

Social media influence on the B2B buying process

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Abstract

Purpose: This study aims to explore if and how business-to-business (B2B) companies can use social media to influence the buying process.

Design/methodology/approach: The study uses an exploratory approach into the existing literature related to the B2B buying process and its relationship with social media.

Findings: The study shows that companies in a B2B context can use social media as a means of influencing the stages of the buying process by means of using one or more of the seven functional blocks of social media.

Research limitations/implications: The findings demonstrate the relation that exists between each stage of the buyer process in a B2B organization and the functional blocks of social media. This study opens the door for further research into the influence of each of these blocks on the buying process stages and the roles involved.

Practical implications: This study identifies how social media's blocks influence the different stages and how organizations can use that to their benefit.

Originality/value: Few studies have investigated the use of social media in a B2B context. However, not many have looked into the influence of social media in the B2B buying process and buying center. This study looks into the relationship between the buying process stages and social media's functional blocks as related to the different roles of the buying center.

Keywords: B2B; Social media; Business-to-business marketing; Buying centre; OBB; Organizational buying process

Introduction

The vast amount of literature on social media (SM) focuses on business-to-consumer (B2C) organizations (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Berthon *et al.*, 2012; Kohli *et al.*, 2015; Laroche *et al.*, 2013; Gefen and Straub, 2004), whereas business-to-business (B2B) organizations and their use of SM receive comparatively little attention (Järvinen *et al.*, 2012; Jussila *et al.*, 2011; Rapp *et al.*, 2013; Michaelidou *et al.*, 2011). This is perhaps not surprising, as despite initial investigations into SM's usefulness for B2B, the actual usage is relatively low. For instance, only 15 per cent of Finnish companies in technology industries considered the development of a SM strategy toward their customers (Keinänen and Kuivalainen, 2015). Although the top three social networking sites for B2B employees are

Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter (Nanji, 2017), nearly half of all companies do not provide any financial support for SM in their marketing budget (Michaelidou *et al.*, 2011) despite their potential impact. For instance, IBM's security business has roughly 23,000 followers on LinkedIn which raises awareness and allows the firm to collect useful feedback through the volume of "likes" and comments. Maersk Line has 1.1 million followers on Facebook, where the firm publishes captains' blogs and stories about people and other issues at a fraction of the cost of advertising. Useful content distributed by IBM and Maersk, for example, show that it can be distributed through digital channels and can be as effective as face-to-face selling (Kovac, 2016). Nonetheless, the widespread adoption of SM in B2B is impeded by a lack of executive support (Keinänen and Kuivalainen, 2015), continued skepticism about how SM can assist the selling function (Agnihotri *et al.*, 2012) and generally a low level of preparedness for how digital marketing and sales channels can significantly change customer behavior (Kovac, 2016).

There is some evidence that these trends are changing and that B2B managers are more welcoming toward new technologies. Buyers in the USA are more active online than before, and they are spending more time and company dollars in the digital space. A 2014 Accenture report emphasizes that 68 per cent of B2B buyers purchased goods online, up from 57 per cent of in 2013. In total, 33 per cent of B2B buyers in 2014 reported that they researched at least 90 per cent of products online before purchasing, up from 22 per cent in 2013. In 2014, 44 per cent of respondents had researched company products on a smartphone or tablet compared with 41 per cent in 2013 (Accenture, 2014). However, these increasing rates of technological acceptance and adoption in the B2B context do not speak to the specific usefulness of SM. Although 94 per cent of B2B marketers (Beets and Handley, 2017) use SM posts for content marketing purposes, managers and researchers remain doubtful and concerned (Agnihotri *et al.*, 2012) about the fact that SM's dark side might influence them in negative ways, much like it impacted B2C companies (Baccarella *et al.*, 2018; Pfeffer *et al.*, 2014; Wilburn and Wilburn, 2016; Grégoire *et al.*, 2015; Cheung and Lee, 2008). Based in part on the bad press that SM has received in the past (DeMers, 2017; Griffith, 2018), most recently, with regard to Cambridge Analytica, managers are reluctant to develop strategies and to allocate resources to engage effectively with SM. As a result, they might miss many of the benefits SM present to B2B. The objective of this article is not to focus on the dark side (Baccarella *et al.*, 2018), but to shed light on these opportunities and to provide managers with an understanding of SM in B2B firms. More specifically, this article explores how the seven functional building blocks of SM add value at each stage of the organizational buying process.

After the introduction, demonstrating both the lack of research and usage of SM in B2B environments, we continue by describing the functional blocks of SM as proposed by Kietzmann *et al.* (2011) followed by an introduction into the organizational buying process, the buying center and the actors that build it with their roles. We then follow with setting up a path for more in-depth research by creating a matrix of buying process tasks on the basis of the breakdown given by Webster and Wind (1972) as one axis and the SM building blocks as identified by Kietzmann *et al.* (2011) as the other axis. We then try to identify which buying center roles are involved with which function within each task. This will allow us to see where and how B2B buyers and sellers can focus their SM efforts to get the most return from their investments.

Business-to-business social media

SM is made up of both the platforms (i.e. that contain knowledge stocks) and the content disseminated through interactions between individuals and organizations (i.e. knowledge flows) (Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011), leading to a state where "we are all connected" (Hanna *et al.*, 2011, p. 265). In a B2C context, this has meant a new relationship between organizations and their customers, one where firms, individuals and communities share, co-

create, discuss and often modify user-generated content. Eight years ago, Kietzmann *et al.*, introduced an SM honeycomb, as shown in Figures 1 and 2, consisting of seven functional building blocks of SM (i.e. identity, conversations, sharing, presence relationships, reputation and groups) and the fundamental implications that each block presents to B2C firms. Although B2C and B2B vary in fundamental ways, this framework is also useful for explaining the functional traits of different SM activities to B2B executives.

