The Honeycomb and the SME: Facilitating Growth Through Social Media in a High Technology Enterprise

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to analyse how a SME owner manager utilised the LinkedIn social media platform to create strategic growth for a new high technology firm in the business-to-business market. The primary research draws on a series of in-depth phenomenological interviews carried out with the owner manager. Findings, when viewed in the context of the owner managers local logic of action and the related opportunity focus, indicate that LinkedIn can provide a valuable conduit for the development of strategic growth opportunities in an SME. Interview analysis details a series of successful routes to growth that could provide the basis for analysis and action for similar firms, in similar situations. In terms of originality, the social media honeycomb construct is deployed as a theoretical and practical device, through which to structure and explore key issues. These include the importance of individual subjectivity in strategy making, a firm's use of resources, and its growth in terms of the adoption and use of social media, in a dynamic product and market setting. Findings will be of value to other researchers interested in the areas of SME strategy, social media and the use of phenomenology as a research tool.

Keywords: SME, social media, strategic growth, social media honeycomb, resources, phenomenology

1. Introduction: Strategic Growth in SMEs and the Role of Social Media

Central to technological change is the social media phenomenon, something which has played an important part in the transformation of business strategy. Social media, in the context of the business to consumer market is widely practiced and researched, a fundamental part of the lived reality for the contemporary consumer (Lamberton and Stephen, 2016; Chen *et al*., 2021 Baima *et al.,* 2023). This popularity has been exploited to form a large part of a company's customer strategy (Jasin, 2022; Ashley & Tuten, 2015). Subsequently, most research has been concentrated on the business-to-consumer (B2C) aspects of organisations (Cartwright *et al*., 2021; Hofacker *et al*., 2020). Relatively modest attention has been paid to the business to business (B2B) sector, where usage is comparatively lower, but nevertheless, increasing (Iankova *et al*., 2019; Cartwright *et al*., 2021). Consequently, the intention of this paper is to focus on the use of digital capabilities and the role LinkedIn plays in providing opportunities for growth in an SME, one starting out in the fast-developing field of wearable medical technology. To study this issue, several in depth phenomenological interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) were used to gather data.

Smuck *et al*., (2021), indicate that wearable technology refers to any miniaturized electronic device that can be easily placed on the body, or in clothing, or with other body-worn accessories. These authors go on to say that whilst some challenges exist about adoption, as with any nascent market, the application of wearables in the healthcare environments is expected to increase, and as the technology advances, interest will inevitably expand. This is a market where entrants need to find ways to grow their business alongside the development of the technology. Importantly, the growth of a firm is the basis on which all companies, can maintain themselves and is a significant feature of performance assessment (Seo & Lee 2024). For new SMEs, to obtain competitive advantage, processes need to be in place that will facilitate growth opportunities and business expansion. (Arsawan *et al*., 2022; Jones *et al*., 2013).

From the perspective of the individual, a useful way to think about growth in the context of an emerging technology-based firm is to employ the opportunity-driven entrepreneur construct (Mart ñez-Rodriguez *et al*., 2020).

Individuals with this distinguishing behavior choose to start an enterprise based on the perception that there is a business opportunity that has not yet been taken advantage of. Evidence suggests that opportunity focused entrepreneurs are driven by a variety of multifaceted motivations, including the need to achieve, to develop new products, and to acquire independence and autonomy (Cassar, 2007). Given this, growth is viewed as a process of continuous opportunity enactment, that involves drawing on past experiences, visioning, planning and the entrepreneurial exploitation of situations. (Bosworth *et al*., 2024; Corbett 2005). More widely, this perspective also merges with phenomenology, where a key individual attribute is one of intentionality. In this context, the world and self are seen as inseparable components of meaning (Husserl, 1931). The linking of individual owner motives and meaning with company resources and the wider context of a dynamic external business sector, provides us with the context of this study.

