customers face many uncertainties about their role and service process and this increases under novel circumstances and requires investments in customer socialization [16]. In customer socialization, a customer “gain(s) an appreciation of specific organizational values, develop(s) the abilities necessary to function within a specific organization, gain(s) an understanding of what the organization expects of them, and gain(s) the knowledge necessary to interact with employees and other customers” ([17], p. 318).

Socialization processes involve tactics used to develop knowledge, and attitudes relevant to facilitate adjustment, social integration, and cooperation promoting organizational success [18]. Socialization takes place when newcomers make the transition from being organizational outsiders to being insiders [19]. Socialization increases in importance the more the organizational outcomes are dependent on these outsiders becoming insiders ([17-19]). Socialization is particularly critical in service-dominant thinking [20], in service ideation, product development, production, and delivery [17] [21] [22], as well as in brand co-design [23].

The theoretical logic of the socialization models rests on uncertainty reduction. Successful socialization reduces the uncertainty individuals face about their roles and about the firm’s values, norms and behavior patterns [15]. Successful socialization increases a person’s role clarity, self-sufficiency, and social approval [19].

What is well accepted in the socialization literature is that the tactics of socialization range from highly institutionalized (structured) to individualized (unstructured and differentiated) [24] [25]. Institutionalized tactics take a formal and collective form (e.g., training program or orientation, organizational documentation, reinforcement, procedures, rules) [16]. Individualized tactics take an informal and individual form (e.g., learning on the job, observing different others or exposure to different texts). Institutionalized tactics are also often fixed in sequence and with a known timetable (e.g., initiative with start and stop dates) and individualized forms are random in sequence and with open timetable. The institutionalized tactics with the social dimension may involve agents like salespeople helping the customer. Institutional tactics promote direct interaction with the firm and promise faster socialization. As they rely on more vertical relationships and communication, institutionalized tactics are associated with more uniformity in terms of what the organization stands for [26]. The individualized tactics provide more differentiated and varied experiences as well as interpretations of the organization’s distinctiveness. Individualized tactics are associated with innovative behaviors [15] [24].

Information technologies are associated with both individualized and institutionalized tactics. Information technologies can facilitate accessing and processing information about the organizational
expectations, values, and behaviors [27]. Technologies reduce the social costs of confronting someone such as a firm’s employee face to face. Digital technologies also promote direct interaction between the newcomers and those experienced agents of the firm that are charged with assimilating newcomers to the organization. Participation can bring about more complex information processing as the person begins to gather appraisal and relational information regarding how they are doing and the nature of their relationship with the firm.

Literature on the intersection of SME and socialization is only emerging. Examining socialization in an organization, Treem and Leonardi [28] argue that SME will change socialization “in qualitatively significant ways.” Specifically, SMEs render it difficult for a firm to apply institutionalized socialization tactics that aim to control a flow of information at a predetermined interval and generate a uniform experience. SME promote more informal spread of information and individualized experiences, as well as peer-based and communal relationships among strangers rather than relational relationships between those outside the firm and those inside. Treem and Leonardi [28] acknowledge that developing relationships with higher status others would be still important. Yet, the greater information availability and accessibility would likely support more passive socialization processes whereby most people would assume the role of lurkers.

Yet, the arguments of Treem and Leonardi [28] advocating individualized tactics render a dilemma, particularly in the context of an extended enterprise. The individualized tactics involve high levels of self-control and self-select goals. It is questionable to what extent such self-select goals would instill beliefs and values that would promote user-innovation congruent with organizational goals. Linking of an externally situated individual’s self-goals to organizational goals requires some form of relational perspective that transcends the organizational boundary. Some of this was evidenced in the work of Kirsch et al. [9] that examined antecedents of clan control in information systems project teams. They hypothesized that managers in those teams would be facilitative for clan control. The control was not exercised in authoritative, hierarchical sense of selecting members to the team, but more on basis of an ongoing interaction of communicating organizational values and norms; demonstrating expected behaviors; and, promoting a shared vision. What in particular helped to facilitate the process was the managers becoming “regular member of the project team.” (p. 472). It was the relationships between the manager and the team members that were particularly influential in developing clan control: an agreement of what is proper socially prescribed behavior.