Figure 1 Business-to-business social media honeycomb



Figure 2 LinkedIn for business-to-business



Identity refers to the information users disclose, portraying them the way they wish to be seen online. For some platforms, this could mean name, age, gender and profession that are accurately representative of the individual, but for others, it may just appear as a self-generated username with no actual substance. In a B2B context, this identity-building block can refer to the corporate identity or brand identity, which in industrial marketing are essential strategic differentiation elements. SM marketing has been known to lower barriers to entry (Kim, 2013) by providing a level playing field within which all B2B companies, irrespective of their size, are able to create a unique identity, upon which they gradually build a following.

Most SM platforms were created to provide a forum for *conversation* among their users which, within this context, refers to the extent to which users communicate with each other. These forums have allowed for an enormous amount of information to be generated and preserved on any range of topics. In a B2C setting, firms have used these conversations as ways to launch and monitor campaigns, contributing when necessary to engage with their customer base directly. In a B2B environment, marketers usually start by casting a “wide net” of unobtrusive content via popular platforms such as Facebook, Instagram or Twitter, and then they move on to more specific content via B2B inclined platforms like LinkedIn. Corporate messages are created, composed and disseminated in a more personalized fashion to appear to be more authentic and give them a better chance of connecting with their target audiences (Lefebvre, 2011). In a B2B setting, where conversations typically have been with fewer individuals and more direct than in B2C settings, conversations are no longer only two-way. B2B SM communication is networked (Dahl, 2015; Kitchen and Schultz, 2009) involving multiple intra-business interactions, and also inter-business conversations across various sites (Mehmet and Clark, 2016). Conversations include, among other topics, discussions around needs for specific solutions, product training, online product demonstrations and comparative positioning of one offering versus its competition. Typical conversations may also serve to attract the attention of potential B2B suppliers and/or customers who may then choose to gain further information by visiting the pertinent source websites.

Sharing can be defined as the exchange, distribution or receipt of content between users on SM. Although not entirely separable from the conversations building block, sharing refers more directly to the content rather than the individuals associated with it. In a B2C context (or even peer-to-peer context), tweets and posts are clearly associated with the individuals sending them, whereas many videos are consumed without a clear sense of who the producer was. In a B2B context, this is again different, as most content is shared within the relationships that already exist. The more astute marketers are fully aware of the potential risk B2B buyers face when recommending products or services to their respective buying centers. It is thus imperative to share appropriate content that reinforces the buyer’s recommendation. By leveraging the sharing functionality, B2B firms are able to observe and monitor commonalities between their users, as well as determine what content they create and share to respond more quickly to changes or requirements. Firms are also able to study the boundaries of sharing and learn why particular content is shared widely or not shared at all.

According to Kietzmann *et al.* (2011), *relationships* may be defined as the way users are related to one another on different SM platforms. In a B2C context, relationships refer to the extent to which users can be related to other users; how they create “forms of association that leads them to converse, share objects of sociality, meet-up or simply just list each other as a friend or fan.” (Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011, p. 246). This development is very much in line with Vargo and Lusch’s (2004) prediction that marketing thought is shifting from tangibles and toward intangibles and from a transaction focus to a relationship focus. In contrast to a B2C context where awareness is the most prominent reason for adopting SM (e-Marketer,

2010), for B2B organizations, awareness is not the top reason for adopting SM but it is placed lower down the list of importance. In a B2B setting, firms focus more strongly on relationships with their corporate suppliers and customers to create a web of users throughout the SM platform that they are able to leverage (Gil-Saura *et al.*, 2009). In contrast to the analog world, where B2B relationships were based on power, conflict and opportunism (Young and Wilkinson, 1989), relationships forged during the digital age have disrupted these traditional B2B relationship marketing rules to the extent that connected consumers today focus on relationships based primarily on person-to-person trust, as the cornerstone of a successful business strategy (Hyder, 2018).

Presence may be defined as the extent to which users are aware of other users' availability and online or physical presence. This would enable firms to develop an understanding of user habits. By leveraging a user's sharing of their location and availability to determine their presence, firms are able to analyze customer preferences toward receiving information. They are able to determine whether users prefer their information presented in real time or through posts they can actively retrieve themselves. Likewise, by being on SM, B2B firms create a sense of "perceived social presence" that positively impacts consumer attitudes, the perceived responsiveness to consumer issues and trust (Hassanein and Head, 2007, p. 689).

Reputation, which the authors define as the extent to which users understand the social standing of others, including their respective content, varies throughout SM platforms and serves to designate the attitude of the community toward a user. Whether their (or their content's) social standing is determined through the view count, "likes" or a "thumbs up," a user's reputation is seen through the eyes of the beholder, the ever-present online community of invested consumers and of the less active yet equally observant onlookers. As a result, especially in a B2B context, SM "should not be thought of as simply another channel, another means by which to interact with the customer or another tool by which to manage brand and firm reputation but, rather, all of those things (and likely many more) simultaneously" (Andzulis *et al.*, 2012, p. 306). In other words, the reputation of the firm reflects such intangibles as its goodwill, brand equity and trust. It has long been argued that institution-based trust develops in online B2B marketplaces to facilitate interorganizational trust (buyers' trust in sellers) (Pavlou, 2002). Such variables as credibility and benevolence in buyer-seller relationships influence the trustworthiness of and the transaction success in B2B marketplaces.