Consequently, our research question is aimed at investigating, in the context of a firm's resources and the social media honeycomb model, how LinkedIn can facilitate growth for DocWear, the (anonymous) name for the high technology case company of this study. The honeycomb is a framework used previously to examine the building blocks of social media activity for a firm and its customers (Diba *et al*., 2019; Kietzmann *et al*., 2011; Dwivedi *et al*., 2021). The model can be viewed as a resource-based view of the firm - RBV - (Chaudhuri *et al*., 2022; Chen *et al*., 2023). Digital capabilities represent resources both tangible and intangible, that can be deployed to exploit strategic growth. In the natural world, the honeybee hive contains the linked wax cells of an internally attached honeycomb that provides the life sustaining features for the colony (Goulson, 2014). Viewed metaphorically, where the essential linked parts of social media can also be taken to be about facilitating life and growth for a firm, the model has excellent explanatory utility. Whilst the honeycomb has been previously discussed regarding B2B (Dwivedi *et al*., 2021), there has been no empirical application of it, and no attention given to how it can relate to growth opportunities in B2B SMEs. In terms of structure, this paper firstly examines literature on strategic growth and the applications of social media to B2B. Next, the social media honeycomb is explained and then there is a section on the research method. Interview findings are then reported. These are followed by a discussion of the implications. Following this, the conclusion highlights some limitations of the research and offers ideas for future investigations in the area.

2. Enabling Growth in the SME: Applications of Social Media for B2B

Some evidence supports the argument that the adoption of social media in the B2B market has been partly obstructed by a lack of executive support. This is accompanied by skepticism regarding how this aspect of digital can assist company customer activity (Keinänen and Kuivalainen, 2015). The study by Malesev & Cherry, (2021) on SMEs in the construction industry, noted for example, that that size, small budgets and limited ability to recruit additional staff prevented respondents from scaling up beyond their current level of expertise in social media. This study also found that one of the biggest barriers for the sector was prioritising staff resources to oversee social media activities. Alternatively, it can be suggested that most business-to-business managers have personal social media accounts and are able to visualise the benefits of these internet platforms, when transferred to a B2B context. Consequently, the impetus exists for development, a factor that is likely to increase the uptake of social media, assisted also, by the outcomes of the Covid lockdowns and the consequent transformation in work operations (Sheth, 2020). As Diba *et al*., (2019) point out, there is evidence that trends are changing and that B2B managers are much more welcoming toward new social media technologies, seeing these as an opportunity to expand the business.

Accordingly various authors indicate that the strategic use of social media contributes to SME growth (Kumar & Ayedee, 2018; Chatterjee *et al*., 2021). In terms of SMEs, B2B social media and growth, three key uses have been identified in the literature (Brink, 2017; Cartwright *et al*., 2021). This is acquiring customers, building the brand and developing long term relationships. Despite its obvious importance to practitioners, there is relatively little literature on the first of these. However, by using commercially purchased website data and Facebook, the study conducted by Meire *et al*., (2017), did find that social media is an effective tool in acquiring B2B customers. This study found that the customer acquisition process is multifaceted, where a company's buying decisions are, nevertheless, driven primarily by strong budgetary considerations. The results of the study show that the automatic handling of Facebook pages is a valuable tool in the acquisition process, where the sales process is improved using both a data mining approach and a formalised information system. Over time, we can expect to see more automation in the form of artificial intelligence playing a highly important role in the social media activity of firms (Hadjimichael & Tsoukas, 2019).

After acquisition, the important next stage is the development of customer relationships, to create a web of connected and committed users. Here, digital capabilities play a key role in facilitating partner selection and development

(Hardwick & Anderson, 2019). Further, it is recognised with some exceptions, (i.e., Gruner & Power, 2018), that multiple platforms are best employed to develop customer relationships. In this context, Hollebeek, (2019) has developed a co - creation perspective. The work considers how a business can share resources with customers to better drive relationships. Through the integration of supplier and customer social media engagement platforms, Hollebeek argues that this will lead to an enhanced level of relationships. The claim is that effective social media use, alongside other engagement strategies like trade shows, face to personal selling, hospitality and events, will boost relationship productivity.

Ancilla *et al.*, (2019) also point to the centrality of relationships in B2B social media, and to the fact that now buyers and sellers have much more information at their fingertips in terms of decision making. Moreover, significant to customer relationships is trust, an important feature to build on in B2B social media platforms, (Zhang & Li, 2019). The implications are that customers in remote locations can be comfortable and confident in their use of organisations' services and products. Thirdly, brand building, the final key use identified, is central to not only trust, but to subsequent growth (Kotler & Pfoertsch 2006). There is little doubt that astute use of the brand name is an important signifier in terms of facilitating future growth and company success. (Drummond *et al.*, 2020). In very competitive markets, the strategic use of social media represents a critical issue facilitating a brands' ability to generate open and regular interactions with customers (Cawsey and Rowley, 2015). Alongside this, the existence of a sound brand reputation provides the buyer with a feeling of assurance about product quality, which in turn, can lead to a greater willingness to pay a price premium for products and services (Bendixen *et al.*, 2004).