3. Case Context

In late 2000’s, a midsized Finnish airline, Finnair, had embarked on a rebranding initiative and explored a variety of ways of using SME, including both individualized and institutionalized tactics. The most promising tactic involved the use of socialization agents: four independent advisors, so called Quality Hunters (QHs), appointed and hired by the company traveled for over 60 days and blogged daily about their experiences. Their role was to signal the values of Finnair, engage customers in discussions and help to co-create new ideas for services and service improvement. The agents had been given a free reign to blog about their experiences. In their blogs, the QHs mostly took the viewpoint of a traveling customer, and posted mainly about travel destinations and traveling in general, not tied to any specific company or airport issue. The readers’ comments were predominantly very brief and unsubstantiated (e.g., “Way to Go!”). While the QHs attracted strong following in readership, the outcomes were primarily realized in terms of brand awareness, rather than in customer co-creation. The developments of the first Quality Hunters campaign are captured in Jarvenpaa and Tuunainen [29].

Finnair decided to repeat the campaign during Fall 2011 and relabeled it as “Quality Hunters Season 2”. The company wanted to involve not just the current but also the future customers who may have never heard of Finnair before. Finding itself under major competitive and financial pressures, Finnair’s long-term survival depended on the growth strategy that sought for greater global presence, particularly in Asia. With a small home country market, Finnair needed a compelling service proposition to create awareness of its existence among other nationalities and overcome their preference to fly with their own national airlines. Reaching the quality conscious travelers between Europe and Asia had proven to be a major challenge. Although Finnair was ranked highly in various safety and customer rankings, much of the air traveling Asian and European customer base had either never heard of Finnair or knew very little of it.

The goal of the Quality Hunters Season 2 campaign was not just about increasing the potential new customers’ awareness in markets outside Finland by presenting Finnair as “the most innovative and convenient way to travel between Asia and Europe”, but there was a more concrete and prominent ambition at service co-innovation. The goal was to
focus on the entire service path of a traveller, from planning to boarding and to the flight. The Finnair manager in charge of the campaign articulated the goal as follows: “25 great ideas are being sought, even 10 nice ideas from the QH Season 2 would be great”. The motivation was to find “ideas large and small to make travelling convenient, pleasant, and hassle-free.”

Seven new Quality Hunters - several of whom had never flown with Finnair before - were selected from over 2000 applicants to serve as “independent advisors” to Finnair for the duration of QH Season 2. They were hired as Finnair employees and they served as socialization agents that signaled the quality and the character of Finnair.

These seven QHs made altogether 171 flights to 36 different airports within five weeks. Each of them focused on different specific topics, including ‘On the move’, ‘Socializing’, ‘Entertainment’, ‘Shopping’, ‘Food & Drink’, ‘Services’ and ‘Business Class’, with an overarching aim at “finding ingenious ideas for improving the overall travel experience”, as well as increasing brand awareness. The pre-assigned topics were expected to support focused blogging and allow for idea generation on new services.

Eighth QH was selected by popular voting, Finnair, and the seven QHs midway through the program. He was recognized for having being active in commenting and ideation on the QH Season 2 website, and was selected from among the followers to travel to two destinations within a week. The potential to become the Eight QH was a significant motivator for co-creation but did not alone explain why the campaign succeeded in generating 250 service and service improvement ideas.

4. Analysis

To understand the antecedents of clan control in terms of the socialization processes and how this control impacted discussion and innovation processes, we analyzed the QHs’ blog posts and readers’ comments and “likes.” As our interest was to understand the relational perspective of socialization tactics, we focused on how the QHs effectively and consistently with Finnair’s objectives managed discussion to instill values and promote idea generation. We collected 276 posts by the QHs’ during the QH Season 2 campaign (September – December, 2011). We first identified 50 posts that had generated most discussion. We then selected from each of the QHs the episode (i.e., a thread of discussion that was triggered by a QH’s blog post) that had generated the most substantiated reader comments. Rather than to try to identify the idiosyncrasies of each QHs’ blogs, we strove to understand the general patterns that contributed to an effective discussion in these episodes. A preliminary analysis suggested that the episodes shared an overall common pattern: the QHs exhibited ambivalent identity; that is, simultaneously being part of the customer community and identifying with the Finnair company. This duality of external and internal, or push and pull, engendered a tension between the identities of being a customer and being a Finnair employee and enhanced the quality of the discussion and ideation. We next report on the episodes (the most illustrative ones first), duality of QHs’ identities in them, and some of the outcomes generated.