Kietzmann *et al.* (2011) define *groups* as communities that users can create on an SM platform to share content with like-minded users. In a B2C setting, as these friendship networks grow larger, this type of segmentation allows users to stay connected and interact with a population created for a specific purpose. Firms can craft specific messages to groups based on their purpose, as well as which groups they could support most effectively. In a B2B setting, these are more likely to reflect different types of stakeholders, including those that constitute formally recognized business relations and those that are informal and might not have been known previously. For instance, B2B firms increasingly make use of crowdsourcing (Prpić *et al.*, 2015) to receive new ideas, feedback and solutions for improving their products and services (Simula and Vuori, 2012).

These building blocks, individually and together, illustrate that SM has the ability and capacity to influence B2B marketing significantly. "The firm as a nexus of exchange relationships" (Håkansson, 1982) might no longer be an appropriate philosophy. As the interaction approach makes way to more and more relationship-based marketing (Möller and Wilson, 1995), the role of SM becomes increasingly important. However, not all SM platforms are equal; each platform or each B2B engagement purpose may rely more heavily on one or more of the seven functional dimensions than others (Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011).

The platform LinkedIn, for instance, focuses prominently on providing professionals with an opportunity to connect and form relationships with each other. According to the Content Marketing Institute, 80 per cent of B2B content marketers agree that their organization is focused on building audiences, of which about 97 per cent use LinkedIn (Content Marketing Institute, a UBM Company, 2017). LinkedIn provides a way for firms to connect their corporate identity with their corporate audiences and to recruit talent. The platform relies primarily on the conversations, relationships and reputation (trust) building blocks, while also making use of the sharing building block. Professionals on LinkedIn connect, converse and form relationships with each other, and they associate with brands within their industries to learn and grow together and to share professional content. There are a number of different platforms that make use of these building blocks in different ways.

Organizational buying process

As illustrated above, SM has a host of advantages and potential roles in a B2B environment. In this section, we focus on the usefulness of SM for organizational buying, a particularly important B2B function. Organizational buying is a decision-making process carried out by individuals, in interaction with other people, in the context of a formal organization (Webster and Wind, 1972). Organizational factors cause individual decision-makers to act differently than they would if they were functioning alone, or in a different organization. Organizational buyer behavior (OBB) is motivated and directed by an organization's goals and is constrained by its financial, technological and human resources. Therefore, the buying process within a B2B organization and its related tasks are conducted and also influenced in a different manner, from those in a B2C organization. Fundamentally, there are three main elements that shape the organizational buying decision process: first, the *specific tasks* at each stage of the process; second, the *roles of the individuals* involved in this process; and third, the *type of decision-making* adopted by these individuals within their organizations. We will be focusing on the roles within the buying center. The different roles that individuals may play in various steps of the organizational buying process may result in a conflict between individuals, which, as Sheth (1973) argues, is prevalent in most joint decisions. This also demonstrates the importance of influence between the parties involved.

Finally, decision-making by individuals within the various roles of the buying process is impacted by three distinct aspects. The first aspect is the psychological world of the individuals involved in the decision-making process, which encompasses a combination of factors such as their expectations, the individuals' background, their information sources, perceptual distortion and satisfaction with past purchases. Second, the specific conditions that precipitate joint decisions among these individuals and finally, the inevitable conflict among these individuals (Sheth, 1973).

However, as discussed by Sheth (1973), the buying decision might change from a joint decision-making process to an autonomous decision-making process. Three factors influence the choice of joint versus autonomous decision-making. First are the characteristics of the product or service such as the perceived risk in buying decisions or the type of purchase. The second factor influencing the choice is the buyer company, such as company orientation (a technology-oriented company has a tendency to have more decisions made by engineers), company size (larger organizations tend to be practicing joint decision-making) and degree of centralization (the more centralized the organization, the more chance of autonomous decision-making). The last factor related to the product is the time pressure. If there is a level of urgency in the purchase of the product or service, it might become an autonomous decision rather than a group process.

At the end of the day, the buying process within an organization is a combination of individual and organizational decision-making processes. Buying behavior involves individuals making decisions in interaction with other people, both within and outside their

organizations (Webster and Keller, 2004). As such we will be focusing on the individuals within the buying center and their roles during the different stages. Locating the actors and their roles inside the buying center might be easy, but identifying and understanding each actor's level of influence and the dynamic of power within the buying center is more difficult (Johnston and Bonoma, 1981).

SM gives customers immediate access to information pertaining to various suppliers' offerings and sometimes even other buyers' experiences. Thus equipped, customers can make more informed choices while increasing their buying power. These customers also rely less and less on traditional sources – such as trade shows, catalogs, trade publications or intermediaries – than on the internet to stay informed. This change is altering the role of salespeople and channels in B2B customers' decision processes and buying behaviors. It is also shifting part of the sales force's role as an information conduit to other channels more readily managed by marketing, including websites and digital media (Wiersema, 2013).

B2B buying and selling have become less linear as customers research, evaluate, select and share experiences about products. More people within and outside the organization are playing pivotal roles in sizing up offerings, so the path to closing sales has become more complicated Lingqvist *et al.* (2015). Sellers who are ready to meet customers at different points on their journeys will exploit digital tools more fully, allocate sales and marketing resources more successfully and stimulate collaboration between these two functions, thereby helping to win over buyers. Lingqvist *et al.* (2015) share their experience with over 100 B2B sales organizations and suggest that as the change required is significant, so are the benefits, which include up to a 20 per cent increase in customer leads, 10 per cent growth in first-time customers and a speedup of as much as 20 per cent in the time that elapses between qualifying a lead and closing a deal.