3. The Social Media Honeycomb and B2B

Despite being grounded in B2C, the honeycomb model proposed by Kietzmann *et al.,* (2011), has high value for social media in B2B markets (Iankova et al., 2019; Diba *et al.*, (2019). The honeycomb consists of seven functional blocks, being identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, and groups. Each of these represent a digital resource for the firm, having important strategic roles than can engender growth (Aramburu *et al.*, 2021). The ***Identity*** block represents the extent to which users reveal their individualities in a social media, setting. This can include disclosing information such as name, age, gender, profession, location, and related information (Kietzmann *et al.*, (2011). In a B2B context, this block can refer to a corporate identity and or a brand identity, representing key strategic differentiation features (Diba *et al.*, 2019). Secondly, social media sites are designed to facilitate ***Conversations*** among individuals and groups. This block represents the extent to which users communicate with other users in a social media setting (Iankova *et al.*, 2019). In B2B, a company can deploy various corporately composed messages, disseminated to create a personalised communication that appears authentic. This gives the sender an enhanced opportunity to talk with their target audiences (Drummond *et al.*, 2020). The third part of the honeycomb is ***Sharing***. This represents the extent to which users can exchange, distribute, and receive content. By leveraging this functionality, B2B firms can monitor similarities between their users, assisting them also, in determining what content they should create to respond to customer requirements (Diba *et al.*, 2019).

The block ***Presence*** is the extent to which users know if others in social media are available and accessible on relevant sites. By being on social media, B2B firms can have a positive impact on customer attitudes, where responsiveness to consumer issues can be advantageous (Drummond *et al.*, 2020). Next, the ***Relationships*** block represents the extent to which users can network closely with others over time. In this case, two or more users have some form of association that leads them to converse, share objects of sociality, meet up, or list each other as friends (Kietzmann *et al.*, (2011). In B2B, firms can focus on forming relationships with their suppliers and customers, to create a web of regular users on a particular platform (Tiwary *et al.*, 2021).

Relationships can be leveraged through trust, a factor that can turn into the foundation of a successful business strategy. Additionally, variables such as credibility and benevolence in the buyer–seller relationship, influence the trustworthiness of and the transaction success in B2B marketplaces (Hofacker *et al.*, 2020). ***Reputation*** is the extent to which users can identify the standing of others, including themselves, in a social media setting (Behera *et al.,* 2022). The reputation of the firm reflects not only good deeds done, but strategic factors like levels of customer-based brand equity (Diba *et al.*, 2019). Finally, the ***Groups*** block represents the extent to which users can form online communities and subcommunities (Carlson, *et al.*, 2019; Mart ńez-L ópez *et al.*, 2016; Hollebeek, *et al.*, 2017). A rich network is usually comprised of an active and probably large group of friends, followers, and contacts. In B2B, firms are increasingly following B2C modes of operation. This includes making use of co creation processes to receive ideas on innovation, solutions to problems, and feedback for improving products and services (Hofacker *et al.*, 2020).

4. Methodology

The philosophical basis of this study is phenomenological, the subject matter of which is individual experience (Moustakas, 1994; Goulding, 2005). The approach is one of description and the explication of the content and structure of consciousness, where the research method is based on the in-depth interview (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Often taken to mean an umbrella term for all qualitative research, phenomenology has only one appropriate source of data, that is, the views and experiences of the interview participant (Giorgi, 1997; Hycner, 1985). The phenomenological interview is about understanding a reality is grounded in people's involvement in the social world, where words, terms, and understandings are verbally shared, where findings are presented using selected quotes (Hackley, 2003). Consequently, we do not observe the owner-manager's actual practices in relation to the company, nor is documentary data or surveys collected. The researcher is primarily interested in accessing an individual's inner world in relation to the 'sense object' (Moustakas, 1994), represented here, by LinkedIn. In phenomenological analysis, the interview should be treated as an autonomous body of truthful data, where there is no attempt made to corroborate findings with other forms of verification (Thompson *et al*., 1989). Other research approaches which use multiple data sources, are representative of either other qualitative positions, i.e., ethnography (Atkinson, 2007) or are reflective of a quantitative orientation. For example, surveys have been widely used in social media research (Baima *et al*., 2023), providing valuable insights into business strategy.