4.1. Finnair goes Meat-free Monday (Sanjoo, Food & Drink)

“Meat-free Monday” was voted by the followers of QH campaign as the most popular idea among the 250 ideas that were submitted during the campaign. This episode clearly illustrates how the QH’s ambivalent identity helped to moderate the diversity of readers’ opinions and to direct the discussion.

QH named Sanjoo, who was assigned to the topic of “Food & Drink”, wrote in his blog that Finnair should consider participating in the “Meat-free Monday” campaign to reduce carbon footprint. He argued that this campaign would align with Finnair’s image and values of healthy living. In his blog, Sanjoo mediated between internal and external views. With the voice of an individual customer, Sanjoo posted, “I think this is a challenge for all of us who eat meat. I do make a conscious choice to eat more vegetarian whenever I have a great option and I think that would work…” And, “Imagine that Finnair took this big step to reduce its carbon footprint and also of its passengers.” Then, with the voice of the firm, “Why not at least start by offering this alternative and build a marketing campaign around it. It reduces costs, is considered good for your health and great for the patient.” He was focused on pursuing what at times appeared to be his “personal idea” but he was also flexible in trying to understand how to entice broader acceptance to the idea in a highly heterogeneous readership community. He changed the title of the idea from “meat free” to “sexy vegetarian food” in an attempt to appeal to a broader audience. The arguments oscillated between what is in Finnair’s best interest and what is in the interest of the customers. He invited the readers into a discussion by asking “Will you endorse such a campaign?”, posting appetizing photos, and reminding others of their social
responsibility and personal health: “It reduces costs, is considered good for your health and great for the planet”. He repeated, “So do share your thoughts here on this simple yet powerful idea.”

Many readers responded to Sanjoo’s posts by saying, “Lovely photos and words Sanjoo”, and “Count me in for a meatfree Monday!”

Responses were, however, divided and this kept the discussion interesting. One reader, Raul, said, “I have to disagree with you on that one. ... I think people deserve the full flexibility of making their culinary decisions...” Sanjoo showed his agreement with Raul, while defending his personal idea by saying that, “I like that idea too Raul. Also with the meat free campaign can begin as an alternative suggestion...” Sanjoo also took the perspective of Finnair in continuing his response, “That would help Finnair justify its actions. Well let’s put both these ideas on the plate.”

The ambivalent identity of Sanjoo accommodated both the internal and the external perspectives; yet facilitated responses and mutual adjustment with “I am sure Finnair at the end will find a hybrid choice here”; “you feel you are part of a movement, making the changes...” Sanjoo’s style was rather corporate-like in the sense that he was mediating the discussion without imposing any integration of or agreement on ideas. He used photos and videos strategically so that people would view the issues in various way, and he directed the discussion toward future possibilities instead of ruminating about past problems.

4.2. What Economy Class Could Learn from Business (Mirva, On the Move)

QH Mirva’s topic was “On the Move”, and she invited readers to propose suggestions on how to improve Economy class by learning from Business Class. This blog post eventually led to the idea of a book-swap at the Helsinki airport, which was voted the second most popular idea of the campaign.

Mirva initiated this episode with her post about improving economy class and increasing Finnair’s reputation, “So here are my TOP 5 suggestions for how to bring business class quality to Finnair’s economy class, and build up Finnair’s reputation as an airline that offers ‘luxury treatment at economy prices... After all, that’s where most travelers end up in, and they are the ones that determine Finnair’s reputation around the world.” Although positive in its opening tone, she came across as an unsatisfied customer. She complained about what she perceived as discriminatory service, “We want to know what’s for dinner too! And yes, sometimes the menu is indeed announced over the speaker, but who remembers it after five seconds if you just hear it and won’t see it written anywhere?” Her negative comments did not solicit only agreement, “Personally, I’ve had many economy class flights where I deplaned thinking “gosh, the flight attendants were exceptionally friendly and good today.”

Mirva initiated the idea of circulating newspapers during a flight, priming the readers to think of their own experiences, “Often times I do not manage to get a paper at all... Then I’m stuck with no reading at all for the entire flight, other than the in-flight magazine...”. She invited people to think of alternatives, particularly in terms of what the passengers could do themselves, “Currently people just hoard the newspapers in their seat pockets...”