Organizational buying process and social media

A set of stages can define the specific tasks that must be performed to solve a buying problem. However, there are a few different schools of thought regarding the number of stages. A few authors have suggested four stages (Webster, 1965; Hillier, 1975; Laczniak, 1979; Naumann *et al.*, 1984; McQuiston and Dickson, 1991; Laios and Xideas, 1994; Xideas and Moschuris, 1998), whereas another group of authors have taken a six-stage approach (McQuiston, 1989; Ghingold and Wilson, 1998; Dadzie *et al.*, 1999). There are also studies with 7 stages (Kennedy, 1983; Lilien and Wong, 1984), 8 stages (Tanner, 1998), 9 stages (Bellizzi, 1981) and 12 stages (Wind, 1978). We will be studying the five-stage model defined by Webster and Wind (1972) and later by Garrido-Samaniego and Gutiérrez-Cillán (2004) in the buying decision process. The main reason for choosing this model, besides its simplicity, was that its five stages were common with the models in other studies which had five or more stages. These five phases as defined by Webster and Wind (1972) are identification of need, establishment of specification, identification of alternatives, evaluation of alternatives and selection of suppliers.

Figure 3 demonstrates the functional blocks of SM and their relationship with each of the steps in the buying decision-making process of a B2B organization. In addition, it identifies the role of individuals involved in the buying process as part of the buying center in each cell.

Figure 3 Social media functions and the five stages of the buying decision process

Social Media Functions/ Buying Process	Identity	Conversations	Sharing	Presence	Relationships	Reputation	Groups
Identification of Need	✓	✓	✓				
Establishment of Specifications	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓
Identification of alternatives	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
Evaluation of alternatives	✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓
Selection of suppliers	✓✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓✓

✓	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓✓
Users, Buyers, Gatekeepers	Users, Buyers, Influencers, including engineers and other specialists, Gatekeepers	Buyers, Suppliers Influencers, including finance, engineers and external experts, Gatekeepers	Buyers, Users, Suppliers, Influencers, including special- ists in various areas, Gatekeep- ers	Buyers, Deciders, including CEO, CFO and other executives, Suppliers, Gatekeepers

With the introduction and infiltration of SM within the context of marketing, the traditional role that the gatekeeper has played is changing. The gatekeeper has traditionally played the role of the individual (s) that manage (s) the flow of information within the organization and the buying center in particular. However, SM and its exponential pervasiveness have democratized the flow of information, potentially giving all parties access. Webster and Wind (1972) defined five roles attributed to the members of the buying center. These five roles are users, buyers, influencers, deciders and gatekeepers. In a more recent article, Keller (2009) defined seven roles. In addition to the previous five roles, the roles of initiators (users or others in the organization that request a purchase) and approvers (the people who authorize the deciders or buyers' decision) were added too. The size of the buying center differs, usually depending on the buy class. In straight rebuy situations, the buying center may consist of only two to three members, whereas in a new task and in modified rebuy situations, the size of the buying center is usually larger, with three to six members (Doyle *et al.*, 1979).

In this article, we will focus on the original five roles.

Identification of needs

The likelihood of SM use during this step is rather low. Nevertheless, individuals who make use of SM for private purposes are more likely to use SM for work purposes. This is because in B2B markets, corporate culture plays a major role on the adoption and use of SM for work. If the general perception is that corporate culture views the use of SM as important, then a person is more likely to make use of SM (Keinänen and Kuivalainen, 2015). The three roles that play major roles in the first step of OBB are those of the users, buyers and gatekeepers. Users, as the individuals directly affected by the need that is satisfied by the purchase of a service or product, are typically the ones who initiate the communication process with the buyer once specific needs are identified. This step is mostly an internal process within the organization, where SM can be used for internal communications. The three SM functional blocks can be used in this process. Buyers and users establish their profile as their *identity*. *Conversations* on SM between users and buyers take place to establish a need and initiating this process. Information and data *sharing* can be used to identify the users' needs. Although other SM building blocks such as presence, reputation and groups could be used, it is

unlikely that they would normally be needed during this step of the buying process. However, external relationships in certain instances can be a source of initiating “Identification of Needs” by creating awareness and bringing the need to the buyers’ attention. In this case, buyers will become aware of a solution that might be a possible buy scenario, through their SM relationships, that they were not initially aware of. This possibility could potentially be enhanced further by a greater *presence* on SM. The emergence of social buying has led to the formation of two segments of B2B buyers: traditional buyers and social buyers who rely extensively on SM and online communities (e.g. IT Knowledge Exchange) during the purchase process (Grewal *et al.*, 2015).

Establishment of specifications

After the need is identified and subsequently it has been established that a purchase is necessary, the buyer works with the users and, if needed, engineers and other specialists to define the exact specifications and requirements. This process is usually an internal process as the discussions are being conducted within the organization’s buying center. However, there could be instances where external sources may influence the process. For example, evaluation, authorization and restriction of chemicals and restriction of hazardous substances standards for hazardous substances pose new, costly challenges that require buyers to carefully vet, document and monitor global networks of suppliers, to an unprecedented degree (Grewal *et al.*, 2015). These influences usually lead to a quest for obtaining additional knowledge about the product or service, which could be acquired through one or more SM platforms, and includes suppliers and consultants. The use of SM during this stage is typically quite extensive, given that the perceived risk faced by the buying decision-maker could be significant.