The data source for this study is based on a series of interviews with Jody, the anonymous name for Docwear's owner manager. Prior to the data collection process, informal discussions took place, with Jody, providing a resource for building rapport. Undertaking this activity also assisted the researchers in better understanding the business, its context and the owner manager (Sapsford & Jupp, 2006; Hackley, 2003). These initial conversations took place over lunch breaks, between meetings and during other types of visits. The informal conversations and the data collection interviews were conducted by one of the authors with previous experiences in medical product and in high-tech SMEs. This was important, as it assisted in making the interviewer credible (Marshall and Rossman, 2014). The interviewer was, however, mindful of the need remain neutral and not impose suppositions on the data collection phase, a process known as bracketing in phenomenological inquiry (Goulding, 2005; Thompson *et al*., 1989).

The data was collected over a two-year period, comprising six in depth interviews. These were digitally recorded and transcribed (Patton, 2014), thus enabling a holistic view of the owners' experiences to be examined. One interview was face-face and five were online. Each interview was intensive and lasted between forty and ninety minutes. The process included a follow-up interview that took place six months after the initial data collection phases. This final interview was intended as a check on the key themes identified, and to aid further clarification of issues (Sapsford & Jupp, 2006). The interviews had depth, but were wide ranging in nature, containing naturally unstructured but purposeful conversation. Discussed were innovation in the SME, use of resources, social media and digital strategy, product, market and client development, the importance of relationship to commercial activity and the role of entrepreneurial self-efficacy. Collectively, these represent the central strategic concerns of a developing SME (McCartan, 2023; Drnovšek *et al*., 2010; Roach *et al*., 2018; Chen *et al*., 2021).

In the final stage, a phenomenological analysis of the data occurred. The method involved a manual examination of deep meanings, as generated through the experiences of Jody as the business grew. This is a process that accords with other phenomenological research studies (Masberg & Silverman, 1996; Ardley *et al*., 2016; Bukhari *et al*., 2022; Cotte *et al.*, 2004). Using this approach means that a sensitive scrutiny of the interview material can occur, strengthening the researchers understanding of the interviewee and their lived context (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009). The data analysis process involved six stages that broadly follow the phenomenological method, where a process of meaning condensation is central (Hycner 1985; Kvale & Brinkmann 2009). Firstly, numerous readings and re readings of the interview transcripts took place, facilitating the acquisition of a deep sense of understanding about the range and depth of issues present. At the second stage, brief preliminary notes were made capturing these issues. At this point, it was clear that the interview data was saturated with material relating to DocWear and growth opportunity exploitation through social media use. Subsequently, stage three represented the formal identification of this as the study's key issue. At stage four, the researchers delineated the interviewee's responses into a range of meaning units, all of which linked to the key issue. For example, one meaning unit was about how relationships contributed to growth and another unit was concerned with the role of content sharing in the development of business. At stage five, each quote representing a meaning unit was identified on the individual transcripts, using a colour coding system, where every interview resulted in the identification of around six or seven meaning units. Finally, at stage six, meaning units were brought together across all interviews. Analytical notes were then made about each meaning unit in relation to the key theme. These notes then formed the basis of the paper's findings, which are now discussed.

5. Findings: The Social Media Honeycomb, Digital Capabilities and Growth

Interview data is firstly drawn on to give an indication of the nature of the DocWear company, products and structure.

When asked about the first of these Jody said, *"There is a global demand for specific medical monitoring such as monitoring of the heart. So therefore, we are doing a lot of work and partnering to make this a focus area, detecting people with issues of the heart, so this is where our next three to five years road map is going."*

The nature of the dynamic, highly technological market for wearable medical products fits the personal entrepreneurial ethos and drive of Jody who states unequivocally that, *"I'm an enthusiastic, open person, I like my innovation."*

Next, Jody points out the structure of DocWear, which is based in the United Kingdom, but has much wider market presence.

We've still just two permanent staff, but then we've got another two full time people who we contract to. We've got a global model, where we assign representatives or agents to different countries, so they work directly for DocWear, but they represent and distribute our products, per country. For us, having somebody local who knows the market, can speak the local language, and can handle everything on our behalf, that works for me."