Readers replied and developed the idea from new perspectives, “I do want to built on your idea with the newspapers and magazines though, and combine this with the social theme and eco-friendliness aspect.” Some suggested offering news through an “e-chatroom” or the entertainment system, “special offer for passengers to take trials of online versions of magazines.” Mirva challenged, “Hey Daniel! ... an “e-chatroom” might be too much for people to deal with. Thus I thought a drop-off box would work best, maybe even the flight attendants returning newspapers there in addition to the passengers...”

4.3. Pimp my seat – Live from Seoul (Mette, Services)

QH Mette, with her focus on the topic of services, made a blog entry that included a video from Seoul, South Korea, on the unique characteristics of a toilet seat in a hotel room. She proposed that it would be great if airplanes had heated toilet seats; “being from Scandinavia, it is always freaking cold and hitch dark in the winter time. This is something I really love, it is absolutely awesome.” This rather unusual post by Mette generated discussion on the restroom services at the airports and airplanes (adding up to a total of 46 comments and 14 likes). The video was triggered by a culture shock as a traveler, a guest in the Korean hotel room. She then quickly switched to her QH role, asking her readers questions related to airline services: “So, I am just suggesting this awesome toilet seat heating option for the airplane. Why not at Finnair?” Then, she swiftly switched back to the customer role, “Um, I actually always bring my own blankets in my hand luggage, because I know I am going to be cold...” She invited agreement from the readers with “Wouldn’t it be great service if there in
the colder destinations (like Helsinki) were cabin crew handing out hot chocolate to the waiting passengers?"

The readers could clearly identify with her experiences, “I remember once entering a plane (outside 30°c) it was so cold that I right away asked for a blanket...This is something I don’t understand anyway, why is the air-con always so cold?” Another reader commented, “Two weeks ago a friend of mine returned from a short distance flight and was sick afterwards because of the air-con. He told me that when asking for a blanket he could have rented one for 10 Euros which he wasn’t prepared to pay – unfortunately, getting sick was in the end more expensive.” People also offered other reference points, “For more ideas on a pimped seat, i would suggest to peek over to automotive industry.”

Mette guided the discussion by agreeing to the comments, “YES Susanne, getting a cold from heavy air conditioning on board the plane is something I’m very familiar with as well. I actually think it’s quite a disgrace to freeze up the cabin and then ask for EUR 10 for blankets. That can’t be a smart strategy for an airline in the long run.” She also related to the readers by showing affection and agreement on their situations and thoughts, but at the same stucked to her QH role and encouraged additional ideas: “Good point Daniel. Let’s revolutionize the middle seat. I’m trying to think of privileges of the middle seat and what could make this seat more attractive... will get back to you on that.”

Mette as a QH used an ordinary object, a toilet seat, to generate innovative ideas and to catch the readers’ attention. Her inspiration came from a customer perspective but she linked it to her QH role.

4.4. Business Travelers, tell us more! (Francoise, Business Class).

QH Francoise, assigned to the topic of “Business Travel”, blogged about who the business travelers are and what are their concerns. Francoise empathized with the readers by taking their personal as well as their organization’s interests into account: “And what is the worry of their companies? Containing costs!”

She actively invited feedback from the readers and readily agreed with their comments on the uncomfortable situations that customers confront in luggage arrival, “As for luggage, at the moment I only do the carry-on because I HATE waiting for luggage on arrival. I will check with my fellow QHs who are all doing check-in luggage I think.” but in the end she switched back to her QH role by continuing with “Could you tell me more?” Again, there is both focus and flexibility in the blog posts.

The posts can be interpreted as reporting to Finnair on her ideas as well as speaking on the behalf of customers, “But what do we know of these travelers? I had thought look at the recent surveys and questioned business travelers whom I know, and here is the result of my findings.” She picked the points that she thought needed the most improvement in services. She finished her posts not with facts, but with her thoughts saying “I believe that airlines have to walk the extra mile to give comfort to travelers, even if they have to charge for extra services, as long as the services provided make sense to the travelers’ manager!” Her posts directed the readers to focus on the most essential issues.