All seven SM functional blocks are involved in this process. Buyers and users establish their profile as their *identity*. Knowing more about the prospect helps to mitigate invasiveness, because all interactions would be targeted to the prospect’s profile (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2012). There are *conversations* between users and buyers, as well as third party experts, whose opinion or expertise may have been sought, establishing the exact specifications required to meet the users’ need, by distributing and *sharing* information that is needed to establish the specifications. Pertinent information is conducive to rational decision-making, where an objective or rational decision style is deemed to be the degree to which a manager relies on deliberation and calculation in making decisions (Simon, 1987). SM facilitates the creation of content that can be shared with both internal and external stakeholders and thus can challenge organizations with traditional hierarchies and centralized control structures (Habibi *et al.*, 2015; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). *Presence* can provide a better understanding of how buyers and other members of the buying center use SM internally, within their organizations. Presence is also a key determinant toward subsequent corporate success; in fact, back in 2013, Marx observed that B2B firms possessed a limited knowledge of SM, which prevented the buyers from adopting SM as a strategic tool, to gain corporate advantages (Marx, 2013).

Established *relationships* within or outside of the buying center, or organization, using SM channels can be used for conversations, information gathering and discussions that ultimately help the buying center define the specifications of the needed product or service. During this step, evaluation entails examining the conformance, effectiveness and efficiency of all buying activities implemented within the parameters of the deal, such as rating seller performance or tracking acquisition cost metrics (Grewal *et al.*, 2015). These relationships can also be used to find and “connect” with additional individuals inside or outside of the organization, as well as with suppliers and specialist consultants who can be helpful in the process. *Reputation* is the functional block that establishes the level of trust that exists between individuals and the weight given to the communication between the buying center individuals, in particular, the buyers and users. In this day and age, advances in

communications technology have practically eliminated any significant geographical or temporal boundaries between B2B buyers and sellers. This explains why, specifically during this early stage of the buying process, brand reputation is particularly important in B2B contexts (Bendixen *et al.*, 2004; Glynn, 2012).

The collective knowledge, creativity and skill set of the *group* are always assets and helpful in establishing the specification details, especially for large projects and complicated purchases. Having different groups with different skill sets and preferences can also help in having simpler, yet more defined communication for the members of the buying center. Once prospects are qualified, the next step in the sales process would be to manage the opportunity by gaining a deeper understanding of these prospects' needs. Sales professionals spend significant time on this intricate step, which involves converting prospects into first-time clients, assuming that the client sees a value match (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2012). SM enables salespeople to offer customers various *touch-points*, thereby influencing customers' perceptions of a salesperson's sensitivity toward the relationship. Again, any temporal and/or geographical barriers could be mitigated by online meetings with all members of the buying center, concurrently, from a distant location, with tools such as GoToMeeting (Agnihotri *et al.*, 2012). In this case, the buyer and members of the different groups could potentially include brand communities and technical groups.

Identification of alternatives

Most of the processes up to this step have been internal by nature, with an occasional external approach. The identification of alternatives consists of a step in which the external aspects of SM play a significant role in the decision-making process. This step is very important for the buyer to be able to gather information regarding the product or service they desire to purchase. Before the advent of SM, the buyer was limited in choice and awareness of solutions, to those that they would personally hear about, come across while browsing journals or visiting trade shows, which they ultimately had to pursue by first contacting the relevant supplier and ask for salespersons to call and arrange for an in-person demonstration. However, today, the buyer can easily search for, find and extract information from a multitude of sources on the internet, and he/she is not bound by limitations such as geographical distance or budget. In the industrial selling context, buyers are using SM for their purchases as they compare products, research the market and build relationships with salespeople (Itani *et al.*, 2017). SM can be used to qualify leads early in the sales cycle by researching the profile of the ideal target prospect (Shih, 2009).

The multitude of information available today provides the buyer with more information and knowledge about alternatives, thus allowing the buyer to evaluate different options and making the best and most educated choice. At the same time, SM enables the sellers to create and distribute much more information about their solutions on the internet, with a much broader reach, generating awareness and educating potential buyers of their products and services. This information can be easily gathered and assimilated by the buyer organization. By using SM to qualify prospects, sales firms can focus on ideal clients that fit their business model, thereby reducing time wasted on less than ideal customers, whilst maximizing time looking for more promising opportunities (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2012).

Another important feature available through SM is the expanded electronic word of mouth available through different sites such as forums reviewing the suppliers' different solutions. This could enable potential buyers to verify certain claims from unknown suppliers, thereby mitigating the associated risk further. It is not uncommon for potential B2B buyers to consult peers within their industry, who in turn tend to influence their buying decision more than any other source (Ramos and Young, 2009). Suppliers, on the other hand, can use private or public SM platforms to increase their credibility, thereby facilitating this process. The result of this step is a group of packages that will be sent to the evaluation process.

The importance of SM during this step is paramount, and all seven functional blocks are involved during this process. Suppliers, buyers and users establish their profile and *identity*. To this end, companies make use of SM to communicate with their customers (or suppliers), to build relationships and trust and to identify prospective trading partners (Shih, 2009).

Conversations between suppliers, buyers and users throughout this process take place. Here, sellers need to avoid being overzealous, as they may risk being branded as potential online stalkers. Lager (2009) suggests creating a two-way conversation with the aid of white papers, a “pull” strategy rather than a “push” strategy. Organizations can accomplish this by coordinating webinars with potential buyers to elaborate on specific topics and create a value conversation. Webinars provide the means by which customers can interact via social technology, enabling “them to feel like they have immediate and direct access to the company” (Lager, 2009, p. 32).