There are numerous social media channels available for businesses to use and for DocWear, they play a crucial role in business activity. In response to a question on the attraction of certain platforms, Jody was asked to confirm that LinkedIn was a key one. *"Yes, we get a lot of contacts and clients either from our website or LinkedIn, its great and has become more and more important for us over time."*

The first of social media honeycomb block to consider is **Identity**, and in relation to this, Jody points out that he just started with the basics, before progressing onto more strategic issues. "*Before setting up the business, I got a LinkedIn profile and some friends on there, wasn't too concerned about who you connected to.*"

With considerable experience in technology and business, Jody has a distinctive personal brand, having previously worked for large corporate enterprises. This was capitalised on in LinkedIn, to initiate awareness of the new venture, by beginning to post about DocWear. In social media, any company can create a unique identity, where they can go on to build a following based on who and what they are. Jody recognised this need to establish DocWear in the minds of prospective customers, where identity, the product and audience recognition, are closely linked. This represents the initial lever for growth.

"So, for me I may have the best product in the world, if nobody knows about it, it means nothing, so it's all about awareness at the end of the day, so LinkedIn is good."

The next block **Presence** can be described as the extent to which users are aware of other users' availability. Jody makes sure that others know DocWear is very accessible.

"We will post announcements of any good news on LinkedIn and on our website, so people look at this. LinkedIn, I have a lot of followers maybe 5,000, and I'm being told it is being noticed by a lot of people, so even if I get, I don't know, say, 50 likes or 100 likes, actually (DocWear) is being noticed by a lot of people."

This strong presence means that DocWear is has become widely known, consequently opening opportunities up for growth in relevant market segments.

Jody says, "*On LinkedIn, (DocWear) is connected to people interested in healthcare, in technology."*

Developing a presence and an identity, provides the firm with the basic strategy from which to then develop its **Relationships** on LinkedIn. Jody was asked if successful long term partner relationships can be bult using social media.

"Yes, definitely. We met people and have relationships that have come out of social media, that are still working now." The building of partnerships through technology can now occur at a faster rate, as noted by Jody, compared to a previous time when more face-to-face business meetings occurred *"Now I think you can build relationships on social media very quickly."*

During this time income and market expansion was building for Jody and, additionally, all contacts have the potential to become part of a future network of relationships, that present strategic opportunities for growth, as customers and Jody learn more about each other.

"You may have only six likes from people who you don't know, so they are new. So, you can connect and then say oh, thank you for liking my posts and so that is networking using social media to expand ……"

Central to building relationships on LinkedIn are the next two areas of the honeycomb, conversations and sharing. Through online talk and the sharing of relevant content, relationships are better established, creating excellent conditions for future income with newly acquired, or existing customers. In terms of **Conversations** a two-way dialogue can take place, credible to the target audiences. Jody points directly to the role conversations can play to successfully acquire, build, and then grow business in a relational fashion, to generate income.

"On social media, quite quickly, you go from not knowing somebody to having conversation with them, the next day, and that conversation could grow onto face-to-face meetings, and turn that into business."

Jody went on to provide a particular example of the two-way interactivity of LinkedIn and the power of conversation to facilitate business for DocWear. He pointed out that four or five companies recently contacted him regarding his last post and asked, "*Can we talk? We saw your stuff and we loved it; how can we talk?*" Jody, went on to say that *"We have clients who have not 'liked' any posts on LinkedIn, but then suddenly reach out to me and say, "Hey we saw what you're doing, can we have a conversation?"*

Sharing, which coexists closely with conversations, is the next block to examine. It involves the exchange, distribution or receipt of content between users on social media. A challenge for any company including Jody's, is to create material for dissemination that is appropriate for the target audience.

"What I find interesting is first, making the content, the posts exciting, that is important. You post generally as regularly as possible. We'd post something that is exciting, the news, what is important, is the shares."

A good example of this sharing happened during the time of the last Covid lockdown. Jody indicated that his firm,

Posted a bit more ….to explain how we can help, how our technology can help with Covid 19. We posted mainly on LinkedIn, for business, we've quite a lot of videos on YouTube, so we posted on there, on YouTube, we generally draw in the audience via a link, through LinkedIn.

The key role of sharing is further stressed by way of the following comment. Sharing content not only can increase business revenue, but assists in cementing existing relationships, where the potential exists for returning customers to contribute to reducing the cost base and increasing profitability and growth.