Switching perspectives of a customer and an agent of a firm helped Francoise to generate discussion. She showed agreement with the readers, “Yes, Katie I was sooo surprised when I started traveling with Finnair a few weeks ago, the allowance for carry on luggage is small compared to other European airlines... I want to emphasize this with Finnair too.” She also exhibited strong motivation to lead the discussion and to get more feedback and fulfill her QH role as a Finnair employee, “This is exactly what I need, your experience and feedback!” Again, the pull and push strategy helped to generate discussion.

4.5. Internet problems in Helsinki (Yuval, Socializing)

QH Yuval, whose topic was socializing, received 63 comments on a blog he posted about wireless Internet problems at the Helsinki airport. As he interacted with the readers, he took charge of the discussion and guided readers to generate new ideas from the posts. Yuval strategically reported on the Internet troubles at critical moments without allowing the discussion to degenerate into rampant complaining. He rather defended the airport and ensured the readers that it must have been fixed quickly: “Unfortunately I haven’t had the time to check how long it took to fix the problem, as I had to board the airplane but I’m sure it didn’t take too long.”

There was a tension between Yuval’s strong motivation to achieve his goals as a QH and his frustrating experiences as a traveling customer during a “rush hour” at Helsinki airport. He identified a concern common to many travelers, “Most people who use the lounge have a laptop, they want to relax, have a drink and some snacks and in the meanwhile to work just before boarding their next flight. An internet failure even for a few minutes may cause a great problem for them.” He was widely agreed with,
“Yuval, I agree, having non wi-fi areas could certainly be a plus as well.”

Yuval took an unexpected and problematic situation that blocked his ability to exercise his QH role and used it as a way to propose improvements (i.e. that airports need to have a backup system for interruptions) but also to open discussion on opportunities to socialize at the airport. A reader, Henrik wrote, “The best socializing spot on an airport is the closest bar, trust me...” Yuval agreed and shared his experience, “Hey Henrik, Good One- it is true that most people Socialize more when they are in the bar.”

Yuval displayed his ability to switch between customer and firm stances, as well as between problem-solving and new opportunity creation. He did not directly complain about services or prompt negative image of Finnair in his comments, but was able to empathize with the customers. Furthermore, he excelled in developing strong personal connections with the readers by responding individually to each reader’s post and addressing them by their user names.

4.6 Fly Finnair Fly ... Up Up to the Sky (Tomas, Entertainment)

QH Tomas, assigned to the topic of “Entertainment”, compared Economy class options for entertainment to those of Business class in one of his blogs. This blog echoed boredom that the readers could easily relate to, “I’ll be honest: I’m a bit disappointed. ... Watched almost every movie and TV show and played around with the on-board games. But now there is nothing left to do for me and I am bored.”. He exhibited skillfulness in delivering genuine feelings that readers could relate to and motivated people to respond. When he took a customer perspective, he was very clear about his role as a QH, as well, discussing entertainment in relation to airline services and airport, “So, back to our initial topic: They (the lovely flight crew) did mention that travelers who are regularly up in the air tend to be a bit annoyed by the lack of diversity and, after turning into a frequent flier myself, I have to agree.” He continued, “They also mentioned that rarely anyone complains about what’s offered as on-board entertainment, except for the odd passenger ... But in general passengers are quite happy with what they get on a Finnair flight regarding the entertainment offerings. Because honestly, what can they really do?” His posts did not end up with complaints but with questions, “if you are flying frequently, this does become a slight annoyance and you are wondering what exactly would be so difficult in aping up basic entertainment offerings? How do you experience that on your flights I want to know? What would you like to see added (be reasonable)? What could be left behind and what NEEDS to change in the name of the almighty ENTERTAINMENT!”

Tomas’ posts were rich in feelings, attracting a number of likes and agreement: “Nice article Tomas, I think you captured most prominent issues, especially for the more frequent traveller.”, “You are correct, in that it is truly hard to improve the quality of entertainment and the flight itself for frequent flyers, as they are quite discerning.” “YES! You are so right. These interruptions with the useless info in several languages.” and, ”you’re so right: a book can be quite amazing!”

In addition, Tomas interacted with the readers through his comments by identifying with them, “I know what you mean ... and I can totally relate that a good book, a nice view and some booze can be entertainment enough”. “Hey, glad you feel the same about these PA announcements...”.