Sharing can be used to distribute information and data needed to identify viable alternatives. From a seller’s perspective, SM platforms such as Facebook and LinkedIn may prove to be ideal sources of information pertaining to potential buyers. Such information should enable sellers to target the “right” buyers and subsequently share pertinent product information that closely matches their requirements. Furthermore, fully understanding the prospect makes the initial contact seem less invasive, because the interaction, questions and presentation are more targeted to the prospect’s profile (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2012).

Although it may be much more difficult to use SM in B2B relationships, mainly because of the many significant differences in typical B2B products, markets and product development (Lehtimäki *et al.*, 2009), *presence* is a key component that needs to be fully exploited. SM presence enables buyers to find additional information. Moreover, sellers become more visible to and can be entertained by buyers as potential vendors. Thus, both need to establish their presence within the necessary and appropriate SM channels. According to Gartner (2018), in the current increasingly complex B2B sales environment, customers mostly value suppliers who provide them with the right information, through the right channels, to make the purchase process easier. This is equally true for both buyers and sellers. SM helps sales professionals in pursuing the right decision-makers during this stage (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2012).

As demonstrated, *relationships* are of utmost importance in organizational buying behavior and as such these established relationships could be crucial in determining alternative solutions. These relationships are between individuals with different roles, buyers, sellers and users, both internal and external across organizations and departments, with current and previous employees, in different positions within either the buyer or seller organizations. Consequently, SM can be used not only to identify new business opportunities, or to create new products, but also to forge stringer relationships with customers and to foster collaboration not only within but also between companies and other parties (Jussila *et al.*, 2014).

Reputation is a functional block that demonstrates the trust of the communication between all parties. During this step, it is of utmost importance that potential sellers manage to project a positive image to their prospective buyers. Brand reputation is especially important within B2B contexts (Bendixen *et al.*, 2004; Glynn, 2012). There is empirical evidence that suggests that B2B companies use SM not only to increase brand awareness, but also to manage their reputation (McCarthy *et al.*, 2014). Due to the potentially high levels of risk involved in B2B purchasing, both buyers and users would like to make sure that there is high-value reputation for the supplier information and product/services. Consequently, *groups* are helpful for the collection of information and collaboration among

group members assisting in the process of identifying the best among alternative solutions. Different SM platforms provide excellent channels of communication among different groups, as well as between members within groups, during this particularly important step of the decision-making process; hence the use of SM for such purposes should be encouraged. In B2B markets, we can assume that corporate culture has an impact on the use of SM for work. If the corporate culture sees the use of SM as important, then a person uses SM (Keinänen and Kuivalainen, 2015).

Evaluation of alternatives

This is the process where suppliers would have submitted their respective packages to the buyer for review. Packages are usually submitted on a timeline which starts the evaluation process. The buyer and users review the packages and compare their required specifications to the respective packages. Both buyers and users and possibly other observers can benefit significantly from SM platforms by reviewing customer reviews and available data, for their own evaluation. During this process, influencers can play a vital role as they attempt to sway both evaluations and potential outcome.

Again, SM has an indispensable role during this stage and all seven functional blocks are involved in this process. This is where evaluation entails examining the conformance, effectiveness and efficiency of all buying activities implemented within the parameters of the deal, such as rating seller performance or tracking acquisition cost metrics (Grewal *et al.*, 2015). Buyers, users, influencers and suppliers establish their profile as *identity* in their attempt to become part of a larger network of stakeholders. Such connections are especially important in intermediate transactions in business markets where customer needs stem from making products for customers in subsequent transactions and a buying center with individuals from different departments and hierarchical levels of the organization emerges to determine product choices (Sashi, 2009).

Back and forth *Conversations* take place between suppliers, buyers and users. These are particularly important during this step, where typically several sellers could be competing for the same business. To complicate matters even further, such conversations are not normally only restricted to buyers and sellers, but they usually also take place between a network of buyers, sellers and influencers (Mehmet and Clark, 2016). Hence, apart from securing the attention of prospective buyers, sellers would also need to find ways of winning over influencers to increase their chances of being “shortlisted” into the buyers’ consideration set. Understanding customers can be very difficult at times, especially because the complexity of the buying process, including dealing with multiple decision-makers, could be a challenging experience. To manage these obstacles, sales professionals must maintain continuous collaboration both with their clients and key influencers (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2012).

Sharing can be used to distribute information and data assisting in selecting a suitable solution. Cohen (2011) argued that SM has been defined as *digital content* and *network-based interactions* that are developed and maintained by and between people. This would explain why individuals have used SM “to participate in social networks, which enabled them to create and share content, communicate with one another, and build relationships” (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2010, p. 312). Astute sellers tend to be more creative in identifying new, effective ways of engaging and interacting with customers, without being overbearing (Jones *et al.*, 2003). Salespersons, in particular, need to be prudent and refrain from hounding potential buyers in their quest to win more sales (Agnihotri *et al.*, 2012). The authors further posit two forms of interaction-enhancing technologies focused on “pulling” customers (e.g. blogs and wikis) toward salesperson-generated content at one end versus those geared toward “pushing” information through expanding networks of connections (e.g. LinkedIn and Facebook) at the other.

A seller's *presence* can provide a buyer with information and a certain level of comfort. Both buyers and users would like to see the vendors' or suppliers' presence, which seems to provide potential buyers with some additional form of assurance. Although, traditionally, B2B decision-makers are considered to be more rational than their B2C counterparts, a recent global study from the B2B agency Gyro and the *Financial Times* (Schick, 2018) confirmed the role of emotion in B2B buying, and they identified confidence and optimism as the most influential forms of emotional capital for B2B brands to invest in.