"If you go onto Facebook, you do not see medical equipment advertised, it's just not the platform, (it's) LinkedIn, and making regular announcements on what we do and sharing what we do. We have some big clients, and this is recognised through LinkedIn."

Jody also sees it as important to examine and respond to the content of others. This type of interaction can be viewed as being about initiating business opportunities.

"It's not just posting new stories but looking at other new stories and seeing that as an opportunity, and if somebody said we are excited to be working on this technical study, (DocWear) can say, come and have a look at this, we may be able to help you."

Reputation, the next block of the honeycomb, reflects for Jody, the issue of business transparency, a key element of strategy facilitating trusting relationships. This factor is central to his business philosophy, and by implication, will help to drive growth through perceptions of his business, which is seen to be operating in a credible, authentic, and trustworthy way. This was probably the closet point in the interviews where the existential issue of 'self-meaning' came to the forefront.

"When I set up my business, I decided to have a choice to be myself, I'm not going to have any airs or graces, I'll be transparent, I don't hide anything, I think people appreciate that."

Reputation can also be enhanced on LinkedIn, through the sharing of success. *"It is always good to be congratulated or to share your success with more of your social friends, and wider. You've got success you can share that on LinkedIn, for example."* This also means that further business opportunities are potentially made available, as a range of other B2B firms are also exposed to the DocWear brand.

The final honeycomb block is **Groups**. Anyone who follows DocWear can be regarded as being part of the firm's community. This can cover many types of commitment and Jody has tapped into this community network, for the purpose of growing the business through gathering ideas and strategic information.

"For me, I've done it all myself – marketing - but that is only possible because I know a lot of people who either supply me with information or, or I can ring and get advice. So, having a good network of people allows you to do that."

Jody has used LinkedIn well to build the business, not through the deployment of complex strategy models, but through an astute local understanding of opportunity enactment, using the evident digital capabilities at DocWear's disposal to create growth. In the final interview, Jody was asked to summarise his view on the value of LinkedIn.

"I appreciate if you do it well, that it's a very powerful tool." Additionally, the flexible structure of DocWear has provided Jody with the ability to be proactive and entrepreneurial. He points out that *"when you are at a corporate level, then you need to ensure there are more people involved, more people to sign off the corporate message, whereas for a SME, you do have the flexibility to post things easier and quicker."* This opportunity driven use of LinkedIn means that income has grown substantially. *"Two years in April, our revenue has gone up by about 300 percent and still growing, so already, we will meet our target."* This means the future looks positive. *"For our size and where we are, we can grow, and we can grow very quickly.*"

6. Discussion: Digital Strategy and the Social Media Honeycomb

This paper contributes to the study of business strategy, and in answering the research question, findings demonstrate that the LinkedIn platform provides a valuable conduit for establishing growth in an SME. Allied to this, and although DocWear's owner did not consciously use the term social media honeycomb, the authors have used the model in an original fashion to assist the inquiry and analysis. What Jody did do, was to demonstrate an acute understanding of DocWear's digital capabilities as key strategic resources. This understanding was presented in an intelligent everyday language, grounded in experience. Other SMEs managers employees, educators and researchers, the authors propose, will find benefit in our investigation and analysis.

In drawing together implications, we firstly return to the original metaphor used in this paper. In the natural world, the honeycomb is constructed on a wall of the hive, as a mass of hexagon shaped cells, all connected and used for containing the brood and its food. In a social media context, with the growing core firm as the binding wax, all the parts of the digital honeycomb are connected. Take one building block or set of cells, out of the structure, and the whole would be adversely affected. Jody appreciated this interconnectedness of the social media building blocks and worked through them systematically.

In the context of being opportunity exploitative, and aware of the firm's digital capabilities, Jody's search for growth started with the first cell of the honeycomb, identity. Brought to LinkedIn was an established and successful business persona, that evolved into the DocWear brand. Subsequent regular and attractive posts were made, resulting in a high-level presence. This brought DocWear to the attention of prospective customers and contacts, resulting in LinkedIn working effectively from a business acquisition perspective. Opportunities for growth were further enhanced through establishing customer relationships on LinkedIn, where it has facilitated continued development. Combined with these features are the quality of the conversations and the shares that Jody posts on LinkedIn, with excellent interactive content helping to maintain the attention of a growing customer base. Along with previous literature, the research here indicates the importance of customer acquisition, a strong brand, and high content, interactive relationships, all key factors that drive growth.