His open and honest posts invited people to reflect both on the past but also on the future. He convinced the readers that they could make a difference with their comments. He mediated the perspectives of both a customer and the firm. “In essence, what I am trying to say is: Either way there will be complaints and there will be happiness with whatever adjustment Finnair comes up with. That’s a rule! Can’t please everyone — but try fine-tuning you can. Hence the QH project that let’s me and you and everyone else who cares develop, brainstorm, bash a bit and hail a bit.”

4.7 Pre-order is great, but.. (Asami, Shopping)

QH Asami, assigned to the topic of “Shopping”, expressed how Finnair’s merchandise pre-order concept was, in her opinion, nice but confusing, and she argued for a more customer-centric perspective. Yet, she showed affinity toward Finnair by connecting aspects of her personal life to Finnair. She posting a picture of a little boy and writing, “Soon after this campaign started, I have always wanted to buy a Finnair plane model for my friend’s son, Kazuki, who is almost two years old... hoping he will soon begin to say “Finnair” as well!” Asami highlighted both the positives and the negatives regarding Finnair’s shopping service, “Pre-order comes in handy if the whole process is simple enough, but in fact, I failed several times.” Asami complained, “Or it takes five good days and no way to shorten the process? People are traveling busily and may not have five days prior to their departure from Helsinki
when they discover this handy service, like me”. She also experienced problems with the language, “but I strongly recommend Finnair to have a Japanese-language pre-order page.” Readers related, “Hey Asami, I understand exactly what you mean about wanting the pre-order website pages to also be in Japanese”, Asami replied to readers’ comments with agreements and by relating with them: “I understand”, “I agree with you”, and “It’s so true”. Yet, she constantly promoted discussion by asking the readers about the difficulties with pre-order without letting the discussion get derailed, “Asia is an important destination for Finnair, right? And I know Asians are generally huge shoppers. That’s why I feel there is a big business chance out there only if language problem is solved.” She strategically used tension in her writing, “Pre-order is great, BUT…”

5. Discussion

In this paper, we have explored the antecedents of clan-based control in the context of heterogeneous, and rapidly changing knowledge intensive SME. Finnair’s campaign goals, use of institutionalized socialization agents (QHs), and the decision to assign each QH to a pre-specified topic certainly promoted organizational control. But organizational control could have backfired, resulted in follower rejection, and stymied co-innovation if QHs had not exhibited duality in their identities. While earlier literature has deemed SME uncontrollable (e.g., [2]), what emerged in our empirical observations was how ambivalent identity allowed QHs to influence and direct conversation while also promoting followers to think out of the box and propose service ideas and improvements: the conversations remained focused but also flexible to take advantage of unforeseen events.

The QHs’ ambivalent identities emerged from multiple competing relational interdependencies. The basis of relational self-evaluation is roles [30]. The QHs had dual roles of Finnair customers and bloggers on one hand, and “service ambassadors” and service developers on the other. They identified with their fellow customers but also with their occupational demands as Finnair employees. QHs recognized how maintaining both of these identities could increase alternatives for ideas, promote new connections, render less traditional thinking, and to increase acceptance for the ideas that would ultimately be implemented by Finnair.

Although ambiguous social identities have been recognized to promote innovation in SMEs by allowing more focus on merits of ideas without liberation from social evaluation, and increasing variety and less concern about consequences, ambiguous social identity have been associated with reduced social controls that can lead to unruly user behavior [1]. Instead, what we found is that ambivalent identity allowed managing and directing conversation, which helped to keep the conversation flexible yet focused for promoting co-creation in an extended firm. Ambiguity can be used strategically to orient toward multiple goals. When QHs managed both customer and organizational identities well, they were able to direct and influence conversation for productive ends, that is, development of new service ideas for Finnair.

The QHs adaptively switched between the stances and goals of a customer and a Finnair employee. In their blog posts, the QHs used their customer identities as a way to invite readers to think of different issues by sharing their common experiences and similar values as customers. Because of the customer identity, the QHs were able to build interpersonal relationships with their readers. They addressed the readers by their names when replying to their comments, and responded to personal requests. Constant feedback and personal interactions via Facebook and Twitter and blog conversations enabled the readers to become familiar with QHs’ faces and personalities during the campaign. By revealing very personal information about themselves in their blogs, the QHs built empathy and attraction with the readers.