Relationships are an important functional block for the evaluation process. This step is particularly attention demanding because the risks involved, especially within a B2B context, could be significant. Having adequate and correct information usually serves as a cornerstone to this step, which mainly concerns suppliers and their products or services, and is essential to the selection process. SM not only enables the collection of customer data (and information) that could help identify business opportunities but also facilitates communications which, in turn, strengthen firms' B2B relationships (Gruner and Power, 2018). Existing relationships between different parties have always been a great source of information. The functional block that involves the *reputation* of the parties includes the level of trust between all parties. This affects how the communication of each individual is perceived by others. Buyers and users would like to make sure that suppliers enjoy a good reputation, leading to higher levels of trust toward supplier information, products and/or services. SM platforms such as Facebook and LinkedIn provide detailed information on prospects. These tools enable sales professionals to increase their social capital and build deeper relationships by sharing content that is a better fit for the prospective client (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2012). *Groups* may provide useful ways of segmenting different product lines and services. From a selling perspective, once prospects are qualified, salespersons need to gain a deeper understanding of their clients' needs, which may necessitate their spending significant time on this intricate step of the B2B buying process (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2012).

Selection of suppliers

The final step of the process is choosing the best among several alternatives and identifying the supplier of choice. This is the step where deciders play an essential role, as they will be reviewing the final evaluation summary sheets, as well as the functional specification before making their final decision. They will be looking at available information channels to facilitate their decision-making process, including supplier related SM content and contacting customers for their final review and reference checks. Internally, the decision-maker would typically consult key influencers which could include engineers or financial specialists. In general, B2B purchasers are more knowledgeable than B2C purchasers. To some degree, this is due to the higher level of risk involved in high-value purchases (Jerman and Završnik, 2012). Moreover, B2B purchasers rely on personal sales relatively more than advertising as a source of product information (Urban and Hauser, 1993). Hence, the complexity of products, high-value exchange and more intense relationship demand a richer and more personalized communication and media strategy (Habibi *et al.*, 2015).

Industrial products are usually purchased by professionals who consider several different criteria before making any buying decision. They tend to acquire plenty of information about the industrial products to be purchased, and they normally evaluate the different alternatives objectively (Jussila *et al.*, 2014).

Again, the use of SM during this stage is quite intensive and all seven functional blocks are involved in this process. *Identity* is for the buyers and the deciders to establish their profile. When dealing in industrial products, there is more emphasis on physical performance and personal selling than there would be in consumer products, where psychological attributes and advertising are critical for success (Urban and Hauser, 1993). Thus, potential buyers

would need to make sure that they attract the best sources, which explains Kahar *et al.*'s (2012) observation that the primary reason small and medium enterprises use SM applications is to establish visibility among present and prospective customers, as well as to keep in touch with them. *Conversation* refers to communications between suppliers, buyers and deciders. Effective communications are of paramount importance for successful B2B relationships, as the economic impact of these communications within and across organizations has been estimated to have exceeded \$1tn (Kane *et al.*, 2014). In the same context, using SM to create a "corporate narrative" can play an important role for B2B firms' ability to reduce uncertainty (Bonnin and Rodriguez, 2019). During this final step of the decision-making process, it is imperative that all parties attempt to build strong and profitable B2B relationships, which is why it is typical of B2B firms to engage in frequent and direct communications with their customers (Crosby *et al.*, 1990). To this end, firms need to consistently engage in direct marketing communications that fit customers' preferences, help foster positive perceptions, influence purchase behavior and eventually improve financial performance (Narayandas and Rangan, 2004). Indeed, evidence pertaining to B2B interactions not only attests to SM's potential within this context but also suggests that it remains challenging for managers to decide how to best use SM to communicate effectively with trading partners (Gruner and Power, 2018). *Sharing* can be used to share information and data to identify the needs. SM enables all parties to participate simultaneously in quick and responsive communications. SM also offers trading partners an opportunity to establish their credibility through more targeted one-to-one (rather than conventional broadcast) communications (Gruner and Power, 2018). *Presence* is a key determinant during this process. Buyers and deciders would like to see the vendors or suppliers' presence. SM platforms have proliferated during recent years, and many companies have more than 20 SM accounts (Rapp *et al.*, 2013); yet, despite this seemingly abundant choice, some organizations choose to focus on a single SM platform, like LinkedIn (Kumar and Mirchandani, 2012).

Relationships constitute one of the fundamental functional blocks, especially for the process of supplier selection. Relationships can exist between any of the roles on both sides of the fence, buyers, suppliers, deciders and even individuals who do not form part of the buying center, including previous and current customers. SM may have facilitated the process of relationship building; however, this would have come at the expense of introducing further layers of complexity to the entire process (Quinton and Wilson, 2016). Having the necessary information about suppliers and their products or services is essential to the selection process, as was the case with the evaluation process. Existing relationships have always been an excellent source of information. The *reputation* of the parties involved is an important functional block. The level of trust between all parties affects how others perceive communication between every individual. Buyers and users would want to ensure that suppliers enjoy a good reputation and, as a result, there is a high level of trust toward suppliers' information and their products and/or services. Moreover, because reputation is experienced before it is assessed, one could conclude that it is dependent on the medium through which it is experienced and the context of the assessment (Zarkada and Polydorou, 2014). Li and Zhang (2019) also demonstrated that SM usage effects customer loyalty and is mediated by buyers' trust in salespersons' integrity/benevolence and as such can indirectly improve a buyer's loyalty. Also, as seen in the employee branding literature by Dabirian *et al.* (2019) and Duncan *et al.* (2019), employees participate and contribute information related to their employers on the different available SM channels. As these contributions increase, they indirectly contribute to the overall brand image and reputation of their employers, the seller organizations. This further emphasizes the importance of SM during this step. Groups are useful in segmenting different product lines and services. The emergence of SM networks has changed the rules of the game by providing unparalleled opportunities for businesses. However, these opportunities may give rise to tensions within the established understanding of business relationships and networks (Quinton and Wilson, 2016). In terms

of SM, B2B marketers are likely to use webinars, blogs and platforms, like LinkedIn, rather than Pinterest and Instagram (Habibi *et al.*, 2015).