The other two honeycomb blocks to consider are reputation and groups. In terms of the first Jody sees it as important to be open and transparent in his business dealings. This is a factor that contributes significantly to reputation, where a growth impetus can come from customer awareness of the owner's authentic ethical position. The group block represents the way Jody has built the entirety of his contacts and relationships, indicative of strong ongoing brand and customer equity. Jody's achievements are the result of a well-constructed overall social media strategy, a strong personal entrepreneurial drive and a flexible business structure. This state of success may not be easy to replicate in other SMEs but does provide a basis for practitioner learning. In terms of Jody's future, the firm might like to consider using co-creation and the various forms it can take, as it is being increasingly recognised and harnessed by practitioners and academic researchers. The high expenditures involved in wearable healthcare products and the risks involved for all parties in the supply chain, if they are operating individually, could mean cocreation presents useful possibilities.

From an individual perspective that relates to strategy, a key aspect of the success of DocWear resides in the opportunity-driven entrepreneurial activity of the owner, where an experientially based focus exists on growing the enterprise. In developing this point, without a clear appreciation of the importance of individual meaning and action, our understanding of business realities for owner managers' and their employees, can only ever be partial. This is a

point sometimes overlooked in the search for universal remedies. In this perspective, individuals 'appear to disappear' into the walls of an organisation, where strategy is viewed as one normative truth. Alternatively, strategy can be seen as highly context dependent, where each firm's situation will have a strong bearing on how for example, the honeycomb might be deployed. As no two natural honeycombs are exactly similar, then no two businesses are the same either. There is a need to be aware of differentiation around factors like employees, company cultures, product-market variations, customers, and the influence of the external environment.

7. Conclusion: Limitations and Future Research

In concluding, some limitations of the paper are considered alongside possible future avenues of research. This is only one study using interviews, and whilst researchers were able to build a high level of rapport with the business owner, the work would have been enhanced if more sources of data could have been evidenced. This was not possible at the time of the interviews, due to time and resource constraints. Obtaining for example, the points of view of employees, combining this with some web analytics, would have meant broadened and deepened research insights. Additionally, although the firm's owner has successfully used LinkedIn, this does not mean that all small businesses will benefit in the same fashion when using the platform. This suggests that it would be useful to conduct further research on a range of SMEs to seek to understand how they use LinkedIn, and whether it results in business growth and opportunity, or indeed the reverse. To approach this would mean conducting cross comparative studies with similar B2B firms in the high technology medical market and, with firms in related, but different sectors like engineering or building for example. In this way, a more generalised analytic perspective could be acquired relating to the factors impacting on SME digitally directed growth. This would highlight techniques that work and don't work, in different contexts. The argument is that whilst Jody has discussed tactics and strategy that operates well for DocWear, it might not be the case for other firms.

Future studies could use the social media honeycomb as research framework to critically examine and analyse different SMEs, where data could not only be acquired in the form of interviews. Wider ranging ethnographic and quantitative research could also be obtained to provide in depth accounts of practice. Besides interviewing employees, the firm's customers could be accessed directly to try and understand their perceptions, and use of a firm's social media. A supplementary numeric approach could also be applied to the various blocks of the social media honeycomb, where each feature could be systematically examined through a quantitative lens. Social media statistics could be collected on factors like customer views per post, conversion rates, time spent viewing posts and videos. In this way, very useful case material could be built up, having both a practical and academic relevance. Indeed, it would also be interesting to carry out investigations on other existing and emergent platforms and how they might be used in a synergistic way. It is also important to look to the time ahead. With rapid developments in technology, further research needs to examine the use of artificial intelligence and how it is now applied and will be in the future, to social media. This could imply the need to possibly alter both the structure and the function of the honeycomb, as it is currently presented. As with events in the natural world, business is also in a state of constant evolution. This means it is it is important to not only anticipate change, but to be proactive in dealing with it, as is well illustrated by the successful case firm of this study.

Authors' contributions

Dr Ardley drafted the manuscript and was accountable for the analytic framework, and for making the revisions. Dr Hardwick was responsible for the initiation, design and implementation   of the primary data collection phase, and for contributing to the manuscript structure. Both authors approved the final output.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Informed consent

Obtained.

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The Publication Ethics Committee of Sciedu Press.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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