Yet, at the same time, all of the QHs promoted Finnair’s interest to encourage participation and idea generation. The QHs strategically used the rhetoric of Finnair’s interests as a way to manage and control discussion. The “Meat Free Campaign” was an example of how QH Sanjoo referred to the interests of Finnair in an authoritative way, “My point is to raise this to a discussion level and bring it up to Finnair as an idea for them to look at.” This was effective particularly as the Meat-Free Campaign received the highest number of votes, even though the Finnair team ultimately decided to choose the Book-Swap as the first idea to be implemented.

The QHs as socialization agents were central to Finnair’s institutionalized socialization tactics. Socialization has been examined earlier in the context of online groups where individuals make contributions to the benefit of the group or the community, but much less when contributions are made to the benefit of the company as in this study. The ambivalent identity of the QHs promoted continuous crossing of external and internal boundaries, or oscillation between outsider-to-insider and insider-to-outside transitions, constituting what we call “ambidextrous socialization”.

667
Ambidextrous socialization differs from the traditional institutional and individual socialization tactics. In ambidextrous socialization, the context is relational and interactional. This contrasts to the context of collective and formal in institutionalized socialization, and individualistic and informal in individualized socialization. We found that socialization experience is relational, with interaction experiences related to other users, firm employees, or objects, such as, videos. What is notable is that in SME, those relational experiences are not just visible to people who experienced them but they are open to navigation by anyone. Yet, as highly subjective, the experiences are likely to be viewed from varying perspectives.

In ambidextrous socialization, content is episodic and discursive as contrasted to sequential and fixed in institutionalized, and random and variable in individualized tactics. Content is driven from events, including unforeseen events as the episode of Yuval suggests. Content is driven by topics that are both pre-specified as well as emergent.

The social aspects of socialization in institutionalized tactics are related to customer-company interaction. The experienced organizational members serve as role models or as agents like salespeople who help customers. In individualized tactics, the social aspects are largely absent; customers take on self-service roles relying on individual initiative. Ambidextrous socialization in SMEs involves both relational customer-company and collective community (customer-customer) interactions. Members of the extended organization experience social acceptance by feeling accepted and appreciated by the QHs (the company) and the community.

Traditional institutionalized and individualized socialization tactics aim at reducing uncertainty. Because of the ambiguities in the context and content of information, uncertainty remains high in ambidextrous socialization. Such uncertainty is not, however, functional or environmentally based but social uncertainty, which is manageable with clan controls enabled by ambiguous socialization agents’ dual identities. This increased uncertainty opens up opportunities to engage different audiences and influence their perspectives and actions, and is expected to incite innovative behavior that is beneficial for both the community as well as for the company.

There are many limitations to the ideas and data presented in this paper. We only examined one company and one form of antecedents of clan control: socialization. We only sampled selective episodes. We have not sufficiently theorized about the organizational context and the nature of innovation, yet. We have not examined the ability of the firm to take the ideas from the extended enterprise and implement them. Hence, much future research is needed to understand the conditions under which firms can benefit from ambidextrous socialization.

6. Summary and Conclusions

In this paper, we contribute to the literature on customer socialization in SMEs by advancing the concept of ambidextrous socialization. While traditional customer socialization is about customer-company interaction, ambidextrous socialization in collective, heterogeneous, and rapidly changing knowledge intensive social media environments’ context is both about relational customer-company and collective community (customer-customer) interactions. Successful traditional socialization increases a person’s role clarity, self-sufficiency, and social approval. Social approval remains an important target also in SME context, but through ambidextrous socialization the customers come to feel accepted and appreciated by the community (i.e. other customers) in addition to the company. Through successful ambidextrous socialization, the customers come to accept, or feel comfortable enough with, and to adapt to uncertainty, which is caused by the heterogeneous SME context and the fact that other users are unknown, cannot be chosen, and the plural community is constantly changing with members joining, participating, and leaving at unforeseeable pace. Furthermore, they learn to interact and participate flexibly with and towards both the company and the community, in a way that is beneficial for the customer, the company and the community. Our empirical study on the Quality Hunters as ambiguous socialization agents illustrates how ambidextrous customer socialization in SME context worked as an antecedent for clan control, having a positive impact on innovation and customer co-creation in an extended firm.

7. References