Conclusion: social media in business-to-business

The economic power of B2B transactions has not been reflected in terms of published research in marketing journals, and the relevance that these publications have for practitioners has been questioned over the past 20 years (Cortez and Johnston, 2017).

We have demonstrated that SM has an important place in B2B organizations in general and OBB in particular. We have also shown that SM is particularly relevant to OBB as it is useful to the buying center in all the functional blocks and in all the stages of the buying process. This finding is in accordance with the results obtained during a survey of over 500 decision-makers of mid- and large-size companies, across industries, commissioned by Forbes in an attempt to better understand how B2B vendors were being assessed and how these executives were being influenced by marketing channels. Results showed that 83 per cent of these executives used SM when choosing a vendor. Moreover, 92 per cent of this segment claimed that SM influenced a purchase decision (Schimel, 2018).

This article has mapped out lots of avenues for future research. Michaelidou *et al.* (2011) mentioned that many organizations are not using SM in support of their brand strategies for a perceived lack of relevance with respect to the industry. Several things have happened since then, and research on adoption need to be updated. Likewise, in the B2B context, research into the required investment into human resources to improve the overall capability and knowledge to use digital marketing tools (Järvinen *et al.*, 2012) is warranted, as is cost, such as in the amount of time required to effectively use SM (Buehrer *et al.*, 2005). Furthermore, research should further explore specific issues such as branding (Brennan and Croft, 2012; Gupta *et al.*, 2015; Leek and Christodoulides, 2011); relationship building, barrier of use, measurement (Michaelidou *et al.*, 2011); blogging (Steyn *et al.*, 2010); sales techniques (Andzulis *et al.* (2012); and lead generation (Bodnar and Cohen, 2011) in B2B marketing.

By looking at the different stages of an organization's buying process within their buying center and identifying the relationships between the various roles and SM dimensions defined in the article, we hope to shed further light on the impact of SM on each stage of the buying process, as it relates to the roles.

As for its practical contributions, this article looks into ways to use SM in helping both the buyer and seller in a B2B setting to make a purchase possible. We have dissected the buying process via the relationship of its stages with the essential building blocks of SM. We have considered each dimension of SM and established which roles the actors in a buying center can play by using them during each stage of the buying process. This will not only allow buyers to focus their efforts on the most effective SM channels, but also the sellers to focus their marketing efforts more effectively, in the right areas of SM, using appropriate tools. By using appropriate SM channels, both sellers and buyers can forge their desired identity, while connecting and sharing the appropriate information with their target parties. For example, despite being targeted at a niche audience of fleet buyers, the Volvo Trucks "Live Test" series of videos have been viewed over 120 million times on YouTube, over a period of three years (Iankova *et al.*, 2018). From the buyers' side, having the ability to use SM for enhancing operations and using the knowledge acquired through the various channels could prove to be invaluable.

During the course of our research, we found that relatively few successful B2B organizations seem to be aware of the power of SM in this respect. Although there are obvious uses of SM in B2B companies, academic research indicates that B2B marketers are not as sophisticated

or skilled in SM usage as B2C marketers (Simmons *et al.*, 2010). Hence, in accordance with Andersson and Wikström's (2017) findings, we have shown that SM should not simply be viewed as a mere customer-communication platform, but rather as a means of enabling firms to communicate with their customers and other stakeholders. In fact, according to Kunz and Werning (2013), failing to think strategically in terms of SM may lead to cross-functional coordination issues.

However, it seems that things may indeed be changing. According to Kunz and Hackworth (2011), user behavior is also likely to change with SM. B2B buyers now seem to have unlimited access to information to enable them to compare vendors and offerings; however, researchers found that they only spend 17 per cent of their time meeting their potential suppliers. Moreover, when comparing several suppliers, the actual time spent went down to 5–6 per cent (Gartner, 2018).

Overall, both the sellers and the buyers can benefit from using SM in their marketing campaigns and their buying processes, respectively. This article looks at the usage of SM in B2B marketing through the lens of OBB and the buying center's decision-making process and highlights the motivations for B2B organizations to use SM in buying decisions.

Meanwhile, it would be worth noting that companies including Ernst & Young and Accenture reported that millennials make up over two-thirds of their entire employee base, whereas it is estimated that by 2025, 75 per cent of the American workforce will consist of millennials, many of whom will occupy key decision-making roles, including c-suite positions (Hall, 2018; Economy, 2018). Millennials are known to be attached to their smartphones and also to be totally captivated by SM (Sashittal *et al.*, 2016).

Future research

As for the future research, the scope of this article is to pave the way for additional in-depth research into the level of influence exerted by each SM dimension, on the associated buying stage, and how each dimension can be used to maximize the level of influence to the organizations' ultimate advantage from both the sellers' and the buyers' perspectives. There has not been much theoretical research regarding B2B organizations and the influence that SM can have on their buying and selling behaviors. Indeed, Gummesson (2014, p. 260) has come forward with his criticism toward B2B marketing theory, or rather the lack of it, by highlighting the fact that most companies have been successful without any significant academic input. We recommend both conceptual and empirical studies regarding B2B organizations and the influence of SM in the buying process, focusing on the buying center.

